

Article by Dr Michael Downes

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To write a single piece of music that distils the essence of six great world religions – not to mention exposing the ethical consensus that unites them – must be a daunting proposition, to say the least. This, however, was the task set by the Global Ethic Foundation, led by the Swiss theologian Hans Küng, in its commission for the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Berlin Radio Choir. The text written and compiled by Küng for *Weltethos* includes quotation from and exegesis of sacred texts from Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, alongside a brief refrain pleading that humans should act with humanity – the overriding theme of the work.

It is scarcely possible to imagine a more ambitious premise for a piece, yet if any composer is equipped to meet Küng's challenge, it is surely the Sutton Coldfield-born Jonathan Harvey, who has contributed with great distinction to both orchestral and choral repertoires, as well as to the field of electronic music, in which he is a notable pioneer. Religious thinking – perhaps more precisely, the idea of 'spirit' – has been the consistent core of Harvey's music throughout a remarkable personal spiritual odyssey. As a boy chorister at St Michael's College, Tenbury, High Anglican ritual made a deep impression on him. After a period of atheism at Repton School, he re-engaged with Christianity at Cambridge University through reading mystical writers such as St John of the Cross. He subsequently immersed himself in Rudolf Steiner's writings about reincarnation and the spiritual nature of earthly phenomena; Harvey's desire to experience the transcendental states of which Steiner wrote led him to study Vedic meditation techniques, which in turn stimulated his interest in a range of Hindu religious texts. Most recently, from the early 1990s, he has been immersed in Buddhist writing and meditation techniques – he now describes himself as 'largely Buddhist'.

A superficial summary such as this might suggest that he has flitted capriciously between different systems of thought – but in fact this couldn't be further from the truth. The ideas he draws from different religious systems reinforce rather than contradicting each other: abstract spiritual concepts run as consistent threads throughout his output, regardless of the specific religious stimulus that has prompted the individual piece. Moreover, Harvey has consistently asserted the need for contemporary music to concern itself with big, important themes, not to retreat into trivial or self-referential preoccupations. Perhaps no theme is bigger or more important than that of world peace – the purpose to which Küng's search for ethical common ground is directed. Now that Harvey's serious illness has sadly made it likely that *Weltethos* will be his last major work, we can see it as a fitting summation of his remarkable career.

Not that there is anything remotely valedictory about the piece: on the contrary, it teems with complex ideas and the originality that has always marked out Harvey's work, whether for electronics or more traditional forces. This distinction is not one that Harvey regards as particularly significant, since his approach to both media is the same: just as he brings to the studio a practical musician's sense of how sounds live and breathe, he brings to the ensembles for whom he writes the ability to imagine entirely new sound-worlds. In his music, sounds mysteriously transform or dissolve into each other, or seem to fly around the hall, even when – as in *Weltethos* – no electronics are involved.

The orchestra used in the piece is large, with a huge array of percussion instruments whose geographical sweep matches the piece's subject-matter: there are Korean temple blocks, Chinese cymbals and bowls, Indian bells, maracas and gueros. These sounds, along with subtle inflections of the scale, are used to suggest the origins of the different religions – though it is never crudely imitative or 'oriental'. The cimbalom also contributes colourfully to Harvey's orchestral palette; so too does the organ, which Harvey intended to be 'the equal of the orchestra' in this work – an ambition realised to the full by the magnificent Klais organ at Symphony Hall.

The virtuosity of *Weltethos* is not confined to its instrumental writing, however. Harvey is unusual among contemporary composers in taking the technical and timbral possibilities of a choir every bit as seriously as those of an orchestra. This is perhaps in part due to his early training as an Anglican chorister – a background he shares with both Edward Gardner, who conducts the CBSO's performances, and Simon Halsey, as Halsey himself points out. Halsey has been intimately involved in the piece from its inception, and played a crucial part in its Berlin premiere. Not only did he train the choral forces, as Chief Conductor of the Berlin Radio Choir, he also took on the unusual role of 'second conductor' in the performance, standing alongside Sir Simon Rattle but beating entirely different patterns for the benefit of different singers and players. Such is the piece's rhythmic complexity that co-ordinating the two conductors took much painstaking advance preparation, as Halsey recalls in the excellent introductory video on *Weltethos* (no longer available at the Berliner Philharmoniker web site).

