

*Song in
Gold Pavilions*

Ronald Stevenson on Music



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Editor

CHRIS WALTON



Song in Gold Pavilions – Ronald Stevenson on Music

(The title of this book is derived from a line in Stevenson's song cycle *Border Boyhood* to texts by Hugh MacDiarmid.)

Published by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch

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First edition 2009

ISBN: 978-1-920109-68-4

e-ISBN: 978-1-920109-69-1

DOI: 10.18820/9781920109691

Cover artwork: Ronald Stevenson by Victoria Crowe, oil on paper. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Cover design by Ilse Roelofse

Typesetting by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch

Publisher: Liezel Meintjes

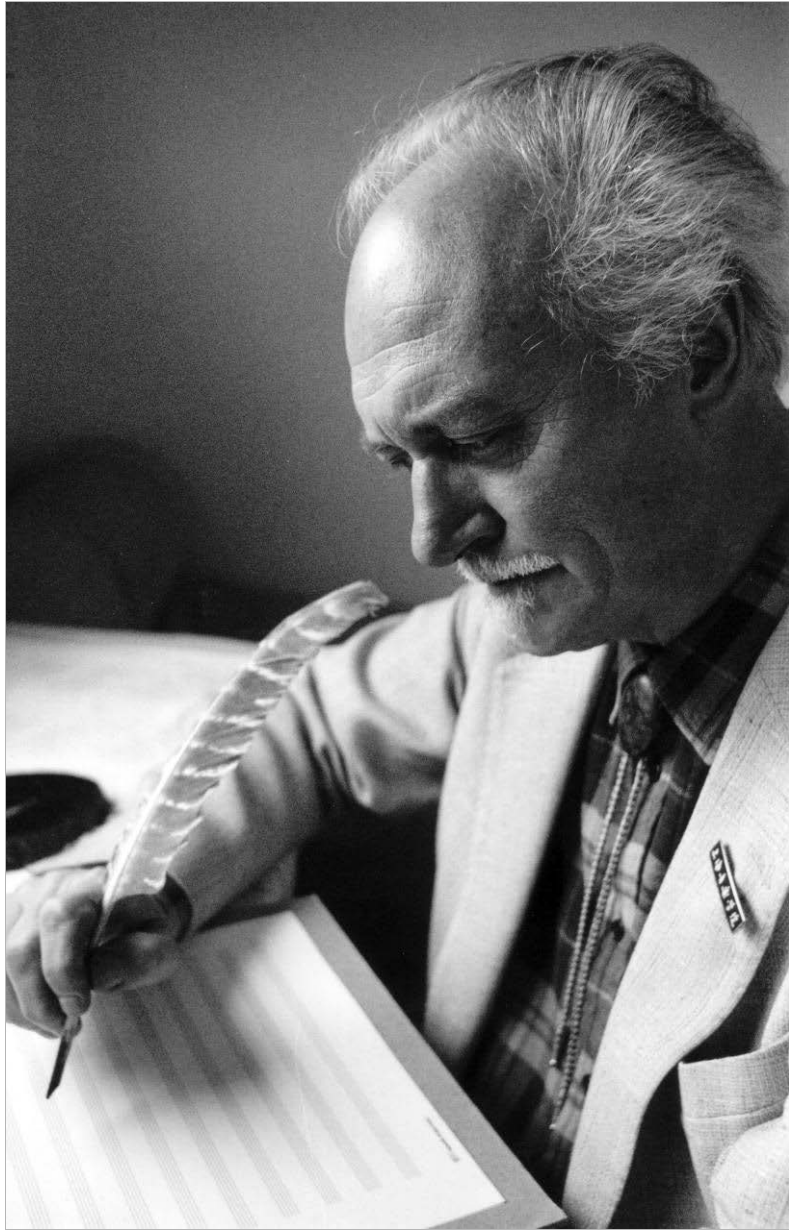
Set in 10/12 RotisSerif

SUN PReSS is an imprint of SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch. Academic, professional and reference works are published under this imprint in print and electronic format. This publication may be ordered directly from www.sun-e-shop.co.za.

Printed and bound by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch, Ryneveld Street, Stellenbosch 7600.

www.africansunmedia.co.za

www.sun-e-shop.co.za



Ronald Stevenson

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank Marjorie and Ronald Stevenson for their constant encouragement and support. Joel Flegler of *Fanfare Magazine*, Malcolm MacDonald of *Tempo*, Antony Bye of the *Musical Times*, Harry Winstanley of the Godowsky Society and Will Scott of the *Newsletter* of the Stevenson Society have all generously allowed articles from their journals to be reprinted here, while Philip Hutton and Martin Anderson displayed the same generosity in allowing me to publish here their interviews with Ronald. Victoria Crowe kindly let us use her beautiful portrait of Ronald as the cover of this book, and I owe both her and Ken Gray much gratitude.

I believe that I have made all reasonable efforts to notify the publishers of the original articles of our desire to republish here, though since some journals no longer exist and the ownership of them has since changed hands several times, this proved difficult in some cases. The examples of Bernard Stevens's music are given by kind permission of Lengnick Publications, Bertha Stevens and the Bernard Stevens Trust. The copyright of Roman Vlad's works lies with SUGARMUSIC S.P.A. (Milan), and I am grateful to them and to Alessandro Savasta for permission to quote from them here. The music examples from Alan Bush's works are given by kind permission of his heirs, represented by his elder daughter, Rachel O'Higgins. My research assistant Annemie Stimie in Pretoria was responsible for typing the greater part of the first draft, and also – together with Karien Labuschagne – for typesetting the music examples; I owe them much gratitude. I further wish to thank the following individuals whose assistance and encouragement have proven vital to this project: Derek Watson, Isobel van der Walt of the University of Pretoria Library; Chats Devroop and Gerhard Swart of the University of Pretoria; Wikus van Zyl of SUN PReSS; Stephanus Muller; and – for their constant patience and support – my wife Riëtte and our children Isa, Elza and Alvaro.

CHRIS WALTON

Introduction

There is an undeniable fascination in reading the words that composers write. Whenever a composer puts finger to typewriter rather than pencil to manuscript paper, we inevitably hope that he might proffer us some insights into the workings of the creative musical mind – that source of much mystery since the act of composition left the realm of low artisanship for that of High Art some two or three centuries ago. Composers who deal with words as naturally as they write notes are, however, a breed of exceeding rarity. Ronald Stevenson belongs amongst them: and the proof of it is to be found amply in the present book.

Stevenson was born in 1928 into a working-class Lancashire family of mixed Scots and Welsh descent. He studied with Iso Elinson in Manchester at what is now the Royal Northern College of Music, he was imprisoned on account of his pacifism and his concomitant refusal to do military service, he worked in a colliery school in County Durham, then subsequently reaffirmed his Celtic roots by moving to a tiny cottage in West Linton in the Scottish borders. With the exception of two years spent lecturing in Cape Town in the early 1960s, he has remained in Scotland, faithfully ‘local’ in that oddly cosmopolitan, internationalist manner that the best Scots creative artists have somehow always managed to attain. He and his wife, Marjorie, still live in that same cottage, half an hour’s bus ride from Edinburgh – though for the visitor, its smallness somehow evaporates once inside, revealing instead the far greater scope of the minds and hearts that reside in it.

Ronald Stevenson is a man possessed of multifarious gifts, though he has been most prominent as a pianist and composer in whom virtuosity and musicality are paired in equal measure. He has performed and lectured in many of the most prestigious venues that the musical and academic worlds have to offer, from the Royal Albert Hall to the Juilliard School of Music, but nevertheless eschewed the customary travelling concert career that was the lot of his performing friends (John Ogdon foremost amongst them). He also (with that Capetonian exception) avoided the route into academia that has been the bread-and-butter choice of many of his fellow composers. Stevenson’s compositional oeuvre is vast, encompassing almost every genre from instrumental miniatures to large-scale concertos and choral pieces, and his works have been commissioned and performed by artists of renown, ranging from Peter Pears to Yehudi Menuhin. He is probably best known for the work that is the topic of the first essay in this book: his remarkable *Passacaglia on DSCH* for piano, which is cited just about everywhere as being the longest single-movement work in the piano literature. At about eighty minutes in length, it might well be. But it is in fact only the tip of the iceberg – albeit a very large, impressive, craggy one. The catalogue of his works in

a recent volume on his life and music is in fact almost eighty pages in length.¹ And besides his original compositions, Stevenson is a master of the art of transcription, one worthy to be ranked alongside Busoni and Grainger.

Stevenson has been hardly less prolific in writing words than in writing notes. For composers to write about music has in fact been something of a *sine qua non* for well over a century now. As in so much else, we can put the blame squarely on Richard Wagner. While other composers before him had achieved prominence as critics – Robert Schumann is the obvious example – it was Wagner above all who awakened the public's expectations that a composer should express his opinions on life, the world and his art in prose. This was for a long while – predominantly, though not exclusively – a German phenomenon, where even those composers with the least to say would insist on doing so at length; furthermore, German academia has long distinguished between that which is 'musical journalism' and that which is 'proper' musicology – with the implication, of course, that the former is comprehensible but flimsy and throwaway, while the latter, being for longer-term consumption, need not be so immediately intelligible. If there is a single major difference between the Germanic and the Anglo-Saxon musicological traditions, then it is surely that this distinction between 'high' and 'low' has ever been blurred in the latter. In his own implicit disdain for such attitudes of altitude and affectation in his approach to prose, Ronald Stevenson has remained decidedly 'British'; and that he has much of import to say will be clear enough to the reader of this book. To be sure, there are ample products of his pen from the past half century that even the most Teutonic of commentators would happily stamp as 'scholarly' – his *Western Music: An Introduction*,² his contributions to the study of Ignaz Paderewski, Bernhard Ziehn or Alan Bush, or his articles on poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley Maclean. But he has also penned many shorter pieces that were intended for more immediate consumption. Here, his regular column on 'last week's broadcast music' for *The Listener* in the 1960s and '70s comes to mind, which allowed him to comment directly on matters of the day, musical and otherwise. But regardless of whether he is writing for the scholar, the student or the homely listener in his comfy chair by the wireless, Stevenson never looks down on his reader, nor dumbs down to him, but looks him straight in the eye, inviting him, too, to do the same back. And, just as Stevenson the composer is seemingly incapable of writing a brief canon or an *Albumblatt* without displaying his mastery of form, structure, art and artifice, and just as his recordings of the technically straightforward repertoire exude the same musicality as do his virtuosic pyrotechnics, so too do his many occasional prose pieces show *en miniature* the

¹ See Colin Scott-Sutherland, ed.: *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music*. London: Toccata Press, 2005, pp. 381-459.

² Ronald Stevenson: *Western Music: An Introduction*. London: Kahn & Averill, 1971. New edition currently in preparation.

same delight in language, the same stylishness and forthrightness as his longer, ostensibly more 'serious' texts.

The topics to which Stevenson turns his attention as a writer have a close correlation to those that have inspired him as composer and performer. No one who has heard him, either live or recorded, could deny that he was a pianist of the first order (the past tense is appropriate merely because he has since retired from the podium). But while others have been content to travel the world performing the great workhorses of the repertoire, Stevenson has devoted his prime energies instead to the zebras, giraffes and Shetland ponies. No standard renderings of Beethoven-Liszt-Brahms for him. Instead, he has invested his energies in promoting the work of Ferruccio Busoni, Alan Bush, Percy Grainger, Ignaz Paderewski, Edvard Grieg, Charles-Valentin Alkan, Henry Purcell, Carl Nielsen, Scott Joplin, Kaikhosru Sorabji, Czesław Marek, Herman Sandby, Sparre Olsen and others – with, of course, the occasional Mozart, Bach and Schubert added for balance. Several once-lost causes, such as Marek, are now no longer lost, since Stevenson first sought and found them. In similar manner, the reader expecting to find in these pages the musings of a master pianist on issues of phrasing in Beethoven or of pedalling in Brahms will be disappointed. The topics covered here are wide-ranging, almost frighteningly so, from Purcell to Roman Vlad, via Kierkegaard, Ruskin, Delius and many others. Stevenson in his writings does not shy away from the well-travelled highways of Western music, but nor does he ever fail to bring home to us just how vital to our musical landscape are the less-trodden lanes and woodland paths. And besides telling us much about the music of others, Stevenson also, of course, tells us much about himself. The interviews with Martin Anderson and Philip Hutton in particular provide much biographical and anecdotal information on the man, his likes, his dislikes and his beliefs, from his idiosyncratically non-dogmatic pacifism and his non-party-political socialism, to his friendships with poets, musicians and artists such as Alan Bush and the brilliantly maverick Hugh MacDiarmid.

We have endeavoured here to offer a broad, representative selection of Stevenson's writings, though we have naturally refrained from including those more recent texts that are still readily available. In order to improve reader-friendliness, we have grouped the essays of this volume into four broader subject groups: Stevenson on his own music; on his fellow Britons; on Scots music; and on the Continental traditions (we hope to be forgiven for placing Percy Grainger – Australian-born, naturalized American, but of British parentage – with the second group, but the company of Delius and Scott seemed to suit him most in our context here). The musician who has most occupied Stevenson's fingers and prose is Ferruccio Busoni, with whom he has long felt a particular empathy as composer, pianist, aesthete and (most of all) as a fellow human being. The fact that Stevenson's Busonian writings are not featured in these pages is for the straightforward reason that a separate volume devoted solely to them is currently in preparation by Martin Anderson of Toccata Press. But a volume of Stevenson's

writings without anything Busonian would be unthinkable; so we here include his own translation of one of Busoni's final essays, and thus at the same time offer the reader another aspect of Stevenson as writer, if one that he only occasionally demonstrated, namely his skill as a translator (and which, of course, has a fascinating corollary in his work as an arranger – a 'translator', so to speak – of the music of others).

The barest of editorial emendations have been made here: occasional typographical errors in the original publications have been corrected without comment, and bibliographical references standardized throughout the volume. The latter are all given as footnotes, as this seemed the most user-friendly format; since a separate bibliography would have simply repeated much of this same information, we have not included one here. Footnotes have further been added where necessary in order to 'update' information (as, for example, in the case of Alan Bush, where Stevenson refers to works 'not yet performed' that have since been premièred). Stevenson's own footnotes are identified by his initials in square brackets at the end of each note (though this practice is not applied where his footnotes comprise only a brief bibliographical reference). Some of his *The Listener* articles on 'last week's music' ranged freely over numerous topics, as one would expect under such a rubric. These have not all been reprinted in full here. Where, for example, a closing paragraph left the article's principal topic in order to summarize briefly the week's other highlights, such an excursion has been excised. The substance of the essays has remained otherwise untouched. We do not offer a list of Stevenson's writings, since the recently published volume on the composer's life and work includes a comprehensive catalogue of them,³ and merely to have repeated that information here would have been somewhat tautological. To any reader keen to acquire more extensive knowledge on Ronald Stevenson and his art, we recommend both that volume and Malcolm MacDonald's biography of the composer, published in 1989 under the auspices of the National Library of Scotland.⁴

Stevenson was naturally consulted at all stages in the preparation of this volume; however, any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the editor alone.

CHRIS WALTON
Solothurn, Switzerland
Michaelmas 2008

³ Scott-Sutherland: *op. cit.*, pp. 463-7.

⁴ Malcolm MacDonald: *Ronald Stevenson: A Musical Biography*. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1989.

Stevenson on Stevenson



Stevenson, Dmitri Shostakovich and Hugh MacDiarmid at the 1962 Edinburgh Festival (photo: Paul Schilabeer)

The Passacaglia on DSCM¹

from *The Listener*, Vol. 82, No. 2115, 9 October 1969

For a start, what *is* a Passacaglia? It originated as a medieval Spanish street-dance. *Pas*, familiar from its usage in ballet, means a pace or step; and *caglia* comes from the Spanish for a street. The idea was that a musician would keep a basic tune going over and over again, and the dancers would sing other tunes above it. The rhythm generally had three beats, with a stamp of the foot on the second beat. From the streets it got into court music and became stylised. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century passacaglias by François Couperin, J.S. Bach and others were variations over a ground bass. The old idea was still there: variable tunes over a constant basic tune. Even the three-beat rhythm was usually preserved, and the

¹ The *Passacaglia* is available on CD, performed by Raymond Clarke (Marco Polo 8.223545), by Murray McLachlan (The Divine Art 25013), and by Stevenson himself (Altarus AIR-CD-9091). The HMV recording by John Ogdon is not currently available on CD.

foot-stamp on the second beat was still to be traced in the occasional second-beat accent.

Work on my *Passacaglia* for piano began during the winter of 1960 and the first draft was finished in the spring of 1962. The full title is *Passacaglia on DSCH*. The letters DSCH are the initials of the dedicatee, Dmitri Schostakowitsch, in the German spelling of his name. These letters are the names of four musical notes: D, E flat (in German – and Russian – Es, pronounced like the letter S), C, H (B natural). The ground bass – that is, the ever-present thematic background – is built out of those four notes. Shostakovich (to use the more familiar spelling) has himself employed this musical monogram in his Tenth Symphony and Eighth String Quartet.

James Joyce, writing the section *Anna Livia Plurabelle* in his *Finnegans Wake*, began by weaving a few names of rivers into his prose-poem and went on piling up river names until the text was a torrent of over 500 of them. That is something like how I wrote my *Passacaglia*. I went on piling up variations over that ground bass until they grew into hundreds: I've never counted them. I felt the nature of the work was 'aqueous' – it should flow. For that reason it should be in one movement. And in the flow should be other forms, similar to what geologists call 'aqueous rocks'. In a letter to me the Australian composer Percy Grainger said that he thought that the European concept of the nature of music as 'architecture in sound' was wrong. He claimed that the nature of music was 'like a ribbon drawn out along the floor, a constant unfoldment'. Personally, I don't see why the nature of music shouldn't include *both* these concepts. I think it's a difference of view determined by geographic and cultural background. Grainger as an Australian had a 'great wide open spaces' idea of music. European musicians, living with urban architecture, and writing music in terms of the acoustic of cathedrals and concert halls, have inevitably thought of music as architectonic. I hope my *Passacaglia* coalesces both concepts: music as flow, and music as architecture.

Early in 1963, I left Scotland and took up the post of Senior Lecturer in Composition at the University of Cape Town for two years. Distance brought both perspective and new involvement. I added a Scottish variation to the *Passacaglia* and recast the African variation after experiencing African music at first hand. It was in Cape Town that I gave the premiere. That was on 10 December 1963.

The form of the work is one long, simple movement in variations, lasting 80 minutes. It also contains other large-scale forms: sonata, dance suite, symphonic march, a sequence of studies, triple fugue and a final set of Baroque variations. In between these, there are episodes in variation form. There are two main climaxes: a physically motivated climax in the frenetic central set of studies; and a more controlled climax in the final set of Baroque variations, reached by a long crescendo.

The content of the music refers to different national intonations: a pibroch; a Russian revolutionary march; a Spanish fandango; African drumming; and the severe German fugal style of Bach. These have all been absorbed experientially: I mean by getting out among people, not by incarcerated contemplation of a sheet of paper or a spool of tape. I absorbed the pibroch from the performance of Highland pipers heard in Scottish crofts; the Russian revolutionary march, from the movement of crowd scenes in Eisenstein films; Spanish dancing, from observations made at Las Palmas; the African drumming, from a performance of a tribal virtuoso in the location of Nyanga, just outside Cape Town; the Bachian fugue style, from analysing, practising and memorising the 48 Preludes and Fugues at the piano.

So the work is rooted in reality. It embraces Romanticism as a part of reality, the part of us that strives after the heroic. Reality is things as they are: Romanticism, a previsioning of things as they shall be. (Here I'm not talking about the false Romanticism that hankers after the past instead of transforming it or developing it.) Che Guevara, Yuri Gagarin and Neil Armstrong are bigger Romantic figures than any in the nineteenth century. One passage of my *Passacaglia* is marked to be played 'with Gagarinesque sense of space'. Music can't tell anything about Gagarin, but the sphere of reason, the noosphere, is expanding to outer space and music can certainly express the emotion behind this expansion.

My music is written from a Scottish base. Scotland hasn't achieved independence, so cultural (not Hitlerian) nationalism is bound to find expression in Scotland. But accelerated communications, the jet and Telstar, have quickened awareness of other nations.

Finally, a word about performing this work. I was fortunate in my adolescence (I was born in 1928) to hear one or two pianists of what might be called the sunset of the great Romantic school of pianism. One was Mark Hambourg. He was old and past it. He played fistfuls of wrong notes. But he also produced an almost orchestral sonority which I heard from no other pianist and which reminded me of descriptions of Anton Rubinstein's playing (I mean Anton, not Artur). Mark was an easy target for critics. Yet Busoni declared him 'the most naturally gifted pianist' he had ever heard. I also admired the almost feline loveliness of Leff Pouishnoff's Chopin playing.

I thought such playing as Pouishnoff's and Hambourg's was no more until one day I heard Clifford Curzon in Brahms's D minor Piano Concerto. Then I saw the rise of John Ogdon, who reminds me forcibly of Hambourg. I applaud these words of Wanda Landowska: 'Sobriety has for its aim the objective presentation of the text without any personal involvement. But is not this tone of indigent indifference another roundabout way of being subjective? Simplicity can be that of a brute who only sees and plays what is written'. With Landowska, I want more daring use of free time (*rubato*) and welcome creative deviations from the text which make a performance approach the improvisational atmosphere of all true music-making.

That is how I try to play my *Passacaglia*. I would go further and say that the technical problems of the work – and particularly problems of endurance – are such as to put it beyond the reach of what I call the ‘bureaucratic’ type of pianist who plays the notes and nothing else. I know there are passages in the work, coming after, say, half an hour’s taxing performance, which would prove problematic for any pianist in the world. In this way, the work is a challenge to the performer. It is also a challenge to the listener.

Stevenson’s Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin. Symphonic Elegy for Liszt

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, autumn 1994

I take just two of my works out of the half dozen that were studied at the recent Piano Weekend Workshop:² one an early piece, *Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin*; the other a fairly recent one, *Symphonic Elegy for Liszt*.

One of the best bits of luck for any composer is to hear a work of his youth performed by a young musician. It’s almost like living one’s youth over again – vicariously, it’s true, but also vividly. There are some compositions that are a young man’s (or woman’s) work and are arguably best interpreted by a young performer. Joseph Long’s performance of my *Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin* was (is) such a performance; and I’m grateful to him for helping me to create the illusion of recapturing youth, even if only for a few minutes, extended by the savouring of it. The ‘fragment’, by the way, is the central canonic episode in Chopin’s F minor Ballade. I quote this in the middle of my Fugue. Chopin was studying Cherubini’s *Treatise on Counterpoint* in his later years and made a number of canonic studies (mostly unpublished, though the *Annales Chopin* of Warsaw published a few excerpts in the late 1950s or early 1960s). Chopin’s little-known A-minor Fugue also belongs to his late period, though it is a simple two-part fugue. When I once played it to Alan Bush, one of the few masters of the fugue, he guessed this to be a work of Chopin’s student years and was surprised by its date of 1841. I have always felt Chopin to be a Classic among the Romantics. Therefore to compose a fugue on a theme of his seemed to follow. Post-Baroque composers have often harked back to Baroque forms, e.g. Brahms and Reger. Perhaps that is because Baroque forms – notably canon, fugue and passacaglia – are archetypes, not only of a historical period but of the essential nature of music itself.

