

Of wild seas, giants a

Paul Hindmarsh talks to composer Rory Boyle about the inspiration behind *Muckle Flugga*, his first work for brass band, and previews the rest of the music to be performed in Perth next week at the European Championships

Scottish composer Rory Boyle (b.1951) describes himself as a "brass band virgin". *Muckle Flugga* is his first work for brass band. "I'd been asked to write a brass band piece before and I turned it down," he told me when we spoke recently, "partly through ignorance I'm sure, but I also wondered whether I would have anything new to say in a set up where, because of the way the instruments work and the way the band is formed, a lot of the music sounds rather similar."

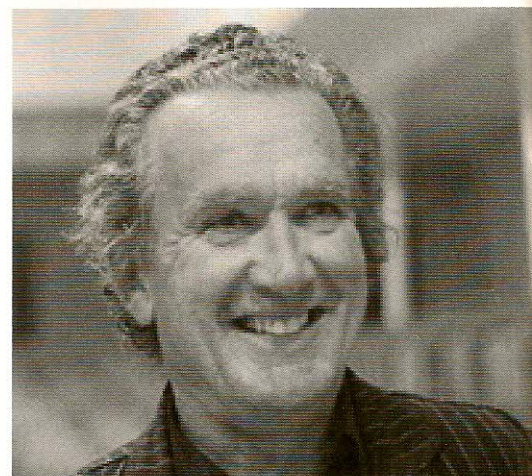
Perhaps the fact that he hadn't written for brass band before was one of the reasons he was approached by Andrew Duncan, Development Manager of the Scottish Brass Band Association (SBBA), about writing the set-test for next week's European Championships in Perth. It has become abundantly clear as the 11 champion bands have been fine-tuning their performances that *Muckle Flugga* brings much that is new in terms of the composer's sound concept and working out. It is also fearsomely difficult to play, even after some last-minute editing.

Rory Boyle's natural medium is the orchestra. In 1971, whilst he was studying with that fine composition teacher Frank Spedding at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow, Boyle won the BBC Scottish Composers' Prize with his first orchestral score *Variations on a Theme of Orlando Gibbons*. Other prestigious awards soon followed from the Royal Philharmonic Society for his *Symphony in One Movement* (1973) and *Clarinet Concerto* (1975). When his *Capriccio*, commissioned in 1998 by the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland, was performed at the BBC Proms, its conductor Nicholas Cleobury penned this appraisal of Boyle's music that also offers a 'way-in' to his first brass band score: 'While Boyle's Scottish roots are never far away, his music has a strong European rigour, with its own brand of virile, challenging,

but always comprehensible counterpoint, dissonance which is hard-fought yet never gratuitous, an unsentimental lyricism and unerring sense of architecture.'

Having spent many years in education, first in Winchester then in Worcester and, from 1999, back in Scotland, Boyle has also composed extensively for young people and amateur musicians. Following in the footsteps of his teacher, he has taught composition at the renamed Royal Scottish Conservatoire since 2000, and was appointed Professor of Composition in 2011. As *Muckle Flugga* amply demonstrates, writing for amateur musicians does not equate with 'writing down' to the performers. "I went to the Scottish Open Championships before I wrote the piece and I was bowled over by the technique of the bands," he says. "I thought, my goodness they can really play! When I realised what the band was all about, I thoroughly enjoyed the writing. I worked very closely with a great friend, trumpeter Bryan Allen, because I needed to get to know about the scoring in particular - all those instruments in treble clef and transposed by several octaves. Luckily with dear old Sibelius one can have the score in C and then transpose."

Given his background and pedigree, Boyle approached the brass band primarily as an orchestral resource. "If you look at the music on the page, it is quite thin in places," he observes, "with just a few things going on. I knew that my style would not suit the traditional homogenous sound of the brass band, so I didn't go down that line. This is essentially me writing an orchestral score but using the full resources of the brass band. I found the process intriguing, thinking of an open pallet of instruments, finding as much colour as I could, especially how could I play around with mutes to find different colours



and textures in the piece."

