Ralf Yusuf Gawlick: Creative Intersections

Interviewed by Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold

In his three recent releases for the Musica Omnia label, composer Ralf Yusuf Gawlick has embarked on an artistic partnership which, he says, 'is very special. I feel that we are like a family of artists, and I look forward to a continuing relationship.'

Gawlick is speaking of his ***Kinderkreuzzug*** *(2010),* ***At the still point of the turning world*** *(2012), and* ***Missa gentis humanæ*** *(2014). The forty-five year-old composer was born in Germany of Kurdish descent, educated in Austria, Poland, and the United States, and currently serves as associate professor on the music faculty of Boston College. His music travels across borders in a far-reaching, all-embracing way. Music for Gawlick is a language which helps human beings connect with their past, understand their present, and discover creative points at which the two intersect.*

As he was preparing to begin a new university semester, Gawlick took the time to share with FANFARE his very eloquent thoughts on his recent compositions, his recordings, and the role of music in our world.

CMV-S: *For Kinderkreuzzug what led you to choose Brecht's text? What do you find most moving about it?*

RYG*:* Brecht's *Kinderkreuzzug* (*Children's Crusade)* is among the most poignant and compelling anti-war poems ever written – having engaged with his poetry for over 2 decades, I was drawn to Brecht's epic ballad, the subject of which focuses on the truly innocent, the most helpless victims of war: war-orphaned children searching for a land of peace. The narrative springboards with dramatic precision from reality to intimate, personal contemplations of that same reality. Brecht's simple and direct tone betrays a lyric force and beauty that stems from and unfolds in an unadorned and episodic story-telling style that is never sentimental or callous. Most moving is the point where, 4/5 into the poem, the narrative shifts to the first person, and, in a moment of interior reflection, this time-specific crusade that embarks in war-ravaged Poland in the fall and winter of 1939/40, intimates ALL crusades of children seeking a land of peace… "without thunder, without fire- a multitude ever growing".

CMV-S: *It has been compared to Britten's War Requiem. What other cantatas on war might you have had in mind?*

RYG: Though comparisons to the *War Requiem* have been made – primarily in conveying the subject of "war, and the pity of war" in the words of Wilfred Owen - I did not have this or any other cantata directly in mind. The work, set as a cantata, is unique in the repertoire for children's choir in that the latter is not an auxiliary performing group to larger choral forces (such as the *War Requiem* or *Mahler's Third*) but is alone the vocal protagonist. Most works for children choir are relatively short or in a multi-movement format. *Kinderkreuzzug*, on the other hand, is a forty-minute cantata that unfolds in one continuous musico-dramatic journey, an exhausting musical crusade that places extraordinary performance demands on the children's choir.

CMV-S: *How does the work achieve both the human and social dimension?*

RYG: The *Kinderkreuzzug* cantata achieves these dimensions by articulating the obvious, namely that this crusade represents "nothing new under the sun": For indeed, there is nothing new in the deprivation, want, suffering, and death that Brecht profiles. Nor is there any redemptive moral hidden in the lost innocence, dogged hope, and simple sincerity of this little band of children. They are neither martyrs nor heralds of goodwill, but simply orphans who are hungry and tired. Their plight and wretchedness are actually quite unremarkable and represent an all-too familiar tale as each generation from time past to time present bears witness to such pitiful crusades. Even hope has become ordinary. In fact, the only extraordinary outcome would be for these children to actually find a land of peace. Is this probable? Brecht's children still walk and suffer in our collective conscience. Although my music may not give bread, it may just harbor their hope, and ours, for the extraordinary.

CMV-S: *What humanitarian crises today does it call to mind?*

RYG: Tragically, Brecht's "crusade(s)" continue in our day and age as humanitarian crises abound throughout the world. From the Syrian refugee crisis to the South Sudanese conflict, to conflicts in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Gaza and Iraq, to the exodus of children from Mexico and Lain America across our southern border, the "crusades" expand in terrifying numbers. At the end of Brecht's poem, peasants find a starved dog wearing a placard around its neck. On it is written, in a child's hand: "Please help, we no longer know the way." The dog performed its last duty by getting the message to people – it is now our collective responsibility to find and help these children…

CMV-S: *Talk about the instrumentation for the work and what sound you wanted from the children's choir(s).*

