

# Composing futures

*Faith Wilson describes how BCMG's Apprentice Composer-in-Residence scheme is helping emerging composers mature.*

The promotion of composers and the music of today are Birmingham Contemporary Music Group's (BCMG) stock-in-trade, so it is natural that the ensemble should also have a vital interest in helping to shape the composers of tomorrow. While it has long been involved in composer workshops at all levels – from school and university through to experienced practitioners – some years ago Artistic Director Stephen Newbould began to consider what happens to aspiring composers immediately after they graduate. He recognised that there is a complex mix of skills and knowledge that can only be learned on the job, and set about providing the opportunity for young composers to learn these skills in a professional environment.

Thus began the BCMG Apprentice Composer-in-Residence scheme, now entering its fifth year with the appointment of [Joanna Lee](#) for the 2011/12 season. Its partner organisation in the enterprise is Sound and Music ([SAM](#), formerly spnm), and the [Leverhulme Trust](#) has funded the scheme for the last four years, with another two years' funding promised.

The scheme is unique because of its length, the depth of engagement it gives to young composers and BCMG's ability to tailor the year-long programme according to each composer's particular interests and needs.

Key features of the scheme are the opportunity to gain an insight into all aspects of BCMG's work – from rehearsal and performance, to the ensemble's extensive learning programme, and administrative and marketing decisions. Each composer is invited to write two new pieces of varying length for public performance by BCMG; providing invaluable opportunities to try out ideas with a full ensemble.

Another cornerstone of the scheme is the pairing of each successive composer with a mentor who provides advice and support throughout the year, and the additional opportunity to 'shadow' an established composer writing a new work for BCMG. This fosters a continuous, in-depth dialogue between the apprentice and professional artists – conductors, composers and the core group of BCMG musicians, who are especially committed to working with younger composers as well as established figures.

During the 2010/11 season, [Seán Clancy](#) was mentored by the American composer David Lang, who was writing a large-scale piece for BCMG. This year's apprentice, Joanna Lee is mentored by BCMG's Artist-in-Association, the composer/conductor Oliver Knussen, and she will 'shadow' the composer David Sawer as he writes his future commission for BCMG, The Lighthouse Keepers.

Looking back on his year with BCMG, which culminated in February with the performance of *Findetotenleider*, a 20-minute work for soprano and chamber ensemble, Seán Clancy reflected: “During my time with the group I was given complete access to the organisation both at an artistic and administrative level, which was beneficial to me both as an artist and as a professional... I think the most important aspect of being involved with BCMG was to be taken completely seriously as a composer and affording me the opportunity to write two compositions of which I am very proud. I believe I conquered my anxieties and rose to the challenge of writing for a group of this stature and as a result my confidence has grown immensely.”

Recruitment targets recent graduates who are ready to embark upon a professional career as composers. We will begin recruiting for the 2012/13 Apprentice Composer-in-Residence in September 2012, through an open call advertised via the SAM and BCMG websites and networks, to ensure a wide range of applications.

The benefits of the scheme flow in both directions. It has enabled us to form strong and lasting relationships with some of the most exciting young talents around, and challenges us to be truly responsive to the needs of the individual artist.

Faith Wilson is Press Representative, BCMG.

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