

HOME SUITE HOME

The Olde House

A small one-storey house, built in the countryside in late Medieval times (15th century). It consists of just one room, but in winter a partition is put up in which part of it is used for sheltering livestock. The walls are made from earth mixed with straw with occasional sections bolstered by stones. The roof is made from turfs lying on top of branches and held down by ropes. The framework is made from tall trees, cut in half and joined by a beam. There is only one small window, the opening covered over by animal hides at first and then twigs, crisscrossed to let in a bit of light. In the centre of the floor there is an open hearth – a fire surrounded by stones in a circle for heating and cooking. In the roof directly above the fire there is a hole in the roof for the smoke to exit. This must have been a miserable and unhealthy place to live in, what with the fumes from the wood fire, the damp floors and living space, and the stench coming from the livestock, and the total lack of privacy. The occupants were at the mercy of the weather, wild animals and marauding gangs. The music for this piece is therefore bleak and stark.

An Abode for a Bard

This is set in Elizabethan times (16th century) as suggested by the title, although Shakespeare is not the bard in question. The use of bricks made an important change to the house and a chimney was built in an exterior wall and a higher floor constructed from wood was added, accessible by a ladder. Most of the walls were still made from wattle and daub – hazel sticks covered by a mixture of clay and straw. Here and there, wooden beams helped to stabilise the framework of the house. The roof was now thatched by reeds or straw. Although a vast improvement on the Medieval house, this was still a dangerous place to live. The abundance of wood and the thatched roof made fire a great liability and many houses at this time burnt down. The Great Fire of London in 1666 is testimony to this.

George's House

In the 18th century, Georgian style of housing came into fashion (and remains so in many areas of the country). To adapt an older house to this new style, a Georgian facade was erected over the front of the building. Georgian architecture is renowned for its symmetry. The weight of the facade on buildings, lacking a proper foundation, made subsidence a big problem as well as causing holes in the joints, particularly where the roof is connected to the walls, and rainwater would leak in.

Dwellingtons

In Victorian times (the 19th century), other changes were made to houses. The coming of the railways meant that mass-produced bricks and glass for windows were made available. Sash windows came into fashion, although these tended to let in a lot of drafts. Victorian houses are very decorative in their stonework, patterned floor-tiles and leaded-lights (small stained-glass windows usually above the front door. But they often had very few rooms (and Victorian families were very large) and there was no running-water or indoor toilets. Victorian society was also very hypocritical, trying to appear very moral and upstanding (think of piano legs being covered over so that men would not be tempted with erotic thoughts, while at the same time, prostitution was rife.) Children were often treated abysmally. I have alluded to this contrast in the music.

Chez New

In England, the expression Chez Moi (my house) and Chez Nous (our house) is found in upper class circles. This piece refers to the mid-20th century. The devastating wars earlier in the century and peace has come and with it, a

demand for a lot more houses to be built. These were often quite sturdy with large gardens in country areas. Electric appliances became commonplace and the temptation for householders to try and repair such appliances themselves, often had dire results. Most houses now had inside toilets and running water. Insulation against the cold, however, was very poor. This was not exactly the jazz age – a term applied to the 1920s, but I have introduced a jazz style into part of this piece, although it is more like the jazz of the 1960s. Stravinsky and Ravel would probably have loved the jazz of this era.

Bricks and Mortar

This brings the suite up to date- the early part of the 21st century. I was tempted to use pop music in part of this piece to illustrate this but refrained from doing so as I have no idea how to do this – present day pop music is totally beyond me. Instead, I have resorted to Latin-flavoured music with which I am more familiar but watered it down in writing for a symphony orchestra. I make no apologies for drawing upon dance music as classical composers did the same in their day. Today, there is a conflict between two policies. One is the urgent need for more houses. On the other hand, developers want to cover every available green space with new houses, few of which are “affordable” and where the infrastructure (schools, health provisions, water and sewage amenities, etc.) is lacking. Nevertheless, a lot of new houses are being built at a rapid pace. People not wanting to have a newly built house have turned to updating older houses, pretty well rebuilding them – something which is egged on by television programmes showing what to do. Will a new style of housing arise? I expect so, but that is beyond the scope of this suite.

Footnote: to show that the same house is affected by all these changes and transformations, a motif from the Olde House occurs in different places in all of the following pieces.