

The joy of risky classical music

Even with her impressive repertoire, new challenges still excite Johannesburg composer, writes **Gwen Ansell**

NOTHING," declares Clare Loveday, "gives me more of a thrill than hearing what a musician does with a score I have written."

Loveday is composer-in-residence at this year's Johannesburg International Mozart Festival, and tomorrow evening, at 6pm at the Goethe Institute, sees the premiere of one of two new works she has created for the event.

This is the sixth edition of a festival which, as well as presenting the classical music of its namesake, often provides a platform for innovative new music, including interdisciplinary works.

Loveday's Goethe piece is a collaboration with visual artist (and 2011 Standard Bank Young Artist honoree) Nandipha Mntambo and violinist Waldo Alexander on the theme of shifting cycles of memory. Her second premiere, which will close the festival on February 9, is a piano concerto: *Three Portraits of Intimacy*.

Loveday says her role in the festival has felt like "a carnival ride. (Festival director) Florian Uhlig's enthusiasm is infectious, and the creativity of the collaborations is exhilarating."

But as with the roller coaster, there's risk too: "With collaborative interdisciplinary work the composer doesn't have complete creative control. Until it comes together, there's always the element of risk: that the meeting-points you envisage won't fit."

Those risks, though, are part of the joy Loveday finds in composing. She began her musical career as a pianist and teacher, working in theatres, on cruise ships and in schools, although "composing always lurked on the periphery"; she also wrote advertising jingles. In 2000, the legacy of a series of physical and personal upheavals — a persistent hand injury and a divorce — led her to enroll for a master's degree in composition and begin to explore the area of New Music — "and that was a total liberation".

Since then, Loveday's work has achieved local and international recognition. She has written for the Stockholm Saxophone Quartet and the Viennese Ensemble Reconsil, and had works selected for the 2008 International Society of Contemporary Music World New Music Days in Lithuania —



CARNIVAL: Clare Loveday is composer-in-residence at this year's Johannesburg International Mozart Festival. A new work premieres tomorrow evening at the Goethe Institute.

Picture: MASIMBA SASA

although resource and visa constraints kept her away — and the 2010 edition in Sydney.

Her current collaboration with Mntambo is not her first: the two have worked together on several projects including a score for the artist's video *Pasa Doble*.

"There are two sides to composing. There's the lonely aspect of the profession: sitting on your own, working through ideas, pulling something into shape, which I find immensely satisfying. But, equally, there's the people side: working with musicians, discovering things I did not write as the players bring new things, aspects of themselves, into the piece as they work." She recounts how Alexander recently played some of the memory work back to her "and I suddenly heard something quite sinister in a passage. Waldo simply said: 'I'm just playing what's written.' But that's the point: often, the music comes alive only when it's played."

In the same way, she feels that audiences bring something to the act of listening. "For the Goethe work, Nandipha has created beautiful reflective arcs that will be suspended in the performance space. Waldo will play inside these. We're all engaging with how situation —

context — mutates memories. But what I've written isn't over. The memory cycles are embedded in the experience of listening, so there is also space for the audience to be part of the creative process."

Seeking the hidden facets of the ostensibly obvious also motivated Loveday as she conceived the piano concerto. "A piano concerto — it's been done, and done, and done. How can you make it be heard freshly?" The festival theme — love — risked being similarly hackneyed: "There was no damn way I was doing that! I had to find the scratchy side — or at least, something a bit more interesting."

So *Three Portraits of Intimacy* operates on a number of levels. She's written the concerto for a 10-piece chamber orchestra rather than a full symphony ensemble, exploring the intimacy between piano soloist, small playing group, and audience. The work is inspired by a series of photographs made by Colombian Juan Orrantia. His work also deals with memory and its dislocations, showing joyful intimacy, violence and the loneliness that can exist within intimacy.

"So you've got both intimacies, musical and thematic, and their interplay,

lying beneath the music."

That's one example of "working with a theme in interesting and challenging ways", which Loveday sees as central to the role of a composer-in-residence. "You can't just write the notes, you must do the brainwork as well, so you are drawing audiences towards the experience of more challenging meanings, which they might otherwise not engage with."

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But if that sounds too sombre, "you also need open explanation and lively conversation — at the Joburg International Mozart Festival that's in the panel discussion — so audiences can learn more about new music, and what exciting fun it is."

In the longer term, though, Loveday feels that festivals alone cannot achieve this goal:

"Festivals happen, they are wonderful, but then they're over." That's one motivation behind her involvement with SoundMindLab, the planned Johannesburg multimedia performance space. It is now hosted as a concert concept at the Goethe Institute, but is destined for realisation at the Samro (South African Music Rights Organisation) building in Braamfontein.

"A space like that provides a consistent presence, rather than a one-off. It offers a process for collaboration between artists from different disciplines — visual arts, jazz, more — and across audiences who'd normally only attend something in one of those disciplines. It's useful to take those collaborations outside a tertiary institution venue, where issues of territoriality and perceived accessibility can get in the way.

"And I see it already happening, in the concerts at Goethe. It's wonderful to see the Goethe Institute auditorium packed with all kinds of people for what might be seen as a 'wacky' show."

While her works for the Johannesburg International Mozart Festival feature violin, chamber orchestra and piano, and her reputation emphasises multidisciplinary approaches, Loveday hankers after more opportunities to compose for saxophone ensembles: an instrument she once described as "feisty, rebellious and capable of anything you demand".

She's been writing works for saxophone since 1996.

Last year, her critically acclaimed 2010 *Duodectet* had its most recent outing at the Scandinavian Saxophone Festival in Arhus, Denmark.

The problem in SA, she finds, is identifying sufficient numbers of reed players working at the same high level. "Classically trained players may have the technical rigour, but are not always flexible. Jazz schools are where you find the fresh musical minds, but jazz students are not adequately exposed to this kind of music." She sighs: "It's another example of the way music education in this country remains compartmentalised."

But she is not resigned to the constraints, and her fascination with feisty reeds persists: "I always think I've got over it — and then I hear a saxophone again..."