**Hugh Wood** (b. 1932)

Edward Venn

Hugh Wood is one of the leading British composers of his generation. In his contributions to all of the major musical genres (with the sole exception of opera), he has focused on the renewal rather than the rejection of tradition. He has taught at Morley College and the Royal Academy of Music, and at Glasgow and Liverpool Universities, and he joined the Music faculty of Cambridge University in 1976. A year later, he was appointed lecturer in Music and Fellow of Churchill College; he retired in 1999.

Hugh Wood was born in 1932 into a music-loving family, and though he ultimately studied Modern History at Oxford, music remained central to his extra-curricular activities both at school and at university. Formal music study commenced in 1954 with lessons from William Lloyd Webber; later, Wood studied with Iain Hamilton, Anthony Milner and Mátyás Seiber. The Bryanston (later Dartington) Summer School provided numerous opportunities to engage with early- and mid-twentieth century music: above all, the experience of hearing the music of the Second Viennese School proved pivotal. Wood first responded to this encounter in chamber works written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and labelled his Variations For Viola And Piano (1957-8) his Op. 1 in recognition that he had discovered his own voice. The presence in this work of a quotation from Beethoven is significant, revealing the extent to which his engagement with twentieth-century modernism was informed by broader musical traditions. Subsequent works continued to explore small forces—Wood has remained committed to chamber music throughout his career—and in the Four Logue Songs (1960-61; rev. 1963), along with the earlier Laurie Lee Songs (1958-9), Wood’s sensitive response to twentieth-century English poetry is apparent.

Yet it was with the poetry of John Milton, in Scenes From Comusfor soprano, tenor and orchestra (1962-5), that Wood’s music reached a wider audience. The music is characterised by densely chromatic motivic writing, Romantic lyricism and dancing rhythms related to those of Igor Stravinsky and Michael Tippett. In this and the elegiac Cello Concerto (1965-69), the expressive fervour is underpinned by a tightly organised structure that owes something to certain principles of Schoenberg’s serialism (and Berg’s expressionism) without lapsing into dogma.

Nevertheless, Wood was aware that the closely argued pitch structures of his music might lead to fastidiousness; the greater emphasis on texture in the music of the late 1960s and early 1970s is to a certain extent a response to this concern. Thus in the String Quartet No. 2 (1969-70) and the Chamber Concerto (1970-71, rev. 1978), mild aleatoricism (incorporation of chance, inspired by, amongst others, Lutoslawski) is used as a musical resource, as is a mosaic-like formal construction drawn from Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. Though strictly notated and through-composed, the Violin Concerto No. 1 (1970-72) and the Song Cycle To Poems By Pablo Neruda (1973-4) bear witness to a continued freeing up of expression. An apparent creative block, coinciding with work on the composition of a 40-minute Symphony (1974-82), was resolved in the String Quartet No. 3 (1976-8). Both the quartet and symphony to varying extents outline emotional journeys from bleakness (or violence) to triumph. Their diatonic endings point to an increasingly relaxed approach to the evocation of traditional, tonal materials in Wood’s later output.

The poetry of Robert Graves has provided a continuous source of inspiration to Wood: sets of songs to Graves’ words were collated in 1976, 1982, 1983, and 1984, and in 2005-06 Wood assembled the song cycle Wild Cyclamen. Vocal writing accounts for around half of Wood’s output, whether in single-authored collections such as The Horses (Ted Hughes; 1963-7, rev. 1968), The Rider Victory (Edwin Muir; 1968), D.H.Lawrence Songs (1966-2001), the German-language Erich Fried Songs (2000), and Tenebrae (Geoffrey Hill, 2002), or in the collections of songs Op. 25 (1959-85), Op. 37 (1984-93) and The Isles Of Greece (2007). In 2010 Wood returned to three songs written in the 1950s, orchestrating them for string orchestra in Beginnings: Three Early Songs. To this list must be added two profoundly poignant works completed in 1989 – the choral-orchestral Cantatato words by D. H. Lawrence and Marina, a setting of T. S. Eliot for voice and chamber ensemble. Both were written in memory of Wood’s daughter Jenny, as was a third work, Serenade and Elegyfor string quartet and string orchestra (1998-9).

The 1990s gave rise to a string of major high-profile works: a Concerto for Piano (1989-91), a String Quartet No. 4 (1993), and a set of Variations for Orchestra (1994-7; rev. 1998). Wood’s recent music has tended to avoid the profound dramatics of his earlier output in favour of lighter, or more elegiac, works. The more popular vein that informed the Concerto for Piano can be found too in the Violin Concerto No. 2 (2004) and Ballade (2011), and in works such as the Clarinet Quintet (2007) and Divertimento (2007) Wood has incorporated more explicit reference to native early twentieth century traditions.

