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*The composer and historian of American Experimental Music David Nicholls, now Professor at Keele University, recalls Hugh Wood's teaching at Cambridge in the late seventies, and a friendship that has continued ever since.*

I HAVE ALWAYS been very fortunate in my teachers. When I first went up to St. John's in the autumn of 1975 my college supervisor was Ian Kemp, a wonderfully enthusiastic Tigger-like character, who tolerated from me a succession of essays on increasingly bizarre topics (climaxing with a study of the baryton). After Easter, Ian went on sabbatical (it suddenly occurs to me that my essays may have precipitated this) and so I spent my final fresher term up in the Johns organ loft with George Guest. George, in retrospect, was responsible for me producing my first believable exercise in pastiche composition, a not-quite-Bachian chorale prelude; the possibility of him performing it must have provided the necessary incentive.

My greatest piece of luck however, came at the start of my second year: Ian Kemp had by this time moved to Leeds, where he had been appointed to the Chair. The logical decision was to opt for supervisions with his then-temporary replacement, Hugh Wood, who would be coming up from London for a couple of days each week. My first meeting with Hugh consequently took place in the autumn of 1976, in the unpromising surroundings of a guest room over the cloisters in John's Chapel Court. I suspect that Hugh was as wary of me as was I of him: after all, he was a famous contemporary composer and I was what Tom Sharpe would undoubtedly have categorised as a grammar school tyke from Birmingham. More worryingly, I was also an ardent admirer of John Cage (and to a lesser extent of his work) which, given Hugh's musical sympathies, was potentially problematic. Not entirely surprisingly, therefore, Hugh seemed at this stage to be very serious and rather forbidding. But looking back over my work, I am struck by the warmth contained in even the severest of Hugh's criticisms, as well as the depth of knowledge he showed at all times. No essay – whether on Ars Nova motets or Messiaen's modes – passed by without helpful and often illuminating comment. Thus I learned not just conventionally but also by example, in terms of what an undergraduate should be able to expect from a tutor: tolerance, knowledge, fair criticism, encouragement.

During that second year, I was living in a huge refrigerated room in a college hostel on Madingley Road. The hostel was run, I remember, by a fearsome retired porter: among its other inhabitants was the president of the university Wagner Society, whose attitudes and behaviour rapidly confirmed my immature prejudices against Wagnerites. At some point during the spring, Hugh must have enquired after my fledgling compositions, as I have a vivid recollection of the sun streaming in through a bay window as I toiled away at a song for soprano and clarinet, to a text by William Empson. The poem, *Missing Dates*, was a villanelle, and I structured the song accordingly, with two varied refrains and free intervening verse material; the



style was distinctly sub-Birtwistlian. When Hugh examined the draft, in what may well have been my only formal composition lesson with him, his comments were brief, entirely apposite, and devastating in their accuracy. 'Why that high note?' 'Why not a more pungent dissonance here?' 'Why not transpose up by a tone the final pair of refrains, to end on a searing climax?' I don't recall any similar lesson ever taking place – even when, in the final year, I was taking composition, the format seemed to consist of me describing my current work relatively informally, and Hugh reacting in kind – but frankly, any further session would have been superfluous. In fifteen minutes of probing questions, Hugh had inculcated in me the absolute need to be painstakingly critical of my own work, just as he was of his. I have tried ever since to sustain the high standards expected of me that afternoon.

For Part II of the (old) Tripos, my Johnian chum David Owen and I opted for what I still consider the dream combination of composition papers – fugue, composition I and II, a three-hour essay, and a portfolio – with special papers on Asian Musics, and on Schoenberg. My principal supervisor was Hugh, David went to Sandy Goehr, and for Asian Musics we studied as a duo with an incredible group of Laurence Picken's postgraduate students: Richard Widdess, Alan Marett, Elizabeth Markham and Rembrandt Wolpert. That year was memorable for many reasons. I was sharing rooms with Rupert Bawden (a real livewire, who had the previous year, with Nick Hytner, mounted a production of *Mahagonny* in the old, ungentrified, corn Exchange); at some stage, with an ensemble that included David Owen, Tessa Knighton, and Sharon Cooper, I performed in Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, to an audience of approximately seven, at Kettle's Yard; and after finals, Paul Webster organised a performance of *Spem in Alium*, on eight punts, outside the Granta Inn. But what remains especially in the memory was the time I spent with Hugh. His comments on my compositions-in-progress were always casual, perceptive, and extraordinarily tolerant; they were rather inadequately marked by the dedication of a short ensemble piece, *Reflections and Refractions*. Hugh's insights into the work of Schoenberg were even more stimulating than one might imagine. His incredibly detailed knowledge of Schoenberg and his milieu was always shared with uncritical generosity, and left me with a lasting and substantial admiration of, and understanding towards, a composer who might otherwise have become anathema to my burgeoning enthusiasm for the American radicals.

