

Penny Boreham, with Prodromos Tsinikoris, Giles Lewin, and Anastasia Bakogianni

An illustrated version of this interview is available on the Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies website (2018 issue)

Penny Boreham has been working as a radio producer and broadcaster for the last 30 years. She was on staff with the BBC until 2003 but since then has worked independently for the BBC, the child rights agency 'Child to Child', The Open University and numerous other organisations. Her mother named her Penelope because of her love of 'the Odyssey' and then read her the Greek myths as a young child. She has loved them ever since.

Prodromos Tsinikoris was born in Wuppertal, Germany. Today he lives in Athens. He is the co-artistic director of the Experimental Stage-I of the National Theatre and works as a dramaturg, performer and theatre director.

Giles Lewin is a British violinist and music composer, but also a vocalist who can play the fiddle, vielle, rebec, gittern, shawms, recorder, mandolin, pipe and tabor. He is particularly interested in old musical instruments and styles.

Anastasia Bakogianni is a Lecturer in Classical Studies at Massey University, New Zealand. Her research and publications focus on Greek tragedy and its reception in the modern world.

Penny, Prodromos and Giles worked together on a radio programme for the BBC World Service entitled *Telling Tales: The Odyssey*, which juxtaposed the stories of refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos with Homer's *Odyssey*. Anastasia was academic consultant on the programme; she conducted the following interviews with Penny, Prodromos and Giles for *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies*. Prodromos was interviewed in Athens in February 2017, and Penny and Giles were interviewed in Oxford in June 2017.

You can listen to the programme by following this link to the BBC World Service website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06360dh>

Anastasia Bakogianni. Penny, you produced the 'Telling Tales' radio series for the BBC World Service. One of programmes in the series is devoted to the Greek refugee crisis (broadcast date 4 April 2018). You brought me onboard as a consultant, because you wanted to juxtapose this very modern tragedy with a famous ancient Greek story. Can you tell us more about the genesis of the project and why you felt it was

important to add an ancient Greek connection in a programme about the refugee crisis in Europe?

Penny Boreham. The power of the ancient Greek myths is that they never age, they reach across time and speak to us with such force and power. There is just so much 'in' them, on so many different levels, and the poetry of the language is breathtaking. I have loved them since I was a child when my mother first read them to me - they caught my attention, they moved me, appalled and fascinated me.

I wanted to inject some of their power and poetry into the programme. I also wanted to make sure that we listened closely to those caught up in this modern tragedy of the refugee crisis, that we were able to absorb their individual stories, and remain open to them. I felt that juxtaposing the poetry of the ancient story, in all its vividness, with the reality of the refugee crisis, would mean we would actually listen more deeply to both ancient and modern. The juxtaposition allows the listeners to feel the resonances, make connections, and be touched by the human condition. It is remarkable that the ancient myths actually remind us of how much we all have in common as humans; they connect us across time and space. I felt the ancient would throw light on the modern and vice versa.

AB. We discussed several possibilities, but in the end you decided on the story of Odysseus, the man of many woes, desperate to return home after twenty years away from his family and home. What drew you to his story in particular given that Odysseus returns home whereas the refugees are fleeing theirs?

PB. I feel that what the refugees are looking for is 'home' – they are looking for safety, refuge. As one individual refugee says in the programme, it's not even important what country he and his family end up in, as long as they are safe and happy, together as a family, and that they can have an education, a future – choices. I was told the hardest thing about being a refugee is not so much leaving your country, although that is very hard, but of course being separated from those you love. As you pointed out, Anastasia, at many points in the story, and particularly when he arrives at the land of the Phaeacians, Odysseus is seeking asylum, 'refuge'. His aim is always to get home to Ithaca, but on the way he relies on the kindness of others, the Phaeacians encourage him to stay, but they also end up supporting him in his choice to leave. I hope the juxtapositions in the programme allow us to form imaginative connections, for example, between what King Alcinous offers Odysseus and what, for example, Greek hotelier Iannis states he wishes Europeans could do – work together to find a solution. This isn't a linear connection and is not meant to be too obvious, but it can function almost at an unconscious level.