RYG: *Kinderkreuzzug*'s instrumental ensemble, string trio [vln,vla,vc], clarinet, organ, and Sanctus bells, reveals extraordinary versatility and sensitivity in interacting with the children's choir as it engages, comments upon, reflects and articulates the narrative in a all possible timbral possibilities. The choice of organ evokes a quasi-sacred reverence of the 'crusade to find peace' punctuated at crucial intervals by the ringing of the Sanctus bells to highlight dramatic narrative junctures. When writing for children's choir, less is more. That said, while unison vocal lines predominate, they are set in relief by bicinium textures and select, dramatic homophonic passages. Polyphonic textures particularly serve to highlight the interpolation and superimposition of the "In paradisum" text [from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass] on Brecht's narrative as the children wander from place to place seeking to escape harm's way…

CMV-S*: In At the Still Point of the Turning World you also use a 20th century poetic text. Why the T.S. Eliot Quartet?*

RYG: As with Brecht, the work of T. S. Eliot has been a dear friend accompanying me on my own artistic journey. "Burnt Norton", the second quartet of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is a mode of meditative poetry that mystically contemplates time and timelessness, metaphysical sensations that invite us to contemplate the temporalities of our existence. The circularity, eternal interrelationship of all time (past, present and future) is profoundly expressed in the opening of this quartet:

> *Time present and time past*
> *Are both perhaps present in time future,*
> *And time future contained in time past.*

And a few lines later:

> *What might have been and what has been*
> *Point to one end, which is always present.*

This rumination is further explored in the second movement where a moment of timelessness in time is gathered together to shape existential balance:

> *At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;*
> *Neither from nor towards … Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,…*

This speculation on time and existence through the movement towards/around/away from the still point inspired me to contemplate the image of the still point musically. This point is a perceived moment in time, an echo of choice, the one end that is itself timeless. In coming to associate circularity (around the still point), opposition, and self-similarity with "[t]he still point of the turning world", I set each of the eight words in the title, one per stand, in an octagonal arrangement (similarly, like a holograph, there are eight musical segments arranged octagonally on each stand). Each word could be the beginning or the end of the performance in which the performer, surrounded by eight stands, navigates around/towards the still point(s), himself becoming the music's visual still point temporarily…

CMV-S: *Why the cello?*

RYG: The work was commissioned by the great cellist Rafael Popper-Keizer, the artist who also premièred the work and recorded it on his debut album for the label Musica Omnia. The entire conception and timbral landscapes of the work are inspired by the cello; its extraordinary versatility regarding range, dynamics and sonority allows it to navigate through multifarious soundscapes shaped by pitched and non-pitched sonorities.

CMV-S: *How does allowing the performer to choose the order affect the relationship between performer and composer?*

RYG: There is always a great degree of trust involved/required between the creative process of the composer and the re-creative process of the performer. The performer breathes life into the work and both blesses and steers its existence through his/her own

inspired interpretation. This is no different with *At the still point of the turning world*. Although, as Popper-Keizer writes "the metaformal rules of construction are immutably defined, the performer must decide how to realize the actual form, structure, and flow of the piece." The work requires the cellist to make structural choices that will shape the work into a linear narrative. (The ensuing musical roadmap is completely established pre-performance- there is no aleatory involved). This degree of compositional decision-making necessary in the re-creative process deepens the relationship between the cellist and the composer: the artistic and musical kinship extends beyond performer-composer to include composer-composer.

CMV-S: *Explain what fascinated you about the relationship of mathematics and musical possibilities and what are the metaphysical implications?*

RYG: Music and mathematics share a filial relationship and are often drawn together (perhaps owing to the fact that music is number and proportion made audible). Ever since the Middle Ages, concepts such as "music of the spheres" entertain and generate mystical correlations that reflect the intertwined relationship between musical structures (micro and macro) and those of the physical world (seen and unseen). Invariably this relationship is articulated in a work such as *At the still point of the turning world* where there exist 192 octillion structurally unique performances. As such, the (near) endless performance possibilities structurally (musically) reflect Eliot's "moment of timelessness in time." The work meditates on 'the still point' and, just as a point is directionless and engenders no direction, so every pitched and non-pitched sonority in the piece helps serve and preserve a dramatic equilibrium that is essentially non-teleological. The individual events, suspended in carefully delineated registral spaces in which silence absorbs each point, line, and gesture, exist in what may best be described metaphorically as states-of-being, not becoming. Hence there is neither one single beginning, nor one ending; no singular past linearly processing the future. Rather, the segments hover in present states-of-being: in other words "nows." A sound is the "present" made audible; silence is both the memory of a now and the anticipation of the next present.

