

INTERVIEW with COMPOSER TARIK O'REGAN

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Conspirare: How did you get into the business of composing music?

O'Regan: I arrived late to it, actually. I played in rock bands in high school and listened to my parents' record collection, which contained a lot of Led Zeppelin, The Who and the Rolling Stones, among others. It had been a rich time for British music in the late 60s and early 70s. I attended a boy's school and, in an attempt to meet girls from the neighboring school, I begged and pleaded to play in the band for the school musical, *West Side Story*. They let me play the drums and that was my baptism into reading and playing semi-classical music. I learned to read music very quickly and wanted to learn more, so I took classes at the Royal College of Music, Junior Department, after school and on weekends. As a percussionist, you sit at the back of the orchestra and observe how everything works. You get to see the compositional process recreated right in front of you. It was wonderful. I became very interested in how it all fits together.

I began to write my own music at about the age of sixteen. The head of composition at the Royal College, Jeremy Dale Roberts, encouraged me to pursue it. Later, I studied music at Oxford and experienced very history-based music instruction. Oxford has three of the world's finest choirs at its doorstep, so I wrote for who was around me. I did venture into writing for instrumental groups but their performances didn't match the caliber of the choral institutions. The evensong system at Cambridge, where I undertook my Master's, and Oxford provided an extraordinary canvas for writing. The irony is that those choral foundations at "stuffy" Oxford and Cambridge were very open to contemporary work. This was especially true at Clare College, Cambridge, where the choir was run by Tim Brown. In fact, they released my CD, *Voices*. I must admit I do not sing at all. In fact, I'm a terrible singer. I didn't come up through the English choirboy tradition.

Conspirare: Is there a Tarik O'Regan trademark sound or style?

O'Regan: Because I didn't have that choirboy background, I didn't feel constrained by the genre and its canon. I am particularly interested in taking the developments in orchestration that one finds in instrumental music over the last century and applying them to choral music. You will find, especially in one of the pieces that Conspirare will perform, "The Ecstasies Above," that one of the driving features of the work is its many textures. This shares an attempt with the way, for example, a symphony might carry musical interest by constantly varying the instrumentation that is playing at any one point.

Conspirare: What composers and pieces have influenced you?

O'Regan: On the classical side, I've always had an interest in the movement that started in the 30s and continued on into the 70s. Aaron Copland, Roy Harris and Samuel Barber are all close to my heart. Barber's song output certainly has remained a major influence. He strikes the perfect balance between having an individual voice and being steeped in European culture, and yet he's also very American. He found an extended tonal language that he stuck with. Barber reminds me a lot of Benjamin Britten, who is also a huge influence. I would also include Leonard Bernstein (who, of course, got me into music in the first place) as well as Glass and Reich.

My mother grew up in Morocco and Algeria, so I've listened to a lot of North African and Andalusian music. You can probably detect these flavors and colors when Conspirare performs "Triptych" and "The Ecstasies Above." Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Nicolas Gombert and Monteverdi are influences of a different variety. Stravinsky for his orchestration and Schoenberg for his boundary-pushing are equally important to me.

Conspirare: How do the pieces that Conspirare will perform this week [and later record] fit together?

O'Regan: The two main pillars are "Triptych" and "The Ecstasies Above." Both are for chorus and strings. All the pieces fit because there's a sense of ecumenical spirituality in both text and musical settings. When I started composing, I was often writing for chapels and cathedrals in the UK, as that's where the finest vocal ensembles were (and still are to this day). I try to write music that is engaging and progressive but also doesn't alienate anyone. This ecumenical approach has always stuck with me. While my mother was brought up a Muslim and my father a Christian, I was never forced into any particular religious direction and, as a result, I learned to embrace diversity rather than division.

What does all this sacred music mean? It means quite a lot to many different people. I always go back to architecture. Consider a great cathedral or temple of any faith – it's relevant to those both inside and outside of the structure. There is awe and wonder, no matter what one's background might be. This music is not aimed at any one particular religious group. I wish people to take something away from it, be they of any faith or none. The text for "Ecstasies" is taken from Edgar Allan Poe, an American poet and writer who is, perhaps, more widely known in Europe than in this country. From the Koranic source of the name for the protagonist, Israfil, the story is refashioned by Poe into a homage ecumenicity to an all-encompassing angel of music. "Triptych" is taken from a number of sacred and secular sources, with each snippet of text contributing to a multi-faceted approach. "Threshold of Night" is loosely Advent-related, however it was

completed on the one year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's landfall, so the words and music take on quite a different meaning.

