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Ahead of his Ripon performance: clarinettist Robert Plane speaks to us about collaboration and new commissions.

Robert, we're really excited to welcome you and the Gould Trio to Ripon in November and we're particularly looking forward to hearing *The Rising of Sirius*, a composition that celebrates the life and influence of Ripon's beloved Saint Wilfrid. Having just premiered *The Rising of Sirius*, what are your initial reflections on the piece? Can you describe the particular challenges and rewards of performing it for the first time?

We're excited to visit Ripon too! We've now played *The Rising of Sirius* twice, at its premiere at the Corbridge Chamber Music Festival and then at the Glasshouse, Gateshead, and it's amazing how much more familiar a new piece feels on its second outing! Firstly, it's fair to say that it's a very difficult piece to play!! Most of the repertoire we play is structured around groupings of notes in 3s or 4s, but Piers Hellawell's piece is almost entirely made up of 5s! So the fundamental challenge when initially learning a piece like this together is playing the right notes in the right place! But of course by the time we're ready for the first performance that initial work is a given, like the unseen foundations of a building. Piers' huge skill as a composer is to write music which is ground breaking, challenging, thought provoking and yet immediately engaging and approachable. The music takes us on a journey, inspired by both Wilfrid's life (the opening turbulent music is a nod to his travels in flimsy boats in rough seas) but more importantly, structurally, by the great buildings he instigated in the North. It's always a privilege to give a world premiere, and it's particularly liberating to be spared the influence of other people's interpretations.

You've had a long-standing collaboration with Piers Hellawell across several notable works. How did you first meet him, and how has your working relationship evolved over the years?

I first met Piers when I was principal clarinet in Royal Northern Sinfonia, when the orchestra premiered a double concerto for recorder and percussion in 1997, and we hit it off immediately. I became an Artist-in-Residence at Queen's University, Belfast, where Piers was Professor of Composition, making three visits a year to give classes, concerts and lessons. I was thrilled when Piers accepted a commission to write a clarinet concerto for me in 2008. The resulting work, *Agricolas*, was premiered with BBC National Orchestra of Wales at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival, and I performed it subsequently in Belfast and Dublin. It's an amazingly creative and colourful piece that pushed me to my limits! You can listen here!

<https://spotify.link/Qj3MEJJqHXb>



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What is your process for commissioning new work, such as *The Rising of Sirius* or *Agricolas*? How did you initially approach Piers Hellawell with an idea?

Such is the quality of Piers' work that the Gould Trio and I didn't hesitate to ask him to write a piece for our Corbridge Festival St. Wilfrid celebrations in 2025. He understands all of our playing so well, reveling in the things he knows we can do, yet being unafraid to push the boundaries of what is possible. That's how all performing musicians develop! It started with a conversation in Corbridge in 2023 when we were featuring Piers as composer in residence at the festival, discussing how the life and buildings of Wilfrid could be captured in sound. The amazing section of the piece where the audience become part of the performance, chanting independently of each other, was actually the first idea he had for the piece. Obviously after the initial request comes fundraising to pay for the commission, and also the question for further performances. This can be difficult with new music, as everyone wants the premiere. But by focusing on venues associated with Wilfrid, like Ripon, we have managed to put together a satisfying run of performances.

As a performer, how do you interpret and shape a piece when you have the composer available to consult? Do you prefer to stick strictly to the score or have some interpretive freedom?

This varies from composer to composer. Piers really trusts his performers so was happy to keep a bit of a distance. But he was really helpful with issues of balance, making sure we were letting the important lines through. There was also some consultation between us regarding the clarinet multiphonics (whereby a clarinet can play a whole chord rather than just one note, an amazing effect!), to find sounds that complemented the mood of that particular section. I think we have as much interpretative responsibility as performers of new music as we would playing something from the classical or romantic repertoire. We still have to delve below what's on the printed page to find the deeper meaning.

You've worked with the Gould Piano Trio for decades. How does that long-standing rapport shape the way you approach and interpret a brand-new work together?

We know each others playing so well that there's almost a sixth sense when we perform together. It has been a wonderful partnership for 30 years! An ensemble also builds trust over such a period of time, which really helps when approaching new music. There's a lot of individual responsibility in a difficult contemporary piece and obviously the personal preparation has to go in before the first group rehearsal. We all understand each other well enough to feel confident to challenge and really speak our minds, and that makes the process so much more efficient and unified.

Looking ahead, what do you hope audiences will take away from *The Rising of Sirius*, particularly given its mix of historical inspiration, architectural form, and audience engagement?

Overall I hope there's a message that music can be thought-provoking, challenging, controversial and stimulating, and not just a 'pleasant listen'! Much new music today doesn't push these boundaries, and I love Piers' music especially because it's uncompromising yet still engrossing. New work isn't meant to be fully comprehensible on its first hearing, or indeed even in its own time. Beethoven's late quartets for example were way ahead of their time - nobody remotely understood them when they were premiered. The audience participation element of Piers' piece is so effective, and really spine chilling in context. Listeners need not worry - we do a little rehearsal beforehand!

And finally...for your upcoming Ripon concert, you're performing The Rising of Sirius alongside iconic clarinet works like Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time and Finzi's Bagatelles. Can you tell us how you put this programme together, and if there's a theme or connection linking these pieces?

As this concert falls on Remembrance Sunday, Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, written whilst the composer was interned in a prisoner of war camp, provides a poignant framework, within which we've slotted other works, or movements from works, many of which were written by composers affected by war. Finzi's Bagatelles for example date from WWII and are nostalgic yet defiant reflections of the era. Rebecca Clarke's trio is a response to the First World War, tense and dramatic. Her later life was turned upside down war, stranded in the USA and unable to return to England, eventually making New York her home. But we also feature classical and romantic works, by Beethoven and Walter Rabl, the first composer to write for the combination of clarinet and piano trio. Having enjoyed thirty years of playing with the amazing Gould Piano Trio I'm really pleased he had the foresight to combine these four instruments!

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