

American Trio (formerly called Hymns, Rags and Blues) (1985)

Peter Dickinson

"Hymns, Rags and Blues is just what its title suggests and is one of a number of pieces in which the composer explored popular music styles. In a sense these works are a tribute from an English composer to his sources in American music which have occupied him as writer, performer, teacher, and broadcaster for many years. This work began with three hymn tunes, one specially invented and two remembered from the composer's Sunday School childhood in the North of England. The three hymn tunes are converted unrecognizably into blues—one for each instrument—and they also form a strain each of a classical rag in the pattern A-A-B-B-C-C-A-B. The rag style is deliberately pre-jazz, and in this case follows quite closely that of Charles Hunter (1876-1906) the blind white player and composer born in Tennessee. The layout of *Hymns, Rags and Blues*, with its often comic juxtapositions, can be clearly followed:

1. A slow prelude announcing the main hymn,
2. The rag for violin and clarinet against the piano's own blues,
3. Cadenzas against the main hymn in the piano,
4. The blues for clarinet,
5. The rag for clarinet and violin against the piano's variation on the hymn,
6. More cadenzas against the hymn,
7. The blues for violin, increasingly disrupted by the clarinet which erupts into its own cadenza,
8. The final rag in the piano with disruptions from both clarinet and violin who both gradually come to terms with the rag just in time."

—Peter Dickinson

The world premiere of *Hymns, Rags and Blues* was on July 15, 1985 in the Verdehr Trio Summer Chamber Music Concert Series at the Wharton Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

Peter Dickinson (born 1934, Lytham St. Anne's, Lancashire) is an English composer, musicologist, author, and pianist best known for his experimental musical compositions and writings on American music. He studied organ at the Leys School, Cambridge on a music scholarship and was a John Stewart of Rannoch Scholar at Queens' College. In 1958, as a Rotary Foundation Fellow, he went to the Juilliard School of Music and spent three years based in New York. It was during this period that he met Cage, Varèse, Cowell, and Carter and became interested in American music of all kinds.

Dickinson returned to England in 1961 and taught in London and Birmingham. In 1974, he became the first Professor of Music at Keele University, Staffordshire where he set up the department and created an important center for the study of American music and pioneered the teaching of popular music and jazz. In 1991, he was named Chair of Music at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and from 1996-2004, he served as a Fellow and Head of Music at the Institute of United States Studies in London. For over thirty years, he was a regular contributor to BBC Radio and a critic on Gramophone.

A regular visitor to the United States, Dickinson has written widely on American music subjects. His books include studies of Lennox Berkeley (two), Billy Mayerl, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Lord Berners, and Samuel Barber. In 2016, he published *Peter Dickinson: Words and Music*.

Dickinson's musical compositions are written for a great variety of musical ensembles, from full orchestra to a single instrument, and there are many keyboard works, solo songs, and pieces for various choral ensembles. His modern works for historical instruments are also notable. His music includes experimental and aleatoric elements and often reflects the influence of ragtime, blues, and

jazz. He layers both serious and popular or past and present musical styles together to create what he calls a style modulation. He has written for some of the leading international performers, and CDs of his music are available on Albany (4), Naxos (3) and Heritage (6). *American Trio* has been recorded by the Verdehr Trio along with Dickinson's other works written for them: *Bach in Blue* and *Celebration Trio*.

As a pianist, Dickinson had a twenty-five-year partnership with his sister, the mezzo-soprano Meriel Dickinson. Their international recitals, broadcasts and recordings include commissions from Berkley, Panufnik, Crosse and Harvey. They represent a wide range of composers—Erik Satie, Lord Berners, George Gershwin, John Cage—and also reflect Dickinson's literary interests in settings of poets such as W.H. Auden, E.E. Cummings, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin, Thomas Blackburn, and Stevie Smith. Their CD *American Song* contains first recordings of Carter, Copland, Cage, and Thomson.

Dickinson is now Emeritus Professor of the University of Keele and the University of London. He also serves as chair of the Bernarr Rainbow Trust for which he has edited several books on music education. He is a member of the Royal Society of Musicians, a board member of Trinity College of Music, and a founding member of the Association of Professional Composers.

Additional information is available at www.foxborough.co.uk.