



A conversation with Peter Meechan

with Greg Crowe

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The music of Canadian-based British composer Peter Meechan is performed throughout the world. His music has been commissioned, recorded, broadcast and performed by some of the world's leading wind orchestras, brass bands, conductors and soloists, including: "The President's Own" United States Marine Band, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Bramwell Tovey, Black Dyke Brass Band, Dunshan Symphonic Wind Orchestra, The Band of the Coldstream Guards, RNCM Wind Orchestra, Steven Mead, Jens Lindemann, Ryan Anthony, Les Neish, Linda Merrick, the BBC Concert Orchestra, Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Rex Richardson, Jacques Mauger and many more.



Meechan's music is featured on over 100 commercial recordings and has been featured at festivals and clinics globally, including the Midwest Clinic, the International Trumpet Guild, the International Tuba and Euphonium Association, BASBWE conferences, and in 2014 his work "The Legend of King Arthur" was used as the set test piece at the British National Brass Band Championships, held in the Royal Albert Hall, London.

Peter was the first ever "Young Composer in Association" with the prestigious Black Dyke Brass band, where he went on to serve as their "Composer in Residence", a position he also held between 2012 – 2015 with The Band of the Coldstream Guards.

He holds an undergraduate degree from the Royal Northern College of Music, a Master of Arts degree and a PhD (composition), both from the University of Salford.

Peter Meechan's music is principally published by his own publishing house, Meechan Music.

GC: How has living in Manitoba for the last two years informed your writing?

PM: I'm certainly in a happy place being in a music community like it is here in Manitoba. There are more people with whom I can talk music and I love that talking about music seems to be part of the regular way of being here. It's not like it is here in Manitoba everywhere - having people so committed and dedicated to music making and Band music in particular, that's a very positive environment to be in for writing.

GC: In your opinion, how is the Manitoba Band community unique?

PM: The dedication to teaching, to music, and to the concept of all the wonderful things that come out of learning music. Many teachers appreciate it for what it is, but it seems they consider it to be part of the norm, when really, in my opinion, it's something special! There's a real sense of community here. It's a cultural thing. Consider the Manitoba Band teachers who work or have worked in their former high schools. Cheryl Ferguson, Matt Abraham, Darrin Oehlerking amongst others – they all learned the craft from master teachers and have followed in their footsteps. It's pretty incredible.

Also, everyone here is truly committed to learning. No one presumes to think that they know it all. Whether it's reading sessions, school-based PD, TEMPO or Midwest, the teachers here are always aiming to better themselves.

GC: What projects are you currently working on?

PM: It's been a bit of an intense time – I'm very busy. In the last few months I've finished a piece for Centennial Collegiate Grade 10 Band in Saskatoon. There's a piece I wrote for the Foothills Concert Band in Calgary, "*Perpetua*". I've been working with Matt Abraham at Vincent Massey on a piece, entitled "*let this place*", that will premiere at The Canadian Rocky Mountain Music Festival in Banff this April with a subsequent performance back in Winnipeg in May, which I'm very excited about. The title for this piece is taken from a plaque that is outside of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp that references a warning to humanity. The first half of the piece reflects that sentiment, where we hear humanity's voice and the second half is a brutal contrast symbolizing the current times we live in, where it seems that all we should have ever learned from the words on the plaque, we've forgotten. The piece doesn't end, it just stops, leaving the audience and musicians to work out how they want it to end. The choice is yours as a human being.

I'm also writing a piece for two trumpets and wind ensemble for Ryan Anthony and Jens Lindemann, who are close friends, which will be premiered in May by them accompanied by The University of Texas Wind Ensemble under the baton of Jerry Junkin.

GC: Is there a project you've always wanted to do but haven't had the time or opportunity?

PM: I loved writing my first symphony and I really want to write another one. It's nice to expand those composing chops in long form. I'd like to write more for orchestra and more for choir, which is happening bit by bit, and always enjoy writing chamber music – the challenges of composing are at their best when writing for small forces.

GC: Who are you currently listening to?

PM: Me (laughs). I don't really have time for listening to music right now. Well, that's only sort of true. I'm listening to my usual mix of Beatles and Oasis. A bit more Stones than usual. Phil Collins. It turns out I'm going through a Phil Collins stage right now, for reasons I can't really work out. I've listened to a lot of different recordings of Copland's *Quiet City* in the lead up to writing the piece for two trumpets, as I wanted it to be a similarly reflective journey. The tough thing about writing music is that the time for listening to music outside of what you do is limited. You need time away for your brain to clear out so what you write next is decent. Also, to listen to any sort of music, classical, let's say, it's common where the analysis part of my brain is listening and not the part that is listening just for the pure enjoyment. It's hard to switch that tool off and so I listen to a lot of great rock music. I get the windows down in the car and sing along.

GC: Do you have any favourite recordings?

PM: I never liked Mahler until I heard Mahler's 2nd with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. I love the second cycle of Beethoven Symphonies done by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. There's a whole cycle of Sibelius symphonies that the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) with Simon Rattle recorded that I just love. When I was a teenager he was the conductor of CBSO, who were my local orchestra – so he was my local conductor! We used to get free tickets to go watch Simon Rattle conduct, and it would often be in the choir seats – getting to watch him work was an incredible lesson. I think if I was to name a favourite recording, which is so hard to do, it would probably be London Sinfonietta's recording of Górecki's 3rd Symphony, conducted by David Zinman and Soprano soloist Dawn Upshaw. That recording changed the way I thought about music, about composing, about performance – it really is incredible.