Wood is well known as a writer and broadcaster; a volume of his selected writings was published in 2007, giving an insight into his values and thoughts about music.

Key Writings by Wood

*Staking Out the Territory*, ed. Wintle, Christopher (London, 2007)

Key Writings About Wood’s Music

Black, Leo, ‘The Music of Hugh Wood’, *Musical Times* vol. cxv (1974), 115-17

Black, Leo, ‘Hugh Wood’, in Foreman, Lewis (ed.), *British Music Now: A Guide to the Work of Younger Composers* (London, 1975), 53-9.

Venn, Edward, *The Music of Hugh Wood* (Aldershot, 2008).

Chronological List of Works

String Quartet in Bb (1956-7)

Variations for viola and piano (1957-8)

Laurie Lee Songs for high voice and piano (1958-9)

Four Logue Songs for contralto, clarinet, violin and ‘cello (1960-61; rev. 1963)

Trio for flute, viola and piano (1961)

String Quartet No. 1 (1962)

Three Piano Pieces (1960-63)

Scenes from Comus for soprano, tenor and orchestra (1962-5)

Three Choruses for mixed chorus *a cappella* (1966)

Capriccio for organ (1966-7, rev. 1968)

Quintet for clarinet, horn, violin, cello and piano (1967)

The Horses for high voice and piano (1963-7, rev. 1968)

The Rider Victory for high voice and piano (1968)

Cello Concerto for solo cello and orchestra (1965-9)

String Quartet No. 2 (1969-70)

Chamber Concerto for chamber ensemble (1970-71, rev. 1978)

Violin Concerto for solo violin and orchestra (1970-2)

To a Child Dancing in the Wind for mixed chorus *a cappella* (1973)

Song Cycle to Poems of Pablo Neruda for high voice and chamber orchestra (1973-4)

Robert Graves Songs Set I for high voice and piano (1966-76)

String Quartet No. 3 (1976-8)

Symphony for large orchestra (1974-82)

Robert Graves Songs Set II for high voice and piano (1977-82)

Robert Graves Songs Set III for high voice and piano (1974-1983)

Piano Trio (1982-4)

Robert Graves Songs Set IV for high voice and piano (1966-84)

Songs for high voice and piano (1959-1985)

Paraphrase on ‘Bird of Paradise’ for clarinet and piano (1984-5)

A Christmas Poem for mixed chorus *a cappella* (1986)

Laurie Lee Songs for solo soprano and orchestra (1986-7)

Lines to Mr Hodgson for soprano and piano (1988)

Comus Quadrilles for small chamber ensemble (1988)

Horn Trio for horn, violin and piano (1987-9)

Cantata for SATB chorus and orchestra (1989)

Marina for high voice, alto flute, horn, harp and viola (1988-9)

To a Friend Whose Work has Come to Nothing for mixed chorus *a cappella* (1973; completely rewritten in 1989)

Piano Concerto for solo piano and orchestra (1989-91)

Funeral Music for brass quintet (1992)

Fifty Chords for David Matthews for two pianos (1993)

String Quartet No. 4 (1993)

Poem for violin and piano (1993)

Songs for high voice and piano (1984-93)

The Kingdom of God for mixed chorus *a cappella* (1994)

Variations for orchestra (1994-7; rev. 1998)

Clarinet Trio for clarinet, cello and piano (1997)

Serenade and Elegy for solo string quartet and string orchestra (1998-9)

Erich Fried Songs for high voice and piano (2000)

D.H.Lawrence Songs for high voice and piano (1966-2001)

This is the Record of John for mixed chorus *a cappella* (2001)

String Quartet No. 5 (2000-01)

Tenebrae for SATB chorus and orchestra (2002)

Cantilena and Fugue for trumpet and organ (2004)

Tribute to Michael Berkeley for solo viola (2004)

Violin Concerto No. 2 (2004)

Overture for violin, cello and piano (2005)

Wild Cyclamen for high voice and piano (2005-06)

Divertimento for string orchestra (2007)

The Isles of Greece, for baritone and piano (2007)

Clarinet Quintet (2007)

Easter for voice and piano (2008)

Beginnings: Three Early Songs for Mezzo Soprano and string orchestra (2010)

From the Pisan Cantos for choir (2011)

Ballade (2012)