



Our Town

By Mike de Sousa

A composition of music, speech, and ambient sounds forming an integrated whole and where all elements are treated musically.

Our Town captures a place and its people at the turn of the 21st century and is about human stories, connections, and dislocations.

From infancy to old age, bankers and beekeepers, mothers and fathers, rich, poor, happy, angry, sad. Some tell of their passions, of those who have left an indelible mark on their lives, and others of their journey as it nears its end.

Our Town ~ The Composition

Music in this work is at times made by musical instruments and at others, from people talking or sounds in the environment. At all times there is music.

The composition Our Town can be listened to and pondered on in a number of ways: as if traveling through the hours of a day from one morning to the next; as if moving through the seasons from spring to summer, autumn and winter until the New Year arrives once more; from the sound of a new born child to the final moments of life.

The spoken words you will hear were recorded in audio interviews I made with hundreds of people from all walks of life within the borough boundaries of the town where I was born. It was a great privilege to speak with members of my community, all of whom so openly and generously shared their worlds. We spoke about those things that are most important to them: their work and interests, their family, their love, their fear.

The borough of Basingstoke and Deane is named after the largest town and smallest village in an area of two hundred and forty five square miles in North Hampshire, England. With a population of over one hundred and seventy thousand (well over half of whom live in Basingstoke), the area is mainly rural with villages and hamlets in countryside that begins a few miles to the east of the town, and stretches west to the rolling hills and woodlands of Watership Down. My home is in Oakley, a village with Deane to the west and Basingstoke to the east.

The hundreds of hours of spoken material was refined and carefully edited. In this process I tried at all times to be true to the essential spirit of what was said. Once the music was composed, every person who is heard in the final work was contacted again so they had the opportunity of listening to their edited contribution. Although every contributor was given the option of removing their contribution from the final work, none made that choice. Once again I would like to thank all those who contributed to the composition Our Town, and who gave it such life.

Mike de Sousa, July 2013

Not So Long Ago

The beautiful traditional wooden flute playing of Erik Faithfull and nature's sounds accompany the words of a woman describing her childhood memories of her modest home life...

We had a small scullery, an enormous kitchen from which there were five doors: the door to the scullery; the front door; the door to a little sitting room; and a door to a pantry; and a door that went up the stairs, but there were only two bedrooms, and er, my sister and I slept in one, and er, my parents were in the other, and that, they, yes, it's how we , that's how we lived till I left home and got married.

We'd all have a bath in that same water, because that's, and then late at night we would carry it out and whoosh it down the, the er, um, ditch that was outside the cottage, remembering we were along a lane, and, and having to go to the loo round the back of the gardens so we used chamber pots at night, you know, I mean those things make me cringe now, but um, those were the things that happened.

Logs, because we couldn't afford coal, I mean we had some, but I mean we used logs which dad would saw up and cut trees down to, to make lots of, um, lots of things that I almost feel ashamed to tell, to have to tell, do you know what I mean? To think that I lived like that.

I can remember mum bringing us up, um, a jug of water, we had one of the old wash stands with wash basins, you know? And she would bring up a jug of water for us to wash in the mornings, and we would have to break the ice on the jug of cold water to add to it, and the window of our bedroom never shut, it would not shut, it was made, it was an iron window made of little diamond panes.

I mean my dad earned thirty shillings a week on the farm. Now I know I'm going back a long way, but it was really a pittance, you know, and er, and he worked from six in the morning till eleven at night some days, he didn't get any overtime. You know, that wasn't paid. He would plough, um, in the moonlight, rather than, if the weather was good, if we'd had some bad weather.

We were given, um, and they went without as it were which I suppose all parents do, to a degree, if push comes to shove.

Full Circle

The following section presents a transcript of spoken words together with my thoughts of the last movement of Our Town:

Bubble

I began composing the work Our Town soon after my son was born. The work's structure is cyclical and during the opening movement my son's baby gurgles can be heard.

"Bubble" was his first word spoken. He gestured to a bubble-wand that allowed us to make giant soap bubbles in the garden. The word bubble also seemed the perfect way to begin this final section of Our Town. A bubble is fragile, floats, is a source of fascination and play, is confining, can represent the world and is fluid ~ the perfect metaphor of our human journey.

As "bubble" was the first word spoken by a young child, the word also represents the start of something new, the first step in connecting with the world beyond family.

There was a beautiful sky about three nights ago, absolutely marvellous, I haven't seen such a brilliant one for ages.

Spoken by a lady in her mid-nineties who, despite her frailty continued to find wonder and excitement in her experiences of the world.

I'm, I'm not even now I'm not fright, frightened of thunder. I said I'd never be frightened of a thunder storm again.

Phyllis was in her late eighties and was recalling her childhood when she would walk long miles from school to her home. She felt her days were less cocooned from the natural world as compared with many people today.

