

Community

The sound of peace

UK-based South African composer Eugene Skeef on a music-based reconciliation initiative, the Quartet of Peace

NATALIE PICKERING

Eugene Skeef is a peacemaker, a pseudonym he used during the seventies when writing political poetry and fighting for freedom in the dusty township streets of apartheid South Africa. His latest work as Artistic Director for the Quartet of Peace revisits a life dedicated to promoting reconciliation, a project aimed at honouring the four South African Nobel Peace Laureates – Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu, FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela. Eugene now lives in London where his deep-found love of music and poetry still finds him writing songs of peace.

How did you first become involved in the Quartet of Peace?

A friend called Lainey Trequesse, a South African woman now living in France, introduced me to Brian Lisus, the violinmaker. The Quartet of Peace is his brainchild. She encouraged him to commission a piece of music from me that would reflect the ethos of his project.

Do you think the message of the project extends further than South Africa?

The message of peace, reconciliation and healing, as embodied in the lives and teachings of our four Nobel Peace Laureates is a message that needs to be heard and embraced by the rest of the world; burdened as it is by intolerance of difference. Moreover, music is the most powerful expressive tool available to humans. The sounds of the violin and its family of stringed relatives have for centuries created an extended palette for expressing the beauty of being human. It does not matter what religion, ethnicity or nationality you belong to, a beautiful sound triggers feelings of belonging. The most profound way I believe the project will impact those further afield is through the affirmation of the humanity shared by all, especially those who have had to endure the ravages of war, discrimination and genocide.

What message does the Quartet hope to take to London and what impact do you think it has on South Africans living abroad?

As a black South African living in London few experiences disappoint me more than witnessing the insensitive behaviour by English people towards white South Africans, tarnish[ing] every white person from our country with the same racist brush of intolerance. I [believe] that [all]

South Africans in the UK will be made proud by the Quartet of Peace. We hope the concert will give them a much needed sense of ownership, something beautiful that stands for peace and unity of purpose.

You've written the piece entitled "Uxolo" (Zulu/Xhosa for forgiveness). What inspired this piece?

The inspiration for writing "Uxolo" came directly from my joy at being offered the opportunity to express my life's mission through music. I set about to create a piece that would combine the salient elements of African and European musical traditions, without it being an all-sorts fusion.

You've been described as a composer, poet, percussionist, educator, broadcaster, workshop leader, creative leader and conflict resolution consultant. Which, for you, encompasses the most important part of yourself?

Separating aspects of one's creative being is a practice that is largely alien to Africans, where traditionally life is viewed in a holistic way. However, [perhaps] my creative abilities can be seen under the title of Rhythm for Life.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa how did music impact your life?

Music was my saviour! As kids my mother sang us all to sleep and awake in the morning. All her communication was through song and dance. She taught me my first chords. I remember finding refuge from the intense violence of the township by secretly climbing out of my bedroom window to join the throng of Shembe spiritual drummers and dancers who wove their enchanting way through the dangerous streets. Not even the most menacing gangsters would defy these unbelievably powerful people with their transcendental musical energy.

You are heavily involved in the London classical music scene. What first brought you here, and what are your most important projects in the UK?

I had to flee South Africa as a result of my work with the likes of Steve Biko in the seventies. I have been working with classical European orchestras in the UK for about 25 years doing what I consider to be my most important [work] – music education projects, which entail bringing together the formally divergent worlds of European classical music and African Diaspora.

Tell us more about your project this year – the Battle of the Wordsmiths

The Battle of the Wordsmiths, which was nominated for a PRS New Music Award, is a creative project of which I am the Artistic



Eugene Skeef

unity

we turn with the wheel
but as scattered spokes
we have no axis

seek not to be sought
for in our abundance alone
shall we be found

then...
we will be
the centre
of all turning things
we shall turn things
always

Eugene Skeef – South Africa 151277

Director and composer. It is an idea created by my friend, Tunde Olatunji, a London-based Nigerian writer of Yoruba ancestry. The central concern is a battle between a king and a boy. While this

project is on the theme of the pen being mightier than the sword, it is principally an opportunity to reveal the depth of creativity in the African roots of most global urban forms of music.

What are the future plans for the Quartet of Peace?

The tour never actually ends. The Quartet of Peace is the beautiful instruments Brian has created rather than the musicians. After London, there will be concerts in every imaginable city or village in the world where there is a need for reconciliation. The Quartet will rotate, always comprising musicians from all over the world. We are already planning to take the funds to places where the impact of violence and intolerance has resulted in damaged children. Through the Quartet's instruments we [hope] to keep the harmonised vision of our Nobel Peace Prize winners alive long after they have passed on... forever.

The Quartet of Peace is set to play in London on 5 December at Kings Place. See www.quartetofpeace.com for more details.

Starfish Greathearts Foundation recruits new Global CEO

STARFISH Greathearts Foundation recently announced that Elinor Middleton, formerly Development Director at Medecins du Monde UK, has been appointed as Global Chief Executive Officer. Middleton will join Starfish in January 2011 and be based in the UK, overseeing operations in the United Kingdom, South Africa and sister organisations in United States and Canada. She succeeds Gavin Salmon who moved to Build Africa as Head of Major Gifts in October following five committed and successful years with Starfish.

Middleton is looking forward to leading the Starfish team, having developed her career across communications, business and international development. "Starfish is able to intervene at a crucial time in the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in the world,

reversing the downward spiral set in motion by HIV/AIDS. I am looking forward to joining a team that can make a difference where and when it counts the most."

Joining Middleton on the global management team is Belinda te Riele, who was appointed as Country Director in South Africa. Te Riele has extensive experience in community development, where she has designed and managed a number of provincial and national programmes, working in partnership with community based organisations and key stakeholders. With her commitment and keen interest she hopes to greatly strengthen Starfish's ability to execute its vision and mission for children left orphaned or vulnerable in South Africa.

Ed Cottrell (Chairman of the Board of Trustees) comments: "Starfish began its journey in 2001,

providing support within long-term community projects to the many thousands of children left destitute as a result of the AIDS pandemic in southern Africa. With the 10th anniversary of the charity in 2011, the organisation has built strong foundations for the next ten years' fight to improve the lives of young victims of AIDS. In Elinor, we are pleased to have found a strong and well-suited candidate to take the organisation forward."

Starfish Greathearts Foundation is a UK-registered charity which aims to bring life, hope and opportunity to the children of southern Africa who have been orphaned or made vulnerable by the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Starfish ethos centres on helping each and every child, one child at a time. The charity does this by working in partnership with carefully selected

organisations at grassroots level; an approach which illustrates the success of empowering communities and community-led responses to the crisis.