CMV-S: *You called Missa gentis humanæ a dialogue with doctrine. Explain?*

RYG: In the *Missa gentis huamnæ*, the dramatic fusion of different languages, ideas, beliefs and Augustinian-type "confessions" creates a profound dialogue with doctrine – the Latin Mass Ordinary. As a composer setting the Mass Ordinary, I am part of a great tradition that reaches back hundreds of years. Every composer must find his or her place in this living tradition. For me, setting the Ordinary is indelibly tied to my faith and my relationship to the Mass. The ritual of the Mass is both a remembrance and celebration of God's sacrifice for every human life. This sacrifice, his Crucifixion for our sins, is the most profound act of love and the redemptive essence of this ritual celebration. The source and origin of my Mass setting lie in including Christ's call to love from the Gospel According to St. John into the traditional texts of the Ordinary: "This is my commandment: That you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Love, so central to human existence, inspired me to augment the Latin Mass texts with literary reflections, meditations, and exhortations concerning it by authors throughout the

centuries, drawn from the main branches (Slavic, Germanic, Koine Greek, Latin) of Indo-European language families. Phrases and extended passages by Borges, Virgil, Brecht, Dostoevsky, Plautus, Zbigniew Herbert and Walter Scott establish broad aesthetic, devotional, linguistic and literary perspectives that engage with the Mass texts and with one another. The Mass thus becomes a multilingual vessel of cross-referential commentary, interpretation, reflection and even textual substitution for portions of the Ordinary. Yet regardless of varying literary aesthetics and traditions, all texts, including those that the Mass Ordinary comprises, are reconciled by the common appeal/commandment: love and to love. By embracing different languages and texts, the appeal becomes universal, and *Missa gentis humanæ* humbly reveals itself as Mankind's Mass.

CMV-S: *The Missa goes beyond traditional text setting by incorporating various linguistic and vocal techniques. What are they and what is their purpose? How do these relate to the idea of the Word made flesh?*

RYG: Unified by the text of the Mass Ordinary, the *Missa* explores a linguistic technique that charts the creation of speech itself. Each language (except the texts from the Latin Mass Ordinary) emerges and utilizes embryonic vocal sounds: humming, mouth-half-open singing vowels, singing the five vowels in rapid alteration, then syllables, words and phrases and finally complete sentences introduce each "worded" section. This process unfolds for all voices, suggesting the creation of each language from its parent branch. All languages transition from the Latin (and, in the case of the Kyrie, Greek) to present "commentaries" on the essential message of the mass: love. It is as though the world must learn to speak before it can sing.

The Catholic mass is a re-enactment of the core doctrinal tenet of the faith: "the Word made flesh". The *Missa gentis humanæ* symbolizes this concept musically by depicting language itself as "made flesh", through the sequential presentation of emergent human verbal expression: from humming to the construction of "the Word." The divine "Word-made-Flesh" is the name of Jesus the Saviour; in religious faith His name reveals itself as the most intimate Word because he literally incarnated to become one of us, fully human. It is this humanization of the Word that the *Missa* explores. For me, the most intimate realization of this concept is the name of my wife: Basia. The letters of her name provide the work's core, fundamental pitch material which I translate (individually and in combination) into musical pitches: for e.g B is B-flat in German; A is A; Es is E-flat in German, etc…

CMV-S: *Musically the piece is a journey through styles and time. Can you comment on that?*

RYG: The *Missa* encapsulates a rich palette of musical (vocal) sounds and devices: from plainchant, through Medieval two, three and four-voice polyphony to complex Renaissance counterpoint and then a suggestion of the more "homophonic" approach to vocal part music dictated by the Council of Trent from 1545-1562. There are also

harmonic and rhythmic references that touch upon many of the cornerstones of the Western musical tradition from the Baroque into the twenty-first century.

