
Faith, comfort and saxual healing

Christian Forshaw's iconoclastic approach to the saxophone has made an unusually deep impression on his listeners, he tells **NINA LARGE**



As far as instruments go, the saxophone has had a rough time of it outside the jazz club. Not long ago no shopping centre was complete without that never-ending, desperate saxophone Muzak. Then there was the overblown, stone-washed schmaltz that the Eighties loved to wallow in. But then there is the 34-year-old saxophonist and composer Christian Forshaw.

Forshaw was trained, and still describes himself, as a classical saxophonist. He now heads the saxophone department at the Guildhall School of Music. "But I knew I wanted to do something different," he says.

"I wanted to create an environment where I could take the kind of music and playing that was personal to me and explore something new." His record collection was heaving with what he describes as "intense music", including Mahler, Radiohead and Joni Mitchell. At the other end of the spectrum his days as a choir-boy in his home town of Knaresborough, North Yorkshire, also echoed in his mind.

Forshaw began arranging hymns and playing his saxophone in churches, where he explored a blend of church organ, saxophone and vocals. The result was his first, self-recorded, self-produced album, *Sanctuary*. It included Forshaw's arrangement of *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*, a 17th-century carol. The track was picked up by Classic FM and Radio 3's *Late Junction*, and the disc has now sold 8,000 copies: an unprecedented success for an unpromoted classical release.

More than that, *Mortal Flesh* was performed at the funeral of one of the London bombing victims. The mother

of the woman who died was the Rev Julie Nicholson, the vicar who said that she couldn't forgive her daughter's killers and resigned her mission. Forshaw's music became a consolation to her. On another occasion a woman told him that her mother, dying of cancer, had asked for *Sanctuary* to be played over and over again in her final hours.

It wasn't long before Sony offered Forshaw an exclusive four-album deal. Every musician's dream? Not for Forshaw, as he worked on his second album, now entitled *Renouncement*. "They wanted easy listening. But the hymns and songs that I have arranged are so perfect and fragile in their original forms that they take longer than anything else to get right. They aren't the kind of thing that I can churn out to order."

He told Sony about the woman who had died of cancer. "One of the executives wrote down, 'Explore funeral market'," he recounts, deadpan. "It was a rather pathetic recognition of how shallow that whole world was."

After months of waiting, he has reacquired the rights to *Renouncement* and set up his own record label, Integra, to release it. It was a simple decision: "Everything I create I want to be 100 per cent happy with, so I have to be in control."

So do *Sanctuary* and *Renouncement*, replete with hymns and a celestial soprano, offer otherworldly consolation? "The world and the things we go through are so far from perfection, and often so painful, that you almost can't bear it. There is an element of that in my music. But the fact that it can connect with people sometimes, maybe that is perfect."

Renouncement is released on April 2 on Integra Records