

## The two lives of Steve Martland's *Glad Day*

2500 words | (77 of notes) = 3000

I felt it important to talk about the composer Steve Martland today, not least because his archive is here at the BL. He died unexpectedly in 2013 but would have been 70 this year – which is quite difficult to imagine given the images we have of him. His music has been terribly neglected, I think partly for the practical reason of recordings not being available for a long period but a great deal because he and his music sat between genres, and was formed by the tensions of opposites and saturated with paradoxes. To take a few examples:

- He was signed to an independent alternative record label but said that ‘most pop music is without any intrinsic merit’.
- As a defiantly working-class composer, he raged against the ‘classical music establishment’s middle-class associations and sought to work outside of the concert hall. Nonetheless, he *was* a classically-trained composer signed to the publisher Schott and wrote works for classical ensembles.
- Finally, he condemned the ‘ugly patriotism’ promoted by Margaret Thatcher as well as brand of nationalism of last night of the Proms. Yet, he was a very ‘English’ composer and his greatest loves were the work of Blake, Purcell, Keats and Shelley, and Tippett.

While best known for works described in his obituaries as ‘rooted in the minimalist style and often amplified with propulsive, infectious rhythms’ such as *Horses of Instruction* and *Danceworks* for ensemble as well as his vast and singular orchestra piece *Babi Yar*, today I’m considering an obscure piece that is, I think, most emblematic of his complexities. The work is 1988’s *Glad Day* for voice and ensemble written for the singer Sarah Jane Morris of the pop band The Communards with bluntly political, anti-Thatcherist lyrics by Martland’s regular collaborator Stevan Keane. It gained its greatest exposure through its release in 1990 on Manchester’s infamous independent label Factory Records. Yet, it was a commission for a concert of contemporary British music at the 1988 Holland Festival. Intriguingly, then, the work had two contrasting lives: a first in dialogue with classical music and another life set against the background of Factory’s New Wave bands such as Joy Division, New Order, and the later ‘Madchester’ rave scene with the Happy Mondays and the iconic nightclub The Hacienda. So, in this paper I’ll begin by looking at how these two contrasting environments affect how we read this genre-fluid and political work. And, for the remainder of my time, I’ll look in more depth at some of the political radically features of the three songs that make *Glad Day*.

In order to introduce the work, I'll let you read Martland's programme note and have a listen to some of the first song so you a sense of how very 80s it is!

**SLIDE & CLICK: Programme note/audio**

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**SLIDE: ASKO** For its premiere in 1988, *Glad Day* was heard alongside works by Martland's English colleagues Simon Bainbridge; Oliver Knussen; Colin Matthews; and Robert Saxton. This other music was written for conventional Sinfonietta lineups. *Glad Day*, on the other hand, was for saxophones, brass, drums, bass guitar and strings. A clear outlier even before we consider its singer and its text. The sense is that Martland based his instrumentation on the Dutch 'street band' Orkest De Volharding<sup>1</sup> co-founded by his teacher Louis Andriessen in 1972. The band were significant in performing concerts with 'explicit connections to current political themes'. Martland, despite being English, was on a kind of home turf in Holland, having only left in June 1987 after five years there. We might wonder what he was trying to achieve in a piece for a Dutch audience that thematised British issues. Seemingly, the sender and receiver were mis-matched. **SLIDE: Garratt** The question of 'intentionality' comes to mind here and it's the first of the three ways James Garratt proposes of approaching the 'question of how music is able to exercise political agency'. The Dutch audience with their relative cultural liberalism was unlikely to have been shocked by Martland's political genre-crossing given that Andriessen amongst others had cleared a path for work like this with works like *De Staat* (1972-76) and *De Stijl* (1984-85).<sup>2</sup> With the piece being at an international festival, the sense with this iteration of *Glad Day* might be of Martland as Hermes, a whistleblower almost, alerting outsiders to the situation at home. Perhaps with the hope that those in England flinch at being critiqued so publicly abroad that they strive to fix the situation. Indeed, reviewing the premiere, *The Times* of London remarked of the lyrical content, 'it is impossible not to feel shame'.

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<sup>1</sup> Their name translates as 'Perseverance' and they were founded by Andriessen and saxophonist Willem Breuker seeking to bring political messages to the streets. They ultimately premiered some of the key works of post-war Dutch contemporary music such as the former's *De Staat* (1972-76). See Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Louis Andriessen: De Staat* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The first work sets parts of Plato's *The Republic* – especially the sections relating to music's ability to change society – and the latter work, though not textually political, is an eclectic collage including boogie-woogie piano, pop bass guitar lines, spoken memories of Modrian and a dancer.