AB. Did the fact that Odysseus is trying to return to his island home of Ithaca and the refugees are making their temporary home on another Greek island, Lesbos, influence your decision?

PB. Yes, I think it was the fact that these refugees are now in Greece and they have travelled so far but are still journeying that felt so significant. And yes, the islands figure so strongly in the *Odyssey*. There are so many associations one can make.

AB. The ancient world seems to be enjoying a renaissance in popular culture, with films, TV series and the internet all adapting ancient Greek and Roman characters, narratives and themes. Was the inclusion of an ancient Greek story a selling point as far as the BBC was concerned?

PB. I suggested a series in which I juxtaposed ancient stories with modern contemporary stories. The series is going out on the BBC World Service and the commissioner could see the power of using an ancient Greek myth in this programme, but he was also concerned that many listening around the world would not know these stories. If it had been a domestic audience on BBC Radio Four I think it would have been a selling point but for the World Service I had to argue my case. But, I am happy that it is going out on the World service as I think many people around the world will know these myths. There will be others who will hear the *Odyssey* for the very first time and I hope they will be intrigued and want to find out more.

AB. Did the refugees you interviewed know the story of Odysseus? How did they respond to it? Did it offer them a small measure of comfort to learn of his sufferings and his eventual return home? Do they also yearn for their own *nostoi* (homecomings)?

PB. No, they didn't know his story and neither did the young Swedish volunteer. The Greek hotelier and his family of course did. I talked about the ancient story with everyone and they were happy it would be included in the programme but we mainly concentrated on their stories. They really wanted to share their experiences.

AB. In your programme you included the voices of some of the Greek inhabitants of the island of Lesbos and their reactions to the foreigners seeking temporary refuge on their island. Is that partly why you liked my suggestion of including a scene from the *Odyssey* in which the epic hero, having lost everything at sea, begs the Phaeacians for asylum?

PB. I loved your idea of using this particular section of the ancient epic. It was perfect and I like the fact that there is a correspondence between King Alcinous and Queen Arete's support of Odysseus and the potential in humans to help those in need, as demonstrated by Iannis, Daphne and their family (who appear in the programme) and volunteers, like the young Erik, whose voice we also hear. I also felt that the interventions and the challenge of the gods, both in terms of their guidance and support, but also of their wrath, took on a special force in the programme in the light of the psychological reserves individual refugees need to find within themselves and what they are battling with – psychologically, spiritually and physically.

AB. In order to tell the ancient story in a way that made sense to modern listeners you engaged the services of a 'narrator'. Your choice of narrator was Prodromos Tsinikoris, who is a director, actor, dramaturg, and one of the two Artistic Directors of the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre of Greece. Did you specifically set out to recruit a Greek voice? A kind of modern Greek *rhapsodos* retelling the story of Odysseus?

PB. Yes, I very much wanted to find a Greek voice, and for it to be someone who could narrate in a very direct, intimate and powerful way. I am so happy to have found Prodromos.

AB. You also commissioned tailor-made music for the programme from composer/musician Giles Lewin. What further dimension do you think this adds to the programme? Where you inspired by the performance of epic poetry in antiquity, which was accompanied by music?

PB. I am delighted with Giles' composition for the programme. He composed his music while listening to the audio recording of Prodromos' reading. He heard it and wrote the music. I think he manages to conjure up both ancient Greece and also the emotional content of the piece. He created certain refrains to represent particular gods. I think he complements the 'emotional' content of the programme but also his music makes it possible for listeners to suspend the story in time.

To be honest, I don't know much about the performance conditions of epic poetry but I instinctively felt we needed music to create a world of 'stories' and the right kind of atmosphere. Plus I've worked with Giles before and we achieved this balance then, too. I also knew how knowledgeable he is about ancient music and instruments, and this was important in this context and for this programme.

