

Michael Blake, born in Cape Town in 1951, has been described by musicologist Stephanus Muller as “the most important and most influential South African art music composer to have worked in South Africa since the advent of democracy”. He studied in South Africa and the UK, left South Africa in 1977 to avoid conscription into the border war, and during two decades in London he directed the experimental music ensemble London New Music and taught at Goldsmiths College, before returning to South Africa in 1998. He taught composition at Rhodes University and established the New Music Indaba, the cutting edge festival he directed for seven editions. He also negotiated South Africa’s re-entry into the ISCM after an absence of nearly four decades, and was President of the South African Section ISCM for six years. In 2000 he set up “Growing Composers”, a project to empower young black composers, and from 2002 devised and curated the highly successful “Bow Project”, which commissioned string quartet responses to traditional South African bow music and resulted in a CD production.

From the mid-1970s Blake’s musical language was partly the result of an immersion in the materials and playing techniques of African music, resulting in the extensive cycle “African Journal”. Some of these works have become his most performed pieces, in particular *Let us run out of the rain* (1986) and *French Suite* (1994). Since 2000, this African sensibility is subsumed into the fractured narratives that are a feature of his recent work (*String Quartets*, *Ways to put in the salt*, *Piano Concerto*). Blake draws as much on the visual arts of Africa and the West – African weaving, abstract painting, underground cinema, silent films – as he does on African musics and American and English experimental music aesthetics. He has now produced work in every medium – stage, orchestral, chamber, keyboard, instrumental, vocal, choral and electronic – as well as numerous video collaborations with Aryan Kaganof, and a large-scale audiovisual piece with conceptual artist Willem Boshoff.

Michael Blake has collaborated regularly with the Fitzwilliam String Quartet who toured South Africa and recorded a CD of his music for his sixtieth birthday in 2011. He also collaborates regularly with pianists Daan Vandewalle, Antony Gray and Jill Richards, whose CD of his complete piano music was released in 2008. In the last decade he has worked regularly with string players Darragh Morgan, Yasutaka Hemmi and Friedrich Gauwerky. He regularly gives piano solo and duo recitals in Europe, America, and South Africa. As well as guest teaching at universities in Europe and America, he was until 2009 senior lecturer and composer in residence at the University of South Africa.

In 2012 Blake established the annual Sterkfontein Composers Meeting, an intensive masterclass for young composers with an international faculty, extending this model into Japan in 2013. He is invited regularly as artist in residence at the Nirox Foundation in South Africa and VICC in Sweden, from 2014-15 at STIAS in South Africa and during 2015 at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Centre in Italy. From 2012-2014 he was Professor Extraordinary in Music at Stellenbosch University, and in 2015, with fellow composer Pierre-Henri Wicomb, he set up Purpur, an annual ‘downtown’ festival of performing arts in Cape Town.

Recent commissions and premiere performances include *Ukhukalisa Umrhubhe* for umrhubhe and tape (Festival d’Automne à Paris commission 2013), *Standing Stone Circle* for harp and violin (Tokyo 2013) *Piano Concerto No 2* (MIAGI commission for Ensemble Reconsil, Vienna 2014), and *Tombeau de Mosoeu Moerane* (ISCM World Music Days, Ljubljana 2015). Current projects include *16 Voices* for choir of soloists; *Alto Trombone and Vibe* for Ivo Nilsson and Jonny Axelsson; and *Afrikosmos*, a cycle of pieces for pianists from easy to concert level. During 2016-2017 Blake will collaborate with artist/sculptor Sean Blem and choreographer/dancer Hideto Heshiki on *Hyperextension*, touring in South Africa, Switzerland and the Far East.

*“Music not of place, but of time. Blake is not unsure of who he is and where he lives. He is not obsessed with Africa, nor is he chained to ‘the West’. He is perhaps the first South African composer to be unselfconsciously an African composer. His are the blueprints and stratagems of a new cosmopolitan South African sound.”* (Musical Times, Dec 2011)