



# ELY SINFONIA

Volume 14, Issue 1

Hon President Raphael Wallfisch

January 2022

## Forthcoming Events

**Sat 30 April 2022 7.30pm**

**ELY CATHEDRAL**

**Mahler Symphony no 1**

**Dvorak Serenade for  
Strings**

### **Tickets Details**

£25 (Premium reserved)

£18/£15 (reserved)

£8 unreserved

Conc £15 in £18 seats

**Friends' Password will be sent to  
FES members**

### **Box Office:**

[www.elycathedral.org](http://www.elycathedral.org)

and click 'Book tickets'.

### **January Workshop: deferred**

### **Ely Sinfonia Enquiries:**

Tel: 01353 721007

Mob: 07798 826880

### **Why not visit our website?**

[www.elysinfonia.co.uk](http://www.elysinfonia.co.uk)

### **Editors**

Charlotte Dean &

IJmkje van der Werf

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 Thank you, Laura!

**Welcome** to this bumper edition of the January 2022 newsletter containing a fascinating interview with composer Colin Riley.

We urge you to read the January 2022 EXTRA issue on the website which is a fuller version of the telephone interview containing additional insights into the influences on Colin Riley's compositional style and his methods. You can also spot there a connection with our conductor Steve Bingham!

## **Stream-Shine: Ely Cathedral**

### **25 September 2021**

A kaleidoscope of orchestral colours

Romance, shimmer and power featured this evening in ways that only a large orchestra can produce. Here was a concert to watch as well as to listen to, with soundscapes conjured both from our regular instruments, often at the extreme ends of their pitch, and also from more exotic instruments such as a harp (Weber, Riley) or a contrabassoon (Brahms) or the large array of percussion instruments (Riley), the latter managed with astonishing dexterity and cool heads by just two players.

The evening started with Weber's romantic *Invitation to the Dance*, a beautiful, lilting piece with an infectious cheerful main waltz tune interspersed with episodes suggesting the request, hesitations, acceptance and joyful dance of the couple, ending on a quietly reflective, but in no way unhappy, note. It was not hard to imagine the swirling ball dresses of the ladies and the upright deportment of the white-gloved, tail-coated gentlemen, along with some real emotion underlying the occasion for this particular couple.



*Philippa Mo*

*Guy Carpenter Gullwing Photography*

Strings and woodwind answered and echoed each other, characterising the couple's formal but charged exchanges. The waltz maintained its forward momentum throughout. This was an overture to assure the audience that they could expect an exciting and enjoyable evening.

The violin concerto **Stream-Shine** by Colin Riley (b1963) was commissioned by Ely Sinfonia and written during lockdown in 2020. This performance was the occasion of its world premiere and it felt a privilege to be involved. Philippa Mo, the violin soloist, was charming and approachable when she came to a rehearsal. The writing calls for immense virtuosity, yet she played with great poise and with little indication, beyond powerful concentration, of its difficulty. She relaxed easily into the rhythmic, playful section, while her contrasting whip-cracks of pizzicato and the end-of-fingerboard or long-stretch harmonics were amazing. Her performance of the piece will have won round any doubters in the audience regarding contemporary classical music. As for the orchestra, Steve Bingham had already achieved this during rehearsals, enthusiastically and patiently 'unwrapping' the rich, clashing harmonies (and harmonics) and insisting on accuracy and clarity with the complex, sometimes jazzy rhythms. Viewing the concert on the live streaming revealed how light on his feet Steve was (almost dancing) when conducting this shimmering concerto.



*Ely Sinfonia rehearsal in Haddenham with Steve Bingham and Philippa Mo  
Guy Carpenter, Gullwing Photography*

After the interval, the harp and the more exotic percussion instruments were dispatched and the heavy artillery of three trombones and contrabassoon joined the back row of French horns, clarinets and bassoons to provide the additional power and rich base texture that one expects from **Brahms**. Throughout the long, magnificent **Symphony no 4**, the horns, woodwind and strings had sonorous, heart-aching melodies to relish, but lest they should get too carried away, the weaving textures and rhythmic complexities kept all players on high alert and prevented any tempting over-indulgence. The enthusiastic applause and bravos from the 250- strong audience indicated that the hard work had been appreciated.

Many among the audience spoke of the high quality of the orchestra. It is thanks to Steve Bingham, our conductor and Artistic Director, for continually raising standards and shaping this community orchestra into what it has become. Ely Sinfonia, and Ely, are truly fortunate to have him at the helm.

Charlotte Dean

## The Bigger Picture and the Building Blocks

In a telephone conversation with IJmkje van der Werf, **Colin Riley** talks about introducing contemporary classical music (and **Stream-Shine** in particular) to audiences and goes on to describe his composing process.

