

Howard Blake at 70

Robert Matthew-Walker talks to one of the most successful composers of our time.

You'd think that a composer, celebrating his 70th birthday on 28 October with a Royal Philharmonic Orchestra concert entirely of his music and conducted by him, who's completed around 600 works, must have written music all his life. But, on meeting him, you may be surprised. The composer is Howard Blake: the first difficulty is in believing his age, for he doesn't look seventy – 20 years younger is nearer the mark. Nor has he been writing non-stop, for in the early 1970s he gave up for several years. After leaving the Royal Academy of Music, in the 1960s he wrote much music for television and films. He also became a session pianist at Abbey Road, but none of these were areas on which Howard Blake wished to concentrate.

As musical gifts often appear early on, I asked when did he realise he wanted to write music?

"I had a local piano teacher, and I'd make up tunes for my family at Christmas and birthdays. Nobody told me to do it, I just wrote tunes, and when I was about eleven I wrote a march and took it to my teacher who said, 'Where did this come from?' I said, 'I wrote it'. At first he didn't believe me. But he realised I was serious, and took me through all of Kitson's harmony and counterpoint books. I loved it."

From then on, Blake knew he liked writing music more than anything, although his father 'Would not have entertained the idea that I could become a musician.' His mother was

musical and played the piano and violin very well. "She encouraged me, and it was through her that I had started the piano." So, with new lessons, I started writing music, which I've always loved doing."

"And you've never stopped?"

"Well, I did stop. I worked hard at playing the piano, getting Grade VIII with distinction. The Hastings Festival – the only Southern England festival offering a Royal Academy of Music scholarship – was the first time I entered any competition. I went in for the Bach Prize, the Beethoven Prize, the Chopin Prize and the Academy Scholarship Prize – and I won all four."

What happened to composition?

"Although I thought

I might make a concert pianist, I still wrote music, but nobody encouraged me much. At the Academy I chose organ as a second subject, but during the interview the subject got round to harmony, and I was told to bring in some original work. I brought a four movement orchestral suite, and they said, 'Shouldn't you be studying composition?' It had never occurred to me!"

I was interested to learn what genre most attracted Howard?

"An idea usually comes because somebody asks me to write something specific. At the moment, I'm discussing writing a string quartet – so I'm thinking about ideas for that work. I've written for string quartet but not a serious piece as such; if it comes off this will be my String Quartet No 1."

Doubtless the answer is whatever Howard Blake is working on at the time. He added, "I'd love to write a really big opera". He has written two operas – *The Station* is a comic opera about five characters on a railway platform, for which he wrote his own libretto. It has just been staged by an Australian company in Melbourne. The other is *Grandpa*, a concert opera that was performed in Adelaide recently. Blake claims, "I didn't know it was really an opera. Channel 4 commissioned it as an animated film, a children's television opera. That was about 1987; then I forgot about it. Around three years ago, a very fine children's choir wanted to stage it – then I realised it was an opera all along! I've also written two large dramatic oratorios, one being *Benedictus*, recorded by Sony; the other is *The Passion of Mary*."

This brings us to Blake's 70th birthday Royal Philharmonic concert on 28 October at Cadogan Hall. The 50-minute *Passion of Mary*, which concludes the programme, was commissioned as a *Stabat Mater* in 2001 and was revised, extended and renamed in 2006. Blake compiled the text himself on Mary, the mother of Jesus, from biblical and poetic sources. In its new form, bearing the impressive opus number 577, it calls for soprano, treble, tenor, bass-baritone soloists, chorus,



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The Passion of Mary

Oratorio for soloists, chorus & orch., London premier Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Patricia Rozario, Cadogan Hall, 28th October 2008

Benedictus

Oratorio for ten., chorus & orch., St Alban's Bach Choir, Martyn Hill, Andrew Lucas, St Alban's Cathedral, Nov. 2007

Songs of Truth and Glory

Cycle of five George Herbert songs for chorus & orchestra, Three Choirs Festival 2005; Reigate & Redhill CS June 2008

The Song of Saint Francis

Cantata for SATB chorus and orchestra, Brian Kay, Lettich Hill Festival 2007

Festival Mass

For double chorus and organ, Bristol Bach Chorus, Cambridge Philharmonic Society 2007

Piano Concerto

Original Sony recording pre-release by SonyBMG to coincide with perf. by William Chen, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Cadogan Hall, 28 Oct 2008

Violin Sonata

Recording by Madeleine Mitchell and the composer for Naxos release Oct. 2008.

Lifecycle

24 pieces for the piano, recorded by William Chen on ABC Classics; featured on Classic FM; Concert Nagoya 2008.

The Snowman (for narrator, boy soprano & orchestra)

Nigel Hawes, Robert William Blake, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Cadogan Hall, 28 October 2008. LPO, RLPO, N. Sing, RSNO, BBC Welsh, Ulster Orch, LCO, Toronto SO, Taipei, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Edmonton, Pamplona, Pau, Milan, Göttingen, Bremen, Budapest, Bruxelles, Dublin, USA perfs c/o B&H (2007/8. Available from Faber Music)

The Land of Counterpane

Cycle of ten songs by Robert Louis Stevenson for children's chorus & orch, Scottish Chamber Orch. 2007

The Snowman Stage Show (full-length 2-act ballet)

Sadler's Wells/Peacock, London 1998-2008; The Lottery, Salford 2008; Edinburgh Festival Theatre 2007 (available from Chester Music Ltd)