The lightning strike and thunder clap took place thirty yards from my studio window and remains one of the most beautiful and powerful sounds I have heard.

It's only about, fif, a fifteen or sixteen days in a year that the main flow comes in, and all the honey that's produced by the bees is produced in those fifteen, fifteen or sixteen days each year. You know, you see, to, er, to me that's an incredible thought you know the bees go out, yes, what they're doing if there's not a major flow on, they're, they're producing just sufficient to keep them going that year or, or the stuff they bring in is the stuff that they eat that night...

The beekeeper's enthusiasm is infectious. I thought of how we all behave in much the same way as bees, how it seems there are so few days when we each fulfil our potential, but that when those days arrive we overflow with energy and are full with life. For many those days are in their youth, and for some lucky few, the flow returns now and again throughout their lives.

I just think that when I'm old and everything, like really old, about seventy or eighty or something, I want to be able to look back and think, you know, that I've done something, with my life. Don't know what it is yet, because you know I haven't really done much yet, but, I just want to know that I've done something, just changed something, and then, you know, it doesn't matter if anyone else knows, just as long as I know, and I'll be happy...

I met this teenager who had fallen on hard times in a homeless refuge, a place where some of my most rewarding conversations took place.

I said to my husband, I'm glad it's happened to me and not the youngsters, they've got their life ahead of them, I've had mine. Oh we don't want to lose you mum, but you've got to, I said you've got to lose me sometime...

The most difficult yet life affirming moments were with those I spoke with in a hospice. The elderly lady who spoke above was such a warm hearted and beautiful person who only had thoughts and concerns for others in her life.

I find the most powerful attribute of art is how it has the potential to maintain the connection between one life and another, even after a person has passed away. Art acts as a trigger to our memories, then reconnects us to those essential experiences that continue to bind us.

How would I like to be remembered? He was a nice bloke. That's it. Right, yeah? Yeah, yeah. That's it...

Whenever I hear these words I am touched by the simplicity of his wish.

With these words the work has moved to those who reflect on their lives.

I quite would like some of the children that I've met along the way to remember me as a happy, fun, caring person because, I, I've loved my jobs with children, and, and they're really very special to me, so, I'd like them, just like I've remembered a favourite teacher, I'd like them to think, either when before when I was Miss Blake, or when I was Mrs Noble, think oh yeah Mrs Noble, she was a really lovely teacher, and, she really had time for us, and, listened to us...

Some speak of a world of engagement.

I shall just be, one of the common out there...

For others talking about their world was a difficult conversation full with regret and a sense of missed opportunity.

If I've done anything for the religion, for the local people, for the elderly, for children or anything, then I would think that was the best thing, I would like to be remembered...

Others spoke of their sense of duty and service.

How easy it is to talk to me...

I asked similar questions to everyone I met, among them, "how would you like to be remembered?" I loved this answer from someone I had great pleasure in meeting and who had suffered from cerebral palsy all his life.

That is the greatest gift anybody can ever give...

The authenticity of hearing voices that speak of direct experiences is something I continue to value over the imagined, invented and interpreted words of the actor. The voices that speak here are genuine and the short passage above was spoken with such clarity and love.

I seek refuge in Allah from Shaitan, the accursed one. *[Translation]*

The phrase above is often recited by Muslims before reciting the Qur'an.

The following is based on an English Translation of The Qur'an by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Professor of Islamic Studies, University of London, and published by Oxford University Press:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the giver of mercy.

This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, who believe in the unseen, who keep in prayer, and give out what we have provided for them; those who believe in the revelation sent down to you, and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the hereafter. Such people are following their Lord's guidance and it is they who will prosper.

Out of respect for the tradition of reciting The Qur'an, no music is heard while the passage is spoken. The natural sound of bubbling water is gradually introduced. The passage is spoken by a prominent member of a Mosque in the town.

Including reference to religious texts in Our Town reflects the rich diversity of spiritual beliefs. The Opening of Our Town for example includes a beautifully sung rendition of The Angel Gabriel, a traditional Christian folk carol, and the cyclical nature of the work mirrors the worlds of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Presenting an extract from The Qur'an in the final movement of Our Town, and immediately before impassioned thoughts about open-mindedness and understanding, seeks to encourage tolerance about our differences.

You know, if people aren't like me, then they're not connected to me, you know, and even if that man, you know, that person's my son, or my daughter, if they're not like me, they don't measure up, well then out you go, you don't have anything to do with me. And that, that kind of thing, that, that understanding is very foreign, it's abhorrent to me, that people don't, you know, that, that blood isn't thicker than water, that there isn't a sense of come what may I am connected to you. You know, um. So there's too much of that ability to draw a line around oneself. I have, you know, this fortress around my life, and you may come into it, if you, you know, relate to this place like I do, or measure up to my standards, and if you don't, you know, then you must go...

