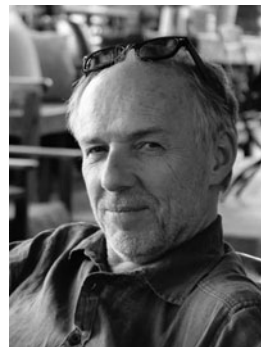


## PROFILE — MICHAEL BLAKE

Michael Blake is a composer, pianist, writer and teacher. He was born in Cape Town in 1951, studied in Johannesburg (BMus) and London (MMus) and received his doctorate from Rhodes University, Grahamstown. Dodging the draft into South Africa's border war in 1977, he moved to London, where he was based until he returned to South Africa in 1998. There he taught composition at Rhodes University, established the New Music Indaba and negotiated South Africa's re-entry into the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) after an absence of nearly four decades. In 2000 he set up Growing Composers, a project to empower young black composers, and in 2012 its successor, the annual Sterkfontein Composers Meeting. From 2002 to 2009 he devised and curated the Bow Project, commissioning string-quartet responses to traditional uhadi bow music.



Michael Blake (Photo: Rudolph Willemse)

His musical language is partly the result of an immersion in the materials and playing techniques of African music, but also draws widely on other found material, guided by both experimental film and African weaving techniques. His works have been played worldwide and feature on some 15 CDs. He lives in rural France with his wife, musicologist and writer Christine Lucia, and their Breton spaniel, Dollie, but spends part of each year in Cape Town, where he is Honorary Professor in the Africa Open Institute at Stellenbosch University. In October 2021 he visited South Africa for a short tour of *Displaced: 101 Ways to Long for a Home*, for keyboard and found soundtrack – a collaborative project with artist Emma Willemse – and the premiere of *Ixilongo*, for solo horn and offstage horn ensemble. In October 2022 his *Symphony No. 1* will be premiered in Germany.

**Your *Afrikosmos* cycle seems to bring together a number of your principal concerns: the music of Africa, music for the piano and your work as a teacher. Did you consciously set out to do this?**

It started out filling a gap in the market, notably the very Western-driven South African classical-music scene, where even with its own grade examinations – a project of the University of South Africa – the choice of local compositions shows little evidence of an indigenous identity. It really got going when Thalia Myers asked me to contribute to her groundbreaking 'Spectrum' – probably the most radical thing the Associated Board ever did – and I wrote a tiny piece called *iKostina* (Michael Finnissy has played it in some of his cabarets). So it's a good example of my three principal concerns, as you say: it draws on many parameters of isiXhosa music and reconfigures them for the piano but also offers a lesson to young composers in translating indigenous material.

That was in 2003 and then the idea sat on the backburner until I had an opportunity to spend a month at the Rockefeller Writers Centre in Bellagio in 2015, and *Afrikosmos* was my project. I don't remember exactly when I decided to reimagine Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* concept as *Afrikosmos*, but in the interim decade I had collected lots of material, sketched a few things, made lots of notes, gathered recordings, etc. When I got started in June 2015 I made a conscious decision to have six volumes of music, progressively arranged, with different categories or genres that appear in each book: studies, pieces focusing on rhythm and texture, character pieces, dances, pieces exploring particular modes or pitch sets, folksong arrangements, variations, transcriptions and homages. I worked on it intermittently over the next five years and finishing it became my lockdown project last year.

I avoided the kind of basic finger exercises that Bartók included and, although many of the pieces draw on indigenous African music from across the continent, there are also cut-ups or assemblages of Schumann, for example, inspired by walks in the mountains in Cape Town. Often titles came first: *Stay on Path*, or *Keep left, pass right*, or my own personal aide memoire on our front door in Cape Town, *Geyser off! Hat on!* Because kids are often more adventurous than adults, there is a graphic score to be played with gloves on the keyboard, and pieces that are strummed directly on the strings or make use of depressed bass notes to set off overtones.

Individual pieces or volumes are on sale as downloads on the *Afrikosmos* website,<sup>1</sup> but when the scores are published by Bardic Edition next year and Antony Gray's complete CD recording is released, I hope it will become a useful resource for pianists and composers, and particularly those in Africa or who have an interest in Africa. A particularly rewarding part of the project for me was dedicating pieces to the many friends and colleagues – including quite a few in memoria – that I've had over the years.

**When we first met you were very active in London as a pianist with Metanoia and then as an ensemble leader with London New Music, both groups that were, in their different ways, trying to extend the expressive possibilities of new music. In retrospect how do you feel about that period?**

I met Jonathan Impett, the trumpeter and composer, while doing MMus studies at Goldsmiths. We realised we had similar interests and started playing together, eventually making realisations of Stockhausen, Pousseur, Cage, etc. In these and our own compositions we used live electronics, tape and a range of keyboard- and trumpet-family instruments. Eventually we drew in other players and the ensemble grew to a sextet. At some point in 1986 we felt we were moving in different aesthetic directions and the logical thing was to split. I was becoming less interested in live electronics and wanted to pursue a more experimental aesthetic, as I was doing in my own compositions. That's when London New Music was born, and the group gave its first concert in January 1987. In the course of the decade of LNM's activity, I commissioned and performed many wonderful pieces, and engaged with composers who became lifelong friends. It was the era of composer-led ensembles and there was a certain camaraderie – we went to each other's concerts – but it couldn't

<sup>1</sup> <https://afrikosmos.michaelblake.co.za/> (accessed 8 September 2021).

last forever. I do regret spending so much time on admin when I could have been writing new pieces, and my own contribution to the LNM repertoire is somewhat slim. When I moved to South Africa in 1998, although I was teaching and running a festival, I was able to spend much more time composing.

