

AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICO MUHLY AND JAMES MCVINNIE

Christian Lane

This article is the sixth in a series to illuminate new music commissioned for the 2014 AGO National Convention.

NICO MUHLY (b. 1981) is an American composer with a significant catalog of work across all genres—with recent collaborations from organizations and performers as diverse as the Metropolitan Opera and pop star Usher. He now adds the American Guild of Organists to his list of commissions; John Scott will premiere his new work for organ during the 2014 National Convention in Boston. I recently had the opportunity to catch up with Nico and his close friend, British organist James McVinnie.

Nico, we are thrilled you have composed a new work for organ to be premiered during the 2014 National Convention in Boston. Please tell us about the piece.

The piece is called *Patterns*. It's in four sections, each of which is sort of a rhythmic étude. The first is a perpetual motion with staggered and angular rhythms alternated between the pedals and the left hand. The second movement is calmer and is centered around an *idée fixe* in the left hand while the right hand interjects and ornaments. The third movement has to do with ways to divide the measure: seven, eight, six, five, four—it's all there. Then the finale is perpetual motion on speed—manic and hyper.

How did you first encounter the pipe organ, and when did you begin composing for it? What about the organ inspires you now?

I first started out by actually playing the organ; when I was a chorister, it seemed like a useful secondary skill to have. Writing for it is always a strange challenge, as each instrument is so specific but you can't restrict your writing to one instrument in one place. So, there's a sense of needing to write almost as if for an orchestra,



Nico Muhly (photo: Matthew Murphy)

where you sort of know what you're going to get but need to leave enough room for personal interpretation.

While every composer brings unique life experiences to his/her work, I suspect an Anglican choral background is relatively rare among your peers. How does this background influence your work today, both in works for these specific forces (choir, organ) and in other media (orchestra, etc?).

I don't know how to trace it too directly, but I know that I'm more emotionally interested in liturgy than in the Romantic period. I find that choral music teaches me more about how to make an emotional impact with orchestral forces than a lot of orchestra music! But I don't fret too much about it.

Would you tell us more about your experiences as a chorister? What made it special to you?

For me, the thing that makes the choral tradition so special is the feeling of playing on a team. All your individual musicianship has to exist in a context of the group; you can't split individuals. The intricacy of unison

singing—particularly in Byrd, Tallis, Taverner—is challenging, but as a boy, you haven't been told that it's hard yet, so you just learn it. It's a really great thing.

John Scott will premiere *Patterns* in Boston. How does your existing relationship with the performer influence the composition process?

It helps to write for John because he can do anything. But he also has such a specific gift for registration that I was even less specific about that than I would be normally; if you trust a musician, you give them the ability to really construct the environment.

Is there any advice you'd give to organists interested in performing your works?

I always say that *tempo* is different than *speed*. Spaces imply their own tempos, and for something to feel fast in, say, Grace Church in Providence doesn't mean it has to be the same tempo as it would be at St. Thomas Church, New York City.

Jamie, as a performer, what are your thoughts about this?

I would add that a big acoustic rarely means one has to play slowly. There are some acoustics in which you will never hear every detail of a piece, and some spaces will be so meager that the organ will seem stymied. For me, the crucial thing is to listen, really *listen*, to get a balance of pacing (or tempo, as Nico says), clarity, and cantabile of line suitable to every space and piece of music. We all know how playing a great organ in a large acoustic is a thrilling experience, as if you are playing the "whole building." Many organists are successful at doing this, but the real art is to make the instrument, the building, and the music itself sound as one living and breathing entity.

Nico, for organists unfamiliar with your oeuvre, are there any specific works you would suggest performers

engage first? Do you have any advice for organists who wish to learn and perform your works?

I would say that my organ music is pretty straightforward, but I would defer to Jamie on that. I think the *Hudson Preludes* are pretty demonstrably solid . . .

Jamie, what about Nico's organ music entices and excites you? What about it is challenging?

I love performing music written by living composers. I guess it was as an organ scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, that I first began to be regularly involved in performing new works. Giles Swayne, John Rutter, Tarik O'Regan were just some of the people who regularly wrote music for the choir. Their physical presence at performances and recording sessions somehow made their music more immediate and more vital, and to be able to marry a musical style through personality with a bond of friendship is one of the great privileges to have as a musician. Crucially also, these kinds of responses and connections continue to shape how I relate to music by composers of the past.