Another question is of whether Martland was critiquing his fellow composers. This, of course, relates to the music's 'material agency' – Garratt's second consideration. The idea is that music is not just a vehicle for political intentionality but the objects involved possess in themselves, as Garratt puts it, a 'thing power'. **SLIDE: instrumentation** Martland's instrumentation – which a critic referred to as a 'classical rock amalgam' – set his work against the other composers and the archive reveals his antipathy to these 'establishment' figures and the ensembles who supported their work. He complains in his sketches of the London Sinfonietta's 'privileged position', that they received disproportionately more funding than similar ensembles, and that they were too conservative in their commissioning. **SLIDE: Classical CD** If the 'medium is the message', then Martland's one is clear, especially in light of him saying such things as 'Symphony orchestras are dead institutions and I refuse to write for them'.

This sense is magnified through Martland's choice of singer: not a classical one, but contralto Sarah Jane Morris best known for her work on the Communards' 1986 No.1 hit 'Don't you Leave me This Way'. Interestingly, in this classical context *The Times* described her reductively and somewhat erroneously as merely a 'jazz singer'. Her presence seems so transgressive as to have left the (classical) critic a little stuck.

The third consideration around agency is the broader aesthetic experience. *The Times* described its 'integrity emphasised by the simplistic rock-influenced language'. It's interesting that it *was* understood here as a classical piece, not an actual pop/rock one. *The Scottish Herald*, however, managed to locate the piece a little better, stating that the 'political satire is as biting as Brecht, his music as vehemently ironic as Weill'. Now, Martland never publicly acknowledged these figures as inspirations but his sketches are full of references to Brecht and there is tantalising handwritten reference to a Dutch publication asking 'Is SM the new KW?'. It seems he found the comparison a compliment.

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### **SLIDE: Factory**

So, let's go two years ahead to the release of the *Glad Day EP on Factory Records* in October 1990. With the Poll Tax riots earlier that year and Thatcher's imminent ousting as PM the following month, the work's political relevance was refreshed. Factory had been formed in 1978 by Alan Erasmus and Tony Wilson as a way of promoting the acts they'd put on at their 'The Factory' nights in Manchester. With the art director Peter Savile providing design inspired by the Bauhaus and the New Typography, they established themselves as a vital, if not chaotic, alternative to

London-based commercial pop music.

### SLIDE: Hacienda

The New Wave bands Durutti Column and Joy Division (who later became New Order) were the label's mainstays but they soon ushered in the 'Madchester' rave scene with bands like Happy Mondays and their infamously badly managed nightclub The Hacienda.

Not content with this success, here's co-founder Alan Erasmus in 1985:

### SLIDE: Erasmus

*There's some incredibly beautiful classical music around at the moment. What's more, it's in desperate need of release. Modern classical music isn't all unlistenable crap, it's something very close to my heart. May not sell, but certainly worth having a go.<sup>3</sup>*

Once the Factory Classical subdivision was established, Wilson said:

*'...we have packaged pop music as if it is classical music ... with Factory Classical [...] we decided to package classical music as pop music. Our ideology in reverse.'*

Indeed, the records didn't sell but included releases by pianist Rolf Hind, the Duke Quartet, recorder player Piers Adams, and composer/pianist Graham Fitkin. Martland released four records over the label's lifespan with the second being *Glad Day*, performed by the brand new 'Steve Martland Band'.

### SLIDE: Factory Classical releases

All in all, there's an unavoidable sense of Factory being a kind of sociocultural activism. With that I'd propose that the release of *Glad Day* was its high-water mark. It was the most explicitly political release of Factory as a whole.

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<sup>3</sup> Nice 2010, p. 271

Now being released on an alternative label, we are prompted again to think about genre and aesthetic experience, and most of all an essential question that Simon Frith prompts to ask right back in his seminal work *Performing Rites*, that of: 'How do words and voices work for different types of pop and audience?'. Of course, for *Glad Day* with the metagenre divide between classical and pop being crossed, now aspects that were relatively neutral in the classical context finds themselves saturated with musical and social meaning in the pop one.

