



Short introductory spiel—Stephane and Rachel, recently returned from tour in Tuscany...

Some of us saw *3 Dreams* as part of ‘Easter at King’s’ in the chapel. Can you tell us a bit about its history?

Yes, and once before: an earlier version of *3 Dreams* was performed in November in the Round Church, although that was more academic, and the theatre of the round offers a different experience to the long lines of the chapel.

In fact, the seeds of the project were sown about four years ago when I met Lorenzo Bastida, a poet and Dante scholar. Within about five minutes of chatting the subject had focussed on a particular movement of a Beethoven late quartet; I remember being struck by how incredibly knowledgeable this man was, as well as how deeply moved he could be moved by art. At the time I was based in Florence; I later returned to King’s to start a PhD, so it was a sign of shared sincerity when, following a pandemic, we resumed our conversation now from different countries.

Why Dante and music?

It’s an unusual marriage in a way. One realises immediately both the inherent music of Dante’s poetry as well as its immense strength (is there another poem that can claim to have founded a national language?). So influential is the poem that traditions have developed for its recitation. Simply adding music to the standard formula of lecture+recitation would likely detract from both so it was clear from the outset that we were looking for something completely different.

Searching for a structure within the great journey I became interested in the dreams Dante describes in the central of the three books, *Purgatorio*. There are three of them, symmetrically positioned throughout the poem at multiples of 9 (3x3)—typical medieval numerology. I was interested in the dreams as moments of transition, such as when Dante dreams he is picked up by an eagle and wakes to find himself elsewhere (canto 9). So dreaming became the theme of the project which we structured in three parts: *Vita Nuova* (Dante’s early writing), the three dreams of *Purgatorio*, and *La divina commedia*—as—dream. In other words, our own three dreams.

### And what about the music?

Small forces were practical and also necessary to balance solo recitation so I wrote some music for two violins that I would be able to play with fellow Cambridge String Quartet violinist, and King's alumna, Rachel Stroud. However there is a crucial twist: the music is written for duo of baroque and modern violins. I say crucial because the notes themselves are a product of the negotiations between the different physical and notational histories of the instruments. To understand what I mean by this it's easiest to think of the violins as different instruments: one is strung with metal, the other with sheep gut; the necks are at different lengths and angles; the baroque bow is light, and speaks strongly only in one direction, whereas the modern bow is powerful and balanced, reinforced with silver. We hold our instruments differently, we sound differently, we move differently. On the page, we read differently. In fact, our instruments are tuned differently, so the same notation provokes a different attack, sustain, quality, but also frequency. Sadly, even at the very top levels of theory and practice there can exist a perception of the baroque violin as a kind of primitive version of the modern violin, despite this argument being had and won over fifty years ago (indeed, we might more accurately consider the modern violin a nineteenth-century invention)!

One way I found to make this relationship clear was to focus on the open strings which, with these two violins, offered eight different frequencies and textures! The music plays on the open strings; it imagines more strings (G-D-A-E-B-F#)... In the first instance I wrote a canon which could be manipulated in various ways—up, down, back-to-front—always familiar but often different, and wove these around three movements (we play these something like 20 times in total). The first movement is technical: three doubly-serial canons—virtuosic number-crunching in musical terms. The second movement is the heart or, rather, lungs of the work, 'Tempo di dormire'. The third and final movement is a kind of analysis of the work as a whole.

### Tell us about the tour. Were there any standout performances?

We gave six performances, beginning in Florence, where we were based, and journeying through Tuscany, stopping by Arezzo and Pienza before concluding back in Florence. We performed in churches, schools, academic institutes, palaces and theatres.

In Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza we performed to a stunning backdrop of an uninterrupted view of the Val d'Orcia. When, during rehearsal, it became apparent that provisions hadn't been made for a dressing room, we were ushered into the nearest room with a door, which happened to be the Pope's bedroom—a rather theatrical place to undress... "Don't touch the furniture", they warned. At the other end of the scale, and my personal architectural highlight was the pieve of San Pietro in Gropina, an unusual Romanesque church lost in the hills: two rows of arches are inset into the apse, where soft light filters through panels of alabaster onto the altar. It is stunning—the pulpit merits a book in itself.

In more standard locations such as theatres, which can prescribe a certain kind of performance and, perhaps more powerfully, a certain kind of listening, we were often working against the structures in a way that we weren't with the less conventional spaces like Gropina. To overcome this, in one theatre, for example, like pied pipers, Rachel and I led the audience firstly from the foyer to the auditorium, and latterly out the fire exit, under the building, up the other side and onto the stage; later, Lorenzo recited a particularly poignant passage from the balcony illuminated only by infrared.

### Any other highlights?

Many, although some would be more accurately described as memories!

After our first performance in Florence, a small group of us went to our apartment for lunch; as we were eating it became evident that an enthusiastic member of the audience had got in the car with us and joined us for lunch—we had all assumed she was a friend of someone else.

Or giving an impromptu performance of some duos in the piazza in Arezzo, drawing the attention of a running group who wanted a picture with us; or all falling foul of food poisoning... But enough of the ridiculous. On an afternoon off we drove to the Medici villa in Poggio a Caiano, arriving late to an empty villa and its staff. They showed us around, starting in a theatre that was added in the seventeenth century and ending in a hall with frescoes by Pontormo and Andrea. I had hoped to see a particular set of paintings, and, though they were about to lock up, after a quick word from Lorenzo suddenly I was escorted upstairs, past the red tape, through locked doors, moving at speed through a dozen rooms of the priceless collection until reaching a room at the far side of the villa: on the walls were four large paintings, mostly of lemons, by Bartolomeo Bimbi. I was asked what I was researching, and I'm afraid I have to admit that I lied, in my most polite Italian claiming a scholarly interest in the history of citrus fruits in Italy, having deemed it inappropriate to cite "general interest" given the trouble they'd gone to. In the room I explained what interested me about the paintings and then we stood in silence for a few minutes. The silence, isolation, and theatre of the journey was more powerful than the paintings.

### Is there a future for 3 Dreams?

For me the most rewarding part of this project has been finding a different audience for this research—"New Music" especially can be insular. It was heartening to see such positive reactions to the music which is at times difficult to listen to, the poetry which can be complicated and very dark, and the theatre which can be quite eccentric. *3 Dreams* worked because we found a genuine function together: it wasn't Dante+music but a theatre of their negotiation. So, yes, I hope so. These sorts of projects don't just happen; they are the fruits of months of research, and then a lot of planning.

I'm currently planting seeds for a small tour for next spring, based in Cambridge—there are some lovely churches in Norfolk. If possible we'll finish in Oxford, where we have made tentative plans to involve colleagues. And then Italy again in the summer. In fact while we were there this year we visited a few potential locations: most memorably the Certosa, a Carthusian monastery that overlooks Florence. The chapel has an acoustic unlike anything Rachel or I had experienced: small holes drilled into the floor and ceiling at two specific points miraculously projected our violins to the heavens. So this, as well as joining a few Dante festivals in other cities. There's also the hints of a spot on Radio Tre—they say all roads lead to Rome...

### And how about other work?

Lorenzo is currently working on the writings of Primo Levi, and is interested in a similar kind of collaboration. A lot of this material taps into ideas of post-humanism, which is a bit of a buzzword at the moment, but I'm interested in electronics in so far as it challenges what it means to perform so I've been sketching ideas involving a reel-to-reel recorder such the performer can record themselves live and then





Experimenting with lighting in a theatre in Florence.



Lorenzo in rehearsal.



Rachel during a break from rehearsal in Arezzo.



Stephane and Rachel with the Arezzo runners.



Prof. Patrick Boyde with Lorenzo on day of performance for 'Easter at King's'.