Getting to know each new piece from Nico has been a fascinating voyage of discovery for me as a performer. Interestingly, in some cases it has taken a considerable amount of time for a piece to settle into a coherent interpretation; but of course, as with all great music, the more you dig, the more you continue to discover. My new recording takes its name from the inherent cyclic quality of Nico's music, much of which is obsessively driven and often concerned with just one or two musical ideas. These smaller ideas or "cycles" are developed and molded into larger-scale cycles that form the structure of each piece. The musical figurations that make up many of the textures are often similar but never the same, which presents some very challenging moments. A tongue twister for the muscle memory, if you like!

Yes, the new recording of Nico's organ works is fantastic, Jamie. How did your collaboration—and specifically this *Cycles* project—come about?

Nico and I met in late 2004. He had written some music for Clare College Choir, and he came over for the first performance in Cambridge. We met in

the organ loft and talked a little about organ registrations—and then after Evensong, we all went out for drinks. Later that year, Clare Choir was on a tour in the States, which culminated in a wonderful joint concert with the Boys of the Choir of St. Thomas Fifth Avenue. For that trip, Nico composed the *Hudson Preludes* for me to play on the organ and *A Good Understanding* for adult chorus and children's choir with organ and percussion. Nico has written pieces for me, about one per year, ever since.

The idea behind *Cycles* really came about by accident. Early in 2012, John Rutter (composer and recording specialist) agreed to record some promo tracks of my playing the organ of Tonbridge School Chapel in the UK. One of the things I put down was Nico's

new music in New York City, and tenor Simon Wall (of Westminster Abbey and The Tallis Scholars) sings each of the seven plainsong *O Antiphons*. The first track, *Rev'd Mustard His Installation Prelude*, was written as a service prelude for the installation service of a mutual friend, the Rev. James Mustard, on the occasion of his installation as rector of East Barnet in April 2012. *Fast Cycles* dates from 2009 and is an austere and obsessively driven toccata. Toward the end of the piece, the music freezes in a constellation of G minor against F major, which in turn spits out a Frenchly voiced and ferocious toccata. The disc spirals to its conclusion with *Beaming Music*, scored for organ and marimba, which was written in 2002.



(photo: Matthew Murphy)

Seven O Antiphon Preludes, which ended up as the centerpiece for the recording. Nico wrote these short, intense musical reflections on each of the *O Antiphons* for me to play at the service of meditation for Christmas in 2010 at Westminster Abbey. John captured both the chapel's magnificent acoustic and lavish four-manual Marcussen organ so successfully that we went back later in 2012 to record all the other music that Nico had written for me over the past eight years. After all the editing, I realized I'd ended up with a cohesive program that seemed too good not to release as an album. Three dear friends make cameo appearances on the recording: Chris Thompson (marimba) and Nadia Sirotta (viola) are both at the forefront of

Jamie, having premiered many new organ works, how would you characterize the ideal role of the performer within the compositional process? What advice would you give organists interested in working with composers, and ultimately premiering works?

I've been lucky in that many of the composers who have written works for me have been familiar with the organ and its repertoire, and the composers who have been less knowledgeable have immersed themselves fastidiously in the genre. Put plainly, I always like to have as little to do as possible in the actual compositional process, and I also love to receive PDF scores with very little in terms of registration directions. I've found that



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Jamie McVinnie (photo: Samantha West)

I've had to encourage composers to be bold enough to write real *music* rather than a *stoplist* on a score, and also to trust the performer to make decisions about registration: it's what organists are trained to do, after all. On the other hand, I constantly have to remind myself of how specific someone like Messiaen is in his writing for the organ, so you also have to be able to offer advice about what a tierce is to the nonorgan-savvy composer: it's a delicate balance. If you are playing a piece by a composer whose work you do not know so well, *you* must immerse yourself in *their* music, too! Above all, a long-lasting and fruitful relationship between performer and composer is as much about knowing and trusting each other as people and friends as it is about being just musical colleagues. I instantly know how to bring alive a musical gesture by someone such as Nico, because we know each other so well. For me, making music this way is the most fun and the most creatively inspiring.

Nico, I know your opera *Two Boys* was recently staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. What major projects are you working on now?

I'm writing a big piece for baritone and orchestra about Frederick Law Olmsted, as well as a bunch more drone-based pieces.

If people want to learn more about you and your music, where can they turn?

My website—Nicomuhly.com.

To hear Nico Muhly's organ music, check out James McVinnie's new recording, Cycles. Purchase from Amazon, go to Bedroomcommunity.net, or download on iTunes.

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