

INTO THE WOODS

Composer **Christopher Hussey** talks about the peculiar charm of the woodwind orchestra and making a recording with the Czech Philharmonic Wind Ensemble to showcase a little-known instrumental line-up through a selection of contemporary British music



In March 2014, accompanied by conductor Shea Lolin, our mixing engineer, and two filmmakers, I set off to Prague, where we were joined by composers Gary Carpenter and Philip Sparke. There was a great sense of excitement and anticipation in our party as we were about to make a unique recording, the culmination of many months of planning and fundraising, and we were heading for the renowned Smecky Studios (home to many film score recordings) where we would work with some of the best orchestral musicians imaginable—the principal woodwind players of the Czech Philharmonic orchestra. Our aim in making this recording was to promote a selection of new music by British composers and to introduce a wider audience to the woodwind orchestra's captivating and kaleidoscopic soundscapes.

One could be forgiven for not being over-familiar with the woodwind orchestra – there are few ensembles of its kind, and consequently very few original works have been written for the medium. As a genre in its infancy, the woodwind orchestra has no fixed instrumentation, though by definition it is a large mixed woodwind ensemble that comprises a selection of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons and saxophones in their various sizes. Its closest relations are the concert band (or symphonic wind ensemble) and ensembles of the flute- or clarinet-choir variety.

Of course, the woodwind orchestra is part of a long tradition of wind music dating back to the 16th century and ranging from chamber ensembles like the wind quintet, to military bands and the concert band. The latter flourished in the 20th century, and its popularity endures throughout the world today, with

◀ Woodwind champion: Christopher Hussey

a well-established repertoire and widely-available recordings. However, the woodwind orchestra presents different tonal qualities from its predecessors, and in creating an album devoted to its repertoire, Shea Lolin and I hope to demonstrate the ensemble's prowess as a medium for musical expression in its own right, distinct from its close relations.

I first encountered the woodwind orchestra in 2008, when I was partnered with the Bloomsbury Woodwind Ensemble, an amateur London-based group with Shea Lolin as its dynamic and progressive young musical director, as part of the SPNM's Adopt-a-Composer scheme. It was during this collaboration, and the writing of my first piece for this group, *Twisted Skyscape*, that I came to recognise the wonderfully exciting possibilities open to a composer in writing for a woodwind orchestra, as well as the rewarding nature of writing for and collaborating with keen amateur musicians, but that's another story.

The woodwind orchestra has a highly adaptable and magical tonal palette – it can be, in turn, boldly vibrant and delicately beautiful, thrillingly powerful and hauntingly tender, earnestly solemn and joyously comical. The opportunities to explore subtle and intricate combinations of instruments and voicings within the ensemble, creating timbres that can very often evoke other instruments (cellos, horns, brass and percussion instruments, for example) give it a greater potential for tonal variety than more homogenous single-family ensembles like the string orchestra, flute 'choir', or indeed, a traditional choir.

The woodwind orchestra has a complete, balanced and rich sound, in which the lower instruments, the contrabass clarinet and contrabassoon, enhance the sonic spectrum. The saxophone section, which in the Czech Philharmonic Wind Ensemble comprises two altos, a tenor and a baritone, adds real dimen-

sion and can be utilised in a variety of ways—the saxes can, for example, add a warmth to the sound, softening and gluing the middle tones of the ensemble, or alternatively, they can be employed to give weight to the louder 'orchestral' sections, or add punch to a spiky, rhythmically-driven passage. This medium has a range of timbre and ability to emulate non-woodwind instruments that allows a composer to achieve such dimension and variety in their soundscape, calling to mind some of the aural illusions of skilfully written brass band repertoire, and endowing it with a symphonic palette.

Beyond our initial collaboration, I have continued to write and arrange for the Bloomsbury Woodwind Ensemble, and in early 2013, following the group's premiere of a specially-commissioned reworking of my choral composition, *Dreamtide*, Shea Lolin talked to me about making a professional recording of the work as part of an album to showcase the genre. It soon became clear that with our mutual passion for the medium and enthusiasm to increase its profile – it was time to make a recording.

In arriving at a selection of repertoire for the album, we were clear from the start that we wanted to demonstrate the range of the woodwind orchestra and the diversity in the types of new music written for it by British composers, ensuring that all works we recorded had in common a level of accessibility and appeal that engages the listener. Philip Sparke's *Overture for Woodwinds* and Adam Gorb's *Battle Symphony* are fine examples of expertly crafted, melodically driven and instantly memorable compositions that draw you in from the very beginning. Gary Carpenter's *Pantomime* is a joyous suite, characteristically comical and typically artful. It was originally scored for the '13 winds' ensemble of Mozart's *Gran Partita*, which includes horns and a double bass. Carpenter specially created a reworked version for

our woodwind orchestra. My compositions, *Dreamtide* and *Twisted Skyscape*, complete the track list, with four out of the five works on the album being world premiere recordings.

We were fortunate to receive the generous support of corporate sponsors including BASBWE and CASS, patrons John Holland and Ann Pfeiffer, and more than 130 supporters, whose contributions through our crowdfunding campaign helped us towards the costs of this project. We are very grateful to our mixing engineer, Jonas Persson, who tirelessly worked with me back in London mixing and mastering the album to achieve the distinctive sound we were all after, and to filmmakers Colin Izod and Tim Watchorn, who captured hours of footage from the recording sessions in Prague and interviews with the conductor and composers, creating a film about the making of the album.

We released the album on 17 July, to coincide with Gary Carpenter's First Night of the Proms world premiere, *Dadaville*. It is available from the website below, where you can also watch Colin Izod's 30-minute documentary and hear excerpts from the album. 

www.twistedskyscape.com



▼ Blowing in the wind: Shea Lolin with the Czech Philharmonic Wind Ensemble