Apart from the Dane Niels Viggo Bentzon, I know of no living composer who has addressed himself to voluminous fugal composition. The Brahms symphonic passacaglia (in the Fourth Symphony) or Reger’s many organ or piano fugues must

² The 1994 Piano Workshop of the Stevenson Society was held on 15-18 July at Garvald School in Peeblesshire.

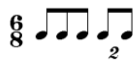
have seemed conservative in the age of the tone poem, but their work has outlived many works of their once self-consciously ‘modernistic’ contemporaries. Essential work – i.e. music that respects the essential nature of its art – is bound to outlast music that wilfully forgets this nature in pursuit of what is *contra naturam*. It is heartening that music I wrote nearly half-a-century ago seems to be attracting the attention of young pianists today.

Evidently, my workshop remarks on my *Symphonic Elegy for Liszt* interested enough to warrant a request for me to try and recapture them in writing. I traced the compositional chronology of this piece by instancing that its inception was not what became the beginning, but rather a passage mid-stream. This circumstance suggests a different approach to piano practice from the usual one. That is, in learning a new piece, it is not always necessary to begin at the beginning. A more congenial approach might be to begin by practising a passage that makes an immediate appeal; then to study its relevance to other sections of the piece.

The passage I composed first in the *Elegy* is marked ‘*romanticamente* – with a full-blown summer air’. This was suggested by my reading of the 22nd ruba’i of Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

And we, that now make merry in the room
They left, and summer dresses in new bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the couch of earth
Descend, ourselves to make a couch – for whom?

This struck at once an elegiac yet joyous mood. Then, thinking of Liszt as ‘a man for all seasons’, I thought of structuring the piece following the cycle of seasons: I wrote a frisky, spring-like variant of my ‘summer air’; then, later, other variants, autumnal and winter. The ‘summer air’ moved in an irregular:



The autumnal and winter variants each lopped off a beat, like the gradual unleafing of a tree: 5/8, then the final winter journey in 4/8, with a slowing down of the tempo.

The dedication of a work to Liszt may suggest pyrotechnical music, but no; I was thinking of late Liszt, so the piece is predominantly meditative. The opening and closing (instrumental) recitatives re-explore Liszt’s late interest in monody. The opening *barcarola* alludes to Liszt’s funereal gondola, though more by idea than by theme. There is a subsidiary theme modelled on Hungarian and Scottish speech rhythms. These national intonations have a common stress on the first syllable of a word (hence the ‘Scots snap’, originally rooted in the Gaelic tongue). In the same year – 1986 – I also made a solo piano transcription of the *Adagio* of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony. I can see now that Mahler’s wide leaping Alpine melody has influenced the coda of my Liszt piece. So it ends alone on a mountain. Richard

Black gave a committed performance at the workshop. The commission for my Liszt piece came from Dr Peter Hick, medico and pianophile extraordinaire. It was a great pleasure to see Dr Hick as a listening participant in the weekend workshop.

Purcell Washed Whiter?

Reflections on my Purcell transcriptions

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, spring 1995

Two views of Purcell. The first, a Germano-American one, Alfred Einstein in his *A Short History of Music*:

Henry Purcell (1659-1695), who wrote music for the theatre as well as an actual opera, was the last important creative force of a country which, as far as music is concerned, has since depended on foreign importations. Purcell may be compared to some extent with Mozart [this is high praise indeed from Einstein, the Mozart authority], not only on account of his tragically short career but also because of the ease with which he assimilated foreign styles. He wrote trio sonatas in the Italian style; but in the strength of their melodic line they are still typically English, and so are his Fancies with their daring harmonic progressions. Beside his effective church music, which culminates in his magnificent *Te Deum*, his miniature opera *Dido and Aeneas* stands on a pinnacle by itself, a model of pure and profound expression achieved by the most modest means.³

The second view I quote is that of the Anglo-Scots critic and composer Cecil Gray, from *The History of Music*:

In England during the seventeenth century there is only one composer who need concern us here, namely Henry Purcell; indeed, he is the only Englishman of any period who is accepted as a composer of the first rank by the rest of the world.⁴

These two quotations serve as background to what follows.

Purcell's harpsichord Suites and Lessons are his shortest works. They provide ideal teaching and sight-reading material for tyro keyboard players. In their *Urtext*, most musicians would agree that they sound best on a spinet or small harpsichord, with one exception, the A major Toccata, which is a 7-minute piece of some import. Indeed it was erroneously included among conjectured works of J. S. Bach in the *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition!

Adverse earlier twentieth-century criticism of the Bach-Busoni transcriptions has been largely reversed in the late twentieth century. This example emboldened me to try my hand at transcribing the Purcell harpsichord Toccata for grand piano.

³ Alfred Einstein: *A Short History of Music*. London: Cassell, 1948, pp. 81-2.

⁴ Cecil Gray: *The History of Music*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1947, p. 145.

Because Purcell belongs to the 'early music' cult more than Bach does, musicological attitudes against transcribing Purcell are that much more critical. Thurston Dart in *The Interpretation of Music* has some of the harshest words for transcribers who would emulate Busoni:

To link one's own name to the composer's with a hyphen is to pimp on his capital; to efface his style with one's own is to erase his original inscriptions; to flout the help of the scholar is to debase the composer's coinage [ah, that's the crux of it!]; to issue one's own music falsely bearing the name of a man long dead is to mint counterfeit money.⁵

Yet the Dover edition of Bach's *Complete Keyboard Transcriptions of Concertos by Baroque Composers*⁶ prints no fewer than sixteen works: six originally by Vivaldi (violin concerti), two originally by Marcello, three originally by Duke Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar and four from anonymous sources. These transcriptions are not published under the hyphenated authorship that Thurston Dart so deplors; they have come to be associated only with Bach's name. Dart's dogma disappears, confronted by the example of Bach; or at least, the aesthetic considerations Dart raises have a large question mark placed after them.

Peter Warlock, in his classic opusculum *The English Ayre*, opines that:

an editor's sole business is to produce a clear and accurate *text* of his subject; if the performer wishes to embellish that text, he is at liberty to do so – but such embellishments are rarely successful, save in such exceptional works as Liszt's transcriptions of Schubert's songs and Paganini's Caprices, which we enjoy as one great artist's commentary on the music of another.⁷

Warlock himself published transcriptions of Dowland's lute music for piano and harpsichord,⁸ but they are the musical equivalent of literal translations of verse (whereas I believe the best verse translation is never merely literal but takes risks and even invents). Half a century after Warlock's editing of Dowland, a later, younger scholar, Ian Copley in *The Music of Peter Warlock: A Critical Survey* takes Warlock himself to task:

Warlock was not always consistent in his adherence to those accepted conventions which should govern modern editorial practice ... modern scholarship and editorial precision may have reduced the absolute value of much of his work, but we have no less cause to be grateful for what he achieved.⁹

⁵ Thurston Dart: *The Interpretation of Music*. London: Hutchinson, 1967, p. 163.

⁶ Johann Sebastian Bach: *Complete Keyboard Transcriptions of Concertos by Baroque Composers: From the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition*. New York: Dover, 1989.

⁷ Peter Warlock: *The English Ayre*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1970, pp. 134-5.

⁸ Peter Warlock, ed.: *The Lute Music of John Dowland. Literally Transcribed from the Original Tablature Notation, and edited for Piano or Harpsichord*. London: Curwen, 1928.

⁹ Ian A. Copley: *The Music of Peter Warlock: A Critical Survey*. London: Dobson, 1979, pp. 275-6.

O tempora! O mores!

The above quotations remind me of an aphorism of Busoni: 'It is possible for an Englishman to be a man of good taste without artistry'. I also feel like exploding (with a Beethovenian *sforzato!*): I am simply not interested in immaculate misconceptions.

That was the conviction that drove me to make my Purcell transcriptions. I have researched enough to relate Purcell to Draghi, Lully and Monteverdi. But I can trust my musical and human instincts enough to find links between Purcell and Mozart (but Einstein already found that) and between Purcell and a whole host of later artists, including Handel, Scarlatti, Chopin, Bellini, Keats, Emily Brontë, Wagner, Mahler and Britten. The reader may copiously (and maybe uncomprehendingly) add exclamation marks liberally to this unholy rosary of names! But at our July weekend workshop I shall justify my allegations by music and literary and biographical examples; and I shall relish vindicating my seeming foolhardiness in the good-natured discussions and arguments I'm sure we'll enjoy.

One Pianist's Credentials and Credo

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, spring 1996

My pianistic grandfather (whom I never met) was Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931), the Russian piano pedagogue of Horowitz, Barere, Neuhaus and Iso Elinson. Elinson was my teacher at the Royal Manchester College of Music, 1945-48. In three years Elinson taught me three maxims: first, never to strike a piano key but to 'take' it – that was his expression, meaning to stroke the key with pressure touch in a smooth movement, drawing the hand in the direction of the body. Elinson never explained *why* one should do that, but, watching videos of Horowitz in my later years, I saw him doing the same and remembering Blumenfeld's teaching. Only when I read Harold Bauer's *His Book*¹⁰ did I know the *reason* for 'taking' the key: Bauer explains that if the finger *strikes* the key there is an extra sound of the finger's impact, which is augmented by the effect of the right pedal, so that it obscures the clarity and purity of piano tone.

Elinson's second maxim was: once a piece is memorised, play it once a week and keep it; do not play it once a week, you lose it. I wish I had followed that advice. If I had, my repertoire would have filled a travel trunk with sheet music. The *third* maxim: unfortunately, I've forgotten it. But I have not forgotten Iso Elinson's merriness. He *exuded* music. He had a smile that reminded me of Josef Lange's portrait of Mozart: a blend of merriment and melancholy.

¹⁰ Harold Bauer: *Harold Bauer. His Book*. New York: Norton, 1948.

In my youth on a free day I did as much as *fourteen* hours a day of piano practice. That is too much. Four daily hours are enough. But all that work stood me in good stead and has helped me to preserve my piano technique intact, even through vicissitudes of ill-health. Rather like learning to ride a bicycle: do it when young and the ability lasts a lifetime, and may be picked up even after periods of inactivity.

I was always an avid collector, compiler and inventor of piano exercises based on actual music, not abstract 'gymnastic' exercises such as Hanon's. When I was twenty-one, I wrote down all I knew about piano technique. It is a manuscript of fifty pages octavo. I still think it is valid. It's *not* detailed, but states the basic truths about the subject. It might even be published one day as an opuscle. I *could* fill in much of the detail but *won't*, because I'd rather *teach* it; or, best of all, spend time composing.

The Busoni *Klavierübung* (Breitkopf) I regard as the best exercises. I wrote them out from public library copies when they were out-of-print just after World War II. I also practised the Bach Inventions and the *Forty-eight* in my youth (and later). At eighteen I could play the two-part Inventions and Book One of the *48*, transposing each one into all the tonalities. Can't do it now!

The Chopin Etudes I regard as the Everest of pianism. I used to think that it was Liszt. More and more, I see it is Chopin. The general public perceives Liszt as the more difficult. He *looks* it but *isn't*.

My most memorable experience of observing a pianistic genius in action at close quarters was my long friendship with John Ogdon, a fellow Elinsonian student, whom I met when he was 9 and I was 18, and with whom I was in constant touch.

My first love in recordings of pianists was Paderewski; and I am constant to that love. The first and last tenet of pianistic faith must be belief in beautiful tone. Paderewski had that more than anybody, whatever criticisms may be levelled at him.



Stevenson and Hugh MacDiarmid in the early 1960s (photograph: Helmut Petzsch)

Composing a Song Cycle: Border Boyhood

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, autumn 1996; a transcript of an interval talk broadcast on 29 March 1972 on BBC Radio 3, along with the first broadcast performance of *Border Boyhood*, performed by the composer and Peter Pears.

As a composer, I find that ideas for a new work come unawares – and sometimes in unexpected places. From my music sketchbooks I see that, one night in September 1968, I couldn't get to sleep for a theme that kept jolting my subconscious into consciousness. Finally, there was nothing for it but to don my dressing gown and go down to my desk and put the thing on paper – and my mind at rest. Interested as I am in the psychic mechanism of composing, a little reflection told me what sparked it off on this occasion. That afternoon, I'd been romping in the autumn woods with my children near our home in the Scottish Borders. We'd returned to hot buttered toast and piping-hot tea by a fire that blazed even brighter than the conflagration of colour we'd seen in the woods. Then I read the youngsters a bedtime chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*. In the middle of the night, I knew the musical idea that had been tied like a cracker to the tail of my

dreams was an evocation of childhood. I headed the page of manuscript *allegro con nuovo ardore* (quick with young ardour). It was my childhood calling to me across forty years.

Now, that page of manuscript lay in my sketchbook till the next summer, till June 1969; when, one morning, I received a letter from Peter Pears, commissioning a song cycle from me, to be dedicated to our mutual friend, Miss Tertia Liebenthal of Edinburgh. To me, Tertia was the last *grande dame* of the Scottish capital, an old-world patroness of music who organised seven hundred lunch-hour concerts in Edinburgh's National Gallery. She even died at one of these concerts, surrounded by music and her friends.

I remember her enthusiasm – shortly before her death – about some childhood memories of the Borders, broadcast by Hugh MacDiarmid. So, when Peter Pears asked me to compose a song cycle, I immediately thought of the childhood memories of MacDiarmid, and began setting them. And I realised that I'd already written the first page of the song-cycle on that sleepless night in the autumn of 1968. Tertia Liebenthal died before the work was completed, so it is dedicated: 'In memory of Tertia, who loved the Border Country'. I gave it my own title: *Border Boyhood*.

Five of the six songs are settings of MacDiarmid's prose, the other song a setting of his free verse. I find prose rhythm nearer to the flow of music than are the more regular patterned rhythms of rhymed verse. Except in 'patter-songs' (à la Gilbert and Sullivan) or in four-square musical phrases, the free flow of music tends to minimise, or even obliterate, the regularity of rhymed verse.

Another problem of setting words to music is this: every musical motif or theme contains the germ of its own development; set words to it, and the development of the *musical* idea has to be subjugated to the development of the *verbal* idea. The music has to yield to the words: like a creeping plant, it has to be trained to a trellis. This problem can be overcome partially by careful selection of the text. In the case of the MacDiarmid words I chose, I didn't use the complete original text but selected from it what suited my purpose. In particular, I selected passages containing recurrent poetic motifs, so that I might allow my *musical* motifs to recur also and to be developed. This thematic cross-reference made the form of my song cycle cyclic in the symphonic sense.

Here are some examples of what I mean. There are recurrent references to the *wood* throughout the cycle. Can you remember the first time you entered a wood as a child? I can. Suddenly to be encircled by shadows and to see the shadows become luminous with bluebells – this was *magic*! I've tried to evoke the suddenness of this experience by a single chord in the opening song. Later, this chord bears a melody associated with birdsong in the wood. Later still, this melody is treated in variation form in a piano interlude, like a meditation in the woods. Another recurrent motif

is the *river*. It meanders in and out of the music of my song cycle as it does in the Border landscape.

Looking through my sketches again, I remember how I worked at the song which is a celebration of colour: the Scottish Borders in the pageant of autumn. First I copied out MacDiarmid's poem. Here's how it opens:

The birch tremulously pendulous in jewels of cairngorm,
The sauch, the osier, and the crack-willow
Of the beaten gold of Australia;
The sycamore in rich straw-gold;
The elm bowered in saffron;
The oak in flecks of salmon gold;
The beeches huge torches of living orange.

When I'd copied out the whole poem, I took coloured crayons and heavily underlined each colour mentioned with the appropriate crayon. Then I saw at a glance that the poet's colour scheme presented a kind of life-cycle of colours – yellow, green, gold, orange, sienna, purple. This immediately suggested a harmonic scheme which determined the form of the whole song. To give only one example, take these words:

Beyond the willow a young beech
Blazes almost blood-red,
Vying in intensity with the glowing cloud of crimson
That hangs about the purple bole of a gean
Higher up the brae face.

My brightest crayon underlined the words 'blood-red' – the young beech – and I drew a crimson cloud in outline around the phrase 'the glowing cloud of crimson that hangs about the purple bole of a gean' (the gean is the wild cherry). I also underlined the word 'purple' in its own colour. Then I sat back and saw that the words and colours were already clothing themselves in music.

At the end of this song, the poem closes with two masterly lines:

Even the robin hushes his song
In these gold pavilions.

The *robin*, mark you. The most prosaic of birds. None of your skylarks or nightingales. And the robin doesn't entirely stop singing: he *hushes* his song. This suggested to me the idea of inserting, at this point in the cycle, a nocturne for piano, subtitled 'The Hushed Song', played *sotto voce* throughout. This nocturne reminisces on themes already heard and anticipates a theme to be heard later.

The *main* theme of the cycle is presented at the opening – that call of childhood that I wrote first of all. Throughout the cycle, this theme is developed. For instance, when MacDiarmid, in one of his unexpected metaphors, writes, 'Memories of a clump of mimulus shining like a dog's eyes, with all the world a bone', the theme

is treated in progressive augmentations of the rhythmic values, dilating like the dog's eyes.

In the penultimate song, which is a kind of scherzo/march/jig, only the spiky outline – a sharp profile – of the cycle's main theme is adumbrated. This is a punchy characterisation of Border people. It is meant to be sung relentlessly, a spate of words:

Border life was raw, vigorous, rich, bawdy, a thing of unquenchable humour, biting satire, profound wisdom cloaked in bantering gaiety, and the mad wealth of humour, with not a trace of whimsy, in the general leaping, light-hearted reckless assault upon the conventions of dull respectability.

The final song takes the main theme as the subject of a fugue. This form was suggested by MacDiarmid's memories of a place in his birthplace, Langholm, called 'The Curly Snake'. That very name suggested the serpentine contours of the fugal subject.

And the poet's train of thought pursues in itself a fugal development in its twining, twisting movement, occasionally arrested by episode-like impressions of nature, like camera 'stills'. You'll see what I mean from this quotation:

There is a place called the Curly Snake, where a winding path coils up through a copse; whence, after passing a field or two, it runs into the splendid woods of the Langfall.

Then MacDiarmid tells us that this place has always haunted his imagination. At this point, I composed a fugal episode like the haunting of the imagination; treating the solo voice as two parts in *stretto*, the voice answering itself by vocalising the theme in low chest-voice notes, answered by the theme's inversion, hummed in head-voice tone – one note of each part at a time. MacDiarmid tells us that the Curly Snake was for him what the Nook of the Eight Paths was for Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. In his book *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard writes of the place in Gribs Forest in North Zealand: 'He alone finds it who worthily seeks it, for it is not indicated upon any map. The very name seems to involve a contradiction. For how can the junction of eight paths constitute a nook? how can that which implies travel in all directions accord with what is lonely and concealed?'¹¹ Perhaps the intimate yet public form of music-making which the song cycle is, may be one way of reconciling – in musical terms – the public and frequented with the solitary and concealed.

'But', you may ask, 'is it still valid in the age of technology and electronics to write *nature* music?' My reply to that couldn't be more surely affirmative. Where I live in Scotland, nature – even in an age of pollution – is still very much with us.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie: *Stages on Life's Way*. New York: Schocken Books, 1967, p. 33.

Believing as I do that the artist's work reflects reality – a reflection as quick-changing as the sky's in the river – how can I *not* celebrate nature, when I have chosen to live among it? Remembering Thoreau, I went to the woods, not as an escape, but because I 'wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life'. And I want my music to talk straight about life.

*A Composer Loyal to his Principles: Stevenson in Interview
with Martin Anderson*

from *Fanfare Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 5, May/June 1995

Ronald Stevenson's magnificent *Passacaglia on DSCH*, at eighty minutes the longest single-movement work in the piano literature, has just been released by Marco Polo, in a staggering performance by Raymond Clarke. The sheer tenacity of spirit required to write a work of such magnitude is another manifestation of Stevenson's dogged adherence to the principles he thinks important, both in art and in life, that has allowed him to carry on composing – a number of works for orchestra, two piano concertos, a violin concerto, cello concerto, chamber music, and literally hundreds of songs and piano pieces, as well as a vast choral symphony, still in progress¹² – in the teeth of complete disinterest from the musical powers-that-be. Politically, he has held positions unlikely to endear him to the establishment: he was a pacifist during the Second World War and, like his fellow composers Alan Bush and Bernard Stevens, a Marxist thereafter, though his views have somewhat tempered since. Stevenson, sixty-seven in March, is also an unfashionable musician, in all three aspects of his musical activity: he is just about the sole surviving member of the long-honoured breed of composer-pianist; he composes music that espouses the value of tradition; and he approaches the keyboard with a profound mastery of piano tone that seems to have been forgotten by most younger pianists. Now that the grip of Modernism on the attention of the musical world has fallen away, how does Stevenson see the apparent vindication of his adherence to tonality, to the sheer craft of composition that experimental Modernism eschewed?

'Well, we have to be very careful about musical fashion. If I talk about a return to the past, I don't mean it to sound retrograde. Was it Verdi who said that if we had to return to Palestrina it would be a step forward? Busoni described that as a pacifist war-cry. I am very disturbed by the sense I read in the *manifesti* that were produced both under Mussolini and under Stalin, for obvious reasons, the one signed in the 1930s by Respighi, Pizzetti, Guerrini, and several other composers and that produced after the War by Zhdanov – yet I have to say that there is a good deal in these *manifesti* that I agree with. When I was writing my *Passacaglia*,

¹² Stevenson's *Ben Dorain* for double chorus, chamber orchestra and large orchestra, to a text by Duncan ban MacIntyre in a translation by Hugh MacDiarmid, was completed in 2006.

it was from a very young, naïve, believing conviction – I was, what, 32, 33? – which, after all, was held by Bertrand Russell, Hugh MacDiarmid and many other people with far greater minds than mine, that the Soviet Union was, at least in the 1920s and early '30s, a kind of experimental theatre for a new society. And I so wanted to believe that when I wrote my *Passacaglia*, which is dedicated to Shostakovich, since I knew that the Soviet people had lost, not only under Stalin but also in the Second World War, something like twenty-five million. That was quite literally a decimation. I had the Molotov report on Nazi atrocities in the Soviet Union. All that went into my *Passacaglia*. But I am now prepared to believe that the rot set in with Lenin, not just with Stalin; I am now very interested in Solzhenytsin's ideas about the Soviet Union'.

