



Nimrod Borenstein: With that name, he was born to be a composer

By Jessica Duchon, March 15, 2013

When Nimrod Borenstein first came to the UK to study at the Royal College of Music, he couldn't understand why his fellow students would start whistling a particular melody when they saw him.

"Nimrod", part of Elgar's Enigma Variations, is well-known in the UK, but less so elsewhere, and Borenstein – born in Israel and raised in France – scarcely knew a thing about it. Still, his name seems to mark him out for a career as a composer.

His best-known work to date is the Shell Adagio for string orchestra, which has been performed more than 30 times – mostly in the United States, including at Carnegie Hall. But now, having lived in London for some 20 years, Borenstein has been given his big break on these shores.

Last month the Philharmonia and the conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy performed his recent work *The Big Bang and the Creation of the Universe* at De Montfort Hall, Leicester. The same orchestra has commissioned a further piece from him, with the world premiere scheduled for the Royal Festival Hall in June; it is called, perhaps appropriately, *If you will it, it is no dream*. It is among eight new works of his that are being aired for the first time this year.

Borenstein, telling me about his life and music over coffee, is a fount of energy and enthusiasm. He needs to be. He is tremendously prolific; and in style, his music has evolved from 20th-century techniques such as Serialism and "sound clusters" to a highly individual take on traditional systems of tonality.

He has been writing music since the age of six. What made him start?

"I wanted to be like Beethoven," he declares. "I really loved music and I wanted to write something that was great."

Thinking big, then? "When I was seven," Borenstein recalls, "I started to write 12-tone music, but I'd never heard of Schoenberg. I developed my own system for how the 12 notes of the scale could be arranged. When I heard that it had been done before, I stopped!"

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“I think some people have a misconception that composing music can be a hobby,” he adds. “It isn’t – it’s a vocation, a calling. Sometimes it’s nice and sometimes it’s awful, but it’s something you can’t live without.”

Borenstein is in many ways a citizen of the world. His accent is a hybrid of French, Polish, Hebrew and West London, where he lives with his Italian wife and two children; and his music, he says, is played most often by Americans on the one hand and eastern Europeans on the other.

His background is riddled with Holocaust tragedy. His paternal grandmother was one of 11 siblings, from Lvov, of whom only two survived the war.

“My grandmother decided to flee to Russia when her husband said that even Stalin was better than Hitler.” The family eventually headed for Israel, where his father Alec, a child prodigy artist, studied before meeting Nimrod’s mother and moving to France.

As Borenstein was finding his compositional “voice”, his father proved a vital advisor. In his student days, he was distressed to find that something he had just composed reminded him inordinately of Mahler. That might not sound such a bad thing – but for a young man with his heart set on originality, it provoked a miniature crisis.

“I ran out to a red phone box,” he remembers, “and my father talked me down. He gave me some sensible advice about comparing my work to other composers as well and then seeing if it really did sound as much like Mahler as I’d thought. I tried: and it was definitely not like Mahler, it was more modern than Shostakovich and it wasn’t like anything I’d heard before. So I thought: ‘OK, I can leave that in’. And gradually, from then on, I found my way to my new world.”

It was a vital lesson in positive thinking – something that extends well beyond the music. “As many of my family died in the Holocaust, it is tempting for me to define my Judaism by this, because I’m not religious,” says Borenstein.

“But my father would say that’s a negative definition; instead we should find a positive one. As a people, we’ve been persecuted – but we’ve also created great things. I think it’s the same in art: saying that you can’t do something, you can’t use tonal music, is not healthy. It’s better to define yourself through the positive: what you are trying to do, rather than what you are not.”

The Big Bang and the Creation of the World was commissioned from Borenstein by a Jewish philanthropist, Zvi Meitar. “He is an extraordinary person, interested in everything and involved with scientific projects as well as artistic ones,” Borenstein enthuses.

The piece sprang from a discussion in which Meitar and Borenstein considered ways to bring together elements of science with elements of the Bible, “to show that these did not have to be opposite ideas”.

Scientific topics are a major preoccupation for Borenstein himself; he gave a lecture on 11 March at the Royal Institution in London, for the Brain Circle, entitled "How do composers write music? Music and the scientific method".

Borenstein feels that his Jewish background has affected his music so deeply that it cannot be easily defined via surface elements.

"Some years ago I was commissioned to write a piece for a Jewish music festival," he says, "and the director then asked me what was Jewish about the work. What's Jewish about it is that I am Jewish! If you want great music from great composers like Beethoven and Mozart, then you have to let them write as the people they are.

"If they are Jewish, there will be something Jewish in their work, just as there is something German about Beeethoven and something French about Debussy. It's part of you. It shouldn't be that you use little themes from folklore; that's not the real thing."

And what's next? Borenstein has just finished writing a large-scale concerto for the Russian violinist Dmitry Sitkovetsky, due for premiere next year. Borenstein's first love, along with composition, was the violin; this was what first brought him to study in London. He cherished hopes of combining a performing career with composition, but there simply weren't enough hours in the day.

"I feel a little like Sibelius in that, like him, I wanted to be a virtuoso myself, but am not," he says, with a laugh. "And I wanted to write a big piece..."

The world premiere of If you will it, it is no dream will be performed at the Royal Festival Hall on June 13. www.southbankcentre.co.uk. Works by Nimrod Borenstein will be played at the National Gallery, London WC2 on March 22. www.nationalgallery.org.uk