
Stuart MacRae

Selected Reviews

Prometheus Symphony

Lammermuir Festival; BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra; September 2019

“MacRae’s astonishing *Prometheus Symphony*, the last of his three works as the festival’s composer in association, was a nervy, dramatic exploration of the Greek myth in almost a sequence of semi-operatic scenes, sung with brilliant conviction by soprano Jennifer France and baritone Paul Carey Jones. It stuttered into life in a dark procession as Prometheus is led to his unending punishment, but passed through radiant, shifting tonal harmonies before ending in a pensive, somewhat ambiguous reflection on his achievements for the future of humankind” - **David Kettle, *The Telegraph***

“The main event of the evening, however, was the premiere of Stuart MacRae’s work...With a forge of percussive effects on piano and harp stage right, as well as a touch of Latin tom-toms and a flavour of big band brass, it is a very rich, expressive piece”
- **Keith Bruce, *The Herald Scotland* ******

“A powerful and muscular work, scored for full orchestra and two soloists (dazzling soprano Jennifer France and magisterial baritone Paul Carey Jones), MacRae’s *Prometheus Symphony* pulls on an assortment of relevant texts, from Aeschylus to Goethe, and weaves them into a sound world that is fundamentally primitive (at its most basic a raw, often mystical triadic confusion of major and minor constantly bludgeoned by anvil-like attacks on percussion), yet blossoms with an abundance of effusive lyricism – soulful qualities that have become a recent feature in MacRae’s maturing style” - **Ken Walton, *The Scotsman***

Anthropocene

Scottish Opera, January 2019

“I was gripped by every minute of it... MacRae’s score is never merely illustrative of a text: there are episodes of rich lyricism, including a duet of almost Straussian sensuality for two sopranos and some marvellously inventive orchestral sonorities evoking both the rigours and splendours of the Arctic landscape through shimmering, skittering strings and growling brass. Its greatest virtue, however, is vividly fluent and expressive vocal writing that enlarges and illuminates the words and the situations as only opera can do.” - **Rupert Christiansen, *Daily Telegraph* ******

“No quibbles, however, about the evocative power of MacRae’s music, which is superbly performed under Stuart Stratford’s direction. Is there another living composer capable of conjuring up such primordial grunts, terrifying shrieks, spine-shivering string effects and histrionic harmonies out of a conventional orchestra, yet still ensuring that every word of the libretto is audible? The opera’s final five minutes — in which the entire band seems to slither downwards in quarter tones — is an orchestration masterclass in itself.” - **Richard Morrison, *The Times* ******

“MacRae’s musical language has softened since his early days as a composer of uncompromisingly modernist works. His score for this is a wonder of skilful orchestration, conjuring icy-cold landscapes and the fear in the hearts of the protagonists. The opening launches straight into the action with fluttering, swirling string motifs suggesting the snow that is about to envelop the ship and its passengers. The musical interludes between scenes, particularly the sensuous depiction of the northern lights, are vignettes of great character and delicacy: it’s no stretch to imagine them being excerpted and expanded into an orchestral work.”
- **Rowena Smith, *The Guardian* ******

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“*Anthropocene*, a tense and riveting 3-Act thriller set in the icy wastes of Greenland by composer Stuart MacRae and novelist/librettist Louise Welsh. Their partnership has been nurtured in a progressive series of Scottish Opera projects, the fruits of which are a work that ticks every box in terms of defining what modern opera should be about if it is to honour tradition, yet say something potent and new [...] The crowning glory, though, is MacRae’s brilliantly aligned score, free and easy in style, rich in dramatic thrust, but always an essential driving force in a work that surely embodies the spirit of good 21st-century opera.”

- Ken Walton, *Classical Music Magazine*

“MacRae, possibly peerless among contemporary British composers in his mastery of orchestral effect, strengthens the characterization in his handling of the vocal lines... [His] score heaves and glistens in a succession of mesmerizing sound-images: not only does the orchestra control the drama’s time and emotional trajectory, but details such as the creaking of the ice, the sudden lust for blood, the impenetrable darkness and consequent moral confusion, are all brought vividly to life.”