Stevenson is one of the finest living masters of the ancient art of counterpoint; indeed, it is for him an entirely natural means of expression. So it's hardly surprising that he places considerable importance on a composer's mastery of technique, and is now thinking of putting his feelings into words.

'What I would like to do is write some essays which would occupy a position in music very much like that of Peter Fuller in art – I admire Fuller as an art critic more than any other art critic I have read in the twentieth century, in English anyway, and I feel very close to his aesthetic position. He began as a friend of Birch, another Marxist, but came away from all that. He wrote a number of wonderful books, one of which was in effect a vindication of Ruskin and a total exposure and demolition of the kind of sham that occurs when the Tate Gallery gets the Turner Prize for work by Gilbert and George. Gilbert and George are two gays who take big photographs of themselves in lounge suits – very *bourgeois*, nothing to do with art – and then they mark them out with squares and numbers, like a child's painting, and paint over it. And that gets the Turner Prize! There's a lot like this that's happening in music as well. For instance, Maxwell Davies composes by squares, which he calls 'magic squares'. There's a wonderful demolition job on that kind of composition in a book by Jacques Chailley, a lecturer on music at the Sorbonne, called *40,000 Years of Music*.¹³ The chapter on how to compose a piece of music like Boulez is masterly – and hilarious. You remember that in *Music Ho!*, Constant Lambert¹⁴ said that the way forward in music was going to be Sibelius, not Stravinsky? He was wrong, of course, but I think it would have been a damn sight better if he had been right'.

Stevenson places his own music in company that these days is highly unfashionable, in a paragraph that demonstrates the tendency of his conversation to emulate Celtic art, spinning off sub-themes and decorative counterpoint.

¹³ Jacques Chailley, trans. Rollo Myers: *40,000 Years of Music: Man in Search of Music*. London: Macdonald & Co., 1964.

¹⁴ Constant Lambert: *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline*. London: Faber & Faber, 1934.

'I feel strongly that my aesthetic belongs to two circles of composers who were satellites round Busoni and Delius. I would have fitted into that circle very well, though I never met more than one of them. There was Peter Warlock, with whom I identify very much, because of his interest in scholarship – non-academic, very creative scholarship. To write a book on the English ayre¹⁵ and to begin it with a quotation from *Finnegan's Wake* is something you could hardly expect these days of any academic. Then there was Bernard van Dieren, who was a sort of Boswell to Busoni's Johnson. Have you read his *Down Among the Dead Men*?¹⁶ It's an extraordinary book. There's a superb essay in it of about a hundred pages, the best thing on Busoni in the English language. There's Sorabji, who dedicated the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*¹⁷ to Hugh MacDiarmid; and there's a Sorabji essay on F. G. Scott, who also had a friendship with Bax, one of the few people to admire the songs of Scott at that time and who wrote to him about them. So there are these circles – not a conscious school – to whose aesthetic I can subscribe. And it's an on-going aesthetic because it presents an extension of a tradition which is essentially humanitarian and which is rooted in the voice. Think of Busoni's work as an Italian composer, think of Delius and all his choral works, and van Dieren and all his songs – some of the greatest songs of the twentieth century, I would say – and Warlock's songs and Bax's. And they all had a love of literature – nearly everybody in that circle was involved in literature as well as music: Busoni was, Delius not so much, but Warlock was, van Dieren was, Sorabji was, and F. G. Scott was a very fine literary critic; I have a lot of unpublished notes of his on listening to radio programmes, on attending Gustav Holst's lectures at Glasgow University. Cecil Gray, who was born in Edinburgh, comes into that circle as well. Have you seen his notebooks, which were published recently?¹⁸ He had a wonderfully dirty mind, and was a very funny man! I have a lot of time for Gray's music, too – his opera *The Trojan Women*, for instance. He was one of the few who were influenced by Hebridean song. That was the doing of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, of course, who is widely considered a bowdleriser of Hebridean song, but Sorley Maclean [the leading Gaelic poet] believes that enough original Gaelic remains in her settings to be able to get something out of it. Ezra Pound was an admirer of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's singing. You'd think that she was a sweet little old Edinburgh lady, one of the scones-and-tea brigade, but she wasn't: according to Pound she had a wild, raucous voice.

'I have been described in the press as "an unashamed throwback". I don't think that's quite right. I don't want to get involved in political comment, but I think a lot of

¹⁵ Warlock: *The English Ayre*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970.

¹⁶ Bernard van Dieren: *Down Among the Dead Men and Other Essays*. London: Oxford University Press, 1935.

¹⁷ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. London: J. Curwen & Sons, 1932. Recorded on CD by John Ogdon for Altarus, and remastered and re-released in 2006: AIR-CD-9075.

¹⁸ Pauline Gray: *Cecil Gray: His Life and Notebooks*. London: Thames, 1989.

people would describe Tony Benn as yesterday's man but agree that he had stayed loyal to his basic principles. Margaret Thatcher was loyal to her basic principles – however much you may disagree with her, you can't deny that. I feel that I have retained a loyalty to two basic principles which were erected into a kind of credo by Stravinsky at the end of his life (and you know I don't quote Stravinsky easily). He had the right to say this as a great ballet composer: "Music, to be music, must sing and dance; if it stops singing and dancing, it's not music". And Stravinsky said that, with many younger composers, it had stopped singing and dancing. Now, my work sings and dances. That's being loyal to basic principles'.

The reference to Tony Benn brings up a question that has always puzzled me about Stevenson: both are individualists in their guts but espouse collectivist philosophies. How does Stevenson reconcile these two conflicting views?

'Hugh MacDiarmid had a very interesting reply to that question, since he was often asked it. He said: "I am a Communist simply because I believe in the individual". People might scoff at that these days, but at the time he said it, in the 1930s, people in the United Kingdom had an average of less than £300 of property. He thought it scandalous to talk of the rights of the individual in those circumstances; he wanted people to have access to certain basic material rights. I don't think people could accept that now'. But what of Stevenson's own position? 'I am not ever involved in politics. Alan Bush was very involved; indeed, I think dear Alan has lost a lot of time in that way. I'll attend the meetings of any organisation that's prepared to show interest in the arts. I have spoken on a platform of the Scottish National Party, for instance, and I have also spoken to the Music Group of the British Communist Party – I spoke very critically of communism, and I was very heavily criticised by everybody present. But I am a musician and I don't want to be involved in politics. If I have something to communicate to people, I think it's best to do it in music'.

Stevenson's substantial Violin Concerto, nearly an hour long, is dedicated to the memory of George Enescu and was commissioned by Sir Yehudi Menuhin, who tried to get various bodies interested in performing it – without success until May 1992, when Menuhin conducted the young Chinese virtuoso Hu Kun in the work, in Glasgow. It is obvious that in their work over the Concerto, Stevenson and Menuhin have been discussing more than music.

'Yehudi is very concerned, very disturbed about politics, and he is doing a lot of thinking and writing about it. He has this rather Shelleyan idea – wasn't it Shelley who said that the poets were the legislators for mankind? – that artists should legislate. People may say that's naïve, though that's not necessarily a bad word in my book; I think it's not very practical: the poets who have been involved in politics actively have not been very good for humanity. I am thinking of Ezra Pound, or Yeats, who was certainly a crypto-fascist. When I mentioned Yeats to Yehudi, he said "Ah, but that was in Ireland!" – with a smile. As if it could only happen in Ireland'. What about Paderewski then? Stevenson agrees: 'He's a

wonderful example of a musician who was a politician and remained true to his political philosophy, which I would say, from reading much about him, was old-fashioned liberal conservatism, although he was an independent and didn't declare allegiance to any party. It is interesting that though he achieved some measure of success as a prime minister – he signed the Treaty of Versailles, and with that signature Poland regained her autonomy – he was in politics for only one year. My impression is that Paderewski was too good a man, too upright a man, to stay in the dirty game of politics for long'.

What, then, of the dichotomy between Stevenson's 'reactionary' approach to composition and his more 'progressive' political views – isn't he taking more or less the same position in music that Prince Charles recently took in architecture? The former admirer of Soviet Russia launches into a surprising defence of the beleaguered Prince.

'I don't think Prince Charles is a reactionary. There's an interesting parallel here. In 1962 Shostakovich came to the Edinburgh Festival and talked at the Press Club. There was an audience there, his translator and interpreter and one or two KGB men in the background, as we had been told there would be. I asked him this question – from the floor, it wasn't vetted: "If we take East and West as they currently are, then the West is politically 'conservative' but 'revolutionary' in art, by intent anyway, and the Soviet Union is 'revolutionary' in politics and 'conservative' in art. What do you feel about this?" Shostakovich's reply was very interesting. It was immediate; he spoke naturally and didn't consult with anyone: "The question reveals a misconception of the word 'revolutionary'. My understanding of the word is 'one who is engaged in revolution'. I am a child of the Revolution: I was born in 1906 and in 1917 I was therefore at a very impressionable age; that Revolution reverberates through my work. Of course, we know about the so-called playing at revolution in art in the western world, we know about John Cage and so on; we know far more about this kind of activity than the West knows about Soviet art." I think that much about Prince Charles is entirely natural, he mixes easily with people, he is a fluent painter. What he has said about architecture is also related to Peter Fuller's views, although it is wide open to the charge of being "reactionary". Likewise, I have no wish to appear to be an aggressively revolutionary artist. I just want to write the music that comes naturally to me after a lot of hard thinking. A lot of composers are writing music for critics, a lot of artists are painting for critics, instead of for people. I don't consider critics people!

'I have had to struggle for my music. I am sure it is a class thing. I don't meet British musicians from the working class, really from the proletariat, at all. They don't exist in Britain, not in concert music at any rate; you always meet people from comfortable backgrounds. My childhood was spent to some extent in the Depression years – I was born in 1928 – and I remember both my parents being out of work. My father was a railway worker and my mother was a cotton-weaver.

One of my earliest memories is of going to the employment exchange with them when they were both receiving dole. If you wanted a bath, there was a tin tub which you had to fill up with pans heated on the range. Friday night was bath night, and you got into this bath in front of the fire. I had an uncle with the wonderful name of Theophilus, who had been wounded in the First World War, and his leg was amputated above the knee. When Uncle Theo went to claim his war pension, it was allocated according to the number of inches he had lost. Those are terrible memories for a child – it's like a scar on the mind. I feel very strongly that if people haven't experienced this kind of thing, it is very difficult for them to empathise or to understand. I associate this aspect of my work with Havergal Brian. I think that Brian, far from being a throwback, is very much a composer for the future. He has done some very brave things in music – the Scherzo in *The Gothic*, for example, is absolutely unique, and that writing for the xylophone has dared me to write daringly for the xylophone in my Violin Concerto. Brian, from a working-class background, left school at twelve. What does he do? He eventually writes this great eruption, this geyser of music that had been building up like bile, this struggle to do something, he writes a huge “Gothic” symphony which makes Mahler's Eighth dwindle, if not in achievement, then at least in aspiration. My *Passacaglia* was like that – the *Passacaglia* was my *Gothic Symphony*. I didn't know that at the time, I wasn't copying him, but I know that that has happened in two lives which have experienced struggle'.

There's another aspect to Stevenson's music that is coming increasingly to the fore, which is that it is espousing an explicitly Celtic aesthetic. 'I think that is very important. Delius had that, Bax had that, so strongly that he actually learned Irish Gaelic, and E. J. Moeran had it. It's new because it's largely unexplored, it's *terra incognita*. I don't think that makes me a throwback, because it's loyalty to principles again, loyalty to roots'.

Ronald Stevenson has a unique approach to the piano, one which is instantly identifiable from the sound he makes, an extraordinary mixture of plushness and clarity, with a good deal of care given to making each note tell in the texture. Quite simply, nobody plays like him. So how come he isn't internationally celebrated in the way someone of his ability might expect?

'I am not interested in the conventional round of playing usual programmes on the international circuit. I am far too much concerned with Marjorie and the family to want that kind of life, the kind of life John Ogdon had. I could have had it but I opted for something else. But I would like to do more concerts. I would also like to do what John Ogdon wanted to do towards the end of his life, which is to play more Szymanowski; indeed, I'd like to do it in memory of him. A lot of younger pianists show little curiosity about what lies beyond the “normal” repertoire. And what I find missing in their playing is beautiful tone, and pedalling'.

Can Stevenson's vast repertoire be ascribed, at least in part, to his refusal to espouse the whirlwind life of the travelling virtuoso? 'I don't know half as much as

Busoni knew, and he was on the concert circuit, though he got fed up with it: he didn't give many concerts towards the end of his life. And Liszt got fed up, too – he retired. I think that not being involved in that kind of life has given me more time to compose. Busoni only composed in the summer, like Rachmaninov, and Paderewski didn't compose after the year 1909. I have a little maxim that to compose one needs to be composed. I don't mind travelling, as long as it is on my own terms – I have composed a lot in trains'.

Stevenson's career as a composer surely can't be separate from his status as a performer? 'That's right. I am glad that I have spent so long, so many years, such intensive practice schedules on the piano, because I have always conceived the piano as an orchestra. It has all the possibilities for you, there, laid out in front of you, and it has helped me a tremendous lot with orchestration. Orchestration is a life study. And I am very interested in colour'. At this point Stevenson turns to the piano to demonstrate how he is always exploring for new colours in the piano – for example, how to produce a note that sounds like a tubular bell. So he is thinking orchestrally, even when he is sitting at the piano? 'Very much so. I am indeed, all the time. But this interest in colour goes against the whole ethos of the current age. When you get phrases like "the hard edge" or "bitterness" or "toughness" that crop up in criticism, it's a sign of a very cynical and callous approach to life, and it percolates through an orchestra, to the minutest detail. So that when a composer asks them to play triple *piano*, he'll get a *mezzo-piano* or a *mezzo-forte* – if you're lucky'.

Stevenson's vast knowledge of the piano literature is reflected in recitals of extraordinary variety, Frank Merrick and Edward MacDowell rubbing shoulders with Paderewski and Eubie Blake. So his ears are always open for unknown music? 'I don't listen to a lot of things, because I can make real music if I want. The things that I do listen to are LPs of the great singers of the past. I never tire of that. I have no other opportunity of hearing such singing at present: there's nobody to compare at all with them. And the old recordings, too. Sir Thomas Beecham used to say that the old HMV 78s were much more faithful to the original sound of a voice than the later LPs with hi-fi, the reason being that in later recordings – of Caruso, for instance – the higher frequencies were boosted, even though, as Beecham said, the human voice doesn't have very high frequencies, it's not overtone-rich. So why not let us have something more natural, like the old 78s? Seventy-eight revolutions a minute – that's some socialism for you!'

Ronald Stevenson and Art: Stevenson in Interview with Philip Hutton

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, January 1998

Philip Hutton: In 1988 I read Peter Fuller's *Theoria*, subtitled *Art and the Absence of Grace*, which took Ruskin as the starting point of a critique of the more

destructive side of modern culture as revealed in the visual arts.¹⁹ I was very pleased, Ronald, that you borrowed that book and went straight through it, with great pleasure.

Ronald Stevenson: Yes, indeed. I admired it very much and still do.

PH: Both Ruskin and the late Peter Fuller took a critical view of the society of their own times, and this seems to have fired your own sympathy.

RS: Yes, I'm a great believer in art being expressed in practice, hands on, more than theory; and I'm delighted that fairly recently I managed to obtain two volumes of Ruskin's early poetry, with drawings done when he was fifteen or so, maybe younger. Doing is learning, and the fact that Ruskin could do must have taught him a great deal of observation.

PH: His poems were very much encouraged by his parents, but by the age of twenty he'd realised that was not his true medium.

RS: But the poetic content went into the prose, for example that final passage in *Preterita* about fireflies and stars.

PH: And passages like that scattered through *Modern Painters*, each very much with a purpose.

RS: I feel very near to Ruskin. I suppose the Lake District has something to do with that, because I always looked north from my birthplace in Lancashire. The town had a Scottish name, Blackburn, and I was born in Stirling Street. My father sang Scots songs, his side of the family came from Scotland originally, and it was a strong thing in my childhood. I recognised that in Ruskin, though people often think of him as a completely English character. I've often visited Brantwood, and always want to go again. I'm delighted to have discovered in Fuller a writer who wants to go on from Ruskin. Many people would think that it was a backward glance, but it's actually a glance into the future, to a future which in his terms doesn't exist, things having gone the way they have. Perhaps it would have been much better if things had gone the way of Ruskin's thoughts. I did a lot of drawing as a child. It was spontaneous, encouraged by a school teacher, not the art teacher but the English teacher. I also kept an account of the literature I read and loved as a child. There are two exercise books in the house somewhere.

PH: So your drawing was an outcome of reading, rather than pictures in books or visits to galleries?

RS: Well, I began life just after the General Strike. I was aware of unemployment and hard times. The unemployed in my family would take me to the art gallery. There was an excellent gallery in Blackburn. I loved it and was aware of my father's interest in the visual arts. Not many working-class people visited the

¹⁹ Peter Fuller: *Theoria. Art and the Absence of Grace*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1988.

gallery in the 1930s, it was the domain of the middle-classes, and I was aware of class because of these hard times. Now, there was this teacher at my primary school, she taught English literature. She got us to copy poems into an exercise book, and I remember very well the day, I was maybe seven, a most impressionable age, when William Blake's poetry was introduced to us. It was the *Songs of Innocence*, and immediately those poems meant a very great deal to me. Later, I did see designs by Blake in books, I bought more books than I or my parents could really afford, and I must say that his designs did not appeal to me as his poetry did. It was much stranger, though the poetry can be strange also. I didn't think that the technique of Blake's drawings was as assured as his poetic technique. I loved his character, the artistic character and fire of him. This was developed when I went to the Royal Manchester College of Music. In Manchester I explored original Blakes. There are two galleries there which contain Blake designs, and I was so enthusiastic about this that I took fellow students, who couldn't really understand my enthusiasm.

PH: You acquired a taste for something which at first sight seemed strange?

RS: That's true, I loved the character of Blake so much, his astonishing honesty ... though he was unfair to some of his contemporaries. You'd think they were all Tories, but in fact Sir Joshua Reynolds was quite liberal. And all this was grist to the mill.

PH: It was out of the fire and hardship of his own experiences.

RS: I realised that and responded to it very much.

PH: Blake was a big influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, and you always responded very warmly to this.

RS: Yes, there was some Rosetti in the Manchester galleries. I was given a rare book on Blake and Rosetti and their relationship. My mother bought me that one Christmastime. My parents were tremendously helpful to me, they had love without understanding – that's a wonderful thing. I remember my mother buying these books which must have seemed very strange to a working-class woman, not well-read even in the daily papers. That was a big influence. I think it was a different aspect to Englishry, to the English art world and the English music world that I was beginning to experience. Blake's relationship to art, and to the life of an artist, was very different from what I saw around me. There was a fire there, and a tremendous conviction. Later, when I came to my ancestral country, to Scotland, and got to know two very significant figures, Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley Maclean, I realised that they were both great enthusiasts for the poetry – and the art – of Blake.

PH: The Blakean side of the Pre-Raphaelites was often expressed in a love of the miniature, the crystalline. Not long swathes of poetry but a perfect verse, 'ae gowden lyric' typically become a Pre-Raphaelite gem.

RS: I suppose there was something post-Pre-Raphaelite about taking these gems, the *Songs of Innocence*, and setting them to music. The first three I set for Marjorie. It was, as it could be in those days, an innocent relationship. She was a second cousin, she came to see me and to hear my piano-playing in my student years. I thought I would give her that which one wouldn't risk giving a young lady these days, the *Songs of Innocence*, for a birthday present. Later I went on to finish the lot, wonderful poems to set to music. I believe that William Blake sang them at parties, and I have often wondered if some capable musician heard them and wrote them down. Some of his friends made portrait studies of Blake. He had a circle of young artists, John Linnell and Samuel Palmer, whose country scenes are illuminated by the spiritual light of Blake. Palmer outlived Blake by many years, he was the youngest of them.

PH: It was interesting what you were saying about Blake, the song, the lyric and the sense of scale. Ruskin was incredibly prolix, he wrote on a vast scale, and you have done work on a vast scale ...

RS: I am now working on a vast scale ...

PH: But you have also often worked on a tiny scale. This is something one can understand through visual arts, our metaphors about scale are drawn from the visual arts, we talk about a cameo, a canvas, a mural. The scale of your work is remarkable in that it is free to go off the middle road.

RS: That's true. I don't find many composers have been miniaturists and masters of the large scale, but I am interested in these extremes. Mind you, I think one could say that about MacDiarmid's poetry, or equally about Ezra Pound, who wrote some very beautiful lyric poems as a young man. It's to do with age. There are very few artists in any art who have continued to be lyrical in old age. It's a biological thing, I don't know, that's a guess. A poet whom I admire very much is Tennyson. He had the widest range of music of any poet I know, and he kept his lyric gift into old age.

PH: And Turner, by analogy, who had epic and lyric gifts, purified them in old age. He lived to 75, which wasn't extreme old age.

RS: Because I discovered Ruskin later, I can't look back on a perspective of influences on my work. I would like to do that.

PH: Is he a writer that you wish that you had read in your twenties?

RS: No, I don't have any regrets like that, I'm just very glad I discovered Blake. I find that there are exceptions to the usual histories of arts in the British Isles. These two men were exceptions, so much in the case of Blake that Yeats and Ellis published an edition of Blake with a long preface that claimed he was an Irishman.

PH: Quite erroneous!

RS: Yes. But perhaps not in the spirit. There's more connection between Blake and the Celtic muse than one might think. This is brought out in one of the first books I acquired on Blake, *A Man Without a Mask* by Jacob Bronowski.²⁰

PH: I've recently been given a book on Ruskin which interested me, a collection of centenary addresses, in 1919, mostly by elderly men recalling Ruskin and his influence. 1919, of course, was the year of Lytton Strachey, the debunking of *Eminent Victorians*. Ruskin by then was a remarkably unpopular writer, and has for much of the twentieth century been a consciously disliked, more than merely unread writer. Ruskin's great popularity in Victorian times can never revive, but a lot of academic interest, and creative interest in people like Fuller, that's mostly within the last thirty years. Now, in my book, printed in 1919, the pages were uncut. I read it with the aid of a paper knife. I wondered what you thought of the ups and the catastrophic downs and possible revivals of reputation. Other artists that you have mentioned, like Frederic Leighton, have also completely lost their original prestige, in Leighton's case without much chance of a critical revival. But a powerful and original artist or critic like Ruskin can actually be an embarrassment to a later generation because he says what the later generation does not want to hear so much.