Though the Berlin Radio Choir are a fully professional group, unlike their counterparts in Birmingham, Halsey is delighted with how well the CBSO chorus have coped with the demands of this hugely demanding score. 'I was expecting them to have some problems retaining the work we'd done, especially given the necessary gaps between rehearsal blocks. But they have thrown themselves into the preparation with enthusiasm and great skill, and have remembered the music extremely well – a tribute in part to the utter distinctiveness of Harvey's choral writing.'

The CBSO Chorus members that I spoke to clearly share Halsey's relish for the challenges of *Weltethos*, and for new music more generally. Gordon Thornett, who sings as a first bass and who is himself a composer and music therapist, says: 'I think that

contemporary music should always form a significant part of our repertoire, and having been involved in the anniversary performance of Britten's *War Requiem* it is fitting that we should now tackle a work concerned with world peace. *Weltethos* is a complex work, and its preparation has taken many of us beyond our individual "comfort zones", but I have no doubt that it will make a powerful impact on both performers and audience.' Claire Noakes, a soprano whose day job involves running a network of twenty-four universities, has enjoyed the variety of demands that *Weltethos* has made of the choir. 'Parts of it remind me of Britten and [James] MacMillan, but taking the ideas and exploring the sound worlds further, with *ad lib* choral textures and spoken text rather than sung words. The spoken bits have actually been quite demanding – just one person getting a "t" or "s" in the wrong place can completely destroy the flow, so we're really having to concentrate. It has been hard work, but after rehearsals I have occasionally found myself humming a few of the melodic lines, which must show it's sunk in!'

The choir are not only required to use numerous different techniques during this work, they also need to swap between two languages, English and German. For the Berlin premiere, the entire text was in German (apart from the wordless vocalising on different vowels and consonants that takes place at certain points in the piece). For the British performances, however, the words of the narrator, introducing the ideas and history of each religion, and the optimistic refrain of the children's choir have been translated into English, as have many sections of the adult chorus. Other sections, however, remain in German, including the whispering that so atmospherically begins the work.

This combination of languages is employed partly for practical and technical reasons – for example, as Halsey points out, choral whispering sounds much more effective with the incisive consonants of a German text. However, it may also be interpreted, rather like Britten's use of English, German and Russian soloists in the original performances of the *War Requiem*, as a symbolic gesture, in this piece which celebrates shared human values in a diversity of cultures. The work's idealism is crucial to its involvement in the Cultural Olympiad, as Simon Webb, the CBSO's Director of Orchestral Management, notes: 'When Simon Halsey and I met with Ruth Mackenzie, Director of the London 2012 Festival, we went with only one intention; to ensure that the CBSO and Birmingham played a prominent role in the festival. We discussed various ideas, and when Ruth spoke of the ethos of world peace that is at the heart of the Olympic ideal Simon immediately recommended *Weltethos*, which he was instrumental in commissioning. The work was not yet completed, but the message, ethos and scale were so clearly perfect for London 2012 that Ruth Mackenzie immediately offered the CBSO the opening concert of the Festival.'

The CBSO's performances of *Weltethos* in Birmingham and London will be a fitting celebration of the ideals that underlie the Olympic movement, as well as of the work of this composer for whom music has never been an abstruse, self-absorbed art-form, but always concerned with the problems and possibilities of the real world. As Jonathan

Harvey notes: 'Among all the global think tanks, global internet action groups and so forth that are springing up, I am keen to posit the musical ingredient with all its mysteries as a powerful force for good, reinforcing the world of words.' Such is the beauty and imagination of the music of *Weltethos* that Harvey's aim – as ambitious in its way as that of Hans Küng when he first set out the idea for the piece – shows every sign of being realised.