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**Colin's father was an amateur pianist and he himself started playing the piano and cello at an early age. He was interested in composing from the start, and became especially intrigued by contemporary music and the new things**

**going on at the time with composers such as Stockhausen, Messiaen, Cage and Boulez. Since most people begin with the classical canon or jazz, pop music or folk, IJmkje asked him what his route was into this new scene.**

When I was seven-eight-nine, all the music that I composed then, which I still have, were small things that sounded a bit like the composers that I was practising on the piano, such as Handel or Mozart. Gradually, as I was learning larger pieces at eleven or twelve, it was sounding more like Chopin or Debussy, and then when I was about thirteen it became more like Schoenberg because I was just discovering these people as I grew older. In tandem with this, I was listening to a lot on the radio. My parents always had Radio 3 on at home, and we would play this game where we would guess who the composer was. We would have to wait till the programme ended and then say, "Rachmaninov!" or whoever it might be. I remember getting more and more interested in stuff that didn't sound like music I'd heard before, for example Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

I think it came just at the right moment for a teenager. Although I didn't realise it at the time, discovering this new-sounding music came at exactly the same moment that I was discovering new things in life. And I loved finding something that I thought nobody else knew about. I had musician friends at thirteen and fourteen who'd be discovering things, and I'd say, "Ah, oh yeah, that's old hat; I've discovered *this*...."

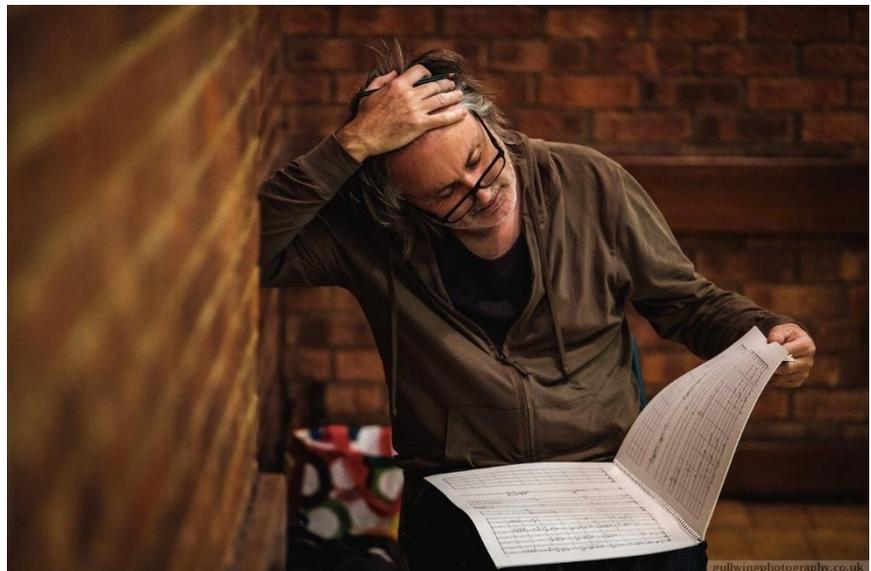
**It's nice to have had a group of friends to share that with.**

Yeah. It seems to me, looking back, that the late 1970s were quite a golden period for education. I remember a lot of my friends played instruments, and at school I was able to form a string quartet and then a string orchestra.

**In your programme notes for *Stream-Shine* you wrote that some of the inspiration came from the sense of wonder invoked by the beauty of nature and from a particular description of sunlight and water in the poetry of Thomas Hardy. Is it important for you that the audience knows that, or can they just listen and discover?**

It's both, I think. I do believe that for someone

coming to the piece for the first time, and maybe never hearing it again, it can be extremely helpful to have a few 'ways in' to the music. I try my best to create the sort of music which will grab them in some way and take them through the music so that they have forgotten that they are listening to something new. If we're watching a film for the first time, that film carries us through with a story and we forget that we are watching something new, and we don't mind. But with music it is slightly different: people like to hear something that they've probably heard before, because they get a little more out of it. But a composer is faced with a hard job because they want someone to



Colin Riley      Guy Carpenter, Gullwing Photography

enjoy it, but it might grow on a listener from listening to it a few more times, so a programme note is often hugely useful.

That said, ***Stream-Shine*** is not the sort of piece which is specifically about one thing only. If you didn't have the programme note, I think you might listen to it and think: 'There's some really bright sounds ... there's some very beautiful elements to this ... it feels very organic and flowing.' But whether you think it's about water, or sunlight on water, or the sky and clouds, that doesn't matter to me. I think it's just helpful to people to know what was part of my process. This is not music that goes with a specific film and has to be only for that single purpose. One part of the piece is meant to be very beautiful; it's as if you were meditating, perhaps, and just enjoying sunlight on your face as much as about looking at something on the water.