**After the ending of apartheid you moved back to South Africa and became involved in the development of a much more inclusive musical culture. How successful do you think this has been? Did you encounter resistance from the white composers who had chosen to stay in South Africa during the apartheid era?**

I was determined, after decades of living under fascist regimes in South Africa and the UK, that I was going to have some experience of life under the Nelson Mandela-led government. That was the good period, and it's gradually gone downhill ever since, but there was a chance to do something useful and constructive after the divisive and dehumanising policies of the apartheid regime. I was just quietly doing my thing in Grahamstown, teaching composition and organising new music concerts, when I had a call from the redoubtable Henk Heuvelmans of Gaudeamus suggesting that I start an ISCM section. Then Geir Johnson and Howard Gamble, from Ultima in Norway, on a visit to the National Arts Festival director in Grahamstown, said, you should start a new-music festival, and we'll give you support. That was the end of my quiet life, but it really gave me the opportunity to try and create a more inclusive culture in the field of so-called classical music.

The ISCM section we formed was called NewMusicSA, and the platform for performances and workshops was the annual New Music Indaba, which piggybacked on the existing National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. One of our most important decisions was to include the 100-year-old tradition of black choral composition in our programming. We commissioned new works for a massed choir that was assembled each year and programmed Arvo Pärt, Percy Grainger, Ives and Stravinsky – even a choral version of *Jesus' Blood* – alongside many local black composers. There was one caveat: all the music had to be transcribable into tonic sol-fa, a system of notation with which all black choirs were familiar. The composers at the workshops, which ran in parallel with the festival, came from universities and local communities, so that white and black could share experience and knowledge, and the playing field was levelled, if you like, by whichever visiting ensemble was in residence: the Duke and Fitzwilliam Quartets, Musicatreize, Ensemble Insomnio, Stockholm Saxophone Quartet and so on. Surprisingly, everyone thought it was a good idea, even the old white guard, but the New Music Indaba is no longer what it used to be, and by the end of the 2000s, after I had retired from the board, NewMusicSA had dropped their commitment to black choral music and in so doing lost the majority of their black membership. Meanwhile I created a new platform for composers to hone their skills, the Sterkfontein Composers Meeting.

**You write music for all sort of different situations but it seems to me that you always compose with a performer's sensibility, imagining what it will be like to play the music. How do you achieve this when sometimes you are writing for virtuoso professional musicians and at other times for student bands?**

I've actually written quite a lot of music in the past decade or so that I can't play, or wouldn't dare to play, including the last volume of *Afrikosmos*, which Tony Gray plays with such ease, and my *Piano Sonata – the Choral* – which Daan Vandewalle charges through without batting an eyelid. Writing the easier *Afrikosmos* pieces was a particular challenge: to write pieces interesting to both performer and listener, while making the technical challenges instructive, and progressively more challenging. (I must admit that some of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* are a touch dull.) The two sets of piano duets with an easy part for the student were a joy to write, because I had such a wonderful model in Stravinsky, and there is a whole repertoire like this, now recorded by Tony Gray and his students on *Il Maestro e lo Scolare*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, working with the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, for example, allowed me to develop a way of writing for their medium, so that even when I'm not writing for them specifically, I'm always thinking of them, seeing them before me, watching their hands and their faces and wondering, what will they make of this? Writing a piano quintet and playing it with them on several occasions was like reaching the stars – I really felt what it was like to be inside a quartet – and I'm sure that affected the next three or four quartets I wrote.

I wrote a CoMA (Contemporary Music for All) piece, *Postcolonial Song*,<sup>3</sup> that was perhaps a bit unsuccessful from the elastic scoring perspective because it needs careful balancing and the CoMA ensembles I have heard playing it have tended to be a bit bottom-heavy, although they seemed to enjoy it. To compensate I made versions of the piece for piano quintet, two pianos, etc. in the spirit of Grainger, and one we did in Lithuania for two birbynés, string quartet and piano. I've found writing for good student orchestras very satisfying (*Let the Good Times Roll*!<sup>4</sup> a few years ago), because they take the challenges very seriously, often more so than their professional counterparts, but one of the strangest mediums for me is the choir, because I've noticed – especially in the UK – that even some of the most experimental composers default to the insipid, anodyne Anglican choral tradition when asked to write a choral piece. I did no such thing when commissioned to write a couple of pieces for a small Anglican choir in Pretoria: they had no problem interlocking (hocketing) in the African style, and the congregation wasn't horrified.

<sup>2</sup> <https://divineartrecords.com/recording/il-maestro-e-lo-scolare/> (accessed 8 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup> [www.coma.org/catalogue/postcolonial-song-homage-to-percy-grainger/](http://www.coma.org/catalogue/postcolonial-song-homage-to-percy-grainger/) (accessed 8 September 2021).

<sup>4</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXv\\_Y4jpC70](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXv_Y4jpC70) (accessed 8 September 2021).