RS: Well, for the legions of the twentieth century who did not read Ruskin, there was one man, very significant in the twentieth century, and I pit this man against all others, and this was the Mahatma Gandhi, who translated *Unto this Last*.²¹ Now, for one Gandhi, a man at the heart of the history of our century, to translate and fructify *Unto this Last*, obliterates all the rest. I think *Unto this Last* is a very great book, and it was a revelation to Gandhi. Let's wind up for the present, and wind up in the other sense next time we meet.

PH: Indeed, wind each other up ...

RS: I think Ruskin should be considered as like a son of Scott. He was well aware of that and wrote a great deal about Scotland. I do think of the Lake District as being connected to Scotland. There is somewhere in the Lake District where one can stand on a high hill and see Burns' country.

PH: Keats felt that, he went to the Lakes and came to Scotland, passing through Burns's cottage ...

RS: I'm glad that you mentioned Keats, who I think is perhaps the only writer in English literature whose evident but unrealised potential gave him a stature equal to Shakespeare's. I've been re-reading Keats recently. The first book that Marjorie bought for me in Edinburgh, at the beginning of our marriage, was a beautiful

²⁰ Jacob Bronowski: *William Blake 1757-1827: A Man Without a Mask*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1943.

²¹ Mahatma Gandhi: *Sarvodaya*. A paraphrase of John Ruskin's *Unto this Last*. New Delhi: Sastā Sāhitya Mandala, 1949.

miniature of Keats, and in that book I read all the Scottish poems. There is one about Ailsa Craig. I have a very early engraving of Ailsa Craig which is even dated – Sorley Maclean has a similar thing in his room, or used to have – ‘This is drawn and engraved by William Daniel, December 2nd 1816’. I’m hoping to set these Scottish poems to music. To my knowledge they haven’t been done, and they are very fine.



Ronald Stevenson at Townfoot House in 1958 (photograph: Helmut Petzsch)

Stevenson on British Composers

Edward Elgar. Panjandrum and Poet

from *The Listener*, Vol. 80, No. 2052, 25 July 1968

Panjandrum and poet: that was Elgar. A colonel's moustache and a poet's eyes. The colonel barks at us from the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches; the poet speaks to us in *Gerontius*, the slow movements, the concerto cadenzas and the string writing. 'Panjandrum' implies a tilt at a title. Regalia fascinated Elgar, but he could also poke fun at it. This sense of occasion, of an institution (in the peculiarly British sense), and this mock element, are all epitomised by the opening night of the Proms, with its grandiose background of the Royal Albert Hall, the 74th season and the good-natured banter from the young promenaders. Elgar's Second Symphony fitly ended this opening all-British programme, which also included Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music* and Walton's Viola Concerto, all performed in memory of Sir Malcolm Sargent. Sir Malcolm's mantle has fallen upon Colin Davis, who already, after only one season, has been accepted by the promenaders with *bonhomie*, fellow-feeling for his relative youth and ready appreciation of his eloquent gifts. These include a superb sense of the Elgarian style.

Elgar was also the subject of the last film in the *Ken Russell Festival (Omnibus, BBC 1)*. It presented a study of genius in desuetude. Born in Broadheath near Worcester in 1857, Elgar struggled for recognition till the age of 40, when his fame burgeoned with his imperial music. Compare the map of the British Empire in 1815 with one of the British Empire in 1914, and you'll get an idea of the expansionist ethos from which Elgar wrote his pageants in sound. Then remember the ten million dead in World War One, the Irish Troubles, the massacre of Amritsar and other British outrages in India, a League of Nations that was in fact a league of colonies, and remember too that Elgar was a student of current affairs and therefore aware, and an artist and therefore sensitive: then you'll have some idea of how his music died in his Cello Concerto, a work of many wounds. The royalist became anti-monarchist; the Catholic, agnostic. He bade farewell to imperial rodomontade. In the last fifteen years of his life (1919-1934), he hardly composed at all.

There was a want of vitality in him. The amusing, though sad, misprint of the *Times*, which, shortly before his death, referred to his suite, *The Wand of Youth*, as Sir Edward's *Want of Youth*, was only too cruelly true. But the English understatement in his earlier music is not to be confused with enervation. Elgar has a quality which is found in all English music from Dunstable to Britten: spleen. A secret ache is there, and a reverie as in an early photograph by Lewis Carroll. I wonder whether this splenic attribute of English music stems from Britain's being

an island suspended in a continual mist. Priestley, in an essay, writes about this enveloping sunless haze and relates it to Turner's pre-Impressionism. If this is true, then Elgar's more intimate music is eminently island music. But, curiously, as island music it suggests little or nothing of the sea, whereas the music of Delius and Vaughan Williams is flecked with salt-spray. This is doubly curious when, remembering Elgar the erstwhile imperialist, one reflects that the might of the British Empire was maritime. But Elgar is essentially English in the gentle contours of his music. He can be brash but never stern, bold but never stark. His cliffs, like those of Dover, are chalk, not granite. Whereas the prototype of one genre of Teutonic melody asserts its heroism by a rapid ascent and a reluctant descent (think of the *Tristan* Prelude or the horn-theme of Strauss's *Don Juan*), Elgar's melody is English in its more gradual ascent and more resigned descent (think of the *Larghetto* of the *Serenade for Strings*) and sometimes starts with a descent (the falling fourths of the *Introduction and Allegro*), shunning heroics. There is also a quirkiness in some of Elgar's themes (the fugue from the *Introduction and Allegro*), an eccentricity like that of the legendary Englishman abroad. The drooping, compassionate sevenths of 'Nimrod' are prophetic of the later Elgar. The 'military' Elgar had at his command the panoply of traditional orchestration, but the poet in him devised other means to weave the fabric of his dreams. The magical cadenza to his Violin Concerto of 1911 employed an accompaniment of *pizzicato tremolo* (rapidly reiterated plucking of strings) five years before Busoni employed it in his opera *Arlecchino*. And the symphonic portrait *Falstaff* contains a pre-Schoenbergian tone-row in a fantastic melody for oboe.

These things indicate that Elgar, though traditionalist by nature, was an innovator by choice. He was the first British composer in this century whose work impinged on the Continental music scene, the first for half a century (since John Field). His predecessors, and some of his successors, genuflected to Central European masters. His contemporaries saw the panjandrum in him: to later generations it is the poet who speaks.

Edward Elgar: Whimsy and Spleen

The Listener, Vol. 85, No. 2201, 3 June 1971

When I was a boy, I used to play a record of Elgar conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in his *Serenade for Strings*. It was his first essay in that medium, his Opus 20, which appeared in 1893, when he was 36; and it was my first introduction to his string music. Certain passages in the *Larghetto* were so intense that I could have sworn that brass instruments were added to the score – an impression I also received from an old Koussevitsky recording of Grieg's *Last Spring*. Further hearing revealed that there was no brass support, but that Elgar, like Grieg, could make a string orchestra suggest a larger ensemble by a cunning use of *divisi* and the sonority of open strings. Something else I remember from the

Elgar recording is the *portamento* (an almost vocal swooping or gliding between notes). This made the string body sound like an ensemble of Kreislers, and was particularly affecting in downward phrases, lending an expression of sometimes almost agonised compassion. This *portamento* style of violin-playing (which was traditional from at least Bach to Kreisler) is now almost extinct, apart from the Soviet school and Menuhin's plea for its partial readmittance – a plea that few, if any, younger violinists seem to heed. No later performance of Elgar's *Serenade* has matched, for me, the intensity of Elgar's, with the exception of Barbirolli's; but then Barbirolli was himself a string player, a cellist of temperament, who later, on the rostrum, was able to communicate to his players a vibrato of higher emotional voltage than others achieved.

The violin was Elgar's own instrument. For this reason, his string music is his most personal testament, though his *Gerontius* is, of course, his confession of the Catholic faith he professed as a younger man (and deserted in his agnostic old age). Because string music is a cipher of the essential Elgar, I want to consider two of his later works as tracing the trajectory of his creative career at its most intimate: the *Introduction and Allegro* for strings, op. 47 (1905), and the Cello Concerto, op. 85 (1919). Here is a 'secret' Elgar: a very different person from the regalia-bedecked master of Imperialism. Don't believe those walrus-mustachioed formal portraits which illustrate his biographies. If we could have tiptoed into his study at Malvern when the spirit was moving him, I'm sure we'd have caught a glimpse of the gazelle-like glances of a Keatsian poet.

The main difference between Elgar's op. 47 and his op. 85 – and it's something of a paradox – is that the earlier work, employing smaller forces, achieves a bigger sound than the later one. Elgar's method of scoring began with his wife ruling the bar-lines on the manuscript paper. That done, he scored his main ideas and, like the famous anecdote of Turner adding a touch of vermilion at a Royal Academy Exhibition, Elgar kept returning to his score, touching it up, adding a note or two here or there to gild the crest of a phrase. Again and again in the *Introduction and Allegro* the string quartet limns the string orchestra, or a section of the orchestra adds point and colour to the string quartet. In the Cello Concerto, however, the full symphony orchestra is deployed with the fastidiousness of a gourmet. There are only six pages of *tutti* out of a total of 104 pages of full score; and one of those six pages includes only one bar of *tutti*. The effect is that the cello is audible whenever it plays. It is, indeed, the only cello concerto of which this can be said.

In his *Introduction and Allegro*, Elgar revived the Baroque concerto grosso. This form, founded by Corelli in the late seventeenth century, contrasts the *concertino* or small concerted group of performers (a string quartet in the Elgar) with the *concerto* or *ripieno*, the large or full concerted group of performers (the string orchestra in Elgar). Handel developed the concerto grosso. Elgar's revival of it links them; he was the first British composer after Handel's death to bear comparison with him. The psychology of the two men suggests parallels. Both were masters of

occasional music for royal events; both masters of massed effects in sound; each had a public persona of swashbuckling panache, concealing a very different private persona. (Berlioz's remark that 'Handel must have looked a brute without his wig' isn't perceptive enough. Christoph Platzer's miniature of the 25-year-old Handel reveals an almost feminine sensibility which is also found in his chamber music: for example, the G minor Trio Sonata of 1733.) The British cult of Handel, and the later Mendelssohn cult, seemed to deliver solar plexus punches to any hope that Britain could produce a great indigenous composer. Elgar was the first British composer to emerge from the shadows of Handel and Mendelssohn. So sure was he of himself by the time he wrote the *Introduction and Allegro* that he could even take the concerto grosso form, particularly associated with Handel, and still create a work of genuine British character. I say 'British' rather than 'English', because the *fons et origo* of the piece was Elgar's experience of sitting on a hill in Malvern and hearing some Welsh people singing one of their folk-songs on a picnic in the distant valley. Elgar's memory of this tune (not a direct quotation) is presented on solo viola soon after the beginning of the work. It is characterised by a sustained note drooping to the minor third below, the phrase being repeated sequentially a tone higher. It is the first intimation of the drooping phrase (the dying fall) which bears the burden of Elgar's world-weariness in the Cello Concerto.

Another thematic connection between the two works is the *perpetuum mobile* semiquavers which the transition of the *Introduction and Allegro* and the scherzo middle movement of the Cello Concerto have in common. In the earlier work, the passage has a modern nervous energy related to the rapid *ostinati* passages in Sibelius and, in its kinetic propulsion, is even premonitory of certain movements in Bartók. In the later work's Scherzo, the rapidly reiterated rhythm is more whimsical.

Whimsy and spleen seem to me the salient characteristics of the English muse; and this polarisation is certainly manifest in Elgar. This English whimsy, whether it be in Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear or Charles Lamb, is not found in the literature of other countries. And spleen is the essence of English song, from the lachrymose melismas of the Tudor lutenists to the arabesque vocal lines of Britten. Whimsy trips the light fantastic through the fugue which Elgar substitutes for the development section of his *Introduction and Allegro*. It is like a caricature of the Victorian academic spirit: its theme bewhiskered in demisemiquaver flourishes.

The Cello Concerto is the most splenetic music Elgar wrote. For me, its final pages are the most heartbreaking music in the world. And yet, this music is not too self-indulgent. Part of its heartbreak is the shy way in which it repeatedly draws back from an outburst of emotion. It sounds as though it was composed by a man who forced tears back as he wrote. There are snatches of the metropolitan spirit, but they are fleeting glimpses. The finest description of this work that I've ever read occurs in J. B. Priestley's play *The Linden Tree*. An old professor's family is having

a row. His young daughter is practising Elgar's Cello Concerto in an adjoining room. One of the company asks what it is. The professor becomes lyrical:

A kind of long farewell. An elderly man remembers his world before the war of 1914 ... being a boy at Worcester – or Germany in the 'Nineties – long days on the Malvern Hills – smiling Edwardian afternoons – MacLaren and Ranji batting at Lord's, then Richter or Nikisch at the Queen's Hall – all gone, gone, lost for ever – and so he distils his tenderness and regret, drop by drop, and seals the sweet melancholy in a Concerto for 'cello. And he goes, too, where all the old green sunny days and the tinkling nights went – gone, gone. But then what happens? Why, a little miracle ... Young Dinah Linden, all youth, all eagerness, saying hello and not farewell to anything, who knows and cares nothing about Bavaria in the 'Nineties or the secure and golden Edwardian afternoons, here in Burmanley, this very afternoon, the moment we stop shouting at each other, unseals for us the precious distillation, uncovers the tenderness and regret, which are ours now as well as his, and our lives and Elgar's, Burmanley today and the Malvern Hills in a lost sunlight, are all magically intertwined.¹

Frederick Delius and the Wisdom of Life

from *The Listener*, Vol. 80, No. 2059, 12 September 1968

Death makes the superlative headline in an age where reverence has been raped. Newsprint juxtaposes solemnity and scurrility. This doesn't make it easier to write about Delius's Requiem, even though the occasion of its broadcast was Monday's Prom and the Proms traditionally mix scurrility and solemnity.

Gauguin's painting *Nevermore* hung in Delius's study. A nude Tahitian woman reclines on a bed; a *tupapau* (spirit of the dead) in the form of a raven is perched in the background. Delius sang the hedonism that Gauguin painted, and the word 'nevermore' is implied in all Delius's music. Delius was an atheist. His is an atheist's Requiem. As such, it is unique. It is curious that the Soviet Union has not given us a comparable work, curious because atheism is fundamental to Marxism. Leningrad has its Museum of Atheism, but no Soviet composer has so far written a choral work with an atheist text. Delius wrote his own words. The work plays for about forty-five minutes, was written during the First World War, and is dedicated 'to the memory of all young artists fallen in the war'. It comprises five sections. The first is a slow movement which sings of life's transience: 'at this regard the weaklings waxed sore afraid and drugged themselves with dreams and golden visions, and built themselves a house of lies to live in'. The second section is vigorous and superimposes the Christian 'hallelujah' onto the Mohammedan *la il Allah*: 'and the highways of earth are full of cries, the ways of the earth bring forth gods and idols'. The third and central section is an apostrophe to the ideal woman,

¹ John Boynton Priestley: *The Linden Tree*, Act II, Scene I. Melbourne, London, Toronto: Heinemann, 1951, pp. 57-8.

who 'gave to many and yet was chaste and pure'. The fourth section is a virile hymn in praise of the ideal man, 'who can love life, yet without base fear can die'. The final section is a serene ode to spring and nature's renewal. The work is scored for large orchestra, double chorus and soprano and baritone soloists. It was premièred in London in 1922, then totally neglected until Charles Groves and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic performed it in 1965. Last week's Prom performance, also conducted by Groves, with Heather Harper, John Shirley-Quirk, the Royal Choral Society and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, was only the third in 50 years. Those bare facts expose the nature of Christian England's charity. God knows how many religious works – so much lumber for Limbo – have been performed at the Three Choirs Festival during this half-century!

Delius's Requiem, more than any other of his works, traces the trajectory of his ethnic and environmental background. Born in Bradford in 1862, the son of a German wool-merchant, as a young man he visited Europe and America, studied in Germany, mountaineered in Norway and amused himself in Paris. He settled in France, but, towards the end, his thoughts returned to the North of England. He died a stoic, in a chronic stage of syphilis, blind and paralysed, in 1934. At the orchestral concerts which Delius *père* and his fellow industrialists sponsored, the young composer would certainly hear Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony. Its opening theme also opens Delius's Requiem. The paean '*à la grande amoureuse*' (Delius's own dedication) is a reminiscence of his early Parisian days (or, rather, nights). The music of the epilogue is pentatonic (that is, playable on the five black keys of the piano) and, at the end, is a kind of transcendental bagpipe 'mountain music', with a quiet drone underpinning the Lydian mode (the 'doh' scale with the fourth note sharpened). This Lydian Mode is found in most Highland music and is essentially Nordic: and the five-note scale, as Delius uses it, has a Celtic flavour. These Nordic and Celtic elements predominated in the environment of his childhood and youth in the North of England. Over all the work is the spaciousness of a man who often looked at the sky.

Death to Delius had nothing to do with newspaper headlines. For him, its odour was not of the sarcophagus but of the pine forest. With Whitman, his music seems to say: 'I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house, and I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air'. For Delius, earth was heaven and hell enough to need no other. With Thoreau, he would say: 'A free man thinks nothing less than of death; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death, but of life'.

Delius's Sources

from *Tempo*, No. 151, December 1984

To my camerado of Delius concerts, Mr Charles King

Peter Warlock's monograph on Delius quotes Delius's childhood reminiscences. They include this significant passage:

My first great musical impression was hearing the posthumous Valse of Chopin which a friend of my father's played for me when I was ten years old. It made a most extraordinary impression on me ... I remember that after hearing it twice I could play the whole piece through from memory.²

Chopin composed twenty-three waltzes, of which eight were published during his lifetime (opp. 18; 34, Nos. 1-3; 42; and 64, Nos. 1-3); twelve were published posthumously (five with opus numbers: 69, Nos. 1 and 2; and 70, Nos. 1-3; and seven without opus numbers); and a further three were lost. The waltz which was, and is, commonly known as *the* posthumous one was that in E minor, composed in 1830 and first published in 1868. This is the one to which Delius refers. Its tempo is *vivace*. It is a virtuoso piece with difficult right hand figurations, left hand leaps and big stretches. In Rachmaninov's recording, it sounds daemonic.

There is no account of Delius ever having been a pianistic prodigy. Indeed, references to his piano-playing are rare. One is quoted in *Delius: A Life in Pictures*, from a letter of Grieg to his friend Frantz Beyer: 'Mr Delius played a piano-piece which he calls "Norwegian Sleigh-Ride" with the greatest of talent ...'³ Delius composed that piece at 25 in 1887.

In the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne, there is a manuscript in the hand of Grainger, a transcript of Delius's dictated memories. This is a slightly different version of the reminiscences quoted by Warlock:

[I] shall never forget the thrill I got when I first heard someone play the posthumous waltz of Chopin, which seemed as if an entirely new world had opened to me. My attempts to play it by ear must have been curious to listeners, but still I managed to do it.⁴

What is the kinship between Chopin and Delius? I believe we have the answer in Percy Grainger's essay 'About Delius' appended to *Delius* by Peter Warlock. Grainger apostrophized Delius as the 'Marcus Aurelius of music ... the musical

² Peter Warlock: *Frederick Delius*. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923, p. 5.

³ Lionel Carley and Robert Threlfall: *Delius: A Life in Pictures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 17.

⁴ Quoted in Lionel Carley: *Delius: A Life in Letters 1862-1908*. London: Scolar Press, 1983, pp. 379-80.

aristocrat of his era'.⁵ It was this aristocracy of the mind that Delius had in common with Chopin: finesse, exquisiteness of sensibility. This kinship grew with time, when Delius answered his syphilis with stoicism: comparable heroism of spirit to that with which Chopin endured tuberculosis. Chopin and Delius share a preference for rhythms in triple time (or its related compound duple time). In Chopin's case this predilection is predetermined by the national dance forms of his native land (the Mazurka and Polonaise) and of his adopted country (the *Valse de salon*); and triple time is found in other Chopin works, too, for instance the Scherzi and the Ballades. Delius's prevalent time signatures are six-four or six-eight. When he writes in common time, there is often a hint of compound rhythms by the use of triplet crotchets or quavers. It is a conjecture to say that Delius's 'first great musical impression', the Chopin E minor Waltz, influenced his preference for triple measure. In Delius's case, these rhythms do not beat in his racial blood or pulsate with national pride. His German lineage, Yorkshire birth and upbringing, Floridan and Norwegian episodes, and French domicile, all conspired to make him a great cosmopolitan. His one dominant trait is his atheistic love of nature and this life, believing in no other. The rocking, undulating rhythms of his music are analogous to the sea's motion (*Sea Drift, Appalachia*); bird flight and birdcalls (many characteristic woodwind phrases); rolling clouds (*The Song of the High Hills*); tossing of tree-branches in the wind, or windswept grasses (the setting of Whitman's words in the first of *Songs of Farewell*: 'Apple orchards, the trees all covered in blossoms, wheat fields carpeted far and near in vital emerald green ...').

Might it be that the aspiring *volante* phrase in the main theme of the Chopin E minor waltz:



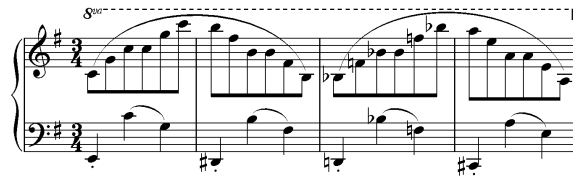
was the origin of Delius's birdsong phrases? My guess is that this kind of phrase had Black American pentatony grafted on to it during Delius's sojourn in Florida, and the mixture produced something quintessentially Delian, as in this theme from the opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*:



⁵ Warlock: *Frederick Delius*, 'reprinted with additions, annotations and comments' by Hubert Foss. London: Bodley Head, 1952, p. 171.

Certainly, Delius shared with Chopin a love of *fioriture*. Think of Chopin's *Berceuse* and his many short cadenzas; think of the flute solo at the opening of Delius's *Brigg Fair*, or the flute then oboe *arabesques* towards the end of the Intermezzo from *Fennimore and Gerda*.

After frequent hearings of the plain cadences of eighteenth-century music played in his Bradford home and sung in choral concerts, the chromaticism of Chopin's Waltz



must indeed have 'seemed as if an entirely new world opened': a world Delius explored in all his music. Note, too, the spacing of those arpeggi. Maybe this was the origin of Delius's disposition towards open harmony (the cipher of his affinity for open space – hillsapes and seascapes). Examples abound. Here is one from *Sea Drift*. Many composers could have written the first chord; only Delius the second, on the word 'stars':



I mentioned the plain cadences of much eighteenth-century music. What a revelation the following cadence from the Chopin Waltz must have been to a ten-year-old boy in Bradford in 1872!:



The first chord, a dominant 13th or dominant 7th with appoggiatura, would not have been that to the young Delius: it would have been a discovery. (Examples of it do occur in eighteenth-century music, but rarely.)