- Guy Dammann, *Times Literary Supplement*

“MacRae creates orchestral textures notable for their delicacy and intricacy which are nevertheless capable of rising to brassy density for moments of high drama.” - George Hall, *Financial Times*

“[Librettist] Louise Welsh knows how to tell a taut story, but so too does MacRae in a score that is approachable but also bold, independent and varied. In the buoyant, spiky string writing of the opening, in the menacing surges of deep woodwind, you can hear MacRae’s influences: among them, Stravinsky, Carter, Xenakis, Birtwistle. Dissonance and harmony jostle against each other. Set pieces, as in the beautiful interweaving voices of Ice and Prentice in Act 1, rise out of a free-flowing, filmic structure.”

- Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer*

“The first act works well, suggesting movies such as John Carpenter’s *The Thing* without special effects, and MacRae’s score, referencing the usual suspects, but full of glacial string tremolandi to make you shiver, is always of interest... The musical highlight is a duet for the two sopranos, lyrical, expansive and intrinsically operatic.” - Hugh Canning, *The Times*

“The arctic is the perfect setting for MacRae’s strong, dissonant score. His clever use of quarter-tones at the extremes of the scale and exotic percussion help build the tension and create a sound picture of an all-white environment, lit by the Northern Lights [...] His vocal lines add weight to Welsh’s libretto, from the elaborate for Mark Le Brocq, as expedition backer, Harry King to the warmth of Jeni Bern, as Professor Prentice, whose husband finds the ice woman.” - Thom Dibdin, *The Stage*

“There is much that is genuinely “cinematic” in both the staging and in MacRae’s score, which conjures up the landscape of the tundra as eloquently as the design [...] *Anthropocene* is a work of great clarity, and very accessible, for all its musical modernity. The relatively few performances of this premiere run should presage an early revival.” - Keith Bruce, *The Herald*

“Then there is MacRae’s music, which is one of his most evocative and effusive scores to date. Out of the long and comfortable working relationship he has established with Welsh – this is their fourth project together – comes a sense of ease and adventure, music that flits effortlessly between feverishly dissonant melodrama, luscious soundscapes and tender arioso.”

- Ken Walton, *The Scotsman*

“Like the best fiction, *Anthropocene* teases the audience's imagination and lingers in the mind after the final page... MacRae's score is constantly fascinating in the translucent textures, whispered atmosphere and intricate cantilenas he conjures from the orchestra, like a *Sinfonia Arctica*... Where Berg was godfather to MacRae's previous operas, Britten is the composer who hovers over much of *Anthropocene*. The first act invokes *Billy Budd* not only in its siren sounds, but also in the way MacRae at one point uses a sequence of chords to magical effect. The entire score has pace and contrast - the music rarely lingers, and when it does, as in the second act's meditative intermezzo and the third's nocturnal dreamscape, it seduces the ear.” - Andrew Clark, *Opera Magazine*

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“Librettist Welsh keeps the tension up with her dramatic plot twists, while MacRae reflects this in an orchestral score which shimmers with surface allure and underlying menace.” - **Susan Nickalls, *Opera Now***

“The crowning glory is MacRae’s brilliantly aligned score, free and easy in style, rich in dramatic thrust, but always an essential driving force in a work that surely embodies the spirit of good 21st-century opera... this is a work that ticks every box in terms of defining what modern opera should be about if it is to honour tradition, yet say something potent and new.”

- **Kenneth Walton, *Opera Now***

Sunrises

Lammermuir Festival (Composer in Association), September 2017

“The first in a projected cycle of three works inspired by the Prometheus myth, it contrasted brilliant, clangorous gestures right at the top of the [Gould] trio’s registers – coming to rest on unexpected, ear-tweaking triads – with gnomic pizzicatos or fragmented melodies lower on the instruments. Everything seemed in a constant state of flux and transformation, repetition and not-quite-repetition – just like the Titan’s unending daily ordeal of having his liver consumed by an eagle. All three instruments contributed to a single idea of remarkable focus and, most importantly, grabbed the attention in what was an immediately captivating, sometimes mesmerising work.” - **David Kettle, *The Arts Desk***

The Devil Inside

Scottish Opera & Music Theatre Wales, January 2016

“Eloquent and beautifully crafted rather than radical, MacRae’s music gleams and shudders... Scoring is transparent, quixotic, each strand audible and drawn together like a loose-woven mesh to encompass and support the voices ...Tender episodes offset the brittle tale of the magic bottle and give the piece rewarding depth.” - **Fiona Maddocks, *The Guardian* ******

“It’s MacRae’s score, however, that really supplies the chilling atmosphere. Rather as Britten did in *The Turn of the Screw*, but in a much more contemporary, unstable, microtone-flecked idiom, MacRae uses a small band (14 excellent players) to conjure a world in which none-too-friendly supernatural elements are constantly slithering beneath, or floating above, the voices of the living.”

