

Music and the man

The composer on resisting pigeon-holing and the critics in his 75th-birthday year

THE room is full of near-identical youthful faces, which is most disconcerting. I blink, but the repetition remains. ‘There’s a casting agency downstairs,’ says Sir Karl Jenkins, by way of explanation, as we sit in his compact studio. ‘It can be a bit unsettling.’ So far, so Soho.

Sir Karl’s writing desk is state-of-the-art, in the heart of London’s creative hub, but the composer says he doesn’t need the hardware all that often—he works on a small, weighted keyboard and laptop, which he uses when working at home in Marylebone or back in his native Wales, which he visits regularly.

Sir Karl, who was born in Penclawdd on the Gower Peninsula, is one of the most frequently performed living composers. *The Armed Man: A Mass For Peace*, commissioned by the Royal Armouries and Classic FM for the millennium, has been in the UK classical charts for 15 years—not bad, considering many new classical works never even see a second performance.

‘I’m proud of *The Armed Man*,’ he says, quietly. ‘There are all sorts of silly statistics about my music.’ The most striking of these is that *The Armed Man* has been performed more than 2,500 times since its premiere in 1999. The work, which was dedicated to the victims of Kosovo, incorporates text from the Catholic Mass and the Islamic call to prayer, as well as secular writing from Kipling, Tennyson and Hiroshima survivor Sankichi Toge.

The piece typifies Sir Karl’s approach, which melds together ideas from rock and jazz—he was a member of fusion group Soft Machine during the 1970s and 1980s—with classical orchestration, honed from many years of composing scores for TV commercials. It’s a distinctive sound that’s become extraordinarily

popular. ‘People do seem to like it,’ he agrees. ‘I’ve even picked up a few awards along the way.’

He’s modestly referring to the OBE, CBE and a knighthood for his services to classical music—the first Welsh composer to receive that accolade. He recently celebrated his 75th birthday and there are celebrations being held all over the world, from New York’s Carnegie Hall to the Gower Festival, of which he is a patron.

There’s also a more unusual event: ‘I’m being sculpted by Frances Segelman,’ he smiles. ‘She sculpts live in two hours, in front of an audience. She’s “done” The Queen, Prince Philip, Charles—and Joanna Lumley. It’s for charity and I’ve asked that the money goes towards a prize at the Royal Academy [of Music, Sir Karl’s *alma mater*].’

Fame has come as a surprise to Sir Karl, who, after working in commercial composition, reached the stage where he could ‘write music for music’s sake’ at the age of 50. ‘Writing for some of those adverts was like writing a miniature score, it was more than just a jingle. I used the opportunity to learn about different types of music that hitherto I hadn’t been familiar with. I’ve

always resisted categorisation in music: it’s the same notes, only used in a different order.’

He offers the example of percussion, which he uses for pulse, as in jazz, rather than for colour and interjection, as it’s often used in classical music, such as in the rhythmic timbre of *Dies irae* in *Requiem* or the propulsive *Gloria*.

‘I’ve resisted categorisation: it’s the same notes, used in a different order’

To mark his birthday, Decca has reissued his back catalogue, including a special edition of *Adiemus: Songs of Sanctuary* (1995). The piece began life as the soundtrack for an advert for Delta airline. The music won awards, so he reworked it into a large-scale piece that went on to sell millions. It set the tone for the next six ‘Adiemus’ albums and brought the composer into the sphere of classical crossover music that was in the early stages of development at the time.

‘A lot of people knock what I do, but not many people can duplicate it,’ he says. ‘One critic complained I was “emotionally manipulative”—he meant it as a derogatory remark, but actually it’s a great compliment to a composer. I’m critic-proof in that sense.’ Purists see the patchwork sound-world as pastiche, but many—many—others derive great enjoyment from his cultural tapestries.

It’s a strange quirk of the classical-music world that our most popular composers are often lampooned for their commercial success in a way that visual pop artists are not. At one Royal Albert Hall concert, a critic colleague complained to the woman beside him that the music was intolerable. ‘That’s a shame, I’m really rather enjoying it,’ she smiled, ‘but, then, I am his wife.’

For his birthday year, Sir Karl has released a solo piano album, with many of his greatest hits scored especially for that instrument. ‘Everything is taken back to the bare bones; it’s very much how I played the music as I was composing.’ There are also two new compositions: *Quirky Blue* and *White Water*, which sees a duet between Sir Karl and his wife, Lady Jenkins, Carol Barratt. The album was produced by their son, Jody, who is also a musician and is married to an oboist.

Sir Karl and Lady Jenkins now live in London, but much of his music was written back home in a mill house on the Gower. ‘It was set in 11 acres of farmland, but that was just for grazing,’ says Sir Karl. ‘It’s nice to have a view, but, really, once I am thinking about music, I could be anywhere.’

‘Retirement doesn’t come into it. I’m working on a saxophone concerto for Jess Gillam [*The joy of sax*, October 10, 2018] at the moment. It’s a way of life and a hobby as much as a job. It’s the old adage: if you like what you do, then you never work again.’

Claire Jackson

On the record

Sir Karl Jenkins conducts works including *Adiemus* and the ‘Benedictus’ from *The Armed Man* at Classic FM Live on April 24 and music including the world premiere of *Miserere* at his birthday concert on October 13, both at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (020-7589 8212; www.royalalberthall.com).

Piano and the ‘Karl Jenkins 75’ reissues are out on Decca

Where is your favourite place? The Gower Peninsula

Favourite building? The Royal Albert Hall

Music? Mahler, Brahms, Bach and I like John Adams, Steve Reich and Terry Riley. I think John Williams is amazing and I’ve also been influenced by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. I like rock music, too, such as Steely Dan and Eric Clapton

Book? *Bleak House* (Charles Dickens)

Food? Italian

Dinner guest? Richard Strauss



Clara Molden