I probably learned more (in concrete terms) from Hugh that year – 1977–78 – than in any other. But equally importantly, our friendship – which I consider one of the few constants of my adult life, over the last twenty-or-so years – blossomed. No longer was our relationship delineated by subject or place: following Hugh's appointment to a faculty lectureship, and fellowship at Churchill, in the autumn of 1977, the formality of our supervisions gradually melded into an informality of almost constant discussion – in his or my rooms, in London, at concerts, in the pub – on all manner of topics. Thus my learning from Hugh moved into another dimension: whereas, eighteen months previously, it had been limited to one hour, within the



confines of a Chapel Court guest room and the needs of Part I of the Tripos, it <sup>how</sup> ~~none~~ became an almost transcendental, ever-moving, educational feast. Again, the lesson learned – that the sharing of knowledge should never be subservient to the conventions imposed by institutionalised teaching – has remained with me, and has guided much of what I have done subsequently.

After graduation, I spent a year 'off' (attempting – and mercifully failing – to become a music critic, travelling overland from Kathmandu to London, writing music, and generally growing up) before returning to Johns as a postgraduate, researching the compositional techniques of the early-century American radicals: Ives, Seeger, Ruggles, Crawford, Cowell and Cage. The next five years – spent initially in a graduate hostel at Johns, as one of the self-styled Merton Hall Morons, and latterly in a two-up, two-down, terraced house in Norwich Street, which we inevitably named 'Seaview' – rather merge in the memory. But many images, however vague as to specific date, leap out: all feature Hugh as a central character, and most involve learning in one form or another.

One: visiting Hugh in London and seeing his delight in my ability to assemble models of animal heads from the back of cereal packets. Two: going to a Round House Prom, during which Hugh's splendid Chamber Concerto was performed. I spent the evening, petrified, sitting (quite fraudulently, I felt) between Hugh and various of his composer peers. (This, among other things, was a primal lesson in tact and diplomacy: I wasn't exactly enamoured of the music of several of them; nor was Hugh. Amazingly, neither of us articulated our feelings until we got to the pub afterwards.) Three: Hugh's wonderful, pealing, infectious laughter, at so many times and in so many places. Sometimes he laughed so fervently that I was scared he would suffer cardiac arrest. Four: our (unpublished) epistolary writings concerning a then-prominent music critic, whom we suspected of having a fondness for close encounters of the ovine kind. At the time of the Falklands conflict, we sent him off to Stanley, where he revelled in his pastoral surrounds, but ultimately perished in action. (If only. Baa!) Five: Hugh's loyal attendance at several performances of my pieces, including the rather dippy *Stars and Distances*, (which he must have loathed). His comments were invariably constructive, honest, and extremely instructive. He added exponentially to the learning experience that always accompanies live performance. Six (which strictly speaking comes a year or so after the period under discussion): Hugh telephoning with congratulations *immediately* after my first Radio 3 broadcast. (The sounds from the radio were barely dry.) Seven: attending the last-but-one rehearsal (prior to its Proms premiere) of Hugh's magnificent Symphony, conducted by Rozhdestvensky, at Maida Vale. If ever there was a point at which I recognised my own limitations as a composer, this was it; but my only (overwhelming) thought at the time was of complete and utter admiration for the work's composer.

There were also, of course, formal tutorials, as Hugh had been appointed my PhD supervisor. My general (and undoubtedly unreliable) recollection of the many hours we spent together is of the discussion of irrelevant topics: Hugh's collections of



ikons, and Woody Allen films come instantly to mind as typical examples. But I'm grateful on a daily basis for the other things that were impressed on me: the need to meet deadlines; the absolute necessity of writing as clearly and communicatively as possible ('Let's make this thesis *readable*'); and the importance of carrying out primary research in America.

Since the completion of my PhD, and especially since my departure from Cambridge in 1987, there has been an inevitable lessening of my contact with Hugh. Among other factors, events in our family lives – both joyful and tragic – have increasingly appropriated time we might otherwise have spent in continuation of the earlier intensity of our friendship. Still, there have been letters and phone calls, occasional concerts, and the odd special event – such as Hugh playing Gershwin at the reception following my wedding, or his 65th birthday concert, given in the Sheldonian Theatre in the autumn of 1997. Listening again to – for – instance – the Chamber Concerto, or the fabulous *Neruda Cycle*, was a timely reminder of both the compositional lessons I'd started to forget, and the compositional heights I should always be aspiring to. It was also wonderful to see Hugh in such good form. More recently, we spoke on the afternoon prior to the 'Last Night of the Proms' performance of Hugh's *Variations for Orchestra*. Typically, talk revolved around the fact that he had felt it necessary to revise the work after its first performance. Any lesser composer would have been entirely happy with that earlier incarnation; but not Hugh, who can never be content with any piece until it has been poked, prodded, queried, and confronted by the demands of performance, sometimes over a period of several years. That evening, the great warmth of the Prommers's response to what – in the context of all the traditional Last Night fare – was hardly an easy listen, spoke forcefully of the innate qualities of Hugh's music.

For a number of years, Hugh introduced me to his friends as 'my best PhD student,' honestly adding, of course, that I was in fact his *only* PhD student. My secret wish was that once Hugh had other PhD supervisees, I would remain the best. Reversing the equation, though, was easy: as a teacher and a friend, Hugh had no equal. I cribbed the title of this reminiscence from a short article by Lou Harrison (another, albeit more recent, hero) which had been penned, at my request, for a symposium on the work of *his* teacher, Henry Cowell. My final thoughts regarding Hugh could do no better than paraphrase the closing lines of a poem Harrison ~~wrote~~ <sup>wrote</sup> about Cowell:

In remembering Hugh I miss him,  
But then I remember him everywhere.