

## Hikers' guide to miracles

---



Battle-fatigued: Talbot composes his music in his front room in Peckham

---

By Joby Talbot

12:01AM BST 28 Jun 2005

**Two movie soundtracks, a Classic FM residency and a choral work meant to be sung on a pilgrimage route. Composer Joby Talbot, once part of pop group Divine Comedy, tells Adam Sweeting about his 'insane' workload**

If spending months staring bug-eyed at sheets of manuscript paper and not getting enough sleep are the hallmarks of a successful composer, Joby Talbot is the Beethoven of his generation.

Although known to a wider public as a former member of the Divine Comedy, where he harnessed his writing and arranging skills to the flamboyant talents of Neil Hannon, Talbot has been pursuing a parallel course as a composer of concert pieces and film soundtracks.

He wrote the scores for the new film versions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and - following his contributions to the original BBC2 series - *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse*.

His album of new compositions, *Once Around the Sun*, has just been released by Sony BMG, and he has been feverishly scribbling down the closing pages of his new choral work, *Path of Miracles*, which will be premièred at the City of London Festival next month.

"The past 12 months for me have been insane," says Talbot, running a hand through his thinning hair and sagging back on his comfy sofa. "All sorts of projects have all come off at the same time. I'm about to go into hibernation to recharge, because you can't keep working at this level of freneticism indefinitely."

The boffinly and mildly dishevelled Talbot lives with his wife, artist Claire Burbridge, and their young son in a quiet street in Peckham, south London. He composes at the piano in his front room, and has a small recording studio in the shed at the bottom of his garden.

"When we were recording pieces for *Once Around the Sun*," he says, "we could run cables down the garden from the studio, record the piano in here and hope there weren't too many roadworks going on

outside."

It's difficult to assess which of his recent multiple challenges has been the most exacting. *Hitchhiker's Guide* demanded 80 minutes of music, scored for 90-piece orchestra and choir.

*Once Around the Sun* comprises the dozen compositions that he wrote during his year-long stint as Classic FM's composer in residence, a post that shackled Talbot to a treadmill of monthly deadlines.

Sometimes he'd find he had a couple of relatively quiet weeks in which to consider the latest Classic FM piece; sometimes he'd be forced to throw something together overnight.

As for *Path of Miracles*, it took three years to reach fruition, following an initial commission from vocal ensemble Tenebrae (who can number Formula One driver Jacques Villeneuve among their patrons), with the stipulation that the piece would be structured around the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

This launched Talbot on an odyssey of research into traditions of vocal music from medieval France, Renaissance Italy and even Taiwan, where tribal peoples sing a bizarre ascending chord to encourage the local millet harvest.

"The original idea was that the choir should do the pilgrimage, and they wanted a piece that had stand-alone movements which could be performed at different places along the route," he says.

"So the first movement would be performed in Pamplona, the second in Burgos, the third in Leon and then all four movements in Santiago itself. Tenebrae were incredibly enthusiastic about it, and they were going to be out there with backpacks hiking across the sierra."

*Path of Miracles* sets contemporary poetry by Robert Dickenson alongside historical texts in Greek, Basque, Spanish and Latin. "If you were a serf in a feudal system somewhere in northern Europe, the pilgrimage was the adventure of a lifetime," Talbot reflects.

"I was also fascinated by the patent fraudulence of the whole endeavour. Because Jerusalem wasn't really an option any more and there'd been a schism in the church, they created Compostela as a new pilgrimage destination. One pope invented the idea that you got a 50 per cent discount off your years in purgatory, which I found fascinating."

However, logistical and timetabling problems rendered the singing-pilgrimage scheme temporarily unworkable, with the result that the first performances of *Path of Miracles* will now take place in the 12th-century church of St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield. "We have high hopes that it will eventually be done as originally intended in Spain," says Talbot.

He is conscious that composing *Path of Miracles* used a different portion of his brain from the bit where movie soundtracks come from.

"You have to adjust your mindset," he says. "What's happening on the screen takes priority, and your music has to serve that. In *Hitchhiker's Guide*, the music has to drag you kicking and screaming through

the film, and it has an incredibly important role, so you can't just write stand-alone concert music."

Talbot experienced a sense of predestination about the *Hitchhiker* job. He had been infatuated with the late Douglas Adams's original book, and can remember daydreaming as a child about being asked to score the film version.

"I absolutely loved working on it; it was a huge challenge. I didn't know Adams, but there was this rather tragic aura hanging over it. A caption comes up at the end saying 'For Douglas', and there's not a dry eye in the house because it's just so sad."

The battle-fatigued composer takes some comfort from the realisation that having to keep leaping between projects of different scale and purpose keeps his imaginative juices bubbling. "It's constantly inspirational, and ideas that come up in one thing can feed into another. It keeps you fresh and keeps you thinking, so you don't just revert to clichés which so many people do."

---

*Path of Miracles* will be performed at St Bartholomew-the-Great on July 7. City of London Festival ([www.colf.org](http://www.colf.org) (<http://www.colf.org>)) runs until July 13. Tickets: 0845 120 7502

---