Conspirare: [And what about the newest piece, based on the Neruda poem?](#)

O'Regan: This is a very good example of the universally spiritual writing I am talking about. The translated title is "Maybe We Have Time." It's a very beautiful poem that can speak to anyone. This is about the consequences of the pressure we all feel, as individuals or as a society, to perpetually "move forward" without finding the time for rest and introspection. Neruda writes at the end, "And so I think that maybe/at last we could be just/or at last we could simply be." We all need time to reflect.

Conspirare: [How would you describe your composing process?](#)

O'Regan: The text almost always comes first and usually in dialogue with the commissioners. The Neruda was suggested by Craig in the English translation at first, but I opted to set it in the original Spanish in the end. I'm a pretty bad sketcher of drafts. I tend to think a lot about the piece and then it all comes out in one burst of writing. In my opinion, too much choral music sounds like piano music that's being sung. I'm blessed by not being a very good pianist. I think about the person, the performing group, place, time of year, everything. Writing it all out tends to be fast and furious with me. The Neruda piece was written on a tight deadline. It took a few weeks, as I was working on my opera concurrently. Often there is a sense of epiphany at the beginning. Practitioners of music and mathematics are often thought to share a certain sensibility. You see, the solution often comes to a mathematician very quickly but the bulk of work is spent finding the proof. Vision in composing can come very quickly for me. But working that vision out into something tangible is where the time is spent.

Conspirare: [Can you compare the British and American choral styles?](#)

O'Regan: They are completely different traditions. The worst examples of both are how they try to imitate each other. Each one is fed by its own composers, performers, and cultures. The British style comes out of 900 years of resonant acoustics – often maintained to this day by boy trebles. In addition, the composers of this music tend to come out of being performers themselves.

The American tradition has a whole range of other sources that the UK has never had, such as gospel, African American spirituals, jazz, in addition to music that came over from continental Europe that never made its way to the UK, especially, for example, Scandinavian repertoire and techniques. American choirs have greater vibrancy. Conspirare has a beautiful mix of the male and female voices. It contains a suppleness of the European tradition with that vibrancy that is so hard to find in the UK. The UK

sound is a very pure, delicate sound, but not one that has a visceral feel. There are very few professional choirs in the UK.

Conspirare: From your point of view, how is choral music doing these days?

O'Regan: In terms of performance, it's fantastic. In terms of repertoire, it's weak. That's a real problem. There is division growing between choral music and instrumental/operatic music. Choral music, on the whole, is performed by amateurs in schools and churches and is sometimes looked down upon because of it. Symphonic and operatic music is mostly professional. There's a popular misunderstanding that choral music is simple. Nothing could be further from the truth. At the recent American Choral Directors Association meetings in Miami, I heard some of the greatest performers ever. Incredible! With one exception – the modern music was somewhat populist and not very interesting for, I suspect, listeners or performers. But I believe that is changing.

When writing for choruses, there is no reason for pandering. Take children's literature as an example: one of the reasons the Harry Potter novels became so popular was because they were not dumbed-down to kids. Choral music must be part of a far larger canvas. It must be linked to the great canon of outstanding music. This is why I was drawn to Craig and Conspirare. Where does modern choral music fit? Remove the word choral from it for a moment. It's simply great music that is sung!

Conspirare: What future projects are you working on?

O'Regan: This concert by Conspirare will be recorded for Harmonia Mundi in the days following the performances and I'm very excited about that. I'm at work on creating a new opera from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through a commission from American Opera Projects in New York and OperaGenesis of the Royal Opera in London. I've done the piano-vocal parts and we will workshop it this winter. My new position as Fellow in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge, begins in October. I'm composing a big piece for the St. Cecilia Festival in London that combines the choirs of Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral and St. Paul's Cathedral. My secular oratorio, *Stolen Voices*, written for the United Nations, will be premiered in this February in the General Assembly Building of the UN in New York.