

PERSONAL TOUCH

Pianist *Clare Hammond* explains how, contrary to received wisdom, introducing contemporary music into mainstream concert programmes can be a popular move with audiences

THE CLASSICAL MUSIC WORLD has an ambivalent relationship with contemporary music. We recognise that living composers should be celebrated and supported, yet new works are often programmed out of a sense of duty and presented apologetically to an audience that we assume is unwilling.

I frequently perform contemporary music, and, wherever I can, try to do so within the context of otherwise mainstream programmes. I do think that we have a duty to play new works, although my motivation for doing so is primarily self-interest. While many listeners will only come to a recital if they recognise the majority of the composers' names, I can

usually guarantee that they will be most taken with the more unfamiliar items. I have lost count of the number of times I have sensed an audience brace themselves for a contemporary onslaught, only to hear delighted comments during the interval. They didn't just last the course, but actively enjoyed what they heard and are keen to explore further.

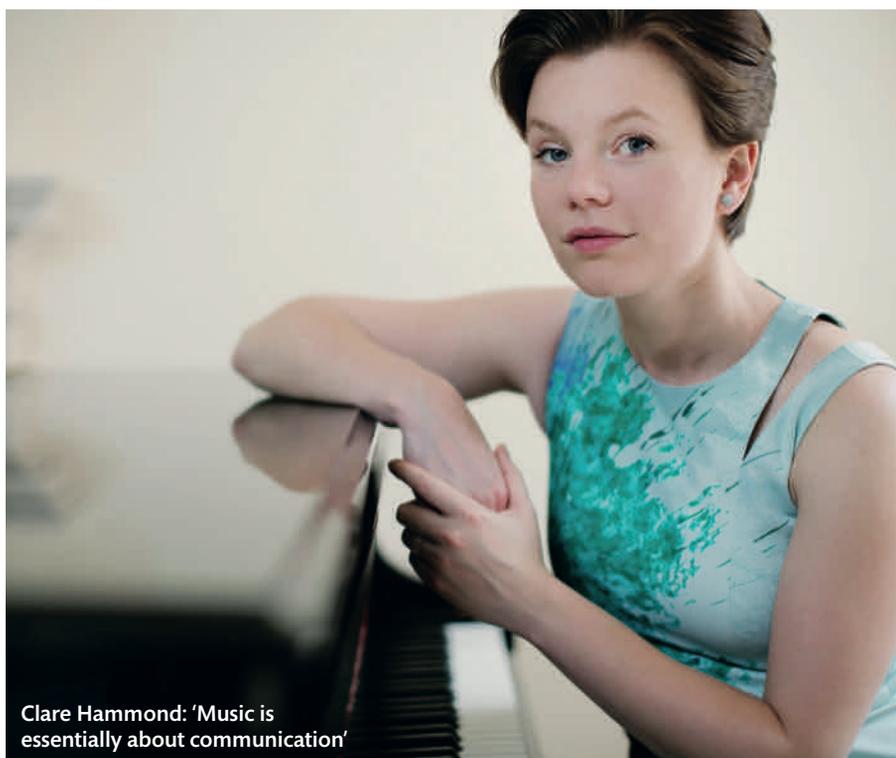
In fretting over issues associated with contemporary music, we often forget to ask what new music, or indeed any music, is for. It is not merely a comforter, the sonic equivalent of a hot bath; nor is it designed primarily to shock and offend. Music is essentially about communication. It may broaden our horizons, introduce new

perspectives, console, challenge or delight, but the one constant is an attempt to create mutual understanding between composer, performer and listener.

New music offers a particular kind of excitement that is absent in more established repertoire: audiences are often thrilled to be present at the world premiere of a work and eager to meet that rare phenomenon – a living composer. They discover that no music occurs in a vacuum. Even when written in a self-consciously abstract idiom, there is always something to latch onto in a new piece. As a performer, it is my responsibility to make that clear.

In order to achieve this, spoken introductions are key. Whether I discuss purely musical features, suggest a narrative, or talk about what this music is like to play, it is crucial that the audience is given a link with something they have heard before. Just as a group of eight-year-olds will be delighted when they spot the returning rondo theme in a Beethoven sonata movement, adults are fascinated to notice the textural similarities between a miniature by Robert Saxton and Gregorian plainchant.

In preparing this repertoire, I use the same techniques as with established works. A particularly lyrical passage might inspire me to mimic the human voice, while dense textures lead me to orchestrate a piece in my mind. A composer may provide a very clear narrative that I can follow or I may have to delve deeper to delineate a structure that I can project. When a passage has been complicated to the point of incomprehensibility, this in itself becomes a feature. We do not have to understand everything that we hear in order to respond to it emotionally, in music as in life.



Clare Hammond: 'Music is essentially about communication'

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YOUNG ARTIST FOCUS

When choosing new music, I am drawn to works that capitalise on variety, present new challenges, and fully exploit the breadth of colour available on the piano. This is why I was so keen to record a disc of solo piano works by the British composer Ken Hesketh. I have been performing Ken's music for over five years now and am continually finding new avenues to explore. The extent of his knowledge, not only of music but also of literature, architecture and iconography (to name but a few of his interests) is astounding and is reflected in the depth and subtlety of his work.

The principal work on the disc, *Horae (pro clara)*, was written for me over a period of two years. While certain features are deliberately aligned with my own preferences as a pianist, and therefore feel natural to me, I am also compelled to grapple with textures and rhythms that lie far beyond my comfort zone. I would hope that anyone who listens to the disc has a similar experience, and that they continue

on to the second or third hearing. Ken's music is truly inspiring and I am sure that whoever encounters it will be enlivened and enriched. 🎵

Horae (Pro Clara), Clare Hammond's latest solo album of music by the British composer Kenneth Hesketh, is now available from BIS Records (BIS2193).

www.bis.se



Clare Hammond studied at Cambridge University, Guildhall School of Music & Drama and London's City University, where she completed her doctorate on 20th-century left-hand piano concertos in 2012. Hammond's commitment to contemporary music has seen her give 24 world premieres and record four solo albums featuring music by 20th- and 21st-century composers. Highlights in 2016 include her Royal Festival Hall debut with the Philharmonia and a tour of Poland with a newly discovered concerto by Josef Mysliveček, a mentor of Mozart. Hammond won the Young Artist category at the 2016 Royal Philharmonic Society Awards in London.

www.clarehammond.com