

Guy Woolfenden

A short summary of his life and compositional style.

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Guy Woolfenden was to the Royal Shakespeare Company what John Williams is to the Star Wars franchise, the person who created the memorable music. Woolfenden spent 37 years - almost half of his life - writing and conducting music for performances of Shakespeare's plays. Woolfenden is the only known person to have written music for all of the Bard's theater works. (Brown) The influence of all the time spent in the theater can easily be seen in Woolfenden's compositions.

Music ran through Guy Woolfenden's formative years. He was born on July 12, 1937 in Ipswich, England. Several of his family members were involved with music. One of his maternal grandparents served as a church organist. His father, who eventually opened a music shop, played trumpet, piano, and drum set, and led a jazz band. Not surprisingly, one of Woolfenden's earliest memories was of his father tapping rhythms out on his knee. His parents identified signs of perfect pitch in the future composer around age two. (Dreiling, 2015)

As Woolfenden aged, he became more involved in musical activities. Encouraged by his parents, he joined his school's choir when he was seven. At age ten he was accepted to the Westminster Abbey Choir School, a boarding school that focused on a rigorous music curriculum in addition to other academics. (Dreiling, 2015) He attended from 1947 to 1951, and began composing anthems for the school's choir before he graduated. (Brown, 2015) After Westminster he attended an elite boarding school, where he learned to play horn. His desire to focus on playing horn, conducting, and composing led to the decision to attend Christ's College in Cambridge. The same desires led to the choice of continuing his studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. (Dreiling, 2015)

In 1961, soon after finishing at Guildhall, a former teacher from Cambridge hired Woolfenden as the Assistant Music Director for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). The primary responsibility of this position was to conduct the twelve person ensemble for all of the plays. Less than two years later, due to a time shortage caused by another composer backing out of a deal, the founder of the RSC asked Woolfenden to compose music for a series of plays. (Dreiling, 2015) Both the series and the music received such accolades that the RSC hired Woolfenden as the Director of Music and Resident Composer. He held the position for 35 years, from 1963 to 1998. (Billington, 2016)

As Woolfenden gained notoriety composing for the RSC, other playhouses commissioned works. By the end of his career, he had composed for theater troupes worldwide, including the Comedie-Française in Paris, France, the Teatro Stabile in Genoa, Italy, the Den National Scene in Bergen, Norway, the Norwegian National Theatre in Oslo, and the Australian Ballet. Besides composing for playhouses, Woolfenden had opportunities to conduct across the globe, from Australia to Russia. He founded and directed the English Music Festival, now known as the Stratford-on-Avon Music Festival, which began in 1995. Among all of the awards and recognitions he received, the highest honor bestowed upon him was the Order of the British Empire in 2007. (www.arielmusic.co.uk) He died on April 15, 2016.

Though Woolfenden composed primarily for the Royal Shakespeare Company, he wrote music for many genres. By his retirement in 1998, the composer had penned over 150 scores for Shakespearian plays, including at least one for every play. (Brown) Dr. Timothy Reynish, a long-time friend to Woolfenden, commissioned a composition for band in 1982. The composer selected music from his recently written Henry IV as inspiration and entitled the piece

Gallimaufry. The work was well received and led to other requests for music. In total Woolfenden wrote fifteen pieces for band and eleven for chamber ensembles comprised mostly of winds. (Dreiling, 2015)

The influence of music from Shakespearian times can be heard throughout Woolfenden's music. In some instances the composer borrowed ideas directly from music he wrote for plays, as exemplified by the approach to *Gallimaufry*. He infused other musical traits of the late Renaissance into his compositions. For example, the music of Shakespeare's time was modal. Typically Woolfenden wrote using church modes with a raised third scale degree - Lydian, Mixolydian, and Ionian. In other cases, such as *Curtain Call* and *Deo Gracias*, he employed the Dorian and Aeolian modes with their lowered third scale degree to create a somber feel. Sometimes he switched modes during the same phrase, as seen in the early measures of *Illyrian Dances*, where he toggled between B-flat and B-natural. Even with the shifting modes, Woolfenden referred to himself as a "tunesmith." The melody always took precedence in the composer's writing and placed in the forefront of the texture. (Dreiling, 2015)

The rhythmic complexity of Woolfenden's music came from a variety of features of Renaissance music. He used syncopation, unsteady meters, polyphony, and popular dance forms, especially the Pavane and Galliard, to create rhythmic interest. Not only did these techniques provide rhythmic fascination, they enhanced the texture and generated extended sonorities. The "Rondeau" from *Illyrian Dances* provides a good example. The texture starts thicker at measure 40, then thins out and at the same time is decorated with sixteenth notes causing an increase in the polyphony. The end of several phrases alters the last measure from

duple to triple meter, the equivalent of adding a beat to the time. This would have been reflected in the dances of the Renaissance. Other typical rhythmic devices common to his music are the Scotch snap and Lombard rhythm. (Dreiling, 2015)