**SLIDE: Glad Day cover**

Thinking about intentionality; *Glad Day* has been described as 'Factory's only direct attempt at a release that would straddle the classical/pop divide' but nonetheless they succeeded in getting *Glad Day's* final song, 'The World is in Heaven', played a handful of times on Steve Wright's BBC Radio 1 show. What's more, where the work clashed with the other pieces on the Holland Festival stage, it sat comfortably in the diverse alternative music catalogue of Factory.

In this popular music setting, we rerun the questions about material agency too. Morris is obviously not longer remarkable for not being a 'classical' singer, in the pop context it is the more detailed, genre-specific question of the particular bands she sang with and *their* associations we think about. Pop audiences knew her from singing with left wing bands such as The Republic and the industrial post-punk Test Dept. on songs including 'Long Live British Democracy and the Generous And Correct Margaret Hilda Thatcher...' After this, she began to perform works of Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler with the group Happy End<sup>4</sup> but success with the Communards forced her to leave in 1988. **SLIDE: Communards** The Communards – a synth-pop duo consisting of lead singer Jimmy Somerville and keyboardist Richard Coles – were highly politicised themselves not least through their name,<sup>5</sup> songs such as 'Breadline Britain', and their openness about their homosexuality. Morris gained fame as the co-vocalist on the duo's chart-topping 'Don't You Leave Me This Way' in 1986. And though it's beyond the scope of this paper you might want to think about the corresponding fashion codes at play here between Martland, Somerville, and Coles all variously sporting a flattop haircut and white T-shirts.

Another visual consideration, though one of a quite different kind, arises when we consider how *Glad Day* as a title comes after a painting by the Romantic poet-artist of 'radical dissent' William Blake. **SLIDE: Albion Rose** It depicts

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<sup>4</sup> It is presumably here where her designation as a 'jazz singer' in *The Times* derives.

<sup>5</sup> Coming after the C19 Paris revolutionaries.

the figure of Albion – the revolutionary personification of Britain – after exultantly throwing off the shackles of physical and spiritual oppression. This employment of older English signifiers aligns with what Dai Griffiths has observed in the themes in British pop music at the end of the twentieth century, where ‘history [is] a central and defining battleground of consciousness and claim’. The sketches for *Glad Day* and a BBC documentary Martland and Keane made simultaneously called ... *Albion*, reveal how they conceived of history as functioning in *their* work.

**SLIDE: Layers** Martland writes of three ‘layers’: mythological; real world; historical. The mythological being the ‘excessive emphasis on a myth-ridden national history to qualify and justify actions taken by our present rulers – “Victorian Values”’. He critiques the The National Trust, ‘making the past as a more attractive place than the present’. With second layer, ‘real world’, he means the present day reality for most people; unemployment, homelessness *et al.* The third layer – ‘historical’ – argues for the *actual* reality of that mythologised past. In other words, that the past was *not* in fact a ‘golden age’<sup>6</sup> and was, as documented by writers like William Cobbett and George Orwell, for most people an existence of struggle and hardship.<sup>7</sup> With the interplay between these strata, Martland and Keane seek to contest the Thatcherite position, calling it into question and arguing a more ‘English radical’ view of history.

So, let’s look at how some of this plays out in the songs themselves:

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**SLIDE: lyrics of ‘Festival of Britain’**

The opening song, ‘Festival of Britain’, is a satirical invocation of the post-war ‘tonic to the nation’ of 1951. The lyrical realism tells of homeless people sleeping underneath a concert hall, with bankers and landlords enjoying music within. The locus for this protest song is easy to uncover: London’s Southbank Centre. **SLIDE: Down and Out** The walkways around the bottom of the brutalist complex were by the 1980s known as the ‘Cardboard City’. It is a potent setting for a song through it being symbolic of post-war optimism though also the swan-song of Clement

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<sup>6</sup> Martland, S. and S. Keane. ‘Fantasy Island’, *Glad Day* (London: Schott & Sons, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Cobbett’s *Rural Rides* (1830) and the latter two’s *English Journey* (1934) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), respectively, come to mind. Indeed, passages of the latter were in the script of *Albion* and research at the BL shows that a filming location was Wigan Pier. They illustrate that while the Industrial Revolution – roughly 1760 to 1840 and the same period that Blake, Shelley, et al. wrote – saw the emerging capitalist system drive manufacturing and create considerable wealth, it left a huge number of the population desperately poor.

Attlee's crumbling and soon toppled Labour government.