Right from the start, the sound world of *Muckle Flugga* is direct and highly dissonant. Boyle generates wave upon wave of energy, huge climaxes and strident effects. This is lean, athletic music for the most part. Its trajectory is linear rather than vertical. Boyle describes his harmonic approach as instinctive; it does not follow the conventions of traditional tonality. At the heart of the music is a very simple musical motif that the listening ear can follow throughout the piece - a simple falling semitone. "There are very few thematic ideas in the piece, but there are motifs running through it, coloured by clusters of pitches - you can't call them chords in the conventional sense."

The core motif first appears soon after the start on euphoniums and trombones like a foghorn (Ex. 1). It becomes a cry of despair at the first powerful climax, and later a tearful, lamenting sigh. Boyle seems obsessed with the semitone throughout the piece, whether as part of a running texture, a cluster chord, or a rhythmic gesture. Stretches of dynamic, fast-flowing material are set in relief by moments of haunting atmosphere, including some of the most demanding solos that I have seen in a competition piece. His approach to tempo and rhythm is also highly intricate, but founded on a simple premise.

Rory Boyle uses just two time signatures throughout *Muckle Flugga* - 4/4 and 6/8 - yet there is hardly a bar in which the layers or strands of music are rhythmically 'consonant'. There are many moments where each line is

nd a great lighthouse

following its own metre independent of the barline. For example, in Ex. 2a the syncopated semi-tone figures follow a five-beat metre, which cuts against the four beats of basses and timpani, while in Ex.2b a syncopated 6/8 cornet line is dislocated by a bass tone heard on every fifth quaver. This temporal layering is engineered to create tension and deliver musical momentum that in tonal music would be sustained by the twists and turns of traditional harmonic progression. "I quite like it when the normal metric feeling gets disturbed," says the composer, "and when I was much younger I wrote a lot of music with changing time signatures all over the place. Now I tend not to, but put everything into quite a simple frame, which the listener isn't always aware of. There is a lot going on in this piece, but I hope that the lines will be clear."

Rory Boyle's inspiration for his dynamic and difficult score is two-fold, as he explains: "I've long been passionate about the lighthouses built round our coasts by the Stevenson family. We have the Turnberry Lighthouse where I live in Ayrshire, of course, and there's the Bell Rock Lighthouse off Arbroath over on the east coast. There is also one on the small rocky island of Muckle Flugga, north of Unst in the Shetlands, the most northerly point of the British Isles, and I thought that was a nice place to begin. Thomas and David Stevenson started to build it in 1854, to protect British ships during the Crimean War, but also to prevent all sailing vessels from floundering on this wild and dangerous place. What the builders did fighting nature to get it built was remarkable. The weather was often so violent that the sea crashed over the summit of the rock and the builders had to crawl on their hands and knees for fear of being pitched out to sea. Yet it hasn't let in a drop of water since it was finished in 1857, such was the brilliance of the Stevensons' design."

Muckle Flugga is closer to the Norwegian coast than the Scottish heartland. Its name is derived from the old Norse 'Mickla Flugey', which means 'large steep-sided island' and there is a local legend that provided Boyle's second starting point: "According to the legend two giants, Herma and Saxa, each fell in love with a mermaid. They fought over her by throwing rocks at each other. One of the rocks became Muckle Flugga. The mermaid taunted them

that whoever could swim after her and get to the North Pole first could marry her. As neither could swim, they both drowned!"

The form of the music, like the lighthouse that inspired it, is strong and well proportioned; the character of the sound world is as vivid, dramatic and evocative as the legend that lies behind it. *Muckle Flugga* is in four clearly delineated parts.

Introduction: Wild Seas and Winds

Muckle Flugga opens with the full force sound of surging seas and howling gales. These provide the context or musical 'environment' of the whole work. The 'foghorn' motif (Ex.1) becomes a dissonant cry as it spreads through the band rising to a cornet trio (muted), which extends the line in a closely-worked canon.

The cry becomes a penetrating howl when all the treble, alto and tenor instruments down to euphoniums blare out in unison a high written E (top space treble clef).

