Music and Place: How Site-specific Compositions can Complement the Architects’ Vision and Enhance Public Engagement with Modern Heritage

Dr Katrina Burton

Edinburgh Napier University, Programme Leader, Bachelor of Music

I would like to:

i. present via pre-recorded film (with a written paper)

Abstract (300 words):

Schafer (2011) said, ‘Without sound space feels lifeless.’ While some site-specific compositions seek to explore the acoustical properties of a building, with music that best exemplifies the resonance of the space, others are borne out of a desire to complement the architect’s aesthetic and enhance the visitor experience. This presentation considers the latter approach, exploring my work written for and performed in Mies van der Rohe’s Carr Chapel (1952). A commission for the 2015 Open House Chicago festival, the solo cello work (approximately 7 minutes in duration) was presented at regular intervals over a three hour period as visitors explored the space. Each performance was preceded by a brief informal talk, in which I introduced the compositional ideas, providing a way in for the largely non-musical audience. Composed for Mies’ only ecclesiatical building, nicknamed the “God Box”, I will also reflect on the ethics of writing contemporary music for a sacred space.

It is well documented that Mies sought the finest materials for his buildings; a visit to one of his structures demands time and space in order to appreciate the intrinsic beauty
found within these materials. Drawing parallels with this, and embodying Mies’ ‘less is more’ aesthetic, through an exploration of textures on the cello the listener is invited to focus on the beauty inherent in simplistic and raw musical ideas, thereby challenging perceptions on beauty in art.

I will discuss how the music heightened the visitors’ response to the space and will demonstrate that such Open House initiatives not only facilitate opportunities for music to reach a wider audience, including those that may not actively seek out performances of classical music, but that they also facilitate opportunities for audiences not knowledgeable about architecture. The presentation will include footage filmed on the day of the Open House event.

References


• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Katrina’s first compositional studies were taken at the University of Glasgow. She then completed an MMus and PhD (in composition) at the University of Edinburgh (both AHRC funded). During her PhD she was awarded a number of scholarships that enabled her to undertake research in New York, resulting in an orchestral work influenced by the architecture and acoustic properties of the Chrysler Building. After completing her PhD Katrina was appointed Lecturer in Music at Edinburgh Napier University, where she now leads the Bachelor of Music programme.

Her music is inspired by the visual arts: painting, sculpture, photography, and architecture and has been performed by the Orchestra of Scottish Opera, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, NYOS: Futures, the Concorde Ensemble, the Research Ensemble and the Edinburgh Quartet with performances in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Malta, Australia, South Korea and the US.

With a particular interest in site-specific compositions, Katrina has twice been commissioned by the Chicago Architecture Foundation to create music for buildings as part of Chicago’s Open House programme. She is currently working on a site-specific project for a B listed building in East Lothian, Scotland, by the practice of Alison & Hutchison & Partners.