

Kim Walker Premieres a New Work for Mezzo Soprano, Bassoon and Orchestra

By Ronald Klimko
Moscow, Idaho

Recent years have seen the creation of several significant new works for the bassoon. First, New York Philharmonic principal **Judith LeClair** gave the premiere performance of a beautiful new concerto for bassoon and orchestra, followed shortly by **Nancy Goeres'** (Pittsburgh Symphony principal) first performance of the striking *Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra* by Ellen Zwilich. Now we can add to this list a new, deeply moving work for mezzo soprano, bassoon, and orchestra by British composer Simon Bainbridge entitled *Ad Ora Incerta (At an Uncertain Hour)-Four Orchestral Songs from Primo Levi*.

Kim Walker, professor of bassoon at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, gave the world premiere of the work on March, 29, 1995 in London with mezzo soprano Christine Cairns and BBC Orchestra conducted by the composer. The BBC was the underwriter for the commission. Recently Kim gave another performance of the work at a Proms Concert in London on Thursday, August 20, 1998, again with the BBC Orchestra. This time the mezzo soprano was Susan Bickley, and the Orchestra was conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky. I had a chance to hear a recording of this performance, and there is no question that the work is bound to become a classic in the bassoon literature.

Composer Simon Bainbridge apparently found these poems while poking around a bookstore in New York in 1992, when he came upon a collection of poems by Primo Levi, an Auschwitz concentration camp survivor. Bainbridge, who had visited Auschwitz a decade earlier, was stunned by the bleak power of the poems. Shortly afterwards he was approached with a commission proposal for a new bassoon work by Kim, and the result was this dynamic new work. As if to underline the impact of this composition, it was awarded the distinguished University of Louisville 1997 Grawemeyer Award with a cash prize of \$150,000. It was chosen as the most outstanding composition from 181 entrants.

Levi's poetry was composed following his return to his native Turin in October, 1945. His prison camp memoir *If this is a man* was first published in 1947, and these poems undoubtedly date from that period as well. The four poems, *Il canto del corvo (The Crow's Song)*, *Lunedì (Monday)*, *Il tramonto di Fossoli (Sunset at Fossoli)* (Fossoli was a deportation/sorting camp for prisoners near Moderna. *Ed.*) and *Buna*, (Buna was a rubber factory at Auschwitz where Levi worked. *Ed.*) depict the horrors of those years of servitude and starvation in a stark, almost sterile narrative. In speaking of the poems Bainbridge said: "one of the most extraordinary things about Primo Levi's poetry is that it

is so objective. He observed from a distance. He never involved himself in the angst, the horror or the situation. Ultimately that was his downfall: He killed himself (in 1987) because he couldn't live with the guilt of survival."

The style of the work is strikingly unique. In her review of the recent Proms performance in the London Times, critic Helen Wallace described the work in the following succinct manner: "Simon Bainbridge's *Ad Ora Incerta* sets the verse of the concentration camp survivor, Primo Levi to dramatise the transcendence of companionship in extremity. The companionship between the solo bassoon and the voice emerges freely in the 'sad friends' of the final poem, but is there throughout, particularly poignantly in *Sunset at Fossoli*, where the two move in an exquisitely dissonant contrary motion. There are familiar shapes and patterns to grasp here; the four movement structure, for one: a weighty opening small still vocalise: a dust-dry Scherzo and a Finale with a catastrophic streak. In the third song, which opens: 'Is there anything sadder than a train that leaves when it is supposed to...' we hear the insect-scratch of a distant locomotive in the strings and its rhythm in the woodblock. Bows on cymbal contain the faraway screech of breaking metal, the noise of 'sad tidings'. As Susan Bickley intones the bad news, strings spiral downwards, like millions of sinking hearts. The alarm which stops the fourth song's apocalyptic chord is deadly familiar, but still shocks. But this is the surface. To talk of individual effects would be to diminish the stature of this deeply involving work. Bainbridge, revealing the precision of a Dutilleux, has fully realized Levi's cool texts into a music drama using a language emphatically his own. The solo bassoonist Kim Walker and Susan Bickley were moving exponents..."

My own impressions of the work were similar to this. The writing for the bassoon-often soaring above the mezzo, is strikingly beautiful. Often it carries the lyrical line while the voice is reduced to an almost monotone incantation of the text. Other times the two "companions" move in parallel intervals to each other a kind of overly sweet union. The most dramatic last movement has an incredible orchestral climax which expresses fully the stark, brutal futility of years of Levi's servitude about as well as it can be expressed.

Bravo to Kim for her role as instigator, and performer (and fund-raiser as well!) in the creation of this dynamic new masterpiece! The work is to be published by Novello. Kim writes that she has performed it several times in Europe, but it has not yet been performed in the US. Schirmer will handle it in this