Then as the piece develops, the music becomes more playful and there's a feeling that you might want to dance, maybe forgetting what age you are and in a childlike way just enjoying losing yourself and being in that moment. The end of the piece comes back to the beginning, so there's a clear shape: it opens with a 'sitting down' moment of reflection or looking at water or sunlight; this makes you feel childlike and innocent again. Then the music folds back at the end. So the piece expresses something that we all can do. You can see it on lots of levels, I suppose.

**You have been a composer for 50 years and a lecturer at Brunel University London for 20 years, so you have been at the forefront of everything new that was happening. Can you say that during this time you have seen a general direction, or movement, or style that contemporary music is taking? (Or are there too many directions? Or are we too close to identify them? Or do you think this is actually not important?)**

That's a wonderful question, and a hard one! Being a composer myself, making art and also teaching younger generations of composers, it's very difficult to pinpoint what is really happening and what I think.

But I will say that at this moment in time there are so many ways that somebody can create music. We are in a kind of kaleidoscopic age, and I don't think that's going to change. Not only have we got huge stylistic variations, we've also got vastly different techniques that people use to compose music, and, as it's recorded, there are different ways of recording it. You can have somebody who's making music purely electronically, then somebody who is using old instruments, or voices, or jazz-inspired music or jazz itself, or heavy metal, or experimental stuff or stuff with folk traditions, I mean it's all there. I see that in my students and when I listen to the radio or when I'm online finding out about some new music. There's a tremendous amount of music out there, and it's quite a difficult job at times to find a way to teach when there are so many approaches. It can be quite bewildering when you're about to compose a piece. My only advice to students is to try to find something that they feel is about them, about how they feel about life, and to attempt to create something new which they think they'd enjoy listening to themselves and that they think other

people might enjoy listening to as well. That's all I think you can do.

Because if you try to follow a fashion, you might not be following your heart. However, if you only follow your heart all the time, you might produce the same thing every time. So you have to be quite playful with how you think about creating your next piece of music. You might have to trick yourself into doing something, or work with somebody new, or with a new instrument that you have never written for, or do something in a new way. That's important because you owe it to yourself to change, to develop, to have a bit of variety rather than just putting the same thing out each time, just with a different order of notes.

**When you begin a new work, do you first think of a motif or a melody, or a rhythm, or the colour or texture of a sound, as in which instrument, voice or material you can use to make that sound?**

Very often when a new piece is developing, brewing, I know the very general things about a piece first. So, for example, with *Stream-shine* I knew I wanted to explore very high sounds on the violin, which meant I would either be asking Philippa to play very high up the fingerboard or trying to explore some of the harmonics the violin can do. I also knew that I wanted this piece to feel as if a violinist comes on stage and literally just tries out a couple of notes and sends them into the air. And then it's as if they're conjuring up the music, like a kind of magician, and gradually forming it. The bow is always like a bit of a wand, a magic wand, and so that is also what the first two minutes of the piece was trying to do.

*Stream-Shine* is dramatic and that's what I wanted it to be. Philippa said, "Are you sure you want me to start with these harmonics?" It's quite an odd way to start a concerto and it's really tough. But I wanted it to start like that because I wanted the audience to be intrigued: "Ok, that's one note... two notes... What's the next note going to be?" I thought that was a really nice way of beginning a kind of story. Even if it's an abstract kind of story, that would lead people on. In different ways, that is how I approach all my pieces. I want something very definite, and if I stand back at a distance, I know that's what it will be.

And then you have to go to the tiny building blocks, the notes, and find some of the things that this music might become. So, for example, a

typical way that I might compose will be at the piano. I might just find two or three chords or combinations of notes that provide the mood or the sense of emotion that I think I want to encapsulate in the piece overall. Then I will come back to look at how I made those chords and try and perhaps make some more – just as an artist

would find a few main colours and then mix a few colours to complement those. Similarly, early in the process I gradually build a page or two of possible chords which I can then return to and use in some way. So I start with a big picture of what I want the composition to be and then I have to create the building blocks.

***We are very grateful to Colin for giving so much of his time.***

You can hear Stream-Shine again in the live stream of our September 2021 concert, available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeQzeSuLN0A> (Stream-Shine begins 21 minutes in).