Martland's three layers are all in evidence: firstly, the now **mythical**, joyous spirit of the 1951 Festival of Britain; secondly, the **real-world** inequality outlined in the lyrics; and, thirdly, the **historical reality** in that neither Festival nor Great Exhibition of 1851 that inspired it were triumphs of a golden age and that in post-war Britain, as Mariel Grant notes, 'shortages existed in everything from housing and transport to clothing and basic foodstuffs'. Though, I must admit that this third layer is more clear in the other songs and sketches.

You might have spotted the prophetic end of the song quoting the famous line of Percy Shelley's political ballad *The Masque of Anarchy*, 'We are many, they are few'. It strengthens the connection already made through the work's title to the English Romantics and their more radical faction. With the Factory release of *Glad Day*, Martland put his cards on the table: **SLIDE: 'I'm a romantic'**

*I hope I'm part of a radical British tradition of dissent and I'm a romantic in that sense. This is not characteristic of modern British composers other than Tippett.*

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'Festival of Britain' with its 'explicit statement of opposition to the political or social status quo' is undeniably in the mode of what Dave Laing would describe 'protest music'. The second song, 'Fantasy Island', treads a more subtle path in advertising, ironically, Britain from the perspective of the previously vilified 'economists of enterprise'.

#### **SLIDE: Fantasy Island**

There is much more to say about this song's persona and its sonic environment (based on some of Allan Moore's work) but an easy thing to spot from the lyrics if read *like* a poem – and this is inspired by Dai Griffiths' writing on *lyric* and *anti-lyric* – is that they are 'heroic couplets' – a rhyming pair of lines in iambic pentameter. This recalls the epic, narrative poetry of the Romantics especially, given the comparable subject matter, Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' (1770) which is in fact a poem quite central to the 'English Radical Tradition'. Martland's fantasy, however, is dispelled at the end. Couplets are abandoned and the Shelley quote from the first song is cynically recast: 'Fantasy Island, where nothing is true/than the labour of many to service the few'.

## SLIDE: The World is in Heaven

The final song revives the call to arms spirit of 'Festival of Britain' but the visionary Blakeian lyrics – 'The world is in heaven / Heaven's in the world' – suggest something more of resistance than protest. The final verse, it's worth noting, is a bucolic image that derives not from Blake but from the well-known Brecht 'motto': 'In the dark times / will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing. / About the dark times'.

The most crucial difference between the premiered work and the **Factory release** is that 'The World is in Heaven' is presented on record in both the original 'classical' version and a new '7" dance' one. This remix abandons almost everything of the original song with its instrumentation and much compositional material completely reworked.

**CLICK: for dance version** The song then has a pop 'authenticity' and one entirely removed from Martland's usual sound. With the drum machine part eventually giving way to a slinky Madchester drumbeat so evocative of the Happy Mondays, all points to the sonic environment of the Hacienda. We are now as far away from that Holland Festival stage as we can imagine.

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So, to conclude I'm going to talk about the **legacy of Glad Day**. In 1991 it was toured by The Steve Martland Band throughout Europe and the UK, including The Hacienda and three nights at London's Bloomsbury Theatre. There is a powerful sense here of Martland as a travelling auteur-activist. Yet, he wrote nothing like else *Glad Day* and while he still attracts the term 'crossover', there are no more songs. What's more **he wrote nothing so bluntly political** and specific to contemporary events and so it forms something of a political high point after which he became progressively more subtle in his incorporation of socio-political ideas

The **SMB** itself, formed for the Factory recording, went from strength to strength and was by 1994 it was a fully-fledged ensemble of hand-picked players and Martland's main musical vehicle into the mid-noughties. For the band he composed some of his career-defining works such as *Horses of Instruction* and *Mr Anderson's Pavane*.

On reflection, *Glad Day's* two lives seem to **bookend for Martland a period of stylist and formal experimentation**. Before, he was a composer of ostensibly classical concert works but afterward had a revised relationship to the 'establishment' and had his own group. He faced a quite novel postmodern problem where, in the late 80s/early 90s, a composer could struggle to find their way between the glamour and class-consciousness of the pop industry and the artistic integrity and seriousness of the classical one.

~~I want to finish though with a little cautionary lesson. *Glad Day*, because it's a bit cheesy and quite '80s' I'd put it to one side. The lesson is that it's the curiosities and oddities in an archive can sometimes be the most enlightening and do most work to unlock the essence of a composer.~~