

# Uncoiling the River

by Kenneth Hesketh (2018)

---

## PROGRAMME NOTE

*“Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.”*

Jorge Luis Borges, *A New Refutation of Time*

Kenneth Hesketh quotes these words in the score of *Uncoiling the River*. Profound and paradoxical, they offer an important clue to the metaphysical ideas that permeate this extraordinary piece - and, indeed, the latent cycle of works of which it is a part, including the award-winning *In Lctu Oculi*.

Of course music is an art of time, founded on growth and decay; movement and stasis; cycles, repetition and change. For Hesketh, such phenomena inspire larger questions about how we perceive and experience time, part of an ongoing fascination with philosophies of existence spanning entropy and mutation; multiplicities and labyrinths; transience; Memento Mori; and Cartesian theories of humans as unreliable machines. These he explores in purely musical, abstract terms from large-scale structure to minute details of harmony, texture and line.

*Uncoiling the River* comprises a series of labyrinths within labyrinths in which a rapid, toccata-like piano figure forms the spine of a pattern that quickly proliferates, coiling and uncoiling, shifting and mutating through piano and orchestra in ceaseless motion. As listeners, we become a part of this process and the liminal space it generates. Time itself becomes illusory, suspended yet implacable as wave after wave of glittering motifs unfold.

Simultaneously they expand and contract, appear to retrace steps then find pathways forward into tremendous, surging climaxes, only to drop into the centre of another labyrinth. Explosive outbursts punctuate layers of tension-rich dialectic, sometimes momentarily engulfing the piano only for it to re-emerge, rippling through and out.

The piece was composed for the virtuoso soloist, Clare Hammond, who inspired its sole programmatic element in celebration of the birth of her second child, Emme. Towards the close, she plays a set of desk bells of specific pitches, laid out in the shape of a Kolam. This is a form of impermanent drawing using media such as rice, flour or chalk, practised in many Asian countries and typically handed down from mother to daughter. In effect, the passage is a public-private initiation rite comprising aural patterns linked in spirit and form to the labyrinthine whole.

*Uncoiling the River* (2018) was co-commissioned by BBC Radio 3 for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with support from the RVW Trust.

© Steph Power 2019