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Chris Walton

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## Composer in Interview: Edward Rushton - an Englishman in Switzerland

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A time there was when it was *de rigueur* for the self-respecting English composer to sample the life and art of our Germanic neighbours. A little time in the *Land der Musik*, it seemed, might help them make their own a little less *ohne*. Elgar supped at the springs in the Bavarian Highlands; Sullivan, Stanford and others in the Leipzig lowlands. It remains perplexing to the German mind that a reference to the 'Frankfurt School' in conversation with an Englishman can elicit praise for Percy Grainger, Roger Quilter and Co., but not a word about Adorno. Even Britten would have studied with Alban Berg, had the RCM not declared him 'immoral', thus forcing Ben to seek out immorality closer to home. To be sure, the rise of National Socialism reversed the tide for a while (the present writer is typical of his generation in that he owes the quality of his musical education to German-Jewish émigrés). But Germania proves today as seductive as ever to the English. Thanks to better pay and employment prospects, our finest graduates are regularly lured across the water to join their countrymen in maintaining the high standards of provincial German opera houses and orchestras. Our composers might on the whole be not as popular; but mentioning the name of Brian Ferneyhough still elicits the same mixture of awe, reverence and enthusiasm in German conservatories and radio studios as would a reference to the Pope in Cracow or to David Beckham at Old Trafford.

Switzerland is not Germany, though the two have often before been confused by many a non-Swiss (usually German, much to the chagrin of the Swiss themselves). Despite its semi-mythical reputation as a pristine land of cuckoo clocks, brotherly love, banks and chocolate, Switzerland has in fact been the point of origin of many of the most extreme moments in modern culture. *Tristan*, *Ulysses*, *Le sacre du printemps*, Dada: without Switzerland, they might not have been. Home-grown culture has proven less spectacular, more elusive. There is in fact a new-music scene to be reckoned with, though the outsider may at first have difficulty finding it; and, once found, the difficulty can then be to understand it.

The composer Edward Rushton was born in

Norwich in 1972. After attending Chetham's School in Manchester, he studied at Cambridge University, where the prime influence on his development as a composer was that of Robin Holloway (himself a former student friend of Rushton's father, the musicologist Julian). There followed further studies, at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, before Rushton followed the now common path (described above) into the world of provincial German opera. Two years ensued as a *répétiteur* at the City Theatre in Münster in northern Germany. In 1998, he moved to Zurich where, despite initial tribulations, he has in a remarkable space of time established himself as one of the leading accompanists and composers of the younger generation. His first CD (of songs, piano and chamber music) is due out on the Guild Music label in 2002.

CW: *Why Switzerland?*

ER: I've landed here through a combination of private and professional circumstances, none of which had to do with composition. My Swiss wife and I decided to move to Zurich in 1998 after two years of full-time employment at the Städtische Bühnen (City Theatre) in Münster, Germany (she as an actress, I as a répétiteur). I auditioned and was accepted for Irwin Gage's class in lied interpretation at the Konservatorium. Two years of full-time work had shown me that I needed more time to compose, which the Gage class would give me, as it consisted of four days of intensive work every month. Financially, the move was risky, as neither of us had any prospects of work in Switzerland. But sometimes one has to jump in at the deep end. Anyway, I didn't choose Zurich for its contemporary music scene – the only living Swiss composer I'd ever heard of was Heinz Holliger. As far as new music goes, my expectations were that, at least in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (which makes up the majority), musical thinking would be under the thrall of the dominant neighbour Germany.

CW: *And were those expectations fulfilled?*

ER: Initially, yes. Experience in Germany had

shown me that the key concepts of 'eclecticism' and 'post-Modernism' are used as invective there, and that's the same here. So I expected little enthusiasm for my kind of music. Sure enough, an initial round of self-promotion, sending tapes and CVs to Swiss new music ensembles, provoked absolutely no reaction. My prejudices confirmed, I gave up thinking about performances and commissions here and concentrated on my self-promotion in Britain. There I've had commissions and been performed by the Schubert Ensemble of London (*L'an mil*, *Combat in the Year Thousand* and *Game/No Game*), the London Sinfonietta (commissioned *Cheap Drinks* and premièred *Lost City Life*), Faber Music (*Lost City Life*) and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. In Britain, I had the feeling that I was beginning to get a foot in the door.