Colin writes a blog about composing, teaching and creativity, which you can access here: <http://colin-riley.blogspot.com> And he has a very interesting new album out, *Isolated Pieces*, which you can find here: <https://www.colinriley.co.uk/older-projects#/isolated-pieces/> It raises money for the charity Youth Music.

A fuller, more conversational version of this interview can be found in the **Jan 2022 Issue 1 EXTRA** at <https://www.elysinfonia.co.uk/friends-of-ely-sinfonia/ely-sinfonia-newsletters/>

### Ely Sinfonia – from a newbie’s perspective!

We’d just finished our coffee break when I heard it - three crotchet B’s followed by a crotchet rest.

**B B B      B B B**

again and again. Smoke alarm in the kitchen, somebody said, and they were right. But it was too late.

One of the cellos had already started playing along with the B’s. Another joined in and a harmony began. Then various instruments from around the orchestra could also be heard contributing their own parts to this wonderfully unexpected jam session.

Me? I was in fits of giggles.

I’d recently joined this Highly Thought Of and Well-Regarded Orchestra (spoken about in *Hushed and Revered Tones* by an elderly relative of mine – “Oh my dear, how Wonderful!”), expecting it to be Very Serious and Definitely No Nonsense. But instead, I found the most welcoming bunch of musicians that I’ve met in a long time, enjoyable rehearsals that whizz by at the speed of light, and a conductor with the ability to draw the best from his players whilst not only keeping his temper but actually laughing along with us when things go slightly askew. Not to mention, of course, the ease of the orchestra to improvise on the spot to a riff of three B’s and a crotchet rest.

Oh, and the smoke alarm itself? Well, it was positioned up high in the kitchen, and cries of “We need a Tall Man!” ensued. To my (and others’) great amusement, the tallest man in the orchestra turned out to be the one who plays the piccolo.....

Hilarity apart, it’s great to be back playing in an orchestra. I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed it. Thanks for letting me join you, and thanks for helping me remember the absolute high we all get from the thrill of playing. Long may it continue.

Larissa Papworth, viola.

## Faure Requiem Mass at Solemn Requiem Eucharist Sunday 14 November 2021, 4pm

In a reduced orchestral version, scored by the composer, a group of Ely Sinfonia string players and two horn players accompanied the three cathedral choirs under the baton of Edmund Aldhouse.

Forming as it did a vital but subsidiary part of the liturgical mass, the musical interpretation was never melodramatic or sentimental. As the building darkened and the incense rose up into the octagon heights, the choirs sang with a purity of harmony and shaped phrasing that was truly beautiful, while the orchestra and organ added further colour to the singing with great sensitivity.

The horns contributed a distinctive timbre to an unusually scored string group, and there was rounded mellow tone from the violas, celli and double bass (who on occasion used the lower extension). The mass explored a wide contemplative and emotional range: mystery and magnificence (*Introit* and *Kyrie*), stillness, fearful anxiety (in the steadily pulsating pizzicati of the *Libera me*), reaching transcendence with the ethereal treble scoring of *Sanctus* and *In Paradisum*: the sustained high trill from Mandy Wyatt, the sole violinist, evoked perfectly the fluttering of angel wings. This was indeed an intensely solemn and beautiful Remembrance Mass.

## A warm thank-you to Laura

My Friends Secretary report for the 2021 AGM ([www.elysinfonia.co.uk](http://www.elysinfonia.co.uk)) mentioned the departure of Laura from newsletter production and I repeat the paragraph here for those who missed it:

“I wish to record my sincere thanks to Laura Millman for her fantastic help with the newsletter. She could always be relied upon to come up with ways to display material, sourcing graphics and working out ways to realise my picky or outrageous requests. Perhaps most notable was one to create a visual ‘wall of fame’ to honour those



*Laura Millman and husband Rob*

who had been members of the Friends for 10 years since its inauguration at the Bach suites performance by Raphael Wallfisch in 2009. Laura could also be called upon to produce a last-minute report of an event and we’d often share ideas for providing different takes on what is, normally, a pretty routine annual programme of events. She now has a young family as well as her work, and babysitting requirements mean she and her violin-playing husband can no longer attend ES together. However, she continues to play her cello, on a non-clashing night, in Cambridge. For the past four years, she has uncomplainingly helped me, despite not having the insider experience of the orchestra or the motivation she used to have, and typically she has offered

to help her successor in this invaluable role: I absolutely could not have managed without her.”

IJmkje van der Werf has very kindly agreed to help in her place. Laura’s parting gift was to show IJmkje the ropes and change the format from Publisher to Word. I am extremely grateful to IJmkje for stepping into the breach, and look forward to coordinating with her and benefiting from her new ideas.

Charlotte