We knew from Fenby's writings how Delius loved to 'mull over' chords at the piano. We can imagine Delius lingering over that Chopin cadence. Years later, its penultimate chord re-appears at the climax of *Sea Drift* on the cry 'in vain':

*Largamente
con dolore e passione*

Delius's love of added-note harmony, enrichments to tone-colour (underpinning his colouristic use of orchestral timbre) may have had its source in the E major trio of Chopin's waltz, with its richly-spaced dominant 9th and added 6th:

The Grainger transcript of Delius's 'Memories of Childhood' continues: 'The next great thrill I got was when I heard Wagner's music. It was the *Walküren Ritt*, played by the Hallé Orchestra'.⁶ Of course, chromaticism is present there in the hail-like laughter of the Valkyries, but the significant influence on Delius from the famous *Ride* is, I believe, Wagner's leaping, flexible bass-line; an influence that found perhaps its most potent impact in the *Mass of Life*.

To return to Chopin. Received opinion categorizes both Chopin and Delius as composers of limited range. The reason for this malapropism is that both of them were not symphonists. The symphony is often regarded as the apex of music. I do not accept this. If I did, I should have to relegate much pre-1750 music to the rank of inferiority. Bach alone explodes the idea. The concept of the symphony's hegemony is something I regard as a lingering nineteenth-century fallacy of progress in art. Oscar Wilde wrote: 'There is no progress in art; all beautiful things belong to the same age'. I regard Chopin and Delius as two of music's greatest poets. Assuredly, Delius is the most poetic spirit among – no, apart from! – all

⁶ Carley: *Delius: A Life in Letters*, p. 380.

musicians born in Britain. Limited range? Music of limited range is that which postulates cross-note puzzles, the misconception of music as a blueprint or computerized game of spot-the-motif or as an IQ test in identifying permutations or palindromes. Delius would have welcomed an aphorism that Cyril Scott once wrote in a letter to me: 'To fabricate a new form of ugliness is easy; to create a new form of beauty is difficult'. Delius was master of his own forms of beauty. His mastery is concealed (and therefore unsuspected) from and by those who favour a display of expertise. Music for Delius, as poetry for Wordsworth, was emotion recollected in tranquillity, not addled cerebration or sensationalism.

The range of his subjects is as wide as the sky. He composed a 'Black opera', *Koanga*, some forty years before Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and his symphonic poem *Paris* a generation before Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. For others, metropolitan pomp and circumstance: for Delius, the bracing wind of his native Yorkshire moors in his *North Country Sketches* (how seldom British music has celebrated the North of England!). He wrote a satire of the Norwegian national anthem in his incidental music to Gunnar Heiberg's play *Folkeraadet (The People's Parliament)*, which created a riot in the Christiania Theatre in 1897.

I hear in his music a great shout of joy in life (*A Mass of Life*, not a Mass for the Dead). I have never heard such ecstasy from a choir, with the sopranos cresting the sonic breakers. I hear, translated into sound, the stoicism of 'the man who dies alone and makes no lamentation' (the Requiem); the heartbreak of transience (the cry 'Heigh-ho! Travellers we a-passing by!' in *A Village Romeo & Juliet*); and a serenity so rare in our century, a large serenity born from contemplation of solitude and far distances, and an intimate serenity in the scented stillness of a summer garden. In an age when men rape the earth, Delius's love of nature is even more salutary today than during his lifetime. The wine of his music has matured.

Francis George Scott (1880-1958)

from *The Listener*, Vol. 79, No. 2028, 8 February 1968⁷

In a gargantuan parenthesis in his poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, Hugh MacDiarmid quips:

I kent a Terrier in a sham fecht aince,
Wha louped a dyke and landed on a thistle.
He'd naething on ava aneth his kilt.
Schoenberg has nae notation for his whistle.⁸

⁷ The original article also included a discussion of Charles-Valentin Alkan.

⁸ Hugh MacDiarmid, ed. Kenneth Buthlay: *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987, p. 36.

That was written in 1926, when Schoenberg was unknown to most British musicians, let alone poets. MacDiarmid knew of him through the dedicatee of the poem, the Scots composer Francis George Scott. Last Wednesday, another gargantuan parenthesis, in the series *British String Quartets*, made a bit of radio history: for the first time, to my knowledge, some of F. G. Scott's MacDiarmid settings were broadcast over the national network. Connoisseurs furth of Scotland have occasionally been able to pick up a few minutes of his music, replayed all too infrequently, on the Scottish Home Service. Now they could hear him in deeper perspective, in an afternoon's broadcasting which also included songs by Wolf, Mahler and Strauss. Scott's music came out of it unscathed, indeed enhanced. I know no British music from the Twenties that is nearer to Schoenberg's twelve-note idiom than certain passages in Scott's MacDiarmid songs: in particular, 'Country Life' (1923), 'Crowdieknowe' (1924) and 'Moonstruck' (1927). Duncan Robertson's interpretation of them was rich in nuance and it was good to hear a younger Scottish composer, Thea Musgrave, playing responsive accompaniments. More singers should investigate the songs of F. G. Scott, and the BBC should give us far more of them. The Lallans texts should not daunt singers who can cope with German. Besides, Scott didn't only set the Doric: he also set English, French and German verse.

Scott became a recluse. He got on with composing, published his music in Glasgow at his own expense and was content to let posterity do its worst, satisfied that he had done his best. If he had socialised and if his music had been published by one of the large London houses, and therefore more widely distributed, his work would be better known.⁹ Single-handed, he created a tradition. It contains enough stuff to be developed by others. It deserves to be. It is a compound of pibroch, folk-song, ballads (Border, bawdy and drawing-room), pub songs and an awareness of Central European techniques. Another Charles Ives? No. Scott was restrained where Ives was spectacular; reasonably normal where Ives was outrageously eccentric; and seasoned professional where Ives was inspired amateur. Scott was an unequal composer. Gourmets should avoid him. He dared to write bad music. That was why he sometimes wrote good music. Today we have many composers who create immaculate conceptions in sound, sartorialising music down to the last semiquaver stitch.

⁹ A selection of Scott's songs was published over a decade after this article appeared, ed. Neil Mackay: *Songs of Francis George Scott 1880-1958. A Centenary Album of Forty-One Songs for Solo Voice and Piano*. Aylesbury: Robertson Publications *et al*, 1980.



The many sides of Percy Grainger (1882-1961)

Percy Grainger: Music's Mogli

A revised transcript of a review, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 17 October 1976.

In the spring of 1976, for a fortnight, I was the guest of Ella Grainger, Percy Grainger's widow, in their home in White Plains, New York. Whilst I was staying there, proofs of John Bird's new book on Grainger arrived.¹⁰ I sat up late alone, reading them every night. It was the perfect setting for reading this book. I could hardly get nearer to Grainger than by living in his home, surrounded by his souvenirs and by his wife's colourful paintings of him in various guises – in Eskimo clothes and hiking gear and so on. And between that atmosphere and John Bird's book there was perfect consonance: I also felt I couldn't get nearer to Grainger than in these pages. I was reminded of Whitman's words about his *Leaves of Grass*: 'Camerado, this is no book: who touches this touches a *man*'.

Bird has not written hagiography, but real biography. His subject is a complex genius. He has written with compassion, love, understanding and sound sense. If you think of Grainger as a light-music composer of such popular trifles as 'Country Gardens', you're in for a surprise. That was only a small part of his musical map. He travelled much further.

The legend of Grainger the aesthetic athlete – Apollo and Mercury in one – the man of natural social charm and gentle affability – is true; but it's only half a

¹⁰ John Bird: *Percy Grainger*. London: Elek Books, 1976.

picture. There's another side that may shock some sensibilities. Here's the background, briefly.

Grainger was born in Melbourne in 1882, son of a big, burly architect father and a diminutive, music-loving mother who came from a farming and horse-raising family. Grainger's father was a syphilitic alcoholic and a wife-beater. The mother defended herself with a horse-whip. The child Grainger witnessed terrible scenes. He became himself a secret, life-long flagellant. If he could have lived with some tribe who practised stoic, masochistic rites, he would have been happy. But he lived in a civilization and urbanisation he loathed and observed the *mores* so that even his friends knew nothing of his secret self.

Grainger could never have married while his mother lived: she exercised such power over her only son, after the separation from her husband. Her own syphilis plus false, malicious gossip drove her to suicide by throwing herself from the 18th floor of a New York skyscraper. Grainger was forty at the time, and away on concert tour. He contemplated suicide himself, but overcame it and eventually married and declared his marriage the best thing he'd ever done. It is a story of considerable human courage.

Though Grainger consorted with seeming ease among his colleagues the composers and virtuosos, he despised the snobbism and socialising surrounding the world of symphony concerts and operas, and only really felt at home with folk-singers. As is well known, he was a pioneer folklorist. It was his initiative that succeeded in getting the first commercial recording made of a folk-singer. This was in 1908 and the folk singer was Joseph Taylor of Brigg, Lincolnshire.¹¹ Thirty years later, Grainger, a man of sterling loyalty, dedicated to the memory of the Lincolnshire folk singers his *Lincolnshire Posy* for wind band. An open-air spirit blows through this suite, and it even contains the ornamentations of the folk song style of singing.

John Bird's book is full of unexpected insights. For example, we learn that H. G. Wells once accompanied Grainger on a folk-song expedition and declared to him: 'Percy, you are trying to do a more difficult thing than record folk-song: you are trying to record *life*'. This was apropos Grainger's concern to document not only folk song, but the folk singer's family, economic and ecological background.

Bird quotes a wonderful letter of the young Grainger's, written to a fellow composer, Herman Sandby, which shows how well Grainger understood his own creative process:

... there are hundreds of other ways of developing composition-techniques besides actual writing, the chief thing is constant observation and thought ... when you play music observe it always from the composer-standpoint, note modes of

¹¹ Grainger's recording of Taylor can be heard online today at www.bardic-music.com/Music%20Files/a03.wma.

construction, develop *above all a sharp criticism* for 'musical' ERFINDUNG: *inventiveness* is the seat of all musical strength, when you see forms & beauty in nature apply it in your mind to the forms & types in music ... when you feel fine emotions, or sweet noble impressions or think strong thoughts, *straight-away* translate them into yr musical language, at least in thought, think out *exactly* how a composition should be to express those lovely things in their fullness ... If you think in this way you will find life full of the NEED of MUSICAL EXPRESSION, all emotions will require to become compositions. So it is with me. I have already *done* my thinking (the elementary part).¹²

It was this certainty that made Grainger an unruly pupil of Ivan Knorr in Frankfurt, where his fellow students included Cyril Scott, Roger Quilter and Balfour Gardiner, who became his life-long friends. It was also this brimming creative confidence that impressed Grieg. After Grainger studied piano with Busoni, the Italian master presented the young Australian with a portrait inscribed: 'To dear Percy Grainger, as dear as he will surely be great'. The second part of that inscription came true, though the warmth between the two men cooled with time. Grainger became a fierce critic of Busoni. In commenting on Grainger's relish for argument, John Bird puts it in a nutshell where he says that Grainger could 'cap or capsize any argument'. Another target for Grainger's criticism was the gentle Fritz Kreisler, whose cardinal sin was to make a transcription of a Grainger piece, giving the fiddle the tune all the time (which was contrary to Grainger's democratic idea of each musician getting his fair share of the tunes). Busoni and Kreisler will survive, though these arguments make engrossing reading.

This new biography is studded with a galaxy of musicians who make entrances and sometimes exits in Grainger's life. Debussy, Delius, Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, Arnold Dolmetsch and Duke Ellington – and oh so many. He plays to Fauré who declares: 'He has plenty of flame – a supreme energy ... It's as if the total population was adancing'. And Grainger, in characteristic self-criticism, comments in relating the incident: 'So he fished the true typical impression out of my rotten hammering'.¹³

About Grainger's performance of the Grieg Concerto, recorded in 1957, when he was seventy-five, I agree completely with John Bird: 'The noblest interpretation ever committed to record'. And Bird adds,

... yet a generation of pianistic typists have attuned the ears of most critics and audiences to expect faultless performances these days, and Grainger's performance (which, let it be admitted, is liberally sprinkled with lapses and avalanches of wrong notes) would doubtless be treated with scorn and derision were it made generally available.¹⁴

¹² Bird: *Percy Grainger*, p. 67.

¹³ Bird: *Percy Grainger*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Bird: *Percy Grainger*, p. 247.

Bravo, John Bird! Splendidly said! Those avalanches of notes, however inaccurate, when played with such grandeur can never be *wrong*, but only victoriously *right*.¹⁵

Yet this book is to be read for what it tells of Grainger's life, rather than for enlightenment about his music. Indeed, some of its comments on the music are gauche. To find Webernesque economy in Grainger's music, as Bird does, is wide of the mark: in fact (to use Scott Fitzgerald's comparison of his own words with those of Thomas Wolfe), Webern is a 'leaver-out', Grainger a 'putter-in'. Towards the end of Grainger's life he built a Heath Robinson-like machine for the realization of what he called his 'Free Music', that is, music free from rhythmic beats or scales, and without harmony, either traditional or atonal. This machine synchronized eight oscillators. When Bird finds that this experimental music suggests a fusion of classical music, jazz and popular music and even invokes a comparison with the currently fashionable (or yesterday's fashionable) 'Pink Floyd' group, it is a purely fanciful description, unrelated to the swooping, siren-like sounds that Grainger's machines made in the private recordings I've heard (which are *all* the recordings of them in existence). In Canada this spring, I heard the music of a wolf pack. There exists a commercial recording of the musical language of the wolves, and it reminds me forcibly of Grainger's 'Free Music'.

One of the chapters is entitled 'Saint and Sinner'. I don't believe Grainger was either. For me, he was music's Mowgli. This wild voice is heard in his composition for voices and gamelan-like orchestra entitled *The Lonely Desert Man sees the Tents of the Happy Tribes*, which has now been issued on a recording. The work which best reveals this hitherto unknown Mowgli-aspect of Grainger is his Kipling *Jungle Book* choral cycle. In the song 'Red Dog', Grainger puts the baying of the wolves into music. In Grainger there was always the boy who felt kinship with the wolves. Could fear of wolves be not for what they are but what we *imagine* them to be; and could it be a fear of something in ourselves? Grainger's music not only expresses the winsome charm of the country garden, but the strange lure of the wilderness.

Alan Bush: Committed Composer

from *The Music Review*, Volume 25, No. 4, 1964

Outline of Bush's career as composer

It is high time that Alan Bush received the serious critical attention that he has so long been denied in Britain. His work demands this attention for three reasons: first, its intrinsic worth; secondly, its almost unique position in Britain as the expression of a politically committed composer; and lastly, because the development of his music – from *quasi* dodecaphonic cosmopolitanism to a

¹⁵ This remarkable performance has since been released on CD: Vanguard Classics, 1083422.

particularly personal form of national neo-modalism – pursues a course diametrically opposed to that of nearly all other contemporary British composers.

The intrinsic worth of Bush's music has been realised by not a few: critics as disparate as Kaikhosru Sorabji and Colin Mason have written of it in very high terms indeed. Bush's political commitment has also been realised – only too well – and is, beyond doubt, the prime reason for his neglect. He has the distinction of being the only composer whose work has been officially banned by the BBC (over the issue of the People's Convention in 1940). Vaughan Williams, who by no means shared Bush's political views, nevertheless admired him as a composer and openly expressed his disapproval of the ban, in the strongest terms. But before that there had been an unofficial ban by the BBC on Bush's music. As the situation is now more liberal, there is no point either in belabouring past injustice or in suppressing it.

The only other British composer of international repute who was at any time a member of the Communist Party was Rutland Boughton. No doubt, Boughton is regarded (if regarded at all) as a suitable butt for cynical and super-sophisticated remarks to be dispatched as rapidly as the Scotch and soda at any fashionable party for the culturally clever. The fact remains that Boughton's endeavours for British music at Glastonbury were no less than heroic and not merely a flexing of his own ego. And whatever detractors he has now, his genius was recognized by Bernard Shaw and Edward Dent. But it would be unjust to the essentially lyric nature of Boughton's gift to suggest that he was as big a composer as Alan Bush.

A few years ago I was commissioned to write entries on contemporary British composers for *L'Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, Rome. I sent out a postcard questionnaire to various composers. The most interesting fact I discovered was that *not one* contemporary British composer of national renown had a truly working-class origin. When one considers the numerous proletarian poets and playwrights who have made meteoric appearances in recent years, this circumstance regarding music seems all the stranger. It is a situation that deserves study for its own interest. The point of referring to it here is to indicate the tenuousness of any connection between music and the working class over most of Britain, at anything more elevated than entertainment level. Though Boughton and Bush were not born into the working class, they are the only British composers of repute who have so far identified themselves with it.

Whereas such British composers as Elisabeth Lutyens, Humphrey Searle or Mátyás Seiber began by writing diatonically and later went over to dodecaphonic composition – and it is safe to say that most of the younger British composers are following the same (if accelerated) course – Alan Bush is unique in having exploited experimental techniques (including dodecaphony) in his earlier works and then having steadily refined his style to an idiom of national neo-modalism.

He has hardly ever embraced the kind of creative dichotomy that Hanns Eisler practised. Eisler (1898-1962), as a Schoenberg pupil, wrote dodecaphonically until the last decade of his career, when he was resident in the German Democratic Republic. However, in his middle-period 'German' Symphony, he did not hesitate to employ a diatonic idiom cheek-by-jowl with dodecaphony within different movements. During the inter-war years, when he was composing dodecaphonic instrumental music, he was also writing many diatonic worker's songs. Only twice has Alan Bush written in a comparable mixture of styles: in his First Symphony op. 21 (1940),¹⁶ which has many *quasi* dodecaphonic pages in its first movement, yet concludes with an essentially diatonic worker's march; and in the Violin Concerto op. 32 (1948),¹⁷ in which the central movement is strictly dodecaphonic, following a *quasi* programmatic plan of treating the violin in an individual relationship to the orchestra, conceived as a symbol of society (the note to the score states that 'in the first movement the individual strives to impose his will upon society. His failure in this attempt leads him to the inward brooding of the second movement. From this retreat the outer world recalls him; and in the finale he throws himself into the onward movement of society, contributing to its development and fulfilling himself in the process').

Those two cases, which have features in common with Eisler's procedures, are exceptional in Bush's output, which generally represents an unequivocal line of progress from complexity to simplicity; from total chromaticism to neo-modalism; and from an amorphous cosmopolitan *imbroglio* of idioms to a well-defined national style.

Bush's struggle towards a national style

Born in Dulwich in 1900, Alan Dudley Bush was the youngest of three sons who all studied the piano.¹⁸ His earliest musical impressions were therefore of instrumental music. If he had been born in the North of England, his first recollections of music probably would have been of choral singing, or brass band playing, with the emphasis on communal music making. As it was, born into a cultured southern English home, he approached music through piano literature and therefore as an individual expression. Even in his first decade, he had heard the music of Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin and Cyril Scott as well as the classics.

Perhaps one of the most valid discoveries of modern psychology is that of the far-reaching effects of a child's earliest experiences. Certainly this is borne out in the case of Alan Bush's introduction to music through the medium of the piano. At the Royal Academy of Music, from 1918 to 1922, in addition to his course in composition, he studied piano with Tobias Matthay (whose teaching he had largely

¹⁶ London: Joseph Williams, 1940.

¹⁷ London: Joseph Williams, 1948.

¹⁸ Bush died in Watford in 1995, four years after his wife Nancy.

to unlearn). Between 1922 and 1927, while he had only one composition teacher, John Ireland (whom he acknowledged to be as fine a teacher as composer), he had no less than three piano tutors: Mabel Lander, Moiseiwitsch and Schnabel. Even today, at an age when many composers find it irksome to practise the piano, Alan Bush delights in finger exercises and studies and, whenever he can, practises regularly, even when his intimates feel his time could be better employed at the composer's desk.

This passion for the piano is revealed straight away by Bush's op. 1, which is not merely a piano piece, but *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* (1921).¹⁹ In all, Bush has written eleven opus numbers for piano, besides his *Piano Concerto* op. 18 (1937)²⁰ and his *Variations, Nocturne and Finale on an English Sea Song* op. 46, for piano and orchestra (1962).²¹ That total represents more piano works than one finds in the catalogues of most other British composers. Indeed, most contemporary British composers have only written one or two pieces for piano. Unlike many of his colleagues, Bush treats the piano in full-blooded fashion and is no practitioner of the genteel school of English piano music, which treats the modern grand no differently than if it were a virginal.

Bush's compositions between 1920 and 1930 are mostly instrumental and nearly all include the piano, either as solo or accompaniment. The style of these early works might best be characterized as 'cosmopolitan eclecticism'. Where the music is contrapuntal, as in the *Prelude and Fugue* op. 9 for piano solo (1927),²² the idiom is close to that of Hindemith. When the music is harmonic, as in *Relinquishment* op. 11 (1928), also for piano,²³ the chord structure owes allegiance to Schoenberg.

From 1929 to 1931, Alan Bush studied philosophy and musicology at the Humboldt University, Berlin; a most unusual step for a young composer to take – at least the kind of step that few do take. It appears even more unusual when one considers that, by that time, he had become established in his post as professor of harmony and composition at the Royal Academy of Music, which he assumed in 1925 and which he still holds.

Even as a schoolboy at Highgate Grammar School, Bush had shown a singular interest in scientific theories such as the origin of the solar system and the Darwinian origin of species. He was not only aware of H. G. Wells the latter-day Jules Verne, but also of Wells the sociologist. Whilst still in adolescence, Alan Bush began to be critical of the structure of British society. No doubt these unusually serious boyhood interests were progressively developed until, as a man

¹⁹ London: Chappell, 1921.

²⁰ London: Joseph Williams, 1938.

²¹ London: Novello, 1973.

²² Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927.

²³ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929.

of nearly thirty, he felt the need to satisfy such long latent scientific curiosity by applying himself academically to a study of philosophy.

During those years of Bush's postgraduate study in Berlin, Arnold Schoenberg was in charge of the masterclass for composition in the Berlin Academy of Arts. Bush was never a Schoenberg pupil, but, as a young, impressionable man, he was certainly aware that Schoenberg, as a German-speaking composer, occupied the most important teaching post in the German capital during his three years there. The Expressionist school, represented by Schoenberg in music, Kandinsky in painting, Bahr in literature and Kaiser in drama, was enjoying something like a witches' sabbath of notoriety before the Nazis banished them. The irony was that Expressionistic art exhibited near pathological traits removed in degree, but not in kind, from the pathological frenzy of the Nazis. It is testimony to Bush's integrity of purpose as a composer that he emerged from his Berlin years unscathed by the spiritually poisonous and rancorously pessimistic influence of Expressionism.

