

Short but sweet

Jessica Duchen reports on pianist Clive Williamson's project of commissioning composers to write works that last just 60 seconds

The concept is a little like speed-dating. One person has just one minute to present themselves. At best, the audience is left wanting more; at worst, the agony will not be prolonged. One Minute Wonders is a series of 40-plus newly commissioned piano pieces, each lasting no more than one minute, each by a different composer, ranging from some of the best-known names in British contemporary music to students from Surrey University. It is a tremendous challenge to any composer, no matter their level.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of all belongs to the pianist Clive Williamson who conceived the project, commissioned the pieces and has been busting a gut to bring the idea to fruition. His concert at The Warehouse on 1 December will showcase the results. As head of performance at Surrey University, he has a wealth of experience in contemporary music, having worked extensively with the London Sinfonietta, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, among others.

'I always had a foot in the educational camp,' he says, 'and this project grew out of that. A lot of our students, writing pieces for their composition portfolios, felt they had to write music that other students were technically able to play. That meant that sometimes they were 'writing down', so I felt it made sense for them to produce, instead, short pieces for me that were easy to programme in a lunchtime recital. They had to go about it in a very professional way, with strict deadlines and a brief to produce a piece 60 seconds long, with no preparation of the piano. To my delight, almost everyone came up with the goods.'

So successful was the exercise that Williamson decided to ask some professionals to write to the same brief. He approached a number of composers with whom he had worked before, 'On

the grounds of "It would be great, but we can't afford to pay" – and they all did it!' Next, he began to present education projects based on the professionals' pieces, taking them into other universities and commissioning the students to the same brief. 'I started doing recitals mixing pieces by well-known composers with those of second-year students. I took them to Cardiff and it was a monstrous success!' David Shepherd, director of Cadenza Music, became interested in publishing the pieces and releasing a CD alongside them; the two volumes and the recording are due out in December.

The closest existing comparison is probably the *Spectrum* series, spearheaded by the pianist Thalia Myers and published by the Associated Board. Those pieces, however, involved an extra limitation, requiring technical levels to match the ABRSM exam syllabuses. Williamson is an admirer of that series, but the only constriction he presented to his composers was the length. 'Technically, they were free to do anything they wanted. I think they found that liberating; and the results have been extraordinary.'

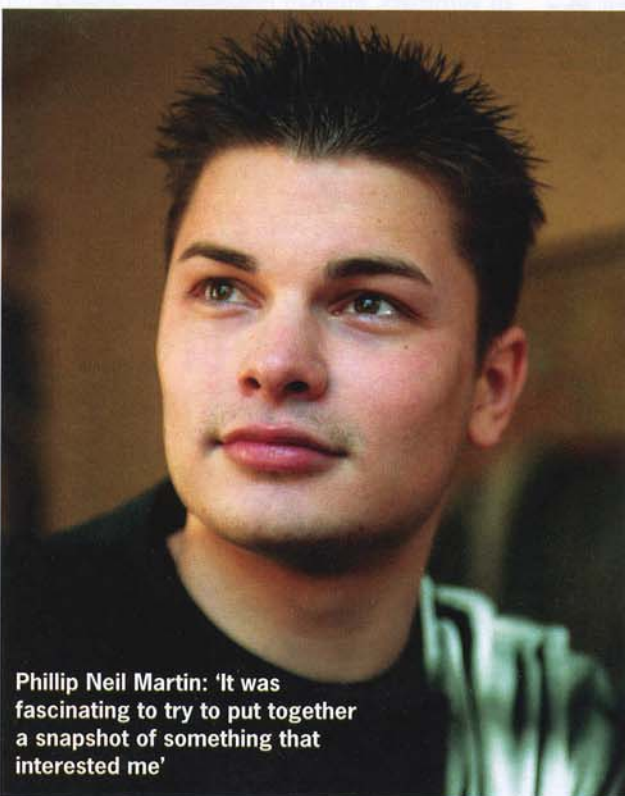
Indeed, the range of music is positively mind-boggling. 'Andrew Toovey's is very, very difficult, as is Michael Finnissy's,' Williamson says, 'but Julian Anderson has written something very straightforward at about Grade II level. Colin Matthews's is fiddly and notey, while Katherine Norman has written something to be played by fists and thumb only! There's an enormous selection, both in technical level and content. It's been great programming them, because no two are the same.'

The spread of opinions on the task among the composers themselves is as diverse as the pieces they've produced. Some find it almost more complex to produce a satisfactory piece lasting one minute than a work lasting ten; others greatly enjoyed the challenge posed by that stricture.