Giants

After that brief but intense prelude, we encounter the Giants - their battle and eventual drowning. The pair emerge from the depths with the sound of clashing semitones at the bottom of the band, set against the ominous sound of timpani and bass drum. "I wanted a prehistoric sound here," Boyle says, "and a manifestation of size and threat. I thought it would be interesting to hear how the bass instruments would work together to growl and roar, even though the dynamic is quiet." As the rest of the band enters we become aware of their size and then as the battle commences, their power (Ex. 2a): "Although the music isn't directly programmatic, I had in my mind the two giants fighting for supremacy."

As their battle is played out, we also hear for the first time phrases of sustained melodic writing, that build on the principal motif, featuring in turn soprano and baritone (two octaves apart) and repiano and flugel (at the octave) (Ex.3). Rory Boyle refers to this as a dislocated melody: "I'm not sure where it came from really, but it's like being on a train. When a train is going very fast in open countryside, you don't really notice how fast you are going. It's only when you are in a cutting or when static objects like trees are going past that you

realise the sensation of speed. It's the same with music. If you write fast music, it doesn't feel fast after a while, so I put something against it which is slower."

After a brief moment of respite featuring muted cornets, which "because of their overlapping note values will sound less hectic", the sustained music gradually assumes greater prominence. Time appears to stand still again when muted trombones, crotales and glockenspiel interrupt the flow with an eerie premonition of the *Lament* to come. We are on the verge of a major catastrophe, which becomes all too real with the return of the now 'howling' material from the introduction overlaid by surging basses and shrill cornets. The moment of drowning is unmistakable, as for the first time we hear the whole band in rhythmic unison followed by gradually 'submerging' tones of a trio of cornets (using practice mutes) in canon and the low bass dissonance that disappears into the depths from whence it came.

Laments for the drowned

This haunting section is, in the composer's words, "a lament not only for the giants but for the many mariners who had come to grief on those treacherous rocks before the lighthouse was built. It also gave me the opportunity to add in a number of solos."

Each solo is extremely demanding in terms of compass and contour. We hear in turn, soprano cornet, euphonium, E flat bass, flugel horn, solo cornet, solo horn and ending with an extraordinary passage exploring the pedal notes of the flugel horn. Many of these are supported by vibraphone. Perhaps just as interesting for the listener will be the material for the band that surrounds them. For example, I found it fascinating that the solo cornet quartet entry after the soprano cornet solo, takes the 'drowned' music of the giants and stands it on its head so to speak. Our ears will also be drawn to a cascading canon, built on an octatonic scale (alternating semitones and whole tones), on cornets playing with harmon mutes against the evocative tolling of bell sounds in the tuned percussion. The interaction of soloists that follows is set against mournful sighs and weeping semitones from cornets and trombones, and tearful lamentations from the horns. In the background, listen out for what the baritones are playing (Ex.4).

Take away the octave displacements, which have been added "to give more of a sense of anguish", and you have what is, in fact, the only stretch of quoted material in the work - an old Scottish tune that Rory Boyle first used many years previously also as a lament in an orchestral work *In Memoriam Culloden*. When it returns in the final section to mark the start of the coda high on solo horn, the original contour is restored, but the rhythm is displaced by a quaver.

The Lighthouse

The sighing semitone is transformed in this final fast section into the main driving force of the music. The writing here is the most conventional in terms of layout, although no less demanding to deliver. The bounding energy is sustained by further rhythmic cross-questioning (Ex. 2b). The composer's fondness for leaping lines and closely worked canons high in the range creates great excitement, building to a powerful climax. In the final

pages Rory Boyle hopes that an element of heroism will emerge: "This final movement is all about noise and man's ability if not to harness nature, then to do the utmost to overcome the elemental and unpredictable power of nature. The music ends in the heroic brass band key of B flat, of course."

Muckle Flugga was commissioned by the Scottish Brass Band Association with funds made available by Creative Scotland.