There is only one tiny sign of anything 'Expressionistic' in Bush's music, and that is a characteristic violin *glissando* covering a seventh or ninth. Examples of this may be found in his *Dialectic* op. 15, for string quartet (1929),²⁴ his *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* op. 52, for orchestra (1959),²⁵ and his *Byron Symphony* op. 53, for orchestra and chorus (1960). But, whereas with Schoenberg the *glissando* over a seventh or ninth sounds, as he often directs, 'like a sigh' or 'like a breath', with Bush this small technical detail, insignificant in itself, serves to invigorate the impetus of the music.

The academic interlude for the pursuit of philosophy was, in Bush's case, not a mere *divertissement* or abstract mental exercise. Before he went to Berlin in 1929 he had already, in 1925, entered into practical musical life (mainly conducting) in the working class movement. (Incidentally, Anton Webern, in about 1925, was also active in the same movement in Vienna, also as a conductor of workers' choirs. But that activity of Webern's did not relate to the music he composed, as did Bush's activity with his music.) So by the time Bush enrolled for the course of philosophy at Berlin University, he had had four years of experience among the working class. This alerted his mind to a sympathetic approach to Marxist philosophy. But his acceptance of it came slowly. The monumental pessimism of Schopenhauer intrigued him at that time, more than the dialectical views of Hegel and Feuerbach. A book which made a tremendous and lasting impression on him, when he first read it in 1928, was Henri Barbusse's novel about the First World War: *Le feu*.

It was only in 1934 – three years after his return to London from Berlin – that Bush adopted Marxism as his world outlook. There can be no doubt that the momentous and phantasmagoric events of that time, which were luridly

²⁴ London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1938.

²⁵ London: Novello, 1962.

illuminated for all the thinking world to see in the flames of the Reichstag Fire, exercised a decisive influence on Bush's standpoint. In 1929, he had succeeded Rutland Boughton as musical adviser to the London Labour Choral Union, a post he held till 1940. Adoption of Marxism trebled his activity in the Labour movement. He founded the Worker's Music Association in 1936, was its chairman from 1936 to 1941, and has been its president from then to the present. He has also been active in the British Trade Union and Co-operative Movements, and in the Labour and Communist Parties.

Bush's entry into the musical life of the working class movement in 1925 marked a change of direction from the early near-obsession with instrumental music to the broader horizons of vocal music. Since that date, an essential part of his output, a part not to be overlooked merely because it is musically unambitious, has been the composition of worker's songs to be sung at political rallies in England. The earliest of these choruses, such as *Song to Labour* (1926), are simple, traditional settings for S.A.T.B., revealing no originality; indeed, they might have been hymns for evangelical revivalist meetings, apart from their text. In this, Bush's early choruses for worker's choirs showed allegiance to the doubtful practice of the Labour rally technique of setting new political words to old religious music. But in 1929, he set Shelley's *To the Men of England* for unaccompanied choir. This song certainly evinces originality, within a broadly Hindemithian harmonic vocabulary (compare it, for instance, to Hindemith's Rilke-setting *En Hiver*, of which, however, the Bush was certainly no imitation, as the Hindemith was written later). Shelley's text is a consciously English political manifesto, but Bush's music is Central European and eclectic. Throughout the thirties, Bush wrote worker's songs, such as *The Hunger Marchers' Song* (about the unemployed marchers of 1934) and *Against the People's Enemies* (the British supporters of Hitler). In these, the words were generally written by Randall Swingler. Gradually this collaboration and the repeated practice of writing these songs, plus the experience of hearing them sung and observing the reactions of the ordinary folk who sang them – what succeeded, what failed – all these factors enabled Bush to strike the balance between originality and popular appeal. Nancy Bush, the composer's wife (and sister of Michael Head, the song composer) wrote most of the texts for the later worker's songs and marches (including a recent one, a translation from the German of Armin Müller's *Ballad of the Aldermaston March*, for speaker, chorus, bass guitar, drums and double bass).

People who are inclined to scoff at such an idea as the worker's march songs are also sometimes the sophisticated music enthusiasts who are fully *au fait* with such fairly recent cults as Mahler in the concert hall and Brecht in the theatre. Alma Mahler's biography of her husband contains an account of how moved Mahler could be by the sight and sound of workers marching and singing. But there are moments and whole movements in his symphonies inspired by that same sight and sound. And Brecht's forays into ballad-form did not stop with *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The many worker's ballads which he wrote in the thirties, often

in collaboration with Hanns Eisler – such ballads as the *Einheitsfrontlied* – are, as original expressions in art, entitled to serious consideration, from the musico-literary viewpoint, even to people to whom they may be anathema, politically speaking. As musical aphorisms wedded to verbal epigrams they occupy a unique place in contemporary music and poetry, being in the direct line of the old chapbook and the street cry, and refreshingly different from the sentimental outpouring of popular song which has perhaps reached a nadir of nonsense in the present age. They have this to commend them: that, at their best, they are laconic, pungent and utterly unsentimental. Eisler has certainly written the most telling music for such songs, but the best songs of this type by Bush may bear comparison with Eisler's.

Not all Bush's songs for workers' chorus are marches. One of his best works in this genre is *Lidice*, which opens with Nancy Bush's words, 'When the last marching step had gone, and the hands, clenched in agony, the outstretched hands, were motionless...'. The *non forte* phrase at the words 'the despairing child's last cry' is memorable in its poignancy, and beautiful in its restraint. These worker's choral songs (mostly unison songs, but some in parts) played a significant role in Alan Bush's struggle towards a national style of composition. A struggle Bush certainly had: not only with the obfuscations of music in a petty bourgeois society – music only as an escape either in entertainment or in abstraction – but he struggled also with his own essentially refined, studious and even introvert character. These qualities are not exactly the best equipment for rousing the masses with commanding musical settings of exhortatory socialist texts. It redounds to Bush's credit that he has overcome both these external and internal problems.

In his founding and conducting of the Workers' Music Association Singers, he has moved among a fair cross-section of workers. This experience opened his ears to the intimate relationships between rhythmic/melodic intervals and the inflection of unaffected proletarian speech. This gradual awareness led Bush to a serious reconsideration of national music. He came to this crossroads in his career after World War II (in which he was a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps). In the aftermath years, a period of spiritual revaluation for all thinking people, Bush arrived at his present conviction as a national composer. The discussions at the Second International Congress of Composers and Musicologists, held in Prague in 1948, finally confirmed Bush in that conviction.

Such belief in the necessity of national music may sound naive to musicians who regard the national schools of music as strictly nineteenth-century phenomena, with manifestations in the Russian 'Mighty Handful'; the Slavonic nationals, Smetana and Dvořák; and the emergence of Norway as a musical power in the form of that 'miniature Viking', Edvard Grieg. This outburst of patriotic fervour, which sprang up like huge bonfires on the European continent, was forgotten in the all-engulfing conflagration of the Great War. But the student of recent music history will discern in the stupefied (and sometimes stupid) aftermath mood, that

even in the silly season which produced Walton's *Façade* and Lord Berners' ballets, there was also a resuscitation of national ideals in the music of such composers as Béla Bartók, Villa-Lobos, Vaughan Williams and others.

Though those three composers just mentioned (and others with similar aims) all worked independently towards a common objective – that is, towards a truly progressive music rooted in reality, which always implies a ratio to people and never to a basic abstraction – and though Bush is aligned with Bartók and the rest and not with the serialists, the difference between his nationalism in music and that of many other composers termed 'national' is that his attitude has a conscious political base, all the more secure for being so slow to mature. Whilst some countries still lack autonomy, Bush believes that nationalism is necessary, and as necessary in music as in politics.

So since 1948, Bush has composed from the standpoint of a Marxist aesthetic which takes national idiom as its first precept. Bush believes it is the composer's business to write mostly in this idiom, but that, for special cases, incursions may be made into the musics of other national idioms, sometimes without reference to the national idiom of the composer's own country, as in Bush's *Three African Sketches* op. 55 for flute and piano (1960),²⁶ based on black folk melodies from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Zululand and the Congo, and in *Three Raga Melodies* op. 59 for unaccompanied violin (1961);²⁷ and at other times, presenting the composer's own national style together with the idiom of another country – an extremely difficult stylistic problem which Bush solved with mastery in the finale of his *Byron Symphony*, which employs the idioms of Greek folk songs and dances, and in *The Ballad of Freedom's Soldier* op. 44 (1953), a cantata for tenor and bass-baritone, mixed chorus and orchestra, which was written in memory of the British hero of World War II, Major Frank Thompson, who died in action in Bulgaria in 1944, and which employs the irregular rhythms of Bulgarian folk-dances.

Whilst the BBC and the Arts Council have no clause in their constitution to pledge them to *any obligation whatsoever* to British music, a national conscience may be no bad thing for a British composer to have.

Speech inflection and modal composition

Although there are early examples of modalism in Bush's instrumental music, such as the mixolydian fugal subject of his *Prelude and Fugue* op. 9 for piano, one of the salient differences between most of his earlier work and the later, is that the former is discursive and chromatic (*quasi* dodecaphonic) while the latter is direct

²⁶ Leipzig: Peters Edition, 1960. The piano accompaniment is suggestive of the marimba accompaniment of the originals, i.e. the African xylophone, played in a seated position, with drumsticks. The brilliant transference of the marimba sounds to the piano, is, in itself, proof of the fineness of Alan Bush's musical perception. [RS]

²⁷ London: Galliard, 1965.

and succinct in its development of modality. This change was certainly effected through experience in writing vocal music to straightforward texts (for political meetings) and through realizations that the key to the question of how best – that is, most naturally – to set English words, was to be found in the manner in which words were treated in English folk song. For this realization, Bush was indebted to the pioneer collectors of English folk song: Cecil Sharp, Percy Grainger and Vaughan Williams.

There are three considerations in setting English words: the pitch graph, plotted from emotive intensifications; the rhythm graph, plotted from the relative time values of different vowels; and the effect of the frequent consonants in breaking up the graph of the melodic line. Only this last consideration is peculiar to English and other partially Teutonic languages, as compared to the Romance languages, which are relatively unhindered by consonantal punctuation, or the Celtic languages, which are vocalic and mellifluous.

The Englishman at home is notoriously level-headed (however eccentric he may appear abroad) and his language is level-voiced. Here we are talking about the ordinary, unpretentious, working-class Englishman. We must differentiate him from some of his middle-class and aristocratic compatriots, who are upholders of well-defined traditions and downholders of the stiffest upper lips and are apt to fly off at a tangent in the pitch of their speech. This phenomenon, unique to the English upper classes, can be heard in the greenroom of any London concert hall. The ordinary southern Englishman has a very steady, almost monotonously mild rhythmic and melodic range of speech. It is only in the North of England, approaching the Scottish border, that one hears an unforced wider pitch range in speech, and a slower *tempo* to accommodate it. Multiplicity of consonants, which is an embarrassment to lyric-melodic flow, is a positive blessing to delivery of prose, by reason of the consonants' aid to clear diction. In political oratory, consonantal punctuation is as much an asset as an aggressive forefinger.

The composition of worker's choruses had shown Bush the value of consonants in an English text, when set to decisive march rhythms. The practical knowledge gained in setting these musically unambitious songs was later utilised in those parts of his operas where the main point was that the political message should project over the orchestral pit to the back seats of the stalls. It is particularly important for the message to reach the back seats; those occupants who have paid least because they can afford least, will probably understand *most*.

In Bush's three operas – *Wat Tyler* (1950),²⁸ *Men of Blackmoor* (1955)²⁹ and *The Sugar Reapers* (1964)³⁰ – he has set three types of English: southern (Kentish) English, employing alliteration and rhymed forms of the fourteenth century

²⁸ Berlin: Henschelverlag, and London: Novello, both 1959.

²⁹ Berlin: Henschelverlag, and London: Joseph Williams, both 1959.

³⁰ Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1965.

without any vocabulary archaisms; northern (Durham) English, employing coalmining idioms from the nineteenth century; and, in the third opera, British Guiana English, in its 'broken' form, as spoken by the native sugar reapers.

In *Wat Tyler*, with a few exceptions (as in the minstrel's song), consonants are more important than vowels. It is through consonants that the peasants' determination and the wonderful capturing of the angular, gaunt and toughly naive fourteenth-century spirit are conveyed; as though an arras or a book of hours illustration had suddenly become alive on the stage. The musical agency through which this is achieved is a masterly use of modes. The even-contoured southern English speech is matched in melodies which move within a narrow pitch range. Even the pedlars and the fishwife at Maidstone Market sing their wares within a perfect fifth and sometimes in monotone.

Men of Blackmoor, using a Northumbrian verbal basis, draws upon the folk song of that area. The pitch-range is wider than in *Wat Tyler*. This is expressed in the use of gapped modes, whereas *Wat Tyler* employed the scalic (so-called ecclesiastic) modes. At the time of writing this essay, Bush's third opera, *The Sugar Reapers*, has not yet appeared;³¹ so it is unfortunately not possible to comment at length on how the word-setting has affected the music. It is safe to assume, though, that the abbreviated forms of the 'broken' English will have suggested a rhythmic treatment different from both the earlier operas.

Just as in the eighteenth century, when parenthetical chromaticism was used to ornament the fundamentally diatonic structure of the music, so Bush, in his employment of modes, uses notes extraneous to the modes to 'colour' the melody or to accentuate it significantly where the text demands emphasis. Further variety is achieved by Bush's free movement between different modes, sometimes within the same phrase. (An example of such a case will be given later in the analysis of the *Byron Symphony*.) Harmony on a modal basis, and particularly based on the gapped modes, yields chord structures of great variety and sometimes of surprising 'modernity'.

By his employment of modes, both as melodic and harmonic bases of his music, Bush is free from the platitudes of diatonicism, the excesses of chromaticism and the restrictions of dodecaphony. Furthermore, in his modalism he has a flexible musical medium which can expand or contract in sympathy with the minutest vocal and intonational variations of his text. The fetish of dodecaphony, which in its absence of any harmonic theory presents a dissonant aspect compound of fashionable (but not always logically tenable) sevenths, ninths, fourths and seconds, has blinded many musicians to the fact that there is, in the present

³¹ Bush's *The Sugar Reapers* was first performed at the Leipzig Opera House on 11 December 1966; it was followed by a fourth opera: *Joe Hill - The Man Who Never Died*, to a libretto by Barrie Stavis, completed in 1967, and first performed at the Berlin State Opera on 29 September 1970.

century, a truly progressive school of composers, who, though not united in any conscious way as were the 'Mighty Handful' or 'Les Six', are nevertheless connected in their common pursuit of a new harmonic language based on a recapture of melody and modality. In Hungary, Bartók and Kodály have been exemplars of this trend; in France, Maurice Emmanuel; in Poland, Karol Szymanowski; in Czechoslovakia, Leoš Janáček; in the Soviet Union, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Sviridov; in Israel, Oedoen Partos; in Brazil, Villa-Lobos; and in Britain, none more than Alan Bush.

The theory and practice of total thematization

The breakdown of traditional tonality at the beginning of the twentieth century necessitated rethinking by composers interested in writing new music, and not merely regurgitating old music. Debussy's occasional use of the whole-tone scale (it had been used before by Liszt, and even Rossini) enabled him to compose without reference to Wagnerian chromaticism; Scriabin used his 'synthetic' chord of superimposed fourths as a constructional principle; Josef Matthias Hauer and Schoenberg arrived independently at similar theories of dodecaphony; Bartók explored new sonic possibilities through plural-modality and irregular rhythms, and applied, with immense ingenuity, the golden section proportional principle to harmonic structure; Stravinsky inverted principles of traditional harmonic progression and evolved his so-called 'wrong note' technique; and Hindemith reasoned his theory of harmony from an acoustic base plus a psychological analysis of chordal tensions.

Alan Bush's way out of the *impasse* which was the no-man's land of post-Wagnerian chromaticism was through what he termed 'total thematization'. That is to say that every bar, every phrase, in an entire movement is derived from the theme. In his earlier works, the theme even predetermined the progression of the inner parts. In his later works, particularly in his operas, he has applied his theory less rigorously, relaxing it for inner voices. He now feels that in vocal music, as in opera, where the impact is primarily melodic, with harmony as a secondary factor, fastidious application of the theory is not repaid in clarity of audibility.

The theory and practice of total thematization is connected, in one respect, to serial composition: both systems pervade the entire structure of a work. But Bush's principle dispenses with the negative aspects of serialism, such as prohibition of repeating notes out of serial order and the avoidance of octave doubling – principles which even Schoenberg himself revised radically, as in his *Ode to Napoleon* (1942). Total thematization is the logical result of Alan Bush's evolutionary view of music. Bush believes that the origin and motivation of music was physical labour. Certainly, this view agrees with the findings of many folklorists. Further, he believes that a motif was the cell from which man's first music grew and from which music can still grow.

A graphic illustration of music being made out of work (not merely an accompaniment to work but growing out of it, being suggested by it and an integral part of it) and, at the same time, an illustration of the basic principle of motivic construction, is found in the ancient Greek coxswain's iambic injunction to the oarsmen to cross oars, then pull off from shore. That physical action and its rhythmic motif are implied by the term which musicians still use for an introductory iamb: the *anacrusis*. The contrapuntal aspects of total thematization derive from sixteenth-century counterpoint. Derivation of harmonic parts from the main theme is an extension of the sixteenth-century principle of imitative contrapuntal voice-leading. It is no accident that Alan Bush is the author of the technical handbook which is still the best, most succinct and clearest introduction to Palestrinian polyphony.³²

In its aspects of harmonic rhythm and structural unity – that is, as a dynamic governing a compositional whole – total thematization extends Beethoven's creative method as seen in the famous notebooks edited by Nottbohm. The physical definition of the word 'dynamic' postulates a relation to motive force and is as applicable to music as to physics. The force and rhythmic impact of a Beethoven motif (take the opening of the Fifth Symphony) provide the propulsive power which drives the music through its course from first note to last. Lenin, in a famous dictum, declared that Beethoven's was the ideal music for a socialist state. In saying that, Lenin (who admitted that his opinions on art were untutored) was probably thinking of the impression of almost moral power conveyed by Beethoven's music, by its virile optimism, rhythmic dynamism and willpower, rather than any specifically technical aspect. But that very dynamism of Beethoven relates to his laborious method of composition, which began with an initial motif and ended in a massive symphonic structure built from the motif. It was a method of composition that only an exceptional willpower could pursue, and thus it is not surprising that the willpower necessary to its prosecution should be expressed through and through by the finished work. What the musically untutored but responsive mind perceives in Beethoven – the phenomenal, almost daemonic rhythmic motivation – is only the synthesis of what the trained musician analyses as thematic, motivic development. The fact that the word 'motivation' can be understood as a technical term of music, and also as a non-technical expression immediately comprehensible to the intelligent layman, indicates that, in the case of Beethoven's motivation, the technical analysis and the non-technical general impression amount to very much the same thing.

Thus, Bush's method of composition is of Beethoven's lineage. It would be as unfair to Bush as to any other musician since Beethoven to expect him, with similar methods of work, to produce results as momentous. Perhaps a Beethoven only arises once in the history of mankind. But we shall be unfair to Bush if, after

³² Alan Bush: *Strict Counterpoint in Palestrina Style. A Practical Text-Book*, with a foreword by John Ireland. London: Joseph Williams, 1948.

a study of his Third Symphony (the *Byron*), we do not admit that here is one of the few twentieth-century symphonies worthy to follow Beethoven, in the grandeur and audacity of its plan, in the authoritative certainty with which the plan is executed, and (by no means least) in its Beethovenian panting after freedom.

Analytical notes on some of Bush's compositions

Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue for orchestra, op. 52

This work consists of sixteen variations and a quadruple six-part fugue. Composed for the usual symphony orchestra with no exotic percussion, its ingenuity and mastery are the answer to the prevalent assumption that the perpetrators of serial music possess the sole rights to the mystery of totally organized composition. There is more hard thinking per square inch of this *Passacaglia and Fugue* than to the square mile of most serial music; I say *most*. For one Dallapiccola who can make serial music sound as music and not as permutations of sounds, there are legions who ring the serial changes without getting a note of music out of the creaking of their treadmill.

Bush never sullies the new wine of his music by pouring it into the old wineskin of antiquated form. He is not guilty of *quasi*-aesthetic imitation of the old contrapuntal styles substituted for logical development. Considered from the formal view of the classical passacaglia, Bush's work does not conform in a number of ways. Whereas the classical prototype constantly repeats the theme, unchanged except in pitch, Bush varies his theme. The old form knew no variation in tonality, tempo and mood: Bush admits all three. In the classical passacaglia, variety is introduced by variations on the theme itself. A stricter title for the Bush work might have been 'variations and fugue'. But it is the music – not the title – that matters.

A comparison of Bush's passacaglia theme with that of the opening of his First Symphony epitomizes his unswerving unity of purpose over twenty years – note the almost identical melodic contour of the two examples – and also affords a graphic insight into the changed aspect of his work over that period of time:

Opening of the First Symphony³³



³³ The examples from Alan Bush's works are printed here by kind permission of his heirs.

Opening of *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* (1959)

The image shows a musical score for the opening of *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* (1959). The score is in 3/4 time and marked 'Allegro'. It features a piano part and a full orchestral arrangement. The piano part starts with a series of chords in the right hand and a rhythmic pattern in the left hand. The orchestral arrangement includes Brass & Bsns. (marked 'f'), W.W. & Str., and Timp. The tempo changes to 'allergando' in the second system.

Wat Tyler Synopsis:

Prologue. The edge of a forest in Kent, end of May 1381.

Serfs return from their day's work. One hides, planning escape. A herdsman tries to dissuade him, hinting at the end of serfdom through the peasant rising. Peasants pass, going to a secret political meeting.

Act I: Scene 1. Maidstone Market, early June 1381.

The community is assembled to be listed for the abhorred Poll Tax. They support Wat Tyler's call not to pay twice. Enter Sir Thomas Bampton, Royal Commissioner. His men are brutal to the recaptured serf of the Prologue. This incenses the crowd, who chase away Bampton and his men.

Scene 2. A room in Tyler's Cottage, near Maidstone, the same evening.

Tyler relates the day's events to his wife, and daughter Jennet. Bampton and his Clerk, having lost their way, request shelter. Bampton overdrinks and insults Jennet. Tyler fells him. Bampton leaves, cursing. Tyler broods on the plotted rising. He goes to rouse the men of Kent.

Scene 3. Maidstone Market, a week later, early morning.

The Peasant Army acclaim Tyler as its leader and frees John Ball, the radical priest, by storming Maidstone Prison. Ball preaches from the Market Cross and, with Tyler, leads the army to London.

Act II: Scene 1. A room in the Tower of London, a few days later. A minstrel sings to Richard II.

