

Tarik O'Regan

A composer who rose to prominence through his choral music but now excels across many disciplines, by Evan Dickerson

Tarik O'Regan first captured my attention in 2005 with a single song – a setting of Mallarmé's poem *Sainte*, which won that year's vocal category of the British Composer Awards. The sense of lyrical line and feeling for the text proved instantly arresting and distinguished itself in the company of a varied collection of new French song on the Metier label.

With more than 100 works, around 30 albums featuring his music and an international performance history of growing prominence to his credit thus far, O'Regan is his own man – something that becomes clear after spending even a little time with his music. Unlike some who plough a single furrow repeatedly across an oeuvre, refining essential characteristics into ever finer detail, O'Regan delights the enquiring listener through exploring the breadth of his cultural erudition within his music.

O'Regan has acknowledged several influences on his work: Renaissance vocal writing, the music of North Africa, 1960s and 1970s British rock bands, jazz and composers including Copland, Harris and Barber. Britten and early Schoenberg (O'Regan's idiom remains solidly tonal) also come to mind, as does a fondness for Harrison Birtwistle's sense of timing.

A fascination with rhythm and an interest in percussive writing have formed a central core to much of his work

Born in London on New Year's Day, 1978, O'Regan grew up in Croydon and spent some of his early childhood in Morocco, where his mother was born, and Algeria. Having learnt to read music while playing the drums for a school production of *West Side Story*, his interest in composition was encouraged at the Junior Department of the Royal College of Music. A fascination with rhythm and an interest in percussive writing have formed a central core to much of his work. Undergraduate study at Pembroke College, Oxford, and a master's degree under Robin Holloway in Cambridge followed. While a postgraduate, O'Regan was appointed composer-in-residence at Corpus Christi College and began a four-year stint as classical recordings reviewer for *The Observer*.

By 2010, fully resident stateside, O'Regan wrote and presented the BBC Radio 4 documentary *Composing New York*, in which he explored the rich heritage of European composers working in this vibrant city. *Composing LA* followed in 2012.

O'Regan recalls his Oxbridge education as being 'very history-based', but also acknowledges the welcome contradiction of 'stuffy' college choirs' acceptance of new repertoire. Despite being 'a terrible singer' himself and not participating in the choral tradition, it was this scene that offered him his first prominent compositional opportunities.



Now resident in New York, O'Regan's musical influences are exceptionally diverse

Four Mixed-Voice Settings (1998–2000) explores the textures of mixed-voice writing in a way that emphasises their inner luminescence, often reliant upon economy of means. The *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis* variations (2000), for double choir and four vocal soloists, echoes the Renaissance practice of alternating sections of chant and polyphony; O'Regan's innovative addition is to have a solo cello part that elaborates material taken from both elements. *Dorchester Canticles* (2004), written for performance alongside Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, marks O'Regan's transition from the UK to New York through the Manhattan-driven rapid toccata rhythms that conclude it. *Threnody* (2004; which also forms part of *Triptych*) is influenced by the music of Copland and Barber.

There are works that are apparently unrelated to any others, but that doesn't diminish their importance or impact. *Acallam na senórach* (roughly translated as 'An Irish Colloquy') (2010) is one such work. The text, one of the longest-surviving works of medieval Irish literature, meets the unlikely instrumental pairing of guitar and Irish *bodhrán*. It's typical of O'Regan to draw together opposites – here, pagan and Christian – and diverse cultures rather than maintain any artificial separation. A demanding piece to perform, it's intricate and absorbing, creating a cathartic experience when heard in a single sitting. Meanwhile, *A Celestial Map of the Sky* (2014), written for the quinqucentenary of the Manchester Grammar School, uses propulsive syncopated orchestral and choral rhythms and thematic invention to fuse the inspiration taken from visual and philosophical views on astronomy, from Albrecht Dürer's 1515 woodcuts of the celestial heavens to Persian and European philosophy regarding man's relationship to the stars.

Listening to O'Regan's growing instrumental output, I am struck by the fact that concision of expression is as much a characteristic as it is in his vocal writing. There's