Ex. 1: principal motif (concert pitch)
 ♩ = 120
 bar 11
 ten. trombones *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf*
 euphoniums *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp*

Ex. 2a: bar 76
 ♩ = 144
 euphs/bars. 1 2 3 4 5
 mp timp.
 basses/bass tbn.
 Ex. 2b: bar 390
 solo cnts (fast tempo)
 f
 4 4 4
 5 5
 tbns/timp (slower speed)

Ex. 3: bar 97
 ♩ = 144
 soprano cornet
 mf
 baritone
 principal motif
 etc with bar. two octaves lower

Ex. 4: Scottish tune, baritones (bar 219)
 ♩ = 60
 p
 etc.



On Saturday afternoon (3 May) the 11 competing bands in the Championship Section will be hoping to show themselves in their very best 'light' in the own-choice competition, which for many is the highlight of the weekend. With 11 different works to be heard from some of the most experienced and admired composers of brass music working in Europe today, there will be much to savour in the music as well as the playing. We will hear from two further contemporary Scottish voices. James MacMillan is one of the finest composers of our time, with an international reputation matched by few others worldwide. Having played in brass bands during his school days in Cumnock, Ayrshire, he has returned to his banding roots on a few occasions since, but *Canite Tuba (Sound the Trumpet)*, commissioned by the Black Dyke Band, is his only major work for the medium thus far. It is a *tour-de-force* of drama, meditation and humour, contemporary in language, yet direct and approachable in its effect, with plainsong-derived melody rubbing shoulders with chants from the terraces of his beloved Celtic FC. It is 25 years since Peter Graham, who was an undergraduate at Edinburgh University at the same time as MacMillan, wrote *The Essence of Time*, which was to become the set test at the European Championships in Falkirk in 1990. To mark this anniversary we will hear the first performance of his *The Triumph of Time*, which I'm told makes use of some of the best

material from the earlier work, which did so much to establish Professor Graham's career in the international brass band community. His Jules Verne-inspired cinematic *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* will be receiving a welcome revival, while *On Alderley Edge* enjoys its second outing in as many weeks, having been the test-piece at the Grand Shield. We also hear Graham's clever take on Bruckner, Miles Davis and Sousa, *On the Shoulders of Giants*.

The second premiere performance is by Philip Harper, conductor of Cory Band. He will be represented by his most ambitious test-piece to date entitled *The Divine Right*. Two recent pieces new to the European that I am looking forward to hearing are *Metamorphosis* by Dutch composer Jan de Haan and *REM-scapes*, a Bach-inspired work by Austrian composer Thomas Doss. The heady virtuosity of another Bach inspiration, *Goldberg 2012* (Svein Henrik Giske), is also scheduled and the list of own-choice works is completed by what seems like the obligatory renditions of *Music of the Spheres* (Philip Sparke) and *From Ancient Times* (Jan Van der Roost).

In Saturday's Challenge Section, there is also much fine music in prospect as the four bands have chosen music by a collection of established writers of repute from Europe and the United States - James Curnow (*Trittico*), Thomas Doss (*The Time Machine* and

Vipitenum Scenes), Alan Fernie (*Citius, Altius, Fortius*) and Oliver Waespi (*Treversada*).

The set test in this Challenge section has been commissioned from the young Scottish bass trombonist and composer Josiah Walters, who was formerly a member of the Carnoustie and District Youth Band and is now a student at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire in Glasgow. He has called his piece *The Pilgrim* and he describes it as 'a journey of development and emotion, encompassing three key stages of emotional state. The opening sounds are full of anticipation and uncertainty. This is followed by a passage of disillusionment and frustration, then moving on to a concluding stage which reintroduces the positive elements of the opening, yet closes quietly, symbolising an inner peace and contentment at the end of the musical journey.'

The competitive music of 2014 is taken into new territory on Sunday for the European Championships' first ever European Youth Day. I am thrilled that the organisers have asked the youth bands to prepare works from the traditional repertoire. Malcolm Arnold's *Little Suite for Brass Op.80*, composed in 1962, would appear to be perfectly pitched for the five bands in the Development Section, while the four bands in the Premier Section will have much to do in terms of sound and style to bring Eric Ball's iconic work *Resurgam* to life.