



The Saxophone Quartet

By Susan Fancher

Lunar Saxophone Quartet

Some of the Silence by Hilary Tann

Hilary Tann's saxophone quartet piece titled *Some of the Silence*, commissioned by the Lunar Saxophone Quartet, is a superb new addition to the saxophone quartet repertoire. While this is Tann's first composition for saxophone quartet, she is certainly no stranger to the saxophone. Her earliest work for saxophone is *Windhover* for solo soprano saxophone or solo flute. She also has two excellent saxophone concertos, *In the First Spinning Place* for alto saxophone and orchestra, written for Debra Richtmeyer, and *Shakkei* for soprano saxophone and orchestra, transcribed from the oboe original for me by the composer. All three of these works are published and available to all interested saxophonists. We are fortunate, indeed, that she has penned so much music for our instrument. In addition, there is a version of her trio *Of Erthe and Air*, originally for flute, clarinet and percussion, with saxophone replacing the clarinet and her *Songs of the Cotton Grass* for soprano voice and oboe have been performed with soprano saxophone replacing the oboe. This body of music is a welcome and significant contribution to the saxophone repertoire.

From her childhood in the coal-mining valleys of South Wales, Hilary Tann developed a love of nature that has inspired all her music. Her deep interest in the music of Japan led to several years of study of the shakuhachi, an ancient Japanese vertical bamboo flute. Tann lives in upstate New York where she is the John Howard Payne Professor of Music at Union College in Schenectady. She holds degrees in composition from the University of Wales at Cardiff and from Princeton University. Critics have hailed her music as "beautiful, lyrical work," "deliciously cinematic," and "dramatically exciting to hear." Her biography lists performances by orchestras from around the world and commissions from many organizations including the Welsh Arts Council, New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts and Meet the Composer/Arts Endowment Commissioning Music USA. For more information about Hilary Tann, visit www.hilarytann.com.

The Lunar Saxophone Quartet has been Wales' leading saxophone quartet since its formation in 2003. The members of the Lunar Saxophone Quartet are Joel Garthwaite (soprano), Hannah Riches (alto), Lewis Evans (tenor), and Lauren Hamer (baritone). The LSQ has performed in a wide variety of concert venues and in numerous television and radio programs. Working with both young and established composers has been a priority



for the LSQ since its formation. The LSQ regularly works with composers in the composition program of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. The LSQ's Joel Garthwaite states, "We would like the saxophone quartet genre to be as widely noticed as a string quartet for example, so when we teach at RWCMD we try to impart as much advice and experience on the new pieces that the young composers are writing to ensure that their pieces get played as often as possible and don't contain any 'saxophonic' issues and impossible passages." Another part of the LSQ's support to young composers is a biennial composition competition for composers under the age of 25. The winning compositions are performed and recorded by the LSQ. Interested young composers should visit the LSQ website at www.lunarsax.co.uk for more information.

The LSQ has two ambitious recording projects currently in the works. The commission of Hilary Tann's new saxophone quartet is part of a CD project made up exclusively of new works



Composer Hilary Tann

by Welsh composers written for the LSQ. The CD will be released on Signum Classics under the title *These Visions* on November 5, 2010 when the quartet embarks on an extensive concert tour to promote the album all across the UK. LSQ's album *FLUX*, scheduled for release in early 2011 on Signum Classics, features seven works never before recorded, five of which were composed for the LSQ.

Let's turn our attention now specifically to Hilary Tann's *Some of the Silence*. The work is inspired by a haiku by poet John Stevenson, a member of the Route 9 Haiku Group to which Tann also belongs (www.upstatedimsum.com) and a former president of the Haiku Society of America. The poem reads:

a deep gorge...
some of the silence
is me

Tann writes, "I enjoy this haiku in part because it speaks to the after-echo of an experience. Japanese music works with the concept of a jo-ha-kyu curve, much like the shape of a wave which crests and then falls. Western music tends to be goal-oriented, V-I, V-I, V-I, but I enjoy the idea of what happens in the immediate aftermath of an experience." She continues, "As a composer, my concern has been with 'the far side of the curve,' not the climax, but the 'result of' reaction to' the climax, the downward curve of the falling wave (the kyu part of the jo-ha-kyu curve)." If you imagine a wave, you see a rising shape that crests where the wave breaks, followed by a downward slope. The haiku is a literary example of this form. It's this downward slope that follows the crest that most interests Tann. It's what she calls the "ah-ha" moment.