--

Anastasia Bakogianni. *Prodrome mou*, tell us how you became involved in the project and what attracted you the idea of being a modern *rhapsodos*?

Prodromos Tsinikoris. I remember receiving Penny's email, inviting me to narrate extracts from the *Odyssey*, for a radio programme she was producing. She wanted to listen to my voice as that was a key consideration for her, so afterwards we spoke on several occasions via Skype. From the very beginning I was impressed by Penny's concept for the programme, but the main reason I was attracted to the project was that we would be working for radio; a new medium for me and one that I was eager to try.

AB. We are taught the ancient epics at school in Greece, but did this experience alter your perception of the *Odyssey* and the possibilities it gives rise to for making connections to contemporary problems?

PT. Four years ago, I was in Berlin and together with Anestis Azas, we created and performed a new production *Telemachos - should I stay or should I go?* at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. It was a kind of theatrical documentary, an on-stage meeting of two generations of Greek migrants in Berlin. The ones who arrived in the 1960s and 70s as 'Gastarbeiter' and more recent immigrants who left Greece during the last couple of years, in order to seek a better life abroad. Their true-life stories mirrored and were juxtaposed with the adventures of Odysseus. Stories of debt and duty, sacrifice and violence, neglect and love were generated out of this fruitful synthesis. As part of our creative process we read the *Odyssey* together with the main actors and asked them questions like: did you ever have to deny your identity like Odysseus did in his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus? Have you ever been caught in a dilemma like Odysseus was between Scylla and Charybdis? We asked a number of

questions in a similar vein, encouraging the actors to ‘see’ the connections between the modern stories and the ancient epic. That experience remained so vivid in my memory and taught me how rich and open to a variety of interpretations and appropriations the *Odyssey* was and of course continues to be.

AB. I loved the part of the programme where you quote the opening line of the epic in ancient Greek before adding a translation. What was your favourite moment in the programme?

PT. It was the opening line of course! I had to refresh my memory of the ancient Greek in order for it to make sense [laughing]. During the recording I found it difficult to listen to the different takes. Just like many actors, I don't much enjoy the sound of my own voice, especially when I have to speak in English, which I learned, on my own. But Penny was very positive and helpful, so with her encouragement, I became more confident and really sank into the narration and enjoyed the process.

--

Anastasia Bakogianni. Giles, you composed the music for the programme. What were your musical sources of inspiration?

Giles Lewin. As Penny has just mentioned, the music needed to evoke a strong sense of time and place. I have always loved the folk music of Greece, a tradition that has its roots in the distant past. In this style of music the clarinet is used in a particularly ornamented, improvisational way, and that gave me an idea for the main theme of the programme. Other ideas came from what I had read about ancient Greek music, particularly the modes and instruments.

AB. You deliberately included a lot of string music in your score. Is this modelled on the ancient lyre?

GL. Yes, that was the idea. I think most people would be familiar with the lyre through its association with Orpheus, and the many depictions of the ancient musician on ancient Greek vases. In fact, there were several types of lyre, from the box-type *kithara* to the bowl-shaped *lyras* and *barbitoi*. Most educated people would have been able to play and sing with them, at least to some degree. They were strummed with a plectrum, and the left hand probably stopped and unstopped strings to make a melody (rather like the *simsimiyyah* of North Africa). Unfortunately, I didn't have an old lyre to hand, so I borrowed a folk harp from a friend in order to sound more modal and exotic! Another famous instrument that I attempted to reconstruct for the feasting scene at Alcinous's palace, was the *aulos*, the double reed-pipe.

When composing music for radio it's important to remember that you're not trying to reproduce an authentic sound, but rather to evoke an idea of it for a non-specialist audience; a 'Hollywood' version of Greek music, if you like.

AB. In your career as a composer you have engaged creatively with what we know about ancient Greek music. As a modern composer interested in ancient and medieval musical styles what do you feel we can learn from these older models?

