

# MUSICAL *Opinion* QUARTERLY

Price £6.00 July – September 2016  
Issue number 1508

Published since 1877 [www.musicalopinion.com](http://www.musicalopinion.com)

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“Ambitious, questing and pointedly European in outlook, the music of Peter Seabourne avoids easy answers.”

## Peter Seabourne – a composer of our time

Richard Whitehouse

Born in 1960 near Devizes, Peter Seabourne studied at Clare College Cambridge with Robin Holloway and York University with David Blake. In 1984 he was joint winner of the Overseas League Composition Competition then came second in the Benjamin Britten Prize for 1986, with works performed at various festivals and at London's South Bank Centre. Around 1989 he abandoned composition, citing a growing dissatisfaction with the new music milieu and the wish to re-evaluate his musical aesthetic. Only in 2001 did he resume composition, since when he has received awards from several international competitions. Seabourne's work has been commissioned by numerous European organisations, and his music has been broadcast in Norway, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the

United States. His now extensive catalogue comprises symphonic and chamber works, song cycles and an ongoing large-scale piano cycle entitled *Steps*. The Italian label Sheva Collection has so far issued five discs of his music, and it is the three most recent releases from this label which are considered here.

Earlier releases of piano music from Seabourne had given notice of a composer wholly (and perhaps unusually in the present day) at ease within the medium of solo piano. The composer speaks of having 'a romantic sensibility ... my art is a lyrical one', though the writing is of a technical and expressive range that indicates a wide knowledge of twentieth-century pianism (latter-day British examples include Nicholas Maw's *Personae* and Colin Matthews's *Studies in Velocity*).

*Studies of Invention* (Sheva SH065) takes its inspiration from Leonardo sketches across a series of 15 pieces, whereas *Arabesques* (Sheva SH088) is a sequence of nine pieces that embodies Seabourne's responses to aspects of the Alhambra as seen through paintings by the composer's aunt. The first disc under consideration here comprises the fourth volume of *Steps* – written with the artistry of Giuseppe Modugno in mind and unfolding along the lines of an 'Italian song-book' where such disparate facets as the village of Bertinoro, the life and work of Amedeo Modigliani, and the pianist's own playing all combine to leave their mark.

*Libro di Canti Italiano* (2010) is a collection of 19 pieces – 'cameo snapshots' as Seabourne calls them – such as ►

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embody many of those qualities which might be thought innately Italian. To take (not entirely at random) just six of these pieces – *Canto della Vita* (No. 1) launches proceedings with a harmonic piquancy and rhythmic agility that are mainstays of this opus as a whole. *Piccolo Canto d'Amore Tremante* (No. 4) constitutes an unanswered love-song, its rippling melody shot-through with an acute poignancy. *Carillon Triste* (No. 10) offers a deft assemblage of bell sounds and metrical patterns that evokes demonstrably powerful emotions as it intensifies. *Canto di Ammultinamento* (No. 11) takes its cue from a visit to the hiding place of Giuseppe Garibaldi

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as is embodied in music accruing detail over a distinct rhythmic ground-plan as stealthy as it is resourceful. *Canto Lontano* (No. 14) constitutes the rapt heart of this work – its three, subtly differentiated verses being marked off by ominous trills in the bass. *Canto Gioioso* (No. 19) concludes the collection with its dance-like verve and energy.

The fifth volume of *Steps*, entitled *Sixteen Scenes Before a Crucifixion* (2014), seems less of a collection than a linear sequence taking as its point of departure the Passiontide canvases by Caravaggio; translated into music that the composer has described

as '... overwhelmingly pessimistic and bleak'. This is evident from the outset of 'I (Numb – tolling – distant)', akin to a processional in its sombrely tolling chords and a halting rhythmic tread such as emerges gradually into the foreground before returning into the distance. Among the pieces that follow, 'IV (Flighty – enigmatic – delicate – fragile)' offers a degree of affirmation with its ecstatic trills and arabesques, though this proves short-lived in context. 'VIII (Troubled – rhapsodic)' summons a melody out of its texture to diverting effect, but this is outpaced by the restless manner of the music overall. 'XII (Meandering – lamenting – increasingly crushing)' is the most complex in its meshing of antagonistic elements towards a brutal climax. 'XVI (Very still – spacious – questioning)' is an ending of stark import as betrayal anticipates crucifixion.

Turning to the *Viola Dolorosa* album



and a work conceptually even more integrated, *Pietà* (2007) is a large-scale 'in memoriam' to the composer's parents whose title was inspired by the statues of Michelangelo. Certainly an often sombre introspection is evident throughout the five movements, the first four of which unfold as gradually intensifying pairs – from the soulful eloquence of 'Berceuse' (1) to the rapt inwardness of 'Elegy' (3), or from a quixotic juxtaposition of fractured rhythmic and sustained melodic writing in 'Enigmas' (2) through to the combative interplay of antagonistic elements that characterise 'Seven Roads' (4). Much the longest movement, this latter justifies its high-flown rhetoric as it surges to a violent close – after which, 'Reminiscence' (5) concludes this piece with a tenderness and repose that feels the more affecting given what went before. At over 37 minutes *Pietà* has few

parallels in the viola literature for its formal ambition and emotional breadth, but the composer has ensured that continuity goes hand in hand with diversity in what is a notable addition to its repertoire.

The performances on all three discs underline the advocacy which Seabourne enjoys among several notable European exponents. Ongoing commitments have also meant that Giuseppe Modugno has not yet been able to perform *Libro...* but the artistry of Fabio Menchetti is its own justification, while Alessandro Viale seems no less inside the more fraught expressive sound-world of *Sixteen Scenes...* Georg

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Hamann (violist of the Aron Quartet, whose cycle of the Schoenberg quartets on Preiser is among the best available) similarly has the measure of *Pietà*, not least through his close accord with pianist Akari Komiya in what a formidable duo partnership. This latter disc also takes in the two principal viola pieces by Britten – the smouldering pathos of the early *Elegy* (1930) and the stylistically more mature *Lachrymae*

(1950), whose varied 'reflections' (rather than variations) on a Dowland melody presage the climactic emergence of that theme. Britten's later transcription for strings may yield greater expressive nuance, but this original version has its own potency when so skilfully rendered.

Clearly Seabourne is a composer with whom to reckon, his music combining a demonstrably Romantic rhetoric with an always audible and yet never facile approach to tonality. Recent years have witnessed an expansion of his thinking – with three symphonies (and a fourth in progress), three chamber concertos and a song-cycle after Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* reaching fruition. Whether his music gains wider dissemination in the UK remains to be seen; should this fail to happen, it is likely to be less through antagonism from what remains of a new music 'establishment' than his refusal to emulate the facile thinking which nowadays too often passes muster for tonal composition. Ambitious, questing and pointedly European in outlook, the music of Peter Seabourne avoids easy answers in its search for an idiom such as embodies the past while it embraces the future: those coming to it afresh will find these discs a persuasive way into a compositional voice as distinctive as it is compelling. ■

**Seabourne: Steps, Volume 4**  
Sheva SH104 (48'58")  
**Seabourne: Steps, Volume 5**  
Sheva SH136 (53'42")  
**Seabourne: Viola Dolorosa**  
Sheva SH137 (58'02")



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