- **Richard Morrison, *The Times***

“MacRae’s music is terminally restless, as if in thrall to the imp’s compulsions. Wind and brass spend the evening on a non-stop racetrack of virtuosity.” – **Richard Fairman, *Financial Times***

“The score is without lyrical marshmallow. It doesn’t charm or seduce: instead it’s powered by an abrasive vitality and nervous tension, shot through with bright edgy orchestration and vivid vocal writing that avoids extremes of pitch or gesture. Surtitles are provided, but they aren’t required: meaning is immediately communicated.” – **Rupert Christiansen, *Telegraph* ******

“The piece boasts a score that is redolent of the work of high modernist composers such as Janacek and Bartok. By turns dark, ecstatic and premonitory, its jagged discordances fit perfectly with the tale’s seeming lack of redemption.”

– **Mark Brown, *The Herald Scotland***

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“MacRae finds a warmth and pulsating energy that marks it out as his best yet... MacRae’s score wastes no time in establishing its role as a binding, life-giving thread. Restless and symbolic from the outset.” – **Ken Walton, *Scotsman***

“Scored for just 15 players, MacRae’s music was tautly drawn, angular and intense as conductor Michael Rafferty relished the swings between orchestral lyrical richness and exposed, nervy solos and ensembles to reflect the strange twists of the tale.”
– **David Smythe, *Bachtrack* ******

Earth

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow, March 2013

“Crafted around the image of a tree and its wayward branches, and inspired by snippets of Hildegard, Ted Hughes and Solzhenitsyn, MacRae's 20-minute score called *Earth* was by far the most original on the programme. Here is a composer who knows how to write for orchestra: how to make its textures shimmer and growl and generally synthesise into more than the sum of its parts. The structure of the piece flits around and took some patience to follow, but there was striking decisiveness, clarity of purpose and boldness of gesture that I have not heard in MacRae's music to this extent before.” - **Kate Molleson, *The Guardian***

“Also receiving its premiere was Stuart MacRae’s impressively evocative *Earth*, which closed the concert. This piece made good use of the Fruitmarket’s balcony, arranging several of the musicians above the audience to create an appropriately immersive effect.”
- **Martin Kershaw, *The Herald***

Nephele

Park Lane Group Young Artists, January 2013

“A superbly concentrated experience... Each of its short eight sections wove its material round a particular textural quality suggested by the combination of instruments, but with an irresistible and brilliantly achieved flow animating the whole and undercutting any sense of dryness.” - **Guy Dammann, *The Guardian***

Ghost Patrol

Scottish Opera, September 2012

“MacRae uses a sparse and punchy libretto, but opts for close-knit musical argument and a constantly simmering orchestral style, using electronics, pre-recorded chorus and inventive aural effects: violins in eerie, double-stopped harmonics, the double bass creating percussive menace by bouncing the wood of his bow. You can hear Birtwistle's influence in the high woodwind laments, but more as homage than imitation.” - **Fiona Maddocks, *The Guardian***

“MacRae’s opera, with no-holds-barred libretto by Louise Welsh, is immediately exciting, making exacting and effective use of rhythm to portray the ugliness and trauma of war.” - **Carol Main, *The Scotsman* ******

“Then, with *Ghost Patrol*, the “something operatic” kicked in – big time. Stuart MacRae’s three-hander about the scars of war, to a libretto by Louise Welsh, does everything modern opera is supposed to do: it asks questions, stirs the imagination, challenges complacency, grabs the heart. Oh, and it renews the art form, too. You come out feeling different – about love, life and death. And yet, despite such complexity of thought and feeling, MacRae and Welsh make opera seem simple: they get the essentials right.

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Welsh's harrowing story, summed up in the line "Only the dead have seen the end of war", lays bare the lasting trauma of military action, which MacRae drapes in a score as sophisticated as it is soulful – beauty and pain indivisible. So it is good to report that *Ghost Patrol* moves to Glasgow and London over the coming month, before touring Wales. It deserves to go further."

