

'A solitary pursuit'

As a cathedral chorister and then an organ scholar, composer Benjamin Woodgates gained a firm grounding in liturgical music – which also stood him in good stead for his latest film soundtrack, as he explains to Harriet Clifford

APRIL ROCHA

▲ In the mix: composer, orchestrator and conductor Benjamin Woodgates

I've grown from almost nothing,' admits composer Benjamin Woodgates humbly, when asked how he has changed over the last four years since he was commissioned to write a Benedicite for St Paul's Cathedral as part of *Choir & Organ's* New Music series. 'I was finding outlets to write music fairly few and far between, so I was very grateful to get any chance, especially to do something in St Paul's.' Woodgates was a chorister at Chichester Cathedral as a boy, going on to be involved in choral music every night of the week between the ages of 18 and 22 when he was an organ scholar at Oxford.

From there, he has paved his way as a composer, although he is the first to acknowledge that this career path hasn't always been plain sailing: 'I think until about two or three years ago, I was regularly tempted – in quite a serious way – to pack it all in.' He speaks openly about the challenge for music colleges and institutions to prepare students for the 'real' world, while also allowing them to grow as composers: 'There's a balance between having it as a sort of sacred space to discover yourself as a composer, and leaving college, university or school with really no idea of how you're going to make a living.'

Woodgates managed to do just that by undertaking a lot of private teaching as well

as orchestrating and expanding his musical reach, although others take different routes. 'That's not necessarily a bad thing, because I've found that – in my case – doing music for media or arranging music has been a really refreshing tonic to sitting on my own in a room with a blank sheet of paper. Composing is quite a solitary pursuit unless you're in education. I think it's a positive thing that composers are almost forced to have another string to their bow.'

'I feel I've been really lucky since [my *C&O* commission] to get a rich variety of commissions to work for. For the first time in

'Music for media is not the only centre of attention; it's one arm of a multi-limbed narrative'

my life, I've actually had to pick and choose between projects, which is a lovely problem to have.' He now sustains himself with a mixture of composition, arrangement and orchestration, writing simultaneously for commercial media like films, as well as concert halls and places of worship.

Writing for media, he finds the visual stimulus 'reassuring' in the same way that he finds a text reassuring: 'The music is not the only centre of attention. It's one arm of a multi-

limbed narrative.' It also involves working with a director to try and realise their vision for a film. 'I find that I write less cluttered music than I would if there was no visual content. Ultimately the proof's in the pudding as to whether it works. It's definitely music written to work against the film rather than on a soundtrack CD.'

After a successful audition, Woodgates recently spent six months writing the score for a feature-length film, which was premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2020. Undoubtedly his biggest project to date, *Dream Horse* stars Damian Lewis and Toni Colette

and is a dramatisation of a true story, which follows a group of Welsh villagers in the early 2000s, who gathered together the funds to breed and rear a racehorse. 'We were looking at a sound for the village and we wanted to create music which spoke of the people in that valley. One direction we tried was a croaky aesthetic, but it's not really true to character. We ended up cobbling together – a bit like the syndicate in the film cobbled together – a selection of slightly rag-tag, dusty, forgotten, unloved but ▶



▲ A recording session for Euros Lyn's film *Dream Horse*, using three different pianos; (r) a still from the film, with Owen Teale (Brian), Di Botcher (Nerys), Brian Doherty (Gordon), Toni Collette (Jan), Damian Lewis (Howard) and Anthony O'Donnell (Maldwyn)



◀ spirited instruments.' One of these was the harmonium: 'The one I really wanted to use was the one I grew up with, which is sadly a quarter-tone too sharp. What we hired in the end was a very simple instrument by R.F. Stevens. It was a compact harmonium dating back to the 1950s or 60s with three stops – a 16ft Bourdon, an 8ft Diapason and a 4ft Principal. 'It had an almost instant connection between the pressure of air and the sound – it sounded almost like an accordion.

'When captured very close, you got this rich, dusty, wheezy sound, which we felt suited this community, which has essentially been left behind by the decline in major industry. It's a bit like the harmonium, which has been left unloved at the back of the cupboard but has really got a lot to give.' The harmonium is part of a six-piece ensemble which accompanies the village scenes and also includes an accordion, an upright piano ('again a slightly dusty, seen-better-days instrument'), a cello and a fiddle. The scenes at the races are scored for a string orchestra, recorded by the London Contemporary Orchestra, while the harmonium is played by Craig White. Choosing this player was important, as it 'needed to be someone who is prepared to use it as an expressive instrument – coming from their foot pedalling as much as from their hands.' Woodgates didn't want a binary pipe organ approach, but rather 'all the stages in between, on and off.

He also worked with two choirs – members of Cór CF1 and CBC Voices conducted by Eilir Owen – who bolstered the on-screen 'spontaneous' singing. 'We worked with them both to create a really strong musical sound, and also to make sure it sounded real and

spontaneous, and not rehearsed or conducted. They were far too well-rehearsed at the beginning of the recording session – their consonants were too "together", their diction was too good. We had to transform them into a slightly drunken rabble.'

Woodgates seems to have taken this project in his stride, but doesn't mind admitting that writing for his first feature-length film came with an element of self-imposed pressure. 'You always go into these jobs trying to hold your head high and pretend you've done this all before, but in reality I was learning everything for the first time and the fear of doing it badly or getting thrown off the project was ever-present. On the other hand, it was reassuring to know that even before I started I could see that the film – just based on the director's work in the past – was going to be a real quality piece of work, and a lot of love had gone into it.'

Alongside his work for media, Woodgates has written a setting of Psalm 67 for a friend's wedding, as well as a choral piece for his own wedding about a year ago. He has also worked on a number of arrangements for groups such as the Swingles: 'It's a very different process. You never have that "blank page" fear with arrangements. I don't want to belittle it, but it feels more of a craft than an art, and I love that.' Other arrangements and collaborations under his belt include a project with Martin Green, an accordion player with the band Lau, which involved expanding an immersive audio installation on the River Tyne for orchestra and chorus: 'It was a fantastic mixture of music and real sound design, and just like nothing I'd ever done before.'

Having grown up singing, Woodgates finds writing choral music comforting in

many ways. 'I felt more confident writing for [choirs] than writing for a whole orchestra of instruments I've never picked up.' He explains that writing for voices is an interesting exercise: 'In order for a choral piece to come off in performance, everyone who's singing it has got to understand the relationship between the notes. For another instrument, where there's muscle-memory, you can play anything that's notated on the page. As a result, it forces composers to write music which the talented musicians that are singing it can actually grasp and understand themselves.'

Speaking more generally about the current landscape of classical music, Woodgates says, 'You'd expect that it would be a casualty of the digital world, but actually it's alive and well. I feel that there's still a question being asked about what direction classical music should take and what is its position in the world.' Challenges confronting contemporary composers include a resistance to new music. Nonetheless, he remains optimistic: 'I think it's exciting that there seems to be more of a young public interest in perhaps more experimental music. I would love to hear more music which isn't post-minimalist, and is also both exciting and accessible.'

With his wide-ranging scope of projects and ideas, there is really only one question left to ask: what does Ben Woodgates's working day look like? 'Should I lie and say it's very structured and grown-up?' he laughs. 'I love the hours in the morning when you're not quite awake yet, but I also find it very hard to actually get up for them – I'm not a morning person.' ■

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