In particular, by choosing to compose a Mass for a cappella choir, I consciously embrace and allow myself to be in dialogue with the great polyphonic tradition that dates back to the late Middle Ages and continues in various genres into our present day. Essentially, the voices and lines unravel in kaleidoscopic combinations and textures in ever-changing tapestries of sound.

CMV-S: *Going back a little: you were born in Germany of Kurdish descent, educated in Europe and America. How does your "citizen of the world" status influence your themes and music?*

RYG: As a child born into and growing up in various multicultural and multilingual environments and moving between cities, countries and continents, I was invariably shaped and influenced by the various languages and traditions that I came in contact with. I see a parallel between the dialogue of old and new musical traditions and my own cultural heritage. I was born in Germany of Kurdish descent and have lived, worked, and studied on both sides of the Atlantic. Through my wife, Poland became my adopted country. Thus, an "old world" European background entwines with a "new world" American experience like a cultural Möbius strip. This stimulating symbiosis, along with a multiplicity of multinational cultural and professional experiences, has profoundly helped shape my compositional voice. My Catholic faith, life experiences and deep involvement with the other arts both inspire and directly resonate within the structural fabrics, psychological developments, and dramatic intentions of my music.

CMV-S: *Who were your composition teachers?*

RYG: During my undergraduate years I studied with Carolyn Bremer at University of California, Santa Barbara, then Kurt Schwertsik in Vienna and Jerzy Bauer in Poland. After that I took my master's at the University Texas, Austin, studying with Dan Welcher and Elliott Antokoletz and then my doctorate at New England Conservatory, working with Malcolm Peyton.

CMV-S: *What lessons from them and from your own compositional experience do you try to impart to your own students?*

RYG: Of course I want to impart specific things about the art and craft of composition but I also like to cultivate in them the art of listening and deriving meaning from that listening - in other words, listening as a profound aesthetic experience in and of itself. I urge my students to learn to listen actively, a skill that fosters a deep engagement with and understanding of the music. I also try to encourage them to find their road into a deeper appreciation of the sister arts - literature, theatre, dance, fine arts - so they realize that nothing occurs in a vacuum. No one has a stranglehold on the issues we deal with in the human condition, and no one can claim them for himself alone. If we are talking about Debussy, we read Mallarmé and study Monet, for example. We need to be engaged

in what is going on at that time. It's a comprehensive in-taking, it's fertile soil. This allows all of us to be in active dialogue with our cultural heritage and with a living tradition. There is an interrelatedness among the disciplines…"seeing" sound and "hearing" in color. If we aren't aware of our past and living legacy it inhibits us. We have always to be aware of our past and present cultural surroundings, and that is when one's singular voice emerges.

CMV-S: *You have been involved in creating music for several historic events: Kinderkreuzzug for 70th anniversary of WWII, 20th anniversary documentary on Berlin Wall – how do you feel music contributes to and marks our historical memory and conscience?*

RYG: As a German, both works you cite are based on subjects that bear heavily on me: Brecht's children still walk and suffer in Germany's collective conscience; the oppression from a divided Germany in the past casts an aching shadow that reaches painfully even into my own family. My engagement with socio-political events of the past extends deep into issues of personal, cultural and national responsibility and identity. In this regard, I believe that, in general, music influenced by or based upon historical subjects not only compels us to remember, honor and reflect, but also to confirm their ever-present, continuing relevance to our own time. Historical memory is a key agent responsible for forming an individual and national sense of self-identity. In this process, every artistic generation plays a part shaping cultural memory (an important subset); it stands at a crossroads of the "then' and "now" and must reconcile and find meaning in 'what was' with current paths.

CMV-S*: You have done some interdisciplinary pieces like the song-cycle Kollwitz-Konnex (…im Frieden seiner Hände) for soprano and guitar. What draws you specifically to her work and generally to art and poetry as an enhanced context to music?*

RYG: In her work, the great German graphic artist Käthe Kollwitz explores themes that are also ours, and, as such, part of a profound humanity with which we can and must identify ourselves. Her art is an art of social conscience that engages with themes of life and death, suffering and empathy, brutality, sickness, family, children, old age and growing old, misery and innocence. She champions the vulnerable poor, despairing; she is the artistic patron saint of mother and child, of the outcast and downtrodden, of those who are neglected and whose lives constantly hang in the balance.

