

Visby Composers Residency (September-October) 2017 Report

Diale Mabitsela

My time in Visby was an incredibly fruitful and informative period. I saw the residency as an opportunity both to reflect on the masters degrees I had completed at Wits and at Oxford, what I had learnt and how I had developed as a composer, as well as to pursue a compositional project I had been interested in for some time. For this I was given one month in the Visby International Centre for Composers (VICC) to see through these aims. Communal accommodation was provided for all composers in residence. Each composer was also given a working space equipped to deal with each person's demands: a fully kitted out studio for electro-acoustic musicians, two notation rooms that were allocated to Dr. Andile Khumalo and me as well as a grand piano room for local folk artists to write and record material.

The Proposed Project

The proposal I had submitted was to write a Roman Catholic mass for choir and miscellaneous instrumentation. Once I had settled in and had done a bit of research on the tradition of mass writing, I decided to focus my attention on composing a communion motet based on psalm 131 and then to develop and complete the rest of the mass upon returning to South Africa based on material in the motet, thus rendering an imitation mass as was common from the 14th through the 16th century. By and large I succeeded in executing the first phase of this plan. 90% of the motet was complete at the time of departing from Visby to return home.

Unfortunately, very soon after returning, I was robbed of both my laptop and cell phone. Nevertheless, the sketches are still in my possession and work towards the completion of the entire project is scheduled to resume very soon, though it will take a little longer than first expected.

Working Space

I also gained in many other ways from my time on Gotland. The Notation room in which I was situated was equipped with two pianos (an upright and an electric), a Mac with Pro Tools, Logic, Sibelius and a sound card and midi controller. I was able therefore to adopt

different approaches and techniques that helped with the compositional process. I also got time to practice my keyboard skills in addition to carrying out a little bit of research and analysis on choral works I had grown to appreciate in my time as part of the Schola Mangum at Blackfriars, Oxford.

The Community and Environment

One of the more important aspects of the residency is the community of composers that forms in and around the centre. We of course enjoyed multiple conversations, attended concerts and on one occasion, we had a listening session in which we heard each other's pieces and gave each other feedback. Having travelled with Andile, I benefitted greatly from our frequent interactions and the many different issues and ideas we deliberated over. The centre was also based in the same venue as the Gotland School of Composition. As such we were able to interact with lecturers and students from the school. We were also allowed to attend lectures and seminars. A seminar on the music of Arvo Pärt was particularly insightful and helped to inspire my general approach to my own work.

Location

The Island was also perfect as a geographical location. It is situated some distance away from the mainland and thus from many of the distractions that might prove counterproductive. Nevertheless, the town of Visby was itself quite enjoyable with many restaurants and cafes. A notable feature is the way in which the old medieval town is dotted with the ruins of old churches, echoing forwards into the present from the past. In some way, I felt a connection to them especially given the nature of my work: in composing a mass setting I am engaging in a task that once dominated the landscape of music compositional work but is now very much stripped of its former importance. Like those ruins, my project stands as a living testimony to a former time. Lastly, being situated on the harbour, the Visby was also a great place to find private space to reflect and perhaps become rejuvenated so as to begin again on the great journey of life as a composer.

Financial Woes

Having discussed the various positives above I now wish to reflect briefly on an aspect of the trip that wasn't very pleasing. I felt that the handling of financial arrangements for the residency left a lot to be desired. From the onset it was expressed that fifteen thousand rands would be made available for the purposes of covering travel fares and daily living expenses. Judging from prior travelling experiences and after having had a look at the cost of return-tickets for both flights and ferries, the quoted amount was certainly sufficient to cover travelling expenses, insurance, visa application fees and per diem costs with accommodation being covered by the VICC. A return flight to Visby from Johannesburg was just over nine thousand rands leaving ca. six thousand rands to handle all other expenses. A return ticket to Stockholm combined with a bus and ferry trip to Visby was at the time roughly one to two thousand rands cheaper (this being the suggested method of travel according to Sten Melin).

However, the channels through which one was restricted to access the funds to cater for these expenses proved unsatisfactory. Transport and insurance arrangements were handled by the Africa Open Institute through a travel agent on our behalf. I immediately queried into what the total cost of the tickets to Visby together with travel insurance would amount to prior to the purchasing of the tickets. No reply was given. Instead a subsequent email was sent insisting that a photocopy of my passport be handed in so as to be able to make the booking. Having complied with this, I was thereafter informed that only three thousand, three hundred rands were left over to cover all other remaining costs, by far way to little to cover the visa application fee and living expenses in Sweden. Furthermore, these funds were deposited into our personal bank accounts only four days prior to the date of departure. Alternative arrangements had to be made regarding the visa application fee as I had to apply for the visa well in advance of that date. Overall the entire process was frustrating.

To my mind, it makes far more sense to release the funds to the composer to handle the expenses themselves. Alternatively, transparency regarding how the money is being spent on the composer's behalf and exactly how much is allocated to the different fees would certainly have been appreciated. I was able to find financial support through family members and some

casual work. This did not amount to much more than the three thousand rand from Africa Open and so my experiences in Visby had their limitations. On occasion I ended up having to borrow money from Dr. Khumalo to cover unexpected costs. I concede that I did foresee such limitations occurring in terms of financial provisions. Fifteen thousand rand was always going to be tight. What was disappointing in this situation was that I was not able to make the best use of the money as may have been more convenient (and I would also suggest more cost effective) due to the inflexibility of the process of attaining the funds.

Thanks

After what might seem to be harsh words, I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to SAMRO for making the funds available and to the Africa Open Institute and the Sterkfontein Composers Meeting for dealing with the administrative aspects of the residency. I'd also like to offer thanks to the VICC as well as to NMSA for electing me to go as their candidate. It was a really inspiring experience and I hope to make the fruits of my labour in Visby available in due course for others to hopefully enjoy.