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Interview with Roxanna Panufnik

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Roxanna Panufnik, one of the most prestigious British composers of our time, unites the world in her very own way. Through her music she tries to bring people and religions closer together with her unique feel for the musical languages of different cultures. In an interview, Roxanna Panufnik talks about her love for the world and choral music and her current projects.

***FH:** You bring people together in your very own way through your compositions. Why do you think it is so important to bring religions and cultures closer together? And is there an international encounter that is especially memorable to you personally?*

***RP:** When 9/11 (the attack on New York Twin Towers in 2001) happened, I was pregnant with my first child and it left me terrified about what kind of world I was bringing her into. I felt powerless to do anything about it until someone reminded me that Christians, Jews and Muslims all believe in the same one God. This set me on a mission to find ways of emphasizing what we all have in common and also to share the beauty in the music and chants of all these faiths and cultures.*

Your compositional style is shaped by your passion for world music. Where does this fascination come from?

When I was 19 years old, my father gave me a beautiful old

book of Polish folk melodies. I was intrigued by how you could already hear hints of Eastern modality in these short tunes and this led to a fascination of what it is about each country's music that makes it sound unique to them.

For Interkultur and the Rundfunkchor Berlin you composed a piece for 10 international choirs – Ever Us. It will be premiered on May 1, 2020 in Berlin during the “Fest der Chorkulturen”. Tell us about it.

The Rundfunkchor Berlin & Interkultur have invited nine choirs from Brazil, Lebanon, Philippines, Belgium, Belarus, Singapore, Sweden, USA and Tasmania to come and celebrate Beethoven's 250th birthday in a concert at Berlin's Philharmonie. They have commissioned a 45-minute piece from me to showcase all these different choirs who will also sing together! The guest choirs will sing in English and the Rundfunkchor, who are the hosts, link the different choirs and endorse what they sing (in German). The words are from the great composer himself and some of his favourite writers (inc. Schiller, Goethe and Kant). These have been beautifully assembled and “poeticized” by Jessica Duchen and cover four main aspects of Beethoven's life, finishing with Jessica's own moving “Ode to Beethoven”. Some 400 performers are taking part – too many to fit onto the Philharmonie stage, so we have opera director Karen Gillingham who will be supervising logistical manoeuvres and also creating some beautiful visual effects in the process.

You compose many vocal pieces and have already published numerous works for choirs. What inspires you about choral music?

When I was growing up I sang in many fantastic school choirs – this instilled a love of choral music. My big “breakthrough” moment in my career was Westminster Mass in 1998, and this seems to have generated mostly choral commissions. I love the intense emotionality and directness of choral singing.



Roxanna Panufnik (b. 1968 ARAM, GRSM(hons), LRAM) studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music and, since then, has written a wide range of pieces – opera, ballet, music theatre, choral works, orchestral and chamber compositions, and music for film and television – which are performed all over the world. She has a great love of music from a huge variety of cultures and different faiths, whose influence she uses liberally throughout her compositions. 2018, Roxanna's 50th birthday year, saw some exciting commissions and premieres for the BBC's Last Night of the Proms and a co-commissioned oratorio "Faithful Journey – a Mass for Poland" for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the National Radio Symphony Orchestra of Poland, marking Poland's centenary as an independent state. 2019 included a new commission for two conductors and two choirs, premiered by Marin Alsop and Valentina Peleggi with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and 2020 will see the world premiere of "Ever Us" for 10 choirs and a symphony orchestra commissioned by the Rundfunkchor Berlin's 2020 Beethoven anniversary celebrations.

Edited by Tadhg Gleeson, Italy