The orchestration of Woolfenden's wind band pieces shows several characteristic styles and the influences of writing for the theater. Often the ensemble is treated like a double quintet; he divides the band into brasses and woodwinds, with the horns joining both groups. His first piece for band, *Gallimaufry*, often employs this technique. An effect of this treatment is that tutti scoring happens rarely. The instances where all instruments play highlight the structure of the piece and demark musically important moments. Consider *S.P.Q.R.*, a piece written about the Roman occupation of Great Britain. Less than ten percent of the measures use tutti scoring. The first time all instruments play together is the end of the first movement. (Dreiling, 2015) This use of orchestration is probably another result of writing for plays. Often the music needed to be performed underneath dialogue. An effective way to keep the ensemble quieter is to restrict the number of instruments playing. As a scene closed, the inclusion of the entire ensemble would augment a crescendo and punctuate the action on stage.

Additional features of Woolfenden's orchestration demonstrate a subconscious preference for orchestral instruments. Percussion parts support wind instruments. The percussion instruments add color to the timbre and texture to the piece, but rarely do they stand alone or play an independent line. The same may be said for saxophone and euphonium, instruments seldom found in the traditional orchestra. Music Woolfenden wrote for these two

instruments tends to be supportive in nature. Typically the composer keeps most instruments in comfortable ranges. (Dreiling, 2015)

37 years of working for the Royal Shakespeare Company had numerous effects on Guy Woolfenden's compositional style. The influences of that long association appear throughout his wind band works. All of these components not only distinguish his music, but also make the music programmatic. One can almost see the plays that might accompany each piece. Perhaps Dr. Tim Reynish sums up Woolfenden's compositions best:

"Guy Woolfenden's music has all of the energy, excitement, wit, and charm ... His music rarely repeats itself, which leads the music in constant change and development. It forces the players to be on their toes and makes them think, and it is very theatrical. Ultimately, his music has a strong emotional message. This creates an opportunity for both the musicians and players to develop a strong musical interpretation and leads to an extremely musical and emotional listening experience for the audience."

References

Billington, M. (2016, April 24) Guy Woolfenden obituary. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/24/guy-woolfenden-obituary>.

Brown, J. R. (n.d.) "Guy Woolfenden: The composer who's written music for every Shakespeare play." Retrieved from <http://www.john-robert-brown.com/guy-woolfenden.htm>.

Dreiling, J. (2015). Guy Woolfenden: A Composer's Musical DNA, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

"Guy Woolfenden." Retrieved from <http://www.arielmusic.co.uk/composers.html>.

Selected Works

Band/Wind Ensemble

- *Gallimaufry* (13:00) 1983
- *Deo Gracias* (6:00) 1985
- *Rondo Variations* (8:00) 1985
- *Illyrian Dances* (10:00) 1986
- *S. P. Q. R.* (12:00) 1988
- *Mockbeggar Variations* (7:00) 1991
- *Curtain Call* (11:00) 1997
- *Birthday Treat* (3:00) 1998
- *French Impressions* (10:00) 1998
- *Celebration* (15:00) 2002
- *Firedance* (10:00) 2000/2002
- *Flourish for Shakespeare* (2:00) 2000/2002
- *Bohemian Dances* (9:00) 2005
- *Claremont Canzona* (5:00) 2005
- *Divertimento for Band* (10:00) 2007

Chamber Works (for primarily winds)

- *Three Dances* (9:00) 1985/2007 Clarinet Choir
- *Full Fathom Five* (8:00) 1987 Brass quintet
- *Prelude, In Memoriam & Finale* (10:00) 1987 Flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, horn, bassoon
- *Sweet Française* (9:00) 1991/2004 2 flute, 2 oboe, 2 clarinet, 2 bassoon
- *Sweet Swan* (6:00) 1993 Flute/piccolo, clarinet in A, bassoon, 2 horn, 2 trumpets, trombone, 2 percussion, keyboard
- *Gordian Knots* (13:00) 1995 Clarinet choir
- *Andantino* 1997 Antiphonal double wind quintet (2 piccolo, 2 oboe, bassoon and 2 clarinet, 2 horn, bassoon)
- *Serenade for Sophia* (11:00) 2001 2 flute, 2 oboe, 2 clarinet, 2 horn, 2 bassoon
- *Reflections Serenade No. 2* (13:00) 2008 2 flute, 2 oboe, 2 clarinet, 2 horn, 2 bassoon