A Sovereign Hawk

for symphony orchestra

Martin Humphries

- 2015 -
Performance note:

In composing *A Sovereign Hawk* I sought to create a piece of music that would be equally rewarding to, and importantly, playable by amateur and professional orchestras alike. In doing so I have removed several avenues for complexity, forcing myself to create quality music from a more limited pool of resources.

Most notably I have restricted the rhythmic content of the work to just ten rhythmic cells - each is just one bar long, always begins on a down beat, and consists of nothing more complex than quavers. Players need only learn the ten rhythmic cells (printed below) in order to render the entire rhythmic content of the work quite playable by musicians of diverse standards. In addition to this, the piece utilises only one constant tempo (crotchet = c.132), metre (3/4), and phrase length (consistently grouped in ten-bar phrases), further removing potential hurdles for players of lower abilities. Finally, I have retained a largely consonant harmony within each timbral grouping (winds/brass/strings), providing each individual player (and section) with comfortable, melodic lines. However, by stacking one choir upon another, a more dissonant and forward-facing harmonic landscape is facilitated through otherwise highly playable individual lines.

The restrictions I placed upon myself were employed to help compose a work that is fundamentally accessible by those of a non-professional performance standard (i.e. youth and community orchestras). That said, the quality of composition and originality of the sonic landscape should not be lessened in any way by these criteria. I seek to forge a compositional language that is original, exciting, and rewarding, yet which does not require complexity as a fundamental component – music which is equally at home in professional and amateur contexts.

![Rhythmic Cells](image)

Programme note:

This work for orchestra takes its starting point in the muddy histories surrounding the last king of Wales: Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. By the end of his life, Wales had become an annex of England under the rule of King Edward I (Longshanks), a legacy which has made Llywelyn a controversial figure in Welsh history. Following a fierce rivalry, Llywelyn imprisoned his brother Owain Goch in Castle Dolbadarn for more than twenty years and took control of his lands. A contemporary poet of the time reflected on the way history may have been written if the brothers had united against the English - my composition explores this theme, with every attempt at heroism negated by the imposing walls of the castle prison:

There is a hero in a tower,
In long captivity,
A brave, kingly, sovereign hawk.
A hero whose loss I feel from amongst the living,
A hero who would not allow England to burn his border.

*(Hywel Ffrol ap Griffri ap Pywll Wyddel)*
Instrumentation:

2 Flutes
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets in B♭
2 Bassoons

4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets in B♭ 1
(each requiring straight mute)
2 Trombones
Bass Trombone
Tuba

Percussion (3 players):
Snare Drum – High Tom – Mid Tom – Low Tom – Bass Drum (with towel for muting)

Strings

Score in C

Duration: c. 4 minutes

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Mechanical, metronomic and unchanging (2/4 c.132)

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