CW: *So how big is the aesthetic gap between Britain and Switzerland today?*

ER: They're worlds apart. To me, brought up and educated in Britain in the 1980s and '90s, Switzerland seemed about thirty years behind the times. It was as if none of the important things that the 1970s had brought us (beginning with Robin Holloway's *Scenes from Schumann*, Colin Matthews's Fourth Sonata or Minimalism) had ever happened. Or as if those key experiences of the late '70s and '80s, the things that had made me want to compose in the first place (I'm thinking of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, *Three Screaming Popes*, *Chevaux de Frise*, Holloway's Second Concerto for Orchestra, the music of Judith Weir, Poul Ruders's Symphony, John Adams) had made no impact at all. Not even such a key figure as Sibelius features on concert programmes, or has had any influence on musical thinking. Yes, it's a totally different culture, which can explain a lot, but to me it seemed musically stuck in the dark ages of Germanocentric Modernism. This may all sound a bit mean and arrogant, but I think a lot of British composers would get the same impression of an overall musical greyness, as if the shadow of Darmstadt still inhabits the musical mind here. And the serious consequence of this general perceived dullness is that new music has an extremely small audience and a very bad reputation amongst 'normal' people. So the scene remains small and self-absorbed (in contrast to, say, visual arts or architecture, areas where Switzerland has a much larger international reputation).

CW: *If Swiss musical life at first confirmed your expectations, have there since been any signs of change?*

ER: Yes, there are now positive things in the air. Recently, I noticed people talking about plurality and diversity as if they were *faits accomplis* of

contemporary music, which must be a sign of acceptance of new ideas. And I've heard some very good things lately. Dimitri de Perrot's work for the dance-performance group *Gopf* springs to mind, as does the influence of Christoph Marthaler with his highly musical form of theatre. Marthaler, director of the Schauspielhaus (the main Zurich theatre), started out as an instrumentalist and composer, then became a theatre director, and now enjoys renown, respect and influence throughout the German-speaking countries. Also recently, Daniel Fueter's *Operette* (to a libretto by Thomas Hürlimann) was a highlight. There is a sense of humour, of game-playing there in the Swiss mind, I feel, and it's a vein more and more people are trusting themselves to tap into. And it's indicative that *Operette* was a total hit with the public. Fueter has a lightness of touch, an incredible ear and a wit that attracts people. I hope he can get some big commissions from big institutions and attract a larger audience to new music. Also worth mentioning is the phenomenal jazz scene. There's a density of jazz musicians here, given the size of the country, that is far beyond anything I've seen in the UK. I think people's need for new sounds is really lived out in the playfulness and innovation and energy that are to be found there.

CW: *Three years ago you were an unknown student in a lied accompaniment class; today you're one of the most successful young composers in German Switzerland. What happened?*

ER: Slowly, I started to make contacts in the musical world. I became the first composer-in-residence of the Hans Schaeuble Foundation at the Zurich Central Library, which, in addition to being the city, cantonal and university library, also functions as a sort of Swiss Music Information Centre. The residency involved a commission for a work for flute, viola and harp (*Les vieux dictionnaires*) and the chance to put on some other pieces in the library's lunchtime concert series (the song cycle *China Soup* and the piano trio *Game/No Game*). These were my first performances in Switzerland. The Library is also organizing my first CD, due out in 2002, while further commissions have resulted from the residency: a piece for cello and piano for the *Klang-November* festival in Aarau (*Views from the Lowlands*), and a chamber orchestra piece for Rätö Tschupp and the Camerata Zurich (*Imbert Fils*). And I managed to reach a much larger audience last summer by being in the finals of the *teatro minimo* competition, jointly organized by the Zurich Opera House and the Bavarian State Opera. My chamber opera for the finals, *Leinen aus Smyrna*, became joint-winner, so I now have