In the song-cycle I draw from her self-portraits (she produced well over a hundred) and her extensive writings. In the work, six movements are organized into nine profiles/pictures: each movement represents a decade in Kollwitz' creative life; every profile corresponds to a specific self-portrait. The textual compliment to her self-portraits are Kollwitz' extensive letters, memoirs and diary. Here we discover her thoughts, hopes, fears and impressions. The texts I have selected to set to music can be seen as literary unfoldings of the self-portrait, both of which mirror the main themes of her art.

I would not say that art and poetry provide an enhanced context for music. Rather, as sister arts they use their own respective mediums to address, contemplate, and enter into dialogue with the vastness of the human condition that touch us all. When music draws upon, sets, or is inspired by a "sister' art," meaning is both derived from and put forth by the interaction of music and/or image and/or word. That is, the compound of the arts reveals its own, inimitable conversations and psychological landscapes. How revealing is the adage that music expresses that which cannot be spoken, or, as Victor Hugo writes: "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent." This holds true for both absolute and text-based music.

CMV-S: *What is the interplay of sacred and secular in your work? And in an increasingly turbulent and secular world, how do you hope your music speaks to people?*

RYG: Whether in sacred or secular mediums, I embrace an aesthetic of creative expression that engenders artistic responsibility by engaging with issues of the human condition. As an artist-as-citizen (not citizen artist - this carries too many political connotations), I seek to musically partake in questions of faith, ethics, moral responsibility and social justice. I would hope that my work addresses and reflects essential concerns of human nature that touch us all. Essentially, I seek to engage listeners' emotions and intellect to lead them through essential aesthetic experiences to a greater understanding of themselves and the issues within the fabric of society and culture.

CMV-S: *What are you currently working on?*

RYG: I am currently composing a string entitled *Imagined Memories*, a work that musically explores distinct personal reflections. Heritage, origin, cultural and national ethnicities are popular watchwords that draw attention to safeguard the individual from collective oblivion. Our present age has brought us increasingly closer together; we are the intersections of cultural, technological, social, and political migrations. Somewhere in these shifting sands is our identity; its preservation depends upon the active presence and cultivation of memory - real and imagined.

Just as penning a literary memoir is a type of archive - a preservation of memory that places and makes sense of the individual in the otherwise neutral continuum of time and place - *Imagined Memories* (*Bîranînên Xeyalî* in Kurdish] is my musical archive: intimate musical reflections based on imagined memories of a distant, severed past. *Imagined Memories* recalls/remembers the spaces in my memory of those emotional experiences I do not know that are buried in my subconscious – the spaces inhabited by my Kurdish biological mother and me right before and after she gave me away before being adopted into my German family.

CMV-S: *Why did you choose the Musica Omnia label?*

RYG: When I approached Peter Watchorn, Musica Omnia was principally known as a label that concentrated on "period" performance of Renaissance through Romantic

repertoire. Our discussions led us to develop the idea that Musica Omnia could also extend its general ethos to the presentation of new music, recorded with the participation and input of the composer. This is very much part of the Musica Omnia ideal of universal musical integrity. It was also good to be associated with legendary artists who record for Musica Omnia: Jaap Schroeder, Max van Egmond, Penelope Crawford, Saskia Coolen, Trudelies Leonhardt and Peter himself - now engaged on his colossal project to record all the harpsichord works of J. S. Bach - the BACH 330 project, to be concluded in 2015 - and to become part of this family of musicians who have dedicated their artistic lives to real musical integrity. This seemed a good fit. We devised a slightly different "look" for the contemporary CDs, while maintaining a strong family resemblance to the label's other offerings. I was also drawn to the idea of having a predictably first-rate recording team and a feeling of participation in the final product, quite different from what one experiences with other labels. . Another of Peter's aims for *Musica Omnia* has been to introduce members of the label's "family" to one another and, if possible, have them collaborate on new work. This remarkable synthesis is present on all my four CDs with the label, most fully realized, perhaps, in the recent *Missa* recording with Trinity Wall Street, where my own work is stunningly realized by a first-rate ensemble directed by a fellow (and exactly contemporary) composer, Julian Wachner, with a standard of recording that reflects the very best of the label's, the performers', and my own values.