

UK première of Pianorama



53 one-minute pieces, nine artists, one venue: **Alison Cox** on bringing this ground-breaking work to Over-Seas House

In 2008, a group of international pianists and I embarked on an ambitious project to commission 53 one-minute piano pieces, representing each of the member countries of the Commonwealth, for the multicultural Commonwealth Resounds music festival – part of the 2009 CHOGM in Trinidad and Tobago. The performers and composers would include as many different Commonwealth musicians as possible. The project was named Pianorama, as a pun on ‘Panorama’, the well-known Trinidadian steel pan festival.

Over six months, Commonwealth composers were identified by phone, email and sometimes by chance meetings. It was not easy to communicate with composers in remote, developing countries, with limited access to the internet or mobiles, and the team was unable to find indigenous composers from all Commonwealth countries in time for the world première in Trinidad and Tobago on 24

November 2009. I therefore adopted an alternative strategy, and invited composers from UK music conservatories and specialist music schools to study the music of the ‘missing’ countries, and to write a one-minute piano piece in response. The Purcell School imaginatively organised a composition marathon to help fill the gaps.

Exactly two months after the successful world première, during celebrations linked to CHOGM, we were delighted to present the European première in Princess Alexandra Hall at Over-Seas House, London, under the auspices of ROSL ARTS. On Sunday 24 January, nine talented pianists arrived early to try out the fine Steinway piano in the hall and prepare for the event. The pianists represented a number of different countries. Teo Gheorghiu from Switzerland, Deanna Lye from Singapore, Nicholas Oliver, Kit Downes, Sean Jackson and Tyler Hay from the UK, Alexandra Gracheva

from Russia, Júlia Hámos from Hungary/USA and Men Gei Li from China/UK performed the 53 pieces between them.

Three distinguished international composers – Clarel Betsy (Mauritius), **Charalambos Sophocleous (Cyprus)** and Alexander Johnson (South Africa) – made a special journey to London for the event, and several other UK-based composers were also present. To accompany the performance, a colourful PowerPoint presentation had been created, showing information about each piece, and images from the different countries and of the composers themselves.

It was a particular privilege to be able to hear a group of pieces by outstanding composers from the Royal College of Music and Royal Northern College of Music. The audience particularly appreciated Tom Harrold’s fiendish piece for Barbados, *Whaloss!*, meaning ‘Oh My Goodness!’ in Bajan, and Jamie Man’s *Opus 64 no. 4* – a more than challenging minute’s worth of music for Dominica.

The final pieces in the performance were written by two excellent young composers: Lloyd Coleman, a pupil from Chetham’s School of Music, whose piece, *A Country Scene and Progression*, represented the UK; and Liam Paterson, whose wonderful miniature *Frigate Dancing* was a response to the music and culture of Kiribati. After the performance, members of the audience, performers and composers had a delicious cream tea, and took the opportunity to network and enjoy an intense musical discussion.

Pianorama has been a fascinating experiment. It has been extremely worthwhile for a large number of Commonwealth composers; created prestigious performing opportunities for talented international pianists; and has been informative and rewarding for audiences. The geographical spread and influence of the project has been extraordinary.

Musical tribute

Maldivian composer Shamun Hameed’s beautiful and intensely moving short piano piece, *Paradise Drowning*, which was given an expressive performance by Júlia Hámos, made a particularly strong impression. Hameed wrote of the piece: ‘Coastal zones were eroded, and the tsunami’s waves spread solid waste around the islands. Groundwater supplies were badly contaminated, further compromising an already fragile drinking water supply system. Inundated with seawater, vegetation and crops crucial to the islanders were badly damaged or destroyed. My piece is dedicated to the people, still suffering, in the Maldives.’



PARADISE DROWNING: Shamun Hameed (above) pays tribute to victims of the tsunami (top)