Some of the Silence is a 9-minute single-movement piece that falls into three wave-like sections. The music begins slowly with a melancholy, lyrical melody over a pulsing triplet figure in alternating bars of 6/8 and 9/8 meter. It gains in intensity, leading to a more dance-like section marked *agitato*. Then, the second section begins with faster music and flowing eighth-note figures leading to a climactic section of tremolos. The tension of this passage is resolved in a slower, lyrical section, similar to the opening, but without the pulsing eighths. As the third section begins, the music builds again in a faster tempo and gains momentum through the return of the accompanying undulating tremolos. The introspective end returns to the calm feeling of the opening of the piece, with similar, but not the same music, fading out to silence.

It is a haunting, beautiful composition, not technically difficult, though there are some tricky rhythmic figures to coordinate. It is the kind of music that demands musically mature players. It would be playable by a strong high school group able to handle the depth of the music. Certainly good college and of course professional groups will be interested in getting their hands on this music.

Hilary Tann and the Lunar Saxophone Quartet were able to rehearse together twice while the work was still being completed. Tann writes, "These rehearsals were an important part of the compositional process." For example, she continues, "In order to get the feel of the water, I had to devise a new term 'Undulating,' which I explain as a tremolo which follows the dynamic shape, the *cresc* - dim hairpin, represented as slower-faster-slower. I tried to write it out in triplet-lengths initially, but the LSQ concentrated on playing it 'in time' whereas I wanted a fluid undulation. For the next rehearsal I wrote 'Undulating' and this worked much better. This is why it's so important for composers

to work with performers, especially with performers as outgoing and receptive as the members of the LSQ. It's also a reason why composers should plan to come to early rehearsals. These are more important than last rehearsals and concerts. It's when the music gets done!"

The LSQ considers itself lucky to be able to commission and work with several outstanding composers over the last couple of years such as Gabriel Jackson, John Metcalf, Peter Reynolds and Hilary Tann. The ensemble aims to commission composers who are keen to push the boundaries of what the saxophone quartet should sound like and be capable of. They find it very rewarding to contribute great new pieces to the repertoire. They work really hard with composers during the rehearsal process prior to first performance to ensure that the audience hears the best possible version of the new work. The positive feedback they receive from audiences and the press reaffirms for them why they commission so much new music.

About the LSQ, Tann remarks, "Their sound is so homogeneous--it's mesmerizing! They're clearly 'an ensemble,' meaning they are totally responsive to each other and yet they disagree/joke/rethink/try out bits/come to consensus. I've enjoyed working with them and the bari player has made me love the instrument (something I hadn't done before--I'm more of a sop. sax. type!)." Garthwaite shares, "We like the piece very much indeed, it contrasts with a lot of the music we have in our repertoire in that it is more understated, generally quieter and really tells a story throughout the work." He continues in his praise of Tann's work, "*Some of the Silence* is extremely well written for the saxophone quartet. It has clear direction and visions and it is obvious that Hilary has a great understanding of the saxophone by her clever use of the range and dynamics. It fits very well under the fingers indeed and as a result it's a joy to play! We hope that audiences will enjoy listening to it as much as we do when playing it." Clearly, the collaboration between this composer and ensemble was a huge success.

The saxophone quartet repertoire has simply exploded in both quantity and quality in the past 30 years. Three reasons for this are the perseverance of saxophone quartets who have convinced leading composers to write for the ensemble, composers find it easier to get performances by saxophone quartets than from ensembles with more established repertoire, and thirdly, the level of musicianship of saxophonists has become extremely high. Music is a lively pursuit and working with composers and being a part of the creation of new music is particularly exciting.

Hilary Tann's *Some of the Silence* will be available for other quartets to purchase beginning in May 2011. Tann expects the work to be published by Oxford University Press in their saxophone quartet series, but until that contract is in place, the work will be available from Rowanberry Music, Tann's own publishing company. The LSQ's past commissions are available to buy through the LSQ website. I admire their commitment to making all these new works available to other quartets, demonstrating their sincere commitment to building the repertoire for all saxophone quartets, not just their own ensemble.

Some of the Silence by Hilary Tann is a wonderful new addition to the saxophone quartet repertoire by an important composer. My May 2011 "to do" list includes ordering the music. I hope many *Saxophone Journal* readers will be inspired to do the same. §