

Michael Blake — Short Biography

Michael Blake, born in Cape Town in 1951, has been described by musicologist Stephanus Muller as “the most important and most influential South African art music composer to have worked in South Africa since the advent of democracy”. He studied in South Africa and the UK, and during two decades in London he directed the experimental music ensemble London New Music and taught at Goldsmiths College, before returning to South Africa in 1998. He taught composition at Rhodes University and established the (now) annual contemporary music festival, the New Music Indaba. He also negotiated South Africa’s re-entry into the ISCM after an absence of nearly four decades, and was President of the ISCM South African Section, NewMusicSA, for six years. In 2000 he set up “Growing Composers”, a project to empower young black composers, and in 2002 launched the highly successful “Bow Project”, which commissioned string quartet responses to traditional African bow music.

From the mid-1970s Blake’s musical language was partly the result of an immersion in the materials and playing techniques of African music, resulting in the collections “African Notebook” and “African Journal”. Some of these works have become his most performed pieces, in particular *Let us run out of the rain* (1986) and *French Suite* (1994). Since 2000, this African sensibility is subsumed into the fractured narratives that are a feature of his recent work (*String Quartets*, *Ways to put in the salt*, *Piano Concerto*). Blake draws as much on the visual arts of Africa and the West-African weaving, abstract painting, underground cinema, silent films — as he does on African musics and American and English experimental music aesthetics. He has now produced work in every medium — stage, orchestral, chamber, keyboard, instrumental, vocal, and choral — as well as numerous collaborations with radical filmmaker Aryan Kaganof.

Michael Blake’s compositional output of well over 100 works to date has been performed widely on all five continents. He has collaborated with many well-known European and South African ensembles and soloists, ranging from the Fitzwilliam Quartet to Jill Richards, whose CD of his complete piano music was released in 2008. He performs as soloist, with piano duo partner Jill Richards, and with the Michael Blake Ensemble. He is a frequent guest lecturer at universities throughout the world, and until 2009 he was lecturer and composer in residence at the University of South Africa. Since 2009 he has lived in the seaside village of Hout Bay near Cape Town with his wife, the musicologist and writer Christine Lucia.