

LXV – 65@65

Stanley Ulijaszek - 65 outdoor swims at the age of 65

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Swim #25, Aldeburgh, Suffolk Coast



Getting to Aldeburgh as the sun set, in civil twilight, a burst of red across the low clouds, and the moon, pale and waxing still but up since 3pm, was growing stronger. It was a 'must get a swim' drive. To get to swim before the most precious light – twilight with a growing moon and clear sky – disappeared. Aldeburgh is special again. I drove to the water front, in a familiar hurry to see the sea, sky and shingle. I shuffled across the deep shingle, mostly stones the size of a thumb, and settled to change on a ledge of shingle. The time and place were even righter than I thought before – the echo-crash of waves across the beach from right to left was something new – the sea was singing, the water was music, percussive, resonant music. A sound I never knew before. I thought to Benjamin Britten, who was drawn to Aldeburgh, wrote many works, wrote an opera, Peter Grimes, set in the Borough / Aldeburgh really. That is the image at the head of this account – Peter Grimes performed on Aldeburgh Beach. Britten's young person's guide to the orchestra, the percussion movement. Britten could not not have heard this sea music. The explanation for this added wonder – of music to the moon and sky and water came with an engineers way of thinking – how does it work? My best guess was that the tide having half come in was pushing in smaller breakers against the shingle – the size of the waves and the height of the ledge were right to set up a 'schzzzhaaa-boom' echo rippling across the beach from right to left as the waves hit the shingle from right to left. An as an audience of one, I realised that I had the perfect seat.

As I changed I moved back away from the ledge, and the sonic beach ceased to be so sonic – more like every day breaking of waves on the beach. This was a very localised music – often you have to be in the right place at the right time... But you also need to be open to perceive something that only takes place at the right time and the right place.

This took me to the memory of singing water elsewhere. I discussed what the music of the shore at Aldeburgh had been, on a skype call to Melbourne (Pauline was visiting family), and she said ‘was it like the sound of the wind whistling on the top of very thin ice when it buckles as you swim’ – yes, in a way, a very similar thing. A very singular thing too – being at the level of the water, looking across the ice, watching it ripple and crack, watching it flex and listening to the very eerie low whistle which only you can hear, at water level. I am in mind of other composers, each making their own sonic sculptures in concert halls, often site-specific. Sibelius, for example, is as big as the Nordic landscape, or a small and eerie as the scraping on the ice. I listened to the Sibelius Violin Concerto in the car yesterday, as a mental preparation for Winter. The opening bar close to silent, bleak and beautiful, the wind on the ice, I thought of bleak January when the first ice settles on the lake and it is my task to break it. The first tentative steps, “how thick, how strong, will it give easily?” Then the breeze in the blue morning light, the first shimmer and scrape, the tentative voice seeking a place in this dry cold landscape. This is how the Violin Concerto starts. And I am close to tears with memory of Winters past. I once saw Elina Vähälä play it, Sibelius, smart and elegant she was. The music restrained initially, then building, swelling, building a sonic landscape. The final movement, a pull at the reins, then full throttle, the dual nature of Finnish people open for all to see and hear. Vahala was neat, composed, collected when she came out for the contest with Sibelius. Like the calm, restrained, polite, but practical and honest character I have come to see in people from Finland. But then wild, racing, cutting, jabbing, left and right, eyes up, down, to the right, twist of upper body, a boxing match; alert, stealthful, hunting, seeking clues, then, racing, the hunt. How to be both, that must be how to be Finnish. Hold on to the saddle, the reins, stay with her. Then it’s over somehow, exhausted, neat air now in a tangle, audience on their feet. This is one landscape

Aldeburgh is not Sibelius, and England not Finland, but I have Sibelius in my mind when the season turns to colder and lesser light. Aldeburgh is Takumitsu, Knussen, Debussy should have come here if he didn’t – this is his English ‘La Mer’. Shingle waves crashing and rippling along the beach in minimalist overlay, wave over wave. Philip Glass has had much bigger concerns in his composing, but I am certain that if he were to come to Aldeburgh (I don’t know if he has) he could set notes to the beach as I hear it now.