a commission for a full-length opera for Zurich as well as for a concert piece for Munich. The audience reaction to *Leinen* (to a brilliant libretto by Dagny Gioulami) was immensely satisfying, and I think that it has a lot to do with the nature of the piece. It's a 25-minute comedy with five female roles, based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus has died, and five women from his life are gathered at his wake, making small talk, bitching, provoking, openly fighting, eulogizing and finally demystifying the dead hero. Meanwhile, each takes the opportunity to spend a personal moment with the corpse. I'm proud that my librettist and I made people laugh while taking the art of comedy very seriously. Humour has been a thing apart from new music for too long in Switzerland, and here I see a big opportunity to attract a new audience. There's a good word in German: *schräg*, which means sort of crooked, playful, eccentric, a sidelong glance at things, that describes very well an aspect of the Swiss mind that I can identify with. It's an aspect very much alive in the visual arts, cinema, theatre, jazz and in conversation, but is banished from new 'serious' music under the influence of Germany.

CW: *If you were given the proverbial magic wand to change something about the new music scene in Switzerland, what would you do?*

ER: First, try and tap into the audience that's waiting for new music that it can actually like. Concert programmers have to do some groundwork in putting exciting, challenging and colourful new pieces into the repertoire. Secondly, find new venues as a counterweight to the plush of the Tonhalle, Konservatorium and Opera House. Too many people don't hear music because they feel slightly sick just setting foot in those opulent buildings; and there's no shortage of wonderful venues here just crying out for music of all kinds. I can't help feeling that this is an area where London could provide a useful example. Thirdly, there's the question of education. There are no education or community projects run by the ensembles, orchestras and opera companies here, despite all the resources being in place and despite the high esteem in which pedagogy in general is held in Switzerland. Some action there would go towards rediscovering a culture of new music amongst normal people. Having said all that, however, I think it's still naïve to expect large numbers of people suddenly to become interested in such a small, inward-looking field if it's not combined and integrated with other, more wide-reaching media. Theatre, for example, extremely popular in Zurich, is a great way for lots of

people to encounter new music. And it works both ways too: the theatre is inspiring to composers as well as audiences – it's no coincidence that my musical highlights mentioned above have all been associated with theatrical forms. I think imagination is the key – it's there (as the other arts show) but it's not generally associated with 'modern music'. And an imaginative attitude to venues, programming and education – and to the resources available – should be developed.

CW: *Your plate is obviously full in Zurich. But what are your plans in Britain?*

ER: I want to continue to build my work in Britain too. That goes without saying. I'd like to visit Britain more often as well, not just for the occasional concert, but to stay in touch with further developments in new music theatre. That shouldn't be a problem, as the two countries are closer than you might think, with great train connections, cheap flights and, of course, easy communication.

CW: *Is there anything definite in the pipeline on this side of the channel?*

ER: I'm in the middle of a piece for the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group at the moment: *Palace*, which will be premiered in December; I have a first performance of my *Three Fragments of Shelley* in October in Stratford upon Avon; and then I have to compose to a couple of commissions here, besides the one for the Zurich Opera House. Meanwhile, I'm eager to revitalize my contacts in British opera seen in the light of the success of *Leinen aus Smyrna*, and I'm finishing off another chamber opera, *The Young Man with the Carnation* (libretto: Tom Smith). There are many small-scale but highly active new opera groups in Britain, and I'd like to tap into that and try and get something onto the British music-theatre stage.

CW: *Has being away from Britain changed your musical language, and if so, how?*

ER: It's difficult to answer that with any perspective, of course, but I can see it getting more and more 'three-dimensional' and more 'grounded'. A too-heavy reliance on external impulses and 'programmatic' devices could lead to unstable structures built on air (however enticing the sounds), so I want to dig deeper into my own imagination, really to listen to what's going on there. I don't want to be too hard on myself, though: I think recent pieces like *Game/No Game*, *Three Fragments of Shelley*, *Lost City Life* and the two chamber operas are significant steps in the right direction for me, and show an increasing seriousness of intention under a sometimes comical, light and colourful surface.