– Andrew Clark, *Financial Times*

Remembrance Day

Scottish Opera, February 2009

"Poignant, farcical and grotesque, Stuart MacRae's *Remembrance Day* is a masterpiece in embryo, full of moods and murmurs and post-Bergian mosaics... In Louise Welsh he has found a librettist whose imagination is as practical as it is theatrical. Around [librettist Louise Welsh's] words he weaves a music of shimmers and shadows, economical and expressive. What's so remarkable about *Remembrance Day* is that you're not aware of technique or the passing of time." - Andrew Clark, *Financial Times*

"And so to the most successful offering of the night, *Remembrance Day* [...] approached with darkly mischievous glee by the composer Stuart MacRae, there are some delightful moments of musical play, as MacRae interleaves the cleaner's tuneless humming or the strains of an old LP over the relentless orchestral score." – Sarah Urwin Jones, *The Times*

"It was the final work, *Remembrance Day* by composer Stuart MacRae, that really seemed to crack the code. Paralleling the dreams of a young student and the memories of an old man and his wife, the work encompassed the comedy of youthful misunderstanding, as well as the erotic horror of devotion. A strong libretto by Louise Welsh certainly helped, as did the haunting innocence of bass Dean Robinson." – Carla Whalen, *The Scotsman*

"...And the masterpiece? Conducted skilfully, as were all the operas, by Derek Clark, and played intensely by the Opera orchestra ensemble, *Remembrance Day*, by Louise Welsh and Stuart MacRae, is a horrific drama... How do you know when the complex drama of Welsh's needlepoint words and MacRae's economic but molten music is working? When you sit bolt upright, mentally screaming, as I did, at soprano Mary O'Sullivan (Lyn): "Do not open that book. Get out of there now. Get out. Run!"

- Michael Tumelty, *The Herald Glasgow*

Gaudete

BBC Proms / BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Albert Hall, August 2008

"Sunday's star premiere - with the BBC Symphony Orchestra - was Stuart MacRae's *Gaudete*, a substantial half-hour setting of extracts from Ted Hughes's magnum opus. MacRae, with his uncompromising language, preoccupation with elemental nature and dark, craggy writing, appears to be a true soulmate... MacRae has thrillingly given Hughes's work a new incarnation. Blood, granite, oak and bone were imprinted anew on the imagination through the heightened experience of music. Susanna Andersson was the soloist: her stratospheric soprano started with a cry almost indistinguishable from the clatter and hushed screams of the orchestra. The jagged, syllabic wordsetting deep-hewed the verse from the constantly quivering, reverberating orchestral air. Through passages of sunblinding and numb valediction, *Gaudete* ran its course. I can't wait to hear it again." - Hilary Finch, *The Times*

"Less a song-cycle than a *scena* for soprano and orchestra, in "Gaudete" (2008) MacRae sets extracts (primarily from the 'Epilogue') from one of Ted Hughes's most densely allusive collections: one that appears to revolve around the relationship of Man to God and to Nature, though that relationship is a necessarily oblique one. MacRae has fashioned them into a 28-minute work in several sections: how these unfold and how they coalesce is likely as much to do with the emphasis of the performance as with the intention of the composer; though this is not to deny the work's underlying conviction, or that the final three stanzas constitute an epilogue of uncommon subtlety and evocative beauty...a work whose ambition requires, and deserves, further hearings. It certainly reaffirmed MacRae among the most distinctive composers of his generation." - Richard Whitehouse, *Classicalsource.com*

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Birches

BBC Proms / Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Royal Albert Hall, August 2008

“Just 24 hours after the announcement of his forthcoming BBC commission, the Ted Hughes-inspired Gaudete for the Proms this summer, the 32-year-old Scottish composer Stuart MacRae was in Edinburgh for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's first major performance of his new piece called *Birches*. A fascination with Man's relationship with nature links both works, and this was an appetite-whetting prelude to MacRae's Proms appearance.

The ten-minute piece works on several levels, and excites many responses. It can be perceived as picturesque - though MacRae says it is emphatically not tone-painting. There are, though, woody sounds for the imagining in the strings' pith and bark, a sense of branching out, of the cycle of the seasons. And then there is the metaphorical significance of MacRae's treatment of strings and woodwind as separate units, symbolising, perhaps, Man's alienation from the natural world.

The abiding effect, though, is one of a strikingly powerful pacing of purely musical energies - of movement, stasis and arresting silences - leading to central complexity and turmoil. The work ends as suddenly and unpredictably as it began.”

- Hilary Finch, *The Times*