Enter the Queen Mother. The Peasant Army has impeded her from an intended pilgrimage to Canterbury. She reproaches Richard for his inaction. Archbishop Sudbury proposes that the King meet the rebels and grant their wishes.

Scene 2. An open field at Smithfield, three days later.

King and nobles await the people's petition. Enter Tyler and the herdsmen. The King grants Tyler's request for freedom from serfdom. Charters are carried to the crowd. As Tyler leaves, Bampton insults him. Tyler draws his dagger. A nobleman stabs him. Richard addresses the people as their leader. John Ball and a few peasants lament Tyler's death.

Scene 3. Outside Westminster Abbey, the end of June.

A peasant deputation, seeking ratification of the charters, awaits Richard. Margaret, Tyler's widow, laments her lost love. King and nobles enter for a thanksgiving service. Richard tears up the charter, promising eternal serfdom. The nobles disappear into the abbey; the peasants turn away. From within, a *Te Deum* sounds. Without, the peasants raise a song of faith in freedom.

The libretto, by the composer's wife, Nancy Bush, is beautifully planned and finely written. Both libretto and music draw upon fourteenth-century sources, as in the incorporation of John Ball's sermon in the Froissart version, and the King's 'speech' in the last scene (according to the chronicles of Stowe) and in the quotation of both words and music of the fourteenth-century popular songs 'The Cutty Wren' (also known as 'Green Bushes') and 'When Adam delved'.

Both *Wat Tyler* and *Men of Blackmoor* are cast in a form that resuscitates the ballad-opera, composed in set arias, duets, concert pieces and choruses, but set these separate forms in a through-composed plan. The general formal conception, therefore, unites the eighteenth-century form with the Wagnerian concept, without adhering to Wagner's leitmotif principle which inevitably imposes upon the flow of musical ideas an artificial code of thematic reference, the origin of which is extra-musical.

In *Wat Tyler*, Bush has gone back to the fountainhead of English music, the Early English Gothic School, most of whose composers are anonymous, with the exception of a few masters such as Lyonel Power (died 1445) and John Dunstable (died 1453). Comparison of the music of *Wat Tyler* with that of the *English Gothic Music* series edited by Dom Anselm Hughes and Percy Grainger³⁴ will reveal the *fons et origo* of Bush's music, also its thoroughly English nature; how the terse harmonies of the fourteenth century form a direct link with a twentieth-century

³⁴ Published in London by Schott in the 1940s.

idiom; and how, informing it all, is Bush's deep atavistic sense, the atavism that only a composer with a sense of historical development can have.

The terseness of the music matches that of the text, which sometimes even approaches the *gestiche Sprache* ('gestural language') of Brecht; that is, speech so concentrated that its very rhythms compel the actor or singer into gesture. Gesture, but not gesticulation. There is an economy of emotion in *Wat Tyler* which is the result, not of a lack, but a depth of feeling. The *non forte* final page is evidence of this. Few other composers would have resisted a *fortissimo* peroration in this context.

Unerring dramatic instinct is revealed in the drastically simple plan of repeating each verse of 'The Cutty Wren' in a higher key each time, towards the end of Act I, Scene 1. This rising line is itself a symbol of the Peasants' Revolt. The effect is the more striking because the song begins very softly and unobtrusively as background music to the duologue of the escapee serf and the herdsman, and ends in a rousing *forte*, when its refrain is taken up by the herdsman.

A whole chapter could be written on Bush's treatment of John Ball's sermon. From the literary aspect, the names of Froissart and William Morris would be invoked. From the musical aspect, the melodic line is more like an accurately realized sound graph of an actual speech than a melody as such. It would not be surprising to learn that Bush had painstakingly notated a recording of a spoken sermon. The unlikelihood of his having done so indicates the precision of his perception. Then too, the projected chapter would necessarily include a side-study of traditional ecclesiastic intonation, which, at its worst, is a thing of unctuous sanctimoniousness, but, at its best, is a natural extension of the contours of plainsong (which in turn grew out of speech inflexion) and the exigencies of cathedral acoustics. And the choral responses to cadential or climatic clauses in the sermon are an extension, in secular terms, of the ecclesiastic response. These answering phrases sung by the peasants are a fine testimony to how close an observer Bush is of mass psychology.

Most of the opera's music might be characterized as Anglo-Saxon. But the Norman element is there in the exquisite 'Minstrel's Song' from Act II, Scene 1. Its long, linked and sweetly lachrymose melismas are in the direct line of the great English lutenists.

Finally, the *mise-en-scène* of *Wat Tyler* should be a challenge to any designer, as it offers practically every possibility of the 'Place' (as that great contemporary English man of the theatre, Gordon Craig, calls it, with his characteristic spatial simplicity): the forest; the market place; a humble cottage; a knight's palace; an open field; and a cathedral.

Men of Blackmoor Synopsis:

Act I: Scene 1. Street in the mining village of Blackmoor, autumn afternoon, 1820s.

The mining families of Blackmoor have been evicted. Soldiers board up the last cottage. The strike is six weeks old. Fletcher, the pit manager, has brought in lead miners and seeks a coal miner to act as overseer. Sarah entreats Geordie, her sweetheart, to accept the blackleg job. Daniel, a collier, brings news that the masters hold to the Bond and the fines.

Scene 2. The same, early next morning.

Jenny, Fletcher's daughter, enters the deserted street. She meets Daniel. Enter Fletcher. He ignores Daniel and upbraids Jenny for associating with him. The lead miners pass, escorted by soldiers. They are pursued by riotous pitfolk.

Act II: Scene 1. A room in the Viewer's house, a week later. Dusk.

Fletcher works at his table. Jenny, compassionate, goes to take broth to the miners' families, against her father's will. As Jenny leaves, Sarah enters. She and Fletcher hatch a plot to ensnare Geordie into accepting the blackleg job. Enter Geordie. He reluctantly accepts. Loud knocking. The miners are at the door. Geordie and Sarah go out another way. The miners demand that Fletcher call the lead miners out of the pit, or violence is inevitable. Fletcher is adamant.

Scene 2. On the fell, the same evening.

The pitmen plan to smash the mine machinery. They draw lots. Daniel is chosen. Daniel, alone, meets Jenny who has come over the fell in fear of what might happen.

Act III: Scene 1. An open place near the village, the following night.

Soldiers encamp round a fire, playing cards. Lead miners enter, by now reluctant. The soldiers reassure them that a Blackmoor man has offered to work as overseer. The soldiers have been alerted to expect this man, but, tired of waiting for him, escort the lead miners to the pit. Enter Geordie, who has been observing and doubting at the last moment. He finally decides to go down the mine. Daniel appears and bars the way. He knocks Geordie out, seizes his pick and goes to the pit.

Scene 2. The pithead, later the same night.

A young lead miner works the engine valves. Sarah startles him and asks him whether Geordie has gone by. The lead miner doesn't think so. Daniel stands in the shadow of the engine house. Sarah curses him for having intercepted Geordie and having thwarted her ambition to reap Fletcher's promised reward. Daniel smashes the valves of the engine with the pick. Sarah runs to the pithead and betrays Daniel. Soldiers seize him. Pitmen enter and try to rescue Daniel. Fletcher and

Jenny and more soldiers appear. The soldiers cordon Daniel off. Jenny leaves her father and goes to Daniel. Geordie reappears, dazed and embarrassed. Fletcher orders the soldiers to take Daniel to prison. The lead miners emerge from the pit shaft and walk away under military protection. The pitfolk curse them as blacklegs. Finally, the coalminers and their wives reassure Daniel that they stand behind him. They sing bravely of their determination to fight for their rights.

Alan and Nancy Bush visited a Northumbrian coalmine in preparation for their work on the opera. They also immersed themselves in Northumbrian mining idioms and in many beautiful songs of the Tyne and Wear. These folk-songs form the basis of the score and, with their characteristic wide leaps, impart to the whole opera a sense of upward surge.

Men of Blackmoor. Act I, Scene 1

Andante espressivo

Chorus 

Si-lent the val-ley, Dark to my sight. Rain on the mount-ain Brings on the night

How completely Bush identifies himself with this folk-song element, absorbs it and allows it to act as a catalyst to creation, may be seen by a comparison of the above folk song³⁵ with the following original and very beautiful melody.

Men of Blackmoor. Act I, Scene 1

♩. = 60

Geordie 

Hap - py we'll be _____ in the bright of the morn - ing,
Hap-py a - gain _____ when eve - ning's clo - sing. When the shift's done and
work is o - ver, When the last corve is brought to bank.

The same kind of affinity already observed between the opening of Bush's First Symphony and his *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* may be also observed between

³⁵ The melody of 'Silent the Valley' is the Northumbrian 'Sair fye'l'd, hinny' ('Sorely failing, love').

the same Symphony and the orchestral interlude leading to Act II, Scene 2 of *Men of Blackmoor*.

First Symphony, first movement

Allegro molto

Men of Blackmoor. Orchestral interlude leading to Act II, Scene 2

Allegro molto e agitato

p

con 8^{vb}-----

con (8)-----

loco

The libretto is, as in *Wat Tyler*, a masterpiece of stage writing. As befits the subject, it is naive without *gaucherie*, laconic without dryness, and violent without becoming melodramatic. A *metteur-en-scène* should seize upon the unusual combination of realism and symbolism in the setting of the pithead which dominates the scene and is, at the same time, both the object of depression and of hope. As the 'satanic mill' of sweated labour, it is hated; as the means of earning daily bread and a fairer future, it is a challenge.

The contrast between the bright tunics of the soldiers and the grimy, ragged clothes of the miners is well judged, as is the subtle interplay and *chiaroscuro* of human relations within the larger plan of mass activity.

When one considers what splendid subjects both *Wat Tyler* and *Men of Blackmoor* are for the operatic medium, it is curious to reflect that nobody had set them before. It is as though English history has waited for a man to sing these sagas (for

they are no less than that, when their nobility and heroism are realized). The right man has appeared in Bush. He has set these two operas in so authoritative a manner as to make it certain that they will not be set again. He has composed them once for all, as may be said only of masterpieces such as Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* or Delius's *Sea Drift*.

It is (or should be) unthinkable that, though *Wat Tyler* has received a BBC studio performance and *Men of Blackmoor* has been valiantly produced by the Oxford University Opera Group, so far neither opera has been staged professionally in Britain. It is all the more deplorable when one realises that they have been staged many times on the continent. If the administration of Covent Garden is sensible enough to elect to produce these operas, they will be doing the cause of British music a true service. If these operas are produced as well in London as they have been on the continent, their success is assured.

The *Byron Symphony*, op. 53

This is Bush's third symphony. The second, the *Nottingham*, was a civic commission from that city. Fine composition as it is, one senses in it a falling away from the dynamism of the First Symphony. Both the earlier symphonies are overshadowed by the *Byron*, which is assuredly Bush's most outstanding achievement, apart from his operas.

It was not the composer's concern to occupy himself with writing music 'inspired' by those aspects of Byron's life which are only too notorious: his scandalous love affairs; the bizarre menagerie of his many households; the flamboyant pessimism and arrogant impropriety of his verse. Bush's concern was with more profound aspects of Byron's psychology: his humanism and his hatred of tyranny. There are four large movements: Introduction and *allegro* (Newstead Abbey: Byron's youth); ceremonial march-theme and variations (Westminster: Byron in the Lords); *andante tranquillo* with central *fugato* (Il Palazzo Savioli: an idyllic, ideal love affair); introduction and choral finale (Missolonghi: Byron's death in the cause of Greek freedom).

Bush's choral finale in the *Byron* was anticipated by the male-chorus finale to his Piano Concerto op. 18 (1937).³⁶ In this he had no conscious thought of the Busoni Piano Concerto as model. The first three movements of Bush's Concerto were composed in 1934-35. He completed the work only when the BBC offered him a performance of it in 1938. Bush felt that the world situation was too urgent to permit a musician to expend much time on composition unless it could be brought to bear upon the political crisis. So the solo baritone and male chorus at the end of the work address themselves to the audience directly, by asking what relevance the Concerto has had to pressing world events. Naturally, Bush's realistic approach will

³⁶ London: Joseph Williams, 1938.

be scorned by those concertgoers who enter a concert hall to shut out the outside world and to escape into an imaginary and unreal Arcady.

The *Byron Symphony* demonstrates how originality in contemporary music need not (as the popular fallacy would have it) consist of cacophonous tintinnabulations at all costs. In this work Bush achieves originality in form. The first subject of the first movement:

Allegro vivace ed energico
+W.W.
Tr. Cl. C.A.
etc.

Strings *f* Brass pizz. Timp.

This musical score is for the first subject of the first movement, marked "Allegro vivace ed energico". It is written for a full orchestra. The score shows the first few measures of the piece, with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). The instrumentation includes strings, brass, woodwinds (+W.W.), trumpets, clarinets, and cymbals (C.A.), and timpani (Timp.). The music is in 3/4 time and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

is developed in an oblique and concealed manner and is recapitulated only in the coda. The structural reason for these exceptional procedures is that the first subject is developed extensively as the final variation of the second movement, the very long but magnificently sustained periodised melody inspired by Byron's great speech in the Lords against a capital punishment for machine breaking:

Cantabile ed espressivo
Massed unison strings
mf Harp
etc.

This musical score is for a cantabile passage, marked "Cantabile ed espressivo". It is written for massed unison strings and harp. The score shows the first few measures of the passage, with a dynamic marking of *mf* (mezzo-forte). The music is in 3/4 time and features a long, sustained melody. The instrumentation includes massed unison strings and harp.

This spacious passage is a symphonic parallel to the operatic treatment of John Ball's sermon in *Wat Tyler*.

Another exceptional (and probably unique) procedure is the daringly transplanted development section from the first movement to the last; an almost exact repetition merely transposed and retaining even the orchestration. Since César Franck, thematic cross-references between movements have been common in symphonies. But that technique concerns the transplantation of themes. Bush employs the technique, but transcends it in his transplanted development. Justification of this audacious idea lies in the programmatic plan. Byron, in the last movement, is imagined as hearing the Greek trumpets from afar, and his response is with the intense vitality and energy of his youth. This idea is not only a striking programmatic conception but is musically convincing also; which is the more important point.

There is much cross-reference between the movements. For example, a prominent subsidiary idea in the first movement, which, in contrast with the virile first subject, represents the brooding, sensuous aspect of Byron's psychology, appears as

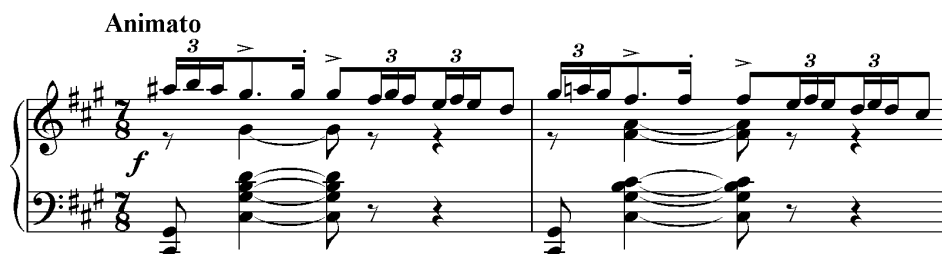
and as

and then becomes the basis of the *fugato* middle section of the third movement:

Similarly, the first subject of the first movement (the youthful Byron) becomes taken up in the Greek national dance of the last movement:



The dance itself, with its orchestration of strings, low winds and tambourine,



provides exactly that dash of excitement necessary to a finale and also throws into high relief the ensuing choral invocation to freedom.

A rare degree of musical inventiveness is revealed in the introduction to this last movement, which presents four different modes in as many bars – and all in one phrase:



This Symphony won for its composer the Handel Prize in Halle in 1962. It is a work which assures Alan Bush his place in the procession of masters of the modern symphony. It is a work which shows all of Bush's attributes at their best: his broad nationalism, which enables him to be *en rapport* with the music of other nations; his traditionalism, which conserves the good and unsentimentally jettisons what is bad – a traditionalism which includes audacity because the great masters, who made tradition, were audacious; his sober optimism, which is so much better than the fashionable western cult of pathological themes in all the arts; then, intimately bound up with all these other attributes, the quality of humanism, which is eloquent in his choice of subject; and, finally, the attribute which unites all the others, his integrity.



Stevenson and Alan Bush in 1974 (photograph: John Humphreys)

Alan Bush in the 70s

from *The Musical Times*, Vol. 113, No. 1553, July 1972³⁷

I have come to my desk from my piano, from practising Bush's Piano Sonata in A flat op. 71. The music is still reverberating in mind and fingers; I hope my pen will seize my enthusiasm. The work is as if written in the vocative: it is an apostrophe to life. The Greek subtitle, 'He Hedone Epikureia', is a tribute to the Epicurean rapture. Epicurus (341-270 BC), the Greek materialist philosopher of the Hellenic period, celebrated the phenomenon of human consciousness and the refinement of sensuous pleasure. So does Bush's Sonata. It is cast in one movement, which comprises an introduction, exposition, transition, slow central section, extended development, recapitulation and coda. It plays for about 20 minutes and presents some unusual features of form and piano writing. The central section contains passages conceived in extreme positions of crossed hands: the left hand playing

³⁷ Editor's note to the original article: 'The composer of this month's Music Supplement is Alan Bush, whose *Concert Overture for an Occasion* will have its première at the Festival Hall on July 5 [1972], as part of the anniversary celebrations of the Royal Academy; his Piano Sonata had its première at the Bath Festival last month, played by Ronald Stevenson'.

a melody in the high treble register and sometimes adding notes in the deep bass, while the right hand plays in the middle register:

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Song in Gold Pavilions". The score is written for piano and consists of three staves. The top staff is the right hand (R.H.), the middle staff is the left hand (L.H.), and the bottom staff is a lower left hand (L.H.). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 8/8. The tempo/mood is marked "cantabile" and "sereno". The right hand plays a melody in the high treble register, while the left hand plays a melody in the deep bass. The right hand also includes a section marked "sereno" and "p" (piano). The left hand includes a section marked "cantabile" and "p". The score features various musical notations, including triplets and slurs.

The justification for this is that the left hand is more naturally adapted to melody-playing than the right. The natural dynamic range – *piano* for low notes, *crescendo* for a rising phrase, *forte* for high notes – corresponds to the anatomy of the left hand, which has the weaker fingers 5 and 4 on the bass side, and the stronger fingers 3, 2, 1 on the treble side; whereas the right hand reverses this order. Another passage in the central section notates (for the first time in my experience) the tradition of the virtuosos of the golden age of pianism, which was to play lyrical music with the hands unsynchronized. This anticipation of treble by bass, however much inveighed against by conscientious piano teachers, is a perfectly natural practice. In amateurish playing it sounds bungling, but in the playing of the virtuosos of the turn of the century it created plasticity of *rubato* and directed attention to the melody.

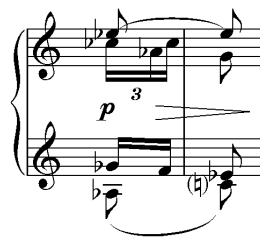
The central section of Bush's Sonata contains music of mature serenity, which is very rare in the twentieth century. As an adjunct to my study of the work, I have been reading the philosophy of Epicurus, who believed that a state of spiritual tranquillity (*ataraxia*) was attainable through wisdom. The Epicurean *ataraxia* has nothing to do with Pyrrhonic abstention from making judgments. In his Sonata, Bush approaches the Epicurean *ataraxia*; he is one of the few contemporary composers who does. Another unusual feature of this work is that it recapitulates its first and second subjects simultaneously.

The Sonata exemplifies a new approach to chromaticism, though much of its melodic material relates to the chromatic forms of the ancient Greek modes. Bush shuns the enervating impression of the kind of chromaticism that droops from sharp to natural or from natural to flat on the same degree. His chromaticism is dialectic and sinewy, not diffuse and flaccid. The grammatical logic of this chromaticism necessitates the frequent use of double flats. This raises the question of what might be termed the 'orthography' of music – the way a composer 'spells' his melodic and harmonic progressions. A composer's orthography is a personal thing, a clue to his creative character. Bax, for example, whose emotionalism was riotous, frequently notates naturals, sharps and flats in one chord. Schoenberg, on the other hand, sought to impose order on his fanatically intense emotional nature:

his notation, even of complex discords, frequently has only one kind of accidental in one chord. Bush's frequent employment of double flats is a cipher of his ratiocinative mentality. I recall his fascination when I pointed out, in one of Reicha's 36 fugues, the only case of a triple flat known to me. Bush, like Reicha, has the natural contrapuntist's love of complexity. Not complexity for its own sake, but complexity contained in a grand simplicity; whereas much so-called 'new' music is fetishistically complex and contains only the most vacuous simplicity.

Bush's complex way of thinking is apparent in his talking; as much in conversation as in a public address. He loves parenthesis. This characteristic informs both his speech and his music, for similar thought-processes are basic to both, in his case. His music exemplifies a De Quinceyan love of parenthesis. One of its hallmarks is that a melody is often introduced by a prefatory phrase or two: Bush prepares his melodies and presents them. This penchant for parenthesis naturally finds expression in transition passages and cadenzas. There is some *fioritura* in the Piano Sonata that makes me wish for the gossamer touch of a Vladimir de Pachmann!

At a time like the present, when some Western composers are feeling that atonality is an impasse, Bush demonstrates how tonality may still yield new results. For instance, long stretches of his Piano Sonata are conceived in one tonality, contrasted with other long stretches in another; this gives the music largeness. Two of the tonalities referred to are B flat minor and G minor. These ratios of tonality, operating over a large time-scale, also operate in cadences: one cadence consists of a G major/minor chord followed by a B flat minor chord. This reflection of the tonal macrocosm helps give the music organic cohesion. A whole article could be written on Bush's cadences; I recommend a study of them to young composers, who could learn much from them about harmonic invention. Study of a composer's cadences is an index to his style. A comparative study of cadences of different composers should be a part of a composition student's training. Samuel Langford, the music critic of *The Manchester Guardian* in its heyday under C. P. Scott (in my view the most trenchant English-speaking music critic of the twentieth century), held that music was the 'art of cadence'. If that is true, as I believe it is, then a composer's treatment of cadence is the essence of his music. Since Van Dieren, I have known no composer working in the United Kingdom who has written such a haunting cadence as this, from Bush's Piano Sonata:



The first instance of this kind of cadence that I noticed in Bush's music was in the song cycle *The Freight of Harvest*, composed in 1969. So far, I have discussed only the reflective side of Bush's music; but his Piano Sonata also contains spontaneous Greek dance-rhythms in 7/8, reminiscent of the finale of his *Byron Symphony* op. 53.