GC: What impact can today's artist have on the socio-political climate and do you try to incorporate that impact into your work?

PM: Yes. Otherwise what is the point? Artists can change the world. We know the power of music and education. We know that through music and education, we not only become accomplished musicians, we become human beings who have a sense of humanity, love, hope, empathy and all those things are good elements to have in the world. If we accept that as being true, then every single note can have beauty and humanity and love and hope and empathy, and if we also accept that, then every single note can change the world in some way.

We have the talent and the ability and the audience – if we aren't trying to change the world around us, trying to make that difference, then the artist ceases to be an artist. The danger in that, though, is that what you write becomes almost pop music – not in terms of musical style, but because you are writing about your times. It is popular culture. It's impossible to get away from Trump, or Brexit or this country's terrible history with its indigenous people. There are so many things we can't get away from so it's advantageous to try and address change through music –

and is in fact, in my opinion, required of us. That does mean that the piece is a product of ‘now,’ so it has to go on and have another journey after ‘now’ is done as a piece of art. Maybe in 10 years, people will be playing today’s music purely because of its artistic value, rather than something that is, of course, art but also relevant to what is happening around us in the world. It’s a journey that all pieces of music go on – some survive, some don’t.

GC: What have been some of the biggest setbacks to your craft?

PM: There are a couple, but I don’t know if I’d call them setbacks. Difficulties, maybe. You spend most of the day by yourself with only your own thoughts. That’s not necessarily what the average person does and it’s probably not the healthiest way to live your life, so you have to find ways of coping and dealing with that. When, as I did, you move to a different country from a place like Manchester (where I had a lot of friends and had lived there a long time) to a place you don’t know and you know very few people it takes some adjusting to. Especially when you move to a country like Canada - in the winter! - where going outside is almost impossible. I didn’t have a license so I wasn’t getting around much, you end up spending a lot of time by yourself, and when you don’t see life around you, you can’t write about life around you.

As I have become more experienced I find that the ‘setbacks’ don’t feel like setbacks. If I’ve had a rough day of writing I just think, “well, that’s one less day of rough writing – it makes tomorrow less likely to be rough”. There are going to be rough days, rough passages in the music and things you will have to fix. You learn to become more confident in yourself and rather than get fixated on a problem, I know I will solve the problem, just maybe not right now. So, when issues come in, they’re almost enjoyable in a way because you know you have to fix them and that challenges you in a good way. By the end I am always happy with what I have done – I embrace the process that happens, the good days and the bad days, because I know it was all part of writing a piece that I fell in love with. But for sure I’m glad no one ever gets to see the piece until it’s finished!!

GC: Do you have any non-musical influences?

PM: The music I write comes completely from inside me. Inside my head; inside my heart. I think who I am is a product of the environment in which I live. It could be my household, or it could be where we’re sitting now, the city, the province, the country or the world – it could be anything. I do my best to fill that world full of things that I know will inspire me. I read a lot of poetry and at other times I used to spend a lot of time studying art. Like for us all, it just depends on where we are at on any given day.

GC: In the face of an ever-changing social context how can we ensure that young people can still be exposed to and interact with great Band literature?

PM: I think balance is key. If we can agree that reflecting the world around us through music is an essential part to changing the world, then playing high quality new music will have a special relevance to young people (and hopefully those not so young too!). But equally there are so many other great works of music that are true pieces of art and need to be kept relevant by performance and exposure to that music.

But there is a small danger that I see almost everywhere on my travels. When you see the same repertoire being used by a conductor year after year, I wonder if the conductor (and this is at any level of music making) has truly selected the repertoire, or if they've almost fallen in to a "habit" of selecting that rep. If it has become habitual it's not to say that it isn't great rep or even a great selection – but perhaps there's a danger that the conductor isn't always on a journey of discovery and learning with that/those pieces. I think there's something very important about players – especially at school level – seeing those in front of them learning too. That journey of discovery has to happen for a lifetime, and seeing their teacher go through that is such a great example.

GC: Where does music education need to go next?

PM: What I am sure of is that if we aim to get the word 'advocacy' out of our vocabulary, that's a good aim. Make the term redundant. I don't want to have to advocate for music education, I want to get to a place where society understand why it's so very important and values it. We need is to embrace the concept of music being for music's sake – and for it to be viewed as an equal to any other subjects.

GC: What advice would you give to the young composer?

PM: 1) supplement your skills with performing skills. I gave up playing in any serious capacity some time ago and I really wish I hadn't. After all, for a young and/or developing composer you can play your own pieces! 2) Work with your friends. Write pieces for your friends. Making music with your friends is the best music to make. 3) Only ever speak from your heart, mind and soul. Don't try to impress anybody or be something you're not. Just be honest to yourself. 4) Don't try and write anything too big – write a short, small piece. Have a plan – know what you want the piece to be and do it. Embrace the change as it happens. 5) Writing for big forces (band!) is a lot easier than small ensembles – the most interesting and exciting composers to listen to have learned their craft by doing just that, and when they turn to writing for larger ensembles they take all that skill and ability and really create something special for larger forces. 6) Take in the world around you.