TARIK O'REGAN FACTS

Born in London, January 1, 1978
Resides in New York City
Studied at Junior Department Royal College of Music, London; Pembroke College, Oxford; and with Robin Holloway at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
Influences include Copland, Harris, Barber and Britten; North African music; 1960s and 1970s British rock bands; jazz
Current appointments include honorary fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford; composition teacher at Rutgers University; senior adviser to the Center for Ballet and the Arts at New York University; and composer-in-residence with Pacific Chorale, California

no avoiding the memorable melodies either, which often expertly link the structural elements of each piece. In lesser hands, this might lead to music that is earnestly

intentioned but lacking in depth. O'Regan banishes this feeling through music of (to quote British composer Joseph Phibbs) 'infectious energy, lyrical beauty, and consummate craftsmanship'. When it comes to O'Regan's instrumental works, a variety of textures and colours are explored with a knowing wit and sophistication. *Rai* (2006) and *Chaâbi* (2012) draw respectively on Moroccan and Algerian folk dance forms grounded in modal rather than tonal language. While not ethnographic in the strict sense, they carry the feeling of remembrances of music heard in his youth – hence they give the impression of constantly shifting tableaux. That said, O'Regan is unafraid to take his cue from the most august of sources should the occasion demand it. *Latent Manifest* (2010) for full orchestra, premiered at the BBC Proms, is an effervescent fantasia-like elaboration or 'transcription' of 'intimations' (to use O'Regan's own description) found in the *Adagio* of Bach's Solo Violin Sonata No 3.

More recently, O'Regan has ventured fully into operatic writing, his aim being to delve into the psyches of the main protagonists. *Heart of Darkness* (2011) sets an English-language libretto by artist Tom Phillips based on the novella by Joseph Conrad; the single-act chamber work audaciously presents Conrad's narrative of the young adventurer Marlow in Africa alongside the writer's later-life denials of his own racism. This inner psychodrama gives the work its dramatic tension, highlighted further by the contrast of sensuous instrumental scoring with the unavoidable presence of the driving electric guitar bass lines.

The Wanton Sublime (2013), a 30-minute chamber monodrama for mezzo-soprano and amplified ensemble, also examines the duality of personality, this time in relation to the Virgin Mary. Its fragmentary accompanying music contrasts the spiritual (evoked particularly by the writing for strings and solo flute) and the earthly (represented by the electric guitars and percussion), thus providing an eclectic

backdrop against which the solitary Mary explores her inner battle between the divine and the human.

Music for dancing to has also produced two notable works. *Louder than Words* (2014), written for the Sydney Dance Company, utilises O'Regan's stand-alone vocal piece *Scattered Rhymes* (2006) as its starting point; the three movements are interspersed with three new electronic movements written jointly with composer Nick Wales. The new movements draw on sampled sections taken from the 2007 recording of *Scattered Rhymes* (Harmonia Mundi) as well as poetry readings in Latin, English and medieval Italian, creating an atmospheric fusion of text and textures that's both ancient and modern. *Mata Hari* (2015), a ballet scored for full orchestra, draws heavily on the American minimalists, with Britten's ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* also detectable as an influence. O'Regan's score deftly underlines the complex central persona through its blending of lyrical writing and the rhythmic interaction of its intricate orchestral layers.

Choral and stage works will continue to feature prominently: *Mata Hari* was recently revived in Amsterdam, and O'Regan's first full-length opera, *The Phoenix*, will be premiered by Houston Grand Opera in spring 2019. Its subject is the extraordinary life of Lorenzo da Ponte, and it boasts a top-notch cast, with Luca Pisaroni and Thomas Hampson singing the parts of the younger and older Da Ponte respectively. If his deployment of the full range of orchestral forces in previous works is anything to go by, one can expect a translucence of texture fused with a keen ear for specific sonorities. If the latter sound carefully crafted – taking their impulse from fragmentary gestures – and deliberately contrasted it is because that is what O'Regan intends, but in doing so he offers his listener something curiously fresh and unaffected. 6

TARIK O'REGAN ON RECORD

Recordings reflecting the range of O'Regan's output

Three Motets from Sequence for St Wulfstan. Magnificat and Nunc dimittis: Variations for Choir. Two Upper-Voice Settings. Dorchester Canticles. Four Mixed-Voice Settings. Collimaçon
 Clare College Choir, Cambridge / Timothy Brown; with Rafal Jezierski vc Adrian Spillet perc Helen Tunstall hp James McVinnie org Collegium (7/06)

An inviting collection of early choral works performed with delicacy and clarity.

Had I not seen the sun. The Ecstasies Above. Threshold of Night. Tal vez tenemos tiempo. Care Charming Sleeper. Triptych. I had no time to hate
 Company of Voices; Conspirare / Craig Hella Johnson Harmonia Mundi (A/08)

Nominated for both best classical album and best choral performance in the 2009 Grammys, this album showcases O'Regan's later eclectic approach to choral writing.

A Celestial Map of the Sky. Latent Manifest. Rai. Chaâbi. Fragments from Heart of Darkness
 The Manchester Grammar School Choir; Hallé Youth Choir; Hallé Orchestra / Mark Elder; Jamie Phillips NMC (4/17)

This debut recording of O'Regan's orchestral works demonstrates his instrumental sureness of touch.