Many who first hear the beginning of the passage above take it on face value, and it is not until towards its end that their view of the woman changes. This impassioned plea for tolerance was spoken by a person who ran a centre for those who had no home or money.

I want to be in this position because I care for people, and from that then flows whatever I can do. I know that someone else could do better, but I'm in the position and so I try to do the best I can...

This warmhearted Catholic priest spoke gently about his vocation. The soft Irish tone of his voice told of his love for others and leaves a lasting impression of someone trying their hardest to do good.

It's a, it's a funny thing, I always say that what you hand out is what you receive. I like, it's a thing I've always had, that anyway. I mean, quite often, what you serve out is what you get back...

It is as if, since a young person, this lady has experienced and observed the world as give and take. She cautions that sooner or later we will experience the consequences of our actions.

You live, you make your own life, in this life. You are part of a society, and society has a duty to protect itself, but each individual has a duty to protect his or her own integrity as well. And if you can live within a society and within your own integrity, it's probably a paradise that doesn't exist too far...

A beautifully articulated passage.

What is particularly interesting for me is how listening to these words, taking in the pauses, hearing the man's compassionate tone, how the aural experience makes what is said far more powerful than reading the words in isolation.

My mum and dad live here for starters. Umm, my home's here...

I love the wide eyed innocence of this young boy's voice as he tells of why the place he lives is important to him.

Live my life how I want it, and, so independent, and happy, a little...

Those final two poignant words offset the aspiration and hopes of those preceding them.

Yes, there are times when er, you want: did I do the right thing? But there again, that is, I think that's the human side, and I think everybody has that experience, no matter what the, your role in life is...

There are two moments when it seems a thought starts but is moderated by another. It's possible the first is "when you want to do the right thing" and the second, "no matter what the status or position the person holds". This is the final personal reflection in the work and suggests we should find peace with the inevitable mistakes we make along the way.

One new year in ancient time ago, in the village, yeah? About er, they got one, er, devil, like a dragon, like a devil, similar like dragon but not. They come in there, and one er, every New Year, they come down, to the houses with other, all the people, have all the people, and run. Every New Year day. And, and the people now, they find it out, now, they have the New Year, and they want to get rid of the devil, use the firecracker, you know firecracker? Bang! Then they go. That's why the New Year. Now then what you know is New Year, the firecracker, what is that mean. Some of people, they don't know, or just firecracker for, er, for the fun or no. They have a meaning. Firecrackers, they have, get rid of the devil...

The owner's son of a Chinese take-away turned and said his father wanted to share something with me. This passage of broken English seemed a perfect expression of how we find ourselves together in a community with others, some of whom have lived very different lives, but with whom we have much in common. We come together like fireworks in the night sky full with light, colliding, dancing, shouting out in awe and wonder. And in the confusion of sparks and sound we find a shared purpose and see off the enemy that divides us.

It was English, it was an English town...

A cacophony of sound greets the New Year which fades into the next.

Our Town Composition Credits

Mike de Sousa Composer and sound editor.

Piano, keyboards, guitars, percussion, sampler programmes, & vocals (Where I Want To Be).

Interviews and recorded ambient sounds.

Studio recording, engineering and production.

Keith Marsden Songwriter: Bring Us A Barrel

The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra Recorded at The Anvil, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England

Erik Faithfull Northumbrian pipes, Uilleann pipes, wooden flute and tin whistle

Rip Rippingdale Lead Singer: Bring Us A Barrel

Saint Michael's Church Choir The Angel Gabriel (extract in Opening): C Edgar-Pettman/
Sabine Baring, Organist and Director of Music: George G Hay

Saint Michael's Church Bellringers Extract in Full Circle

All Saints Church Bellringers Extract in Full Circle

The Salvation Army Brass Band Extracts in Full Circle

The People of Basingstoke Ambient sounds from public areas

Sound Recording Technology Mastering

Contributing Organisations

The Anvil; Basingstoke Sports Centre; Mayflower Morris Dancers; Basing Clog Morris Dancers; Camrose Football Ground; Oakley Junior School; Basingstoke Cycle Works; Club 2000-2005 Bingo; Queen Mary's College; Basingstoke Football Club; Common Players Theatre; The Old Trout Band; Basingstoke Ice Rink; Corbett and Gelson; Sisk Builders; Basingstoke Model Eng. Soc.; The Irish Club; Warner Bros. Cinema; Basingstoke Ramblers; J Sainsbury's; Wella Bisons; Basingstoke Ruby; Kingsclere MOT Centre

Individual Contributors

The following list of contributors is in alphabetical order and as agreed, no reference is made to their occupation or interest group. Many others contributed but wished to remain anonymous.

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Contact

If you have any comments you are always welcome to get in touch via my site's contact form where you can also sign up to my mailing list:

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Thank you for listening!

Mike de Sousa

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