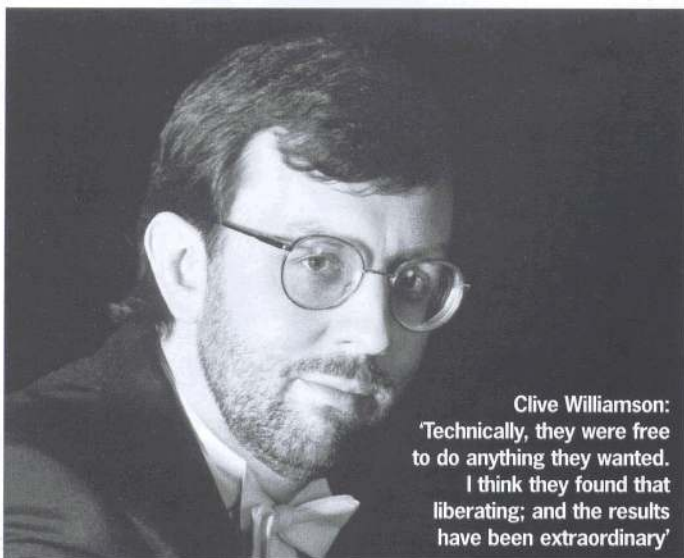
Colin Matthews's *60-second Waltz* offers a personal take, a focused concept and plenty of intricate finger-work. He had known Clive Williamson for some time and was attracted, he says, by the notion of having to fit his ideas into one minute. 'Once I'd decided on a waltz, and calling it *60-second Waltz* rather than *Minute Waltz*, the piece rather wrote itself,' he says. 'Fulfilling any composition brief is rewarding.' But is it viable to convey a distinctive compositional 'voice' in such a short space of time?

'Possibly,' he says, with caution, 'but, for me, not if I'm writing a piano piece. I'm a poor pianist and it's not my natural mode of expression. The best I could do within these confines was to combine pace and a sense of humour with a somewhat acidic harmonic palate – as the piece is very fast throughout, there aren't many shades of mood!' And what about the project as a whole – what does he think it will do to help promote contemporary piano music? 'To be cynical, it caters for the attention span of Classic FM listeners,' he says, 'but, more seriously, I think that anything that captures the imagination and allows the audience to feel they're being a bit adventurous is bound to be positive. And the pieces certainly deserve to become part of the pianist's repertoire.'

Among the younger composers involved is Phillip Neil Martin. 'There have been several short-piece projects around recently,' he says, 'but this one was interesting because you didn't have to hone it to a certain standard of performer. It was fascinating to try to put together a snapshot of something that interested me. I write very slowly, so it took me two or three weeks; one minute of very intense music can take as long to write as two or three minutes of less concentrated writing. It's about how you distil something into its most condensed form – a bit like a haiku.' He enjoyed the time limit: 'It's a riddle in some ways. It depends what you do with that minute. A minute can feel exaggerated or crammed, longer or shorter than it really is.' He is in no doubt about the long-term value of the project: 'Like *Spectrum*, it takes



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a kind of music that was previously only available to specialised players with great ability, and gives it to a younger audience.'

Matthew King's piece is somewhat unique: he has taken one bar from each of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas and strung them together into a remarkably coherent piece within the 60-second limit. 'I'm terrible at timekeeping, but I can work out timescales and I like economical writing,' he says. 'It's worth being as concise as one possibly can be. There are too few instances through history of composers who are willing to discipline themselves to that degree, unlike Webern, or Beethoven himself. The *Eroica* symphony is big and grandiose, but in the bagatelles for piano, Beethoven hones everything down to tiny proportions. A good composer should be able to get their scale right. Even Wagner is highly disciplined!'

Several composers have used ideas from their one-minute pieces to form the germs of larger works. Tom Ingoldsby's one-minute concept has spawned his Piano Sonata No 3, also commissioned by Williamson. 'That whole piece has grown out of this: it also contains references to my first and second piano sonatas and forms a kind of giant last movement to those two works, which are one movement each. It only took me a few days to write my one-minute wonder, because that was all I had - I was in the middle of composing my violin concerto and I'm afraid I forgot all about it until a few days before Clive's deadline! I decided to aim for simplicity and elegance, which is a quality I love in 20th-century French music; I think that's what we need in the 21st century. When I heard all these wonderful one-minute pieces, I felt they were unbelievably varied, and the work that Clive has put into arranging them into a programme has been a great inspiration.'

David Shepherd, director of Cadenza Music, was 'blown away' on hearing Williamson's concert; his publishing offer followed rapidly. 'There's no shortage of contemporary piano music,' he says, 'but One Minute Wonders provides a unique survey of British composers writing in a concert idiom. It's valuable source material for performers to explore different styles and gives the audience the same opportunity. Pianists could programme small groups of the pieces without discomforting the audience and, though it's not so ambitious, they could use them as encores in a contemporary programme. What else can you play after Ligeti or Ferneyhough?'

And where does it go from here? 'Clive's concert on 1 December marks a culmination of sorts, but there are still composers who are interested in writing pieces,' says Shepherd. 'We could easily produce a third volume, and hopefully more universities will be interested in taking on the concept: it's a tremendous discipline to instill into composition students.' And, as with *Spectrum*, there is a possibility that the idea could be extended to other instruments and other nationalities - though, Shepherd says, 'We'll see how this one goes first.'

Tickets for Clive Williamson's concert at The Warehouse on 1 December are available in advance *only* from the Cadenza Music website. Also, Shepherd is offering a special subscription discounted price of £25 to anyone pre-ordering both volumes of sheet music and CD: full details can also be found on the website.

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