

MICHAEL BLAKE AT 60

A seminar presented by Domus and
Stellenbosch University

29 October 2011

Stephanus Muller

Jean-Pierre de la Porte

George King

Christine Lucia

Paul Hanmer

Aryan Kaganof

Exhibition curated by Lizabé Lambrechts

Michael Blake's importance as a South African composer derives from a number of factors. His music is representative of an experimental/minimalist aesthetic that found early expression in the music of the internationally celebrated South African composer Kevin Volans, and of which Blake is now (and has been for a considerable time) the foremost South African exponent. He has consistently probed the connections between experimentalism as a tradition, minimalism and African structures, rhythms and pitch material. Among the many composers who have ventured along this path since the late 1970s, Blake's interest in these connections counts as among the most sustained, compelling and sophisticated. In the Cambridge History of Twentieth-century Music, Martin Scherzinger described this music as 'understated translations of African music into Western idioms [that] deftly negotiate the borderline between quotation and abstraction; and, in the process interrogate the opposition between the two'. Blake has now produced work in every medium – stage, orchestral, chamber, keyboard, instrumental and vocal (solo and choral). He has worked in film and dance and in 2009 he completed the draft of an Afrikaans digital opera in seven scenes, *Searching for Salome*, based on Etienne Leroux's 1962 novel *Sewe Dae by die Silbersteins*.

Dr. Blake has been commissioned by prominent international ensembles and his music has received significant international premiers. Most notably, the Fitzwilliam String Quartet recently commissioned his String Quartet No 4, extending a long creative relationship between this highly regarded quartet and the composer. Important CD recordings of his music include the Complete Solo Piano Music of Michael Blake 1994-2004 (recorded by Jill Richards) and the String Quartet No. 3 by the Nightingale String Quartet on the Bow Project CD (2010). The latter deserves special mention, because it illustrates the importance of Blake's contribution to the future of New Music in South Africa. Initiated in 1999, the Bow Project aimed to give up to twenty composers an opportunity to study, reimagining and recompose music from the recorded performances of the Xhosa bow player Nofinishi Dywili. As a musical vision of how South African composition could evolve as an indigenous practice, this project has few if any rivals. It constitutes an audacious collective aesthetic experiment that produced remarkable music.

Although first and foremost a composer, Michael Blake has published important academic writing in reputable journals. This includes publications in accredited journals like SAMUS (South African Music Studies) and the international journals *Fontes Artis Musicae* and *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

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9:00 Stephanus Muller

Miniature Blueprints, Spider Stratagems: a Michael Blake Retrospective at 60.

9:40 Jean-Pierre de la Porte

Permeability, Power and Scale: Michael Blake's Small Worlds.

10:20 George King

Toxic Triads, or Breaking Through to Composition: Michael Blake and Composition Studies at Unisa.

11:00 Tea/Coffee

11:30 Christine Lucia

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12:10 Paul Hanmer

Michael Blake, composer and instructor

12:50 Aryan Kaganof

Film Première: 'Carpet of Memory' by Aryan Kaganof .

Collaboration and Creativity, and the Nature of the Creative Process

13:30 Closing Statement and thanks (Mareli Stolp, on behalf of Domus)