GL. When I started playing music as a boy, there was definitely a sense among my teachers that music had reached its pinnacle with the Western Classical traditions of Mozart and Beethoven (sometimes Wagner was also included in that list). At the same time, David Munrow was introducing us to a wealth of exciting new sounds from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As I learnt more about these styles, I realised that the pinnacle achieved by Mozart was just one of many in the long history of music. There was a whole mountain range of human achievements to explore. Some of the surviving music from these ancient cultures sounds surprisingly modern, whether it's the coincidental clashes of harmony in mediaeval polyphony, or the subtle divisions of the tone in early Greek music, and I've explored both these elements in my writing. Also, there is plenty of creative space to fill in between the gaps of our knowledge, something lacking in modern Classical music.

AB. Having composed the score, how difficult was it to perform it for 'Telling Tales'?

GL. It would have been much more difficult had I written the notes down. I tailor the music to my own abilities, which involves minimal technique – on a number of instruments. But music for this kind of programme benefits from simplicity, as over-complexity would get in the way of the storytelling. I like to write in a semi-improvised way, playing along to the script and discovering ideas as I go. I play over cues several times until things start to fit with the narration. It's important to allow gaps for the script to breathe. Sometimes I work the ideas into themes, perhaps to represent particular gods or situations, which can recur at appropriate moments throughout the narrative.

AB. In your role as a musician, what are the challenges one faces when performing ancient music? In your experience how do modern audiences respond? Do you have to make some adjustments to make the music more accessible?

GL. There are lots of challenges. How do we interpret the notation? What did the instruments really sound like and what was their playing style? How can we make an intimate song work in a big concert hall? Fruitful and exciting answers to some of these questions can be found in surviving folk traditions. But often we just make things up, as musicians tend to do. After all, we know we can't achieve a completely authentic sound, but we can hope to find a spirit of authenticity. Performers of ancient music sometimes find themselves caught between their own creative endeavours and the interests of academics, who feel they should be ambassadors for their research. But audiences are generally much more forgiving – unless of course they're comprised of academics! The biggest barrier to sympathetic performances of this type of music is the modern concert hall, and it helps to have a more imaginative and informative approach to performance and its presentation.

AB. How familiar are you with the story of Odysseus and the performance of epic in the ancient world? Did you find it helpful to engage directly with the Homeric epic while you were working on the score?

GL. Well, the idea of the Homeric *rhapsodos* was in the back of my mind as I accompanied Prodromos' narration, but the main role for the music here is to highlight the drama in the story.

--

AB. I'd like to offer some brief concluding thoughts. As a Hellenist I have been privileged to teach the *Odyssey* on numerous occasions, but being involved with this project allowed me to engage with the epic with fresh eyes.

To my mind, we discover in the epic a key theme that I feel really resonates with the modern refugee crisis that has so affected my native country; the ancient concept of *xenia* (guest-friendship), which is repeatedly put to the test in the *Odyssey*. We witness a number of responses to Odysseus' requests for hospitality, from the Cyclops' breaking of the rules by eating his guests to the Phaeacians' exemplary hospitality. But even that comes at a cost, because the decision to help Odysseus brings down the wrath of Poseidon on their kingdom. The ancient epic reminds us of the complexity of every action, which always has consequences, even when it is the right thing to do. King Alcinous, his advisers, and the Phaeacian court honour Zeus Xenios, who protects all those seeking hospitality. But their actions also anger his brother Poseidon, father of Polyphemus, blinded by Odysseus in his escape from the cave where the Cyclops had imprisoned him and his companions. The enormous challenge facing Europe with the influx of so many refugees from war-torn and poverty stricken regions of the world is another multi-faceted and complex issue with no simple solutions. The role of art is to help us face up to these tough challenges and to fully appreciate their scope and impact. To know that it has all happened before offers us a measure of consolation and a way of talking about the issues involved. And telling stories goes to the core of what it means to be human. So thank you very much Penny for inviting me to join you on this journey!