After the concentrated effort on his Piano Sonata, Bush wrote a shorter work, *Men of Felling* op. 72, for male voice chorus and piano, a setting of a poem by his wife, Nancy (who has written the texts for many of his works). It is dedicated to the Felling Male Voice Choir. The poem recounts the struggle of the coalmining community of the County Durham district of Felling, alluding to events in its local history, such as the winning of the Low Main Seam in 1810, the pit explosion in 1812 and the 'gentlemen's agreement' between the coal and newspaper owners not to make mining accidents public. This song relates to Bush's opera *Men of Blackmoor* (composed 1945-6, published 1959) in its absorption of the wide leaps that characterize Northumbrian folk song. It is set in D flat with much pentatonic intonation. The sonorous choral writing is supported by an eloquent piano part. It is a testimony to Bush's versatility that he can turn from writing a virtuoso piano work to write a short chorus for an amateur choir; and yet both are expressions of one creative character.

The next opus was again a work of entirely different scope: *Africa*, a symphonic movement for piano and orchestra op. 73. Composed in 1971, it will have its première in Halle (Handel's birthplace) in East Germany on 16 October 1972, with the composer as soloist. The form of this, Bush's third work for piano and orchestra, relates to the single-movement form of his Piano Sonata; that is, it comprises a central section flanked by two sections which themselves are flanked by exposition and recapitulation, introduced respectively by introduction and coda. But whereas the central section of the Piano Sonata was a high plateau of tranquillity, here in *Africa* it is the explosive climax of the work, a memory of the events at Sharpeville, with a machine-gun-like wood-block rhythm amplified through a loudspeaker in the hall, against a sombre background of low woodwind trills and brass.

This work, which has the same title as one by Saint-Saëns for the same forces, is no genre piece. Indeed it embodies a new approach to programme music – what I would term *ethnic* programme music. Bush's idea in this instance is to put the African anti-imperialist struggle into music; and so he expresses European and American imperialism by military brass writing and the African resistance to it by using snatches of African folk music and suggestions of African dances. And the piano concerto medium, with soloist pitted against orchestra, underlines the struggle.

During the winter of 1971-2, Bush composed his *Concert Overture for an Occasion* op. 74. The occasion is the 150th anniversary of the Royal Academy of Music, with which institution he has been associated for over 50 years. This *Concert Overture*, dedicated 'to the student orchestral players of the RAM', includes concerto grosso

elements; it is designed to display the prowess of the various sections of the orchestra, in solo and in consort. The writing is appropriately youthful and vigorous. The lyrical second subject is derived from an English folk song. With the work's academic associations, it is appropriate that it delights in ingenious contrapuntal textures, including an example of invertible double counterpoint at the 12th, which is rare (and indeed is difficult to write if it is to sound as natural and convincing as it does here).

Bush's most recent composition, *Song for Angela Davis* (to a poem by Nancy Bush), again shows him identifying himself with a cause which is very much that of youth. Angela Davis, a young, black American and Marxist intellectual recently tried for her life, is a symbol for many progressive people today. It is characteristic of Bush to dedicate a song to her. And he naturally wants this song to be as widely sung as possible: for that reason he suggests that it can be performed by SATB or unison choir and piano, or unaccompanied choir, or as a solo song with piano accompaniment. It is written with majestic ire, a strong, straightforward statement with English intonations in the Aeolian mode. No attempt has been made to simulate anything 'negroid' in the music; it is a white Englishman's declaration of unity with the cause of a black American woman.

Alan Bush belongs to the British tradition of the aristocratic rebel, which includes Byron and Bertrand Russell. He is an aristocrat by nature, not by heredity. His four operas, based on revolutionary subjects from the history of the English-speaking peoples, have had ten productions in Eastern Europe, but only one on a British stage. Another Bush opera will be produced in Odessa in 1973. His latest opera, about the American trade unionist Joe Hill, is still running after two years in East Berlin. Meanwhile, two recent films about Hill have been hailed in London, but not Bush's opera. John Masefield's words about Gordon Craig also apply to Alan Bush:

Here is the work. Who, greater than his age, will use this work to consecrate the stage?

William Walton's Extravaganza

from *The Listener*, Vol. 79, No. 2024, 11 January 1968³⁸

'It's laughter' – runs an old Chinese proverb – 'laughter, not religion, that unites people'. I often laugh at the more fatuous avant-garde noises, but I'm told I shouldn't and that it's all supposed to be serious – and then I take it seriously and find it funnier than ever. So to find a contemporary composer whose purpose is to cause laughter, and who succeeds, is rare indeed. Such a composer is William Walton in his new 'extravaganza in one act', *The Bear*. This is based on an early

³⁸ The original article also included a brief discussion of Egon Wellesz and Elizabeth Maconchy.

Chekhov comedy, adroitly turned into a libretto by the composer and Paul Dehn. The plot is simple. A boorish creditor (the 'Bear') calls to collect a husband's debt from his widow; they quarrel, draw pistols – and can't shoot because they're in love. It was broadcast last Sunday in the recent recording by the same cast as premièred the work at the 1967 Aldeburgh Festival: Monica Sinclair as the widow, Norman Lumsden as her manservant and John Shaw as the protagonist – all in fine voice – and the English Chamber Orchestra playing with point under James Lockhart. The music parodies many twentieth-century composers, including the Darmstadt clique, and there is also a self-parody of the Walton of *Façade*. From the opening sighing string glissando we recognise a musical pun on *Wozzeck*, and other glissandi cock a good-natured snook at Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The music raises eyebrows and laughter. In a gloom-fraught world, that's worth something. When we remember the urgency and purpose of Walton's First Symphony, the cataclysm of his *Belshazzar's Feast*, and the autumnal serenity of his Cello Concerto, we admire his humour all the more because it is the obverse of his seriousness. He is probably the most versatile British composer ever. Certainly, he is the only one whose work has invaded both music hall and temple. He has a gift which has forsaken most composers today: he can write a tune. He might have given us more of them in *The Bear*. We would gladly forfeit some of the tricky allusions for a tune. Besides, the Darmstadt circle – today's *haute-couturiers* of music – will one day be as forgotten as Kalkbrenner and Thalberg are now. Yet in Liszt's early days in Paris, these were the last word in the slick and smart.

From *Portsmouth Point* onwards, Walton has looked more and more to the Mediterranean. It is not only Britten, in his settings of Rimbaud and Michelangelo, who has 'Mediterraneanised' British music: Walton was already doing it in the Twenties. This breath of the south has restored British music, after it had for so long inhaled the dust of Victorian academicism. Apart from pockets of folk-culture here and there, Britain has no all-pervasive music culture, as Italy has in its opera or Germany in its *Hausmusik*. So the aspirant British composer has very largely had to look elsewhere to acquire laboriously what in some other countries is acquired involuntarily.

Benjamin Britten's War Requiem

from *The Listener*, Vol. 78, No. 2014, 2 November 1967

For years Britten has been the recipient, or victim, of a stream of adulatory, and sometimes sycophantic, journalism. He must be sick of it. In this country we have no machinery for the kind of discussions on music which have taken place in the USSR at meetings of the Composers' Union. The position of the British composer without a private income is still so fraught with frustration that most of the meetings of the Composer's Guild are concerned with discussions of finance, not music. So I welcome this opportunity of saying something on Britten's *War Requiem*,

and saying it more as a composer than a journalist. The *Requiem* has enjoyed, or endured, unprecedented popularity for a work of its serious import. This relates, as I see it, to the vague hope for peace felt by many people in countries which are not actively engaged in war on the home front. But I am not going to assume that every reader is familiar with the work: there is always somebody coming new to even the most established classic. So first, a brief résumé.

The work was commissioned for the consecration of Coventry Cathedral in 1962. Its structure is on three levels: solo voices and chamber orchestra, chorus and full orchestra, boys' voices and organ. Respectively, these explore different planes of experience: the personal, the universal, the ideal. They are set off against each other and unite only in the final pages. There are six movements: *Requiem Aeternam*, *Dies Irae*, *Offertorium*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei* and *Libera Me*. The full chorus and boys' chorus sing the Latin text of the Mass for the Dead and the solo voices sing poems by the English poet Wilfred Owen, who died in action in 1918. These poems are selected in such a way that they seem to comment on the Latin text. The whole work plays for some 85 minutes.

There are three outstanding British works precursory to Britten's *Requiem*: Delius's *Requiem* (1914–1916), Bliss's *Morning Heroes* (1930) and Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* (1939). They are all scored for soloists, chorus and orchestra.

Delius's work is dedicated 'to the memory of all young artists fallen in the war'. It is an atheist's threnody. Its themes are the transience of life, the honour of the stoic who accepts mortality, and the weakness of those who fear death and have 'drugged themselves with dreams and golden visions and built themselves a house of lies to live in'. Both Warlock and Beecham, in their books on Delius, dismiss this work. The truth is that 'British fair play' does not often extend to the promotion of an avowedly atheist work of art in a society that keeps up the pretence of being Christian, but which is in fact largely agnostic.

The Bliss work is a symphony dedicated to the memory of the composer's brother 'and all other comrades killed in battle'. Its five movements are based on war poems by Whitman, Li Tai-Po, Chapman's *Iliad*, Wilfred Owen and Robert Nichols. Again, its neglect – and it is a splendid, deeply felt work – may be due to the fact that it lies outside the Christian tradition of British choral music.

Tippett's work lies just within that tradition, because it employs Negro spirituals in place of chorales. It has been performed much more than the Bliss or the Delius. Unlike those works, it is written, not in memory of the fallen in the First World War, but of a young Jewish victim of Nazism in the Thirties. But this distinction is only superficial, for the common theme of all these works and of the *War Requiem* is fallen youth.

Let me say at once that I consider the Britten *Requiem* a failure. I know this view is contrary to the general critical opinion that it is his masterpiece. Until the *War Requiem*, Britten wrote successful works; with it, he became a deeper, more austere

composer – and failed. The failure of a large work with noble aspirations is always more edifying than a facile success.

Why do I think it is a failure? Because, while its avowed intention is to warn of future wars, its warning, expressed in terms of solo voices and chamber orchestra, is stifled by the emotional impact of the chorus and full orchestra in the Mass for the Dead. Nothing from the settings of the Owen poems impinges upon the memory as does, for instance, the sculpted beauty of the solo soprano's *Lacrimosa*, accompanied by the chorus and full orchestra. Wilfred Owen's words protest, but the Mass induces resignation. The audience leaves, feeling awed but reconciled.

Much has been made of the ingenuity of the juxtaposed Christian ideology and Owen's own personal anti-credo in his poem 'Le Christianisme', which is not set in the *Requiem*. He describes a shelled chapel in Flanders. A statue of the Immaculate Virgin is unscathed. A Tommy has haloed her with an old tin hat. Owen's reaction is expressed in a last line which punches like fists: 'But a piece of hell will batter her'. Nowhere in Britten's score is there battering like that. Britten has written 'battering' music in his Donne Sonnet, 'Batter my heart, Three-Person'd God'. But it is a self-immolatory battering, not pugnacity aimed at external evil.

Throughout the *Requiem*, Britten's settings of Owen are characterised by understatement, as though the content of the poet's words has produced in the composer a kind of spiritual catalepsy. This again stifles Owen's protest. It is particularly noticeable in the setting of the climactic 'Strange Meeting', which comes near the end. This poem describes the soldier's dream of meeting in hell the enemy he killed. The enemy tells what he might have done with his life. Here Owen's words are woven out of the sounds of pain:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Notice particularly the vowel-sounds of the second line: ow-ugh-ow-ugh-ugh – ooh! This ejaculatory diction, in which almost every word is literally a cry of pain, is smoothed out by Britten, because he sets the poem as a dream in which nothing is defined but everything melts. Yet this is an exteriorised concept of the nature of dreams, for in dreams images are heightened and stand out in sharp relief. The only relief in the Britten setting are the sudden *crescendi* on muted strings which are unmistakably expressive of a human face shrieking horror – a masterly touch which probes the phantasmagoric with the certainty of an Alban Berg.

Britten's penchant for illustrative accompaniment is ultimately decorative and at odds with the building of an architectonic structure. He never misses an opportunity to illustrate laughter or whistling, and lingers fondly over echoed phrases associated with particular words, such as the delicate *arpeggi* which decorate the words 'sweet wells'. This characteristic is predictable and is opposed to the toughness and essentiality of a poet such as Owen.

Owen ends 'Strange Meeting' with the laconic line 'Let us sleep now...'. The point of this is its brevity. In a statement of aims, Owen wrote: 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry'. Yet Britten repeats Owen's last laconic line – 'Let us sleep now' – no less than 30 times, and, in doing so, poeticises it into a lullaby-like epilogue.

But Owen doesn't have the last word in the *War Requiem*: that is confided to the *a capella* choir who sing *Requiescant in pace. Amen*. This produces a soporific effect. The soldiers in two world wars fought that men may be free. Their spirits will not rest in peace until freedom is won. The balm of Britten's *Amen*, though conceived in sincerity and wrought in beauty, rings hollow during the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people. All this means that, while it is an easy matter to construct music with the prime concern of solving technical problems, it is exceedingly difficult to create music concerned with voicing human problems. There is probably more anti-human behaviour in the world today than ever; there is certainly more anti-human music. Britten is concerned about people and writes music that seeks to voice his concern. If he fails, it is because his aims are high.

Britten at Aldeburgh

from *The Listener*, Vol. 80, No. 2049, 4 July 1968

They say 'a bevy of beauties': what do they say for festivals? 'A flourish of festivals'? To me it's a surfeit of them. They'll be having one next in the Great Gobi Desert. But Aldeburgh is always an exception. I have never experienced the delight of unaffected music-making unaffectedly enjoyed as I have at Aldeburgh. The authentic atmosphere, the enthusiasm, ease and élan, can be felt over the ether, but it's even better on TV, as it was in Sunday's Tchaikovsky Concert, conducted by Britten, with Rostropovich as soloist on BBC 2 in colour. This, with the camera tour of the locale during the interval, was almost as good as having a complimentary ticket. TV sound is notoriously below par, but it seemed to me better than I have ever heard it during this concert. If my impression is correct, it argues a good case for recent appraisals of the Malting's acoustic. This is Aldeburgh's twenty-first season. I'd like to add my congratulations to so many others. I hope that, despite having come of age, it will remain the eternal adolescent among festivals, in its open approach to music, its refreshing naïveté, freedom from cleverness, and zest for both the old and the new. When it was launched in 1947, it was fashionable for sophisticates to sneer at Tchaikovsky. These jejune prejudices come and go, but it is heartening to find Britten loyal to music that has brought countless honest-to-goodness music lovers so much delight.

My immediate impression after hearing the premiere of Britten's new church parable *The Prodigal Son* is that it is the best of the trilogy. The coalescence of

Purcellian and Asian melisma in a wholly Brittenesque line, at the first appearance of the Tempter (Peter Pears), the 'inner voice' of the Prodigal, was memorable. The Tempter approaches through the congregation. This introduces an element from the Japanese popular theatre, the Kabuki, in addition to the Noh Play elements. John Shirley-Quirk was outstanding as the Father. At moments, his voice had a vibrancy I haven't heard since Peter Dawson's days. In *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, Britten fortuitously taught a lesson to young composers who direct their performers to walk about as they perform: the procession of instrumentalists through Orford Church at the premiere in 1966 – I was there – presented an acoustic kaleidoscope and showed once and for all how the technique could be justified. Now in *The Prodigal Son* he has another fortuitous lesson for young composers, by showing how a fragmented line can be employed with cogency instead of unconvincing cleverness. The Tempter, referring to the Prodigal, sings: 'This is the one I use to break this harmony. See how I break it up'. In the first orchestral passage (with only eight instrumentalists from the English Chamber Orchestra), Britten brings occidental music nearer to the Orient than it has ever been. I have the feeling that Britten has found the vehicle for his most essential expression in this work. The oriental influence enables his melodic line, which has always been decorative, to become almost calligraphic. He is a superb illustrator in music. Here he extends the mediaeval tradition of illumining a sacred text. How far he illumines the meaning of the parable itself will become clearer on later hearings. It sometimes seems these days that it is Christianity itself which is the prodigal son.

Bernard Stevens

from *The Musical Times*, Vol. 109, No. 1054, June 1968

In Britain, most musicians are reluctant to mix Marxism and music. Any possibility of a relationship between the two is generally dismissed before it is discussed. Yet in a period when less and less new Western music communicates to more than coteries, it may be no bad thing to consider a world view which at least attempts to relate music to reality. So far, only three British composers of repute have grappled with any kind of Marxist aesthetic. The first was Rutland Boughton (1878-1960), whose socialism owed more to Morris than to Marx, and was religious in impulse. The second is Alan Bush (born 1900), who has identified himself with the general principles of socialist realism as promulgated by Soviet nationalist composers. The third is Bernard Stevens (born 1916³⁹) who, while admiring some of the work of both Boughton and Bush, shares neither the religious motivation of the one nor the ideology of the other, but, accepting

³⁹ Stevens died in Colchester in 1983.

Marxism as basic, nevertheless questions some of the misconceptions which have been fastened on to it.

Stevens does not believe that any one political party holds the monopoly of Marxism. So it is that he has written what is probably the most succinct and lucid exegesis of Marxist aesthetics in English (the first dozen pages of his essay 'The Soviet Union'),⁴⁰ but has also criticized a too facile interpretation of the Marxist theory of reflection, which postulates art as a reflection of reality, and has suggested that 'art is a part of reality itself' and that 'the composer is as much exploring the still unknown regions of this reality as the astronomer'.⁴¹

Stevens is a Londoner. As a boy, he was given free piano lessons by Harold Samuel, whose devotion to Bach was an abiding influence. At eighteen, he studied with Edward Dent and Cyril Rootham. He later graduated from Cambridge University in music and English literature. This period quickened his understanding of English poetry and the English choral tradition. Leaving Cambridge, he had a few lessons from Tovey, and studied at the Royal College of Music – composition (R. O. Morris), piano (Arthur Benjamin), orchestration (Gordon Jacob) and conducting (Constant Lambert). In the army for six years, he still managed to compose intermittently. On demobilization in 1946, he lived in London, composing for films and amateur choirs. Since 1948 he has taught composition, harmony and counterpoint at the Royal College of Music.

At a time of extirpation of human content in some Western music, other composers – Stevens among them – have remained unshakable at the fulcrum of an artistic creed which attests to the continuing validity of embodying human thought in sound. Steven's music is ratiocinative: it has premises and conclusions; it doesn't merely start and stop. It finds its impulse in an awareness of music's past achievements and present problems and finds its goal in awakening like awareness in others. In a paper entitled 'The Crisis in Contemporary Art-Music and its Resolution',⁴² he analyses the crisis under three headings. '1: The limited performance of contemporary art-music. 2: The isolation of contemporary art-music from contemporary popular music. 3: The simultaneous existence of contradictory idioms in contemporary art-music'. He suggests that resolution of the crisis depends on 'the creation of a genuinely popular music' and 'the creation of an idiom, in art-music, capable of wide acceptance but in no way acting as a restraining influence on melodic, harmonic or rhythmic invention'. He thinks that the most significant music has always possessed a universality of idiom which 'permitted the composition in the same idiom of works of a profound character and those of a purely diversionary nature'.

⁴⁰ Howard Hartog, ed.: *European Music in the Twentieth Century*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, pp. 223-251.

⁴¹ *The News Letter*, Vol. 1, No. 27, November 1957, p. 226. [RS]

⁴² Address to the Musicological Conference at the Prague Spring Festival, 1948. [RS]

He is one of the very few Western composers today capable of embodying an essentially popular element in a symphonic context without loss of serious purpose. His *Dance Suite* for orchestra, op. 28 (1957), is perhaps the best example of this. Here rhythm plays hide-and-seek and catch-as-catch-can with the bar-lines in a way that ultimately relates to the rhythmic flexibility of the Tudor madrigalists, and yet which also pulses with modern neuricity.

His melodic invention is personal, well-defined and memorable. The basic mould of his melody is shaped by a predilection for sonorous, open, perfect intervals, which expand or contract chromatically (Ex. 1a & 1b):

Ex. 1a Violin Concerto⁴³



Ex. 1b Ballade for Piano op. 18



This tensile conception of melody contains possibilities of extension to polyphony and harmony. Indeed, Stevens' monody often contains an inner two-part conception within the single line, as it does with Purcell and Bach and all natural contrapuntists. His harmony achieves newness through chromatic inflexions which are never the expression of a trailing-out of emotion, but are always controlled by a subtle dialectic. It is harmony which transforms and extends the traditions in which it has its roots. Ex. 2 exemplifies considerable harmonic potency, for it develops harmonic syndromes found only rarely in European music, as in Gesualdo and the late psalm setting of Grieg.

⁴³ These excerpts are printed by kind permission of Lengnick Publications, Bertha Stevens and the Bernard Stevens Trust.

Ex. 2 Fantasia on 'Giles Farnaby's Dreame' for piano



Stevens' finesse of craftsmanship and genuineness of emotion find their most direct expression in chamber music. But he has also written large-scale orchestral works of importance and impact: his Variations and his two Symphonies, for example. The first symphony (*A Symphony of Liberation* op. 7, 1946) is prefaced by a quotation from Blake's *America*: 'Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field / Let him look up into the heavens and laugh into the bright air'. The three movements are subtitled Enslavement, Resistance, Liberation. If the symphonic form is still music's 'book of life', as D. H. Lawrence claimed the novel was literature's, this work is a salient contribution to its progress. If the seemingly inevitable, increasing momentum of the world crisis accelerates in its present course, the avant-gardists are going to appear pathetically pre-historic, and such work as Stevens' *Symphony of Liberation* will gain increasing relevance. His Second Symphony evinces development of his powers. Its second movement is the most vitally propelled scherzo in any British symphony, and its lyrical episodes serve to intensify its drive. Such work has few affinities in British music.

But it is in his choral works that Stevens is at his most human. The noble tradition of English choral music created a medium centuries ago which has been awaiting fulfilment in settings of vital human content. For too long supple polyphonic techniques have borne the burden of the innocuous 'heigh-ho' and 'ding-dong-bell' instead of matching the textures with worthy texts. Stevens' two cantatas, *The Pilgrim of Hope* op. 27 (William Morris, 1956, rev. 1967) and *The Harvest of Peace* op. 19 (Randall Swingler, 1952) are fit companions for such mature masterpieces of British choral music (albeit miniatures) as Percy Grainger's Negro shanty *Dollar and a half a day* and Alan Bush's *Lidice*.

Stevens has rare catholicity of taste. Among his personal predilections are his friend Rubbra's Fifth Symphony, Shostakovich's Tenth, and Frank Martin's Harpsichord Concerto. His wife is a violinist (the dedicatee of his Violin Sonata) and conducts a Suffolk orchestra which includes contemporary music in every programme; their daughter plays the horn and violin and is a member of the Yehudi Menuhin School string quartet. Bernard Stevens is a delightful companion. His warm, kindly and utterly unaffected character are all there in his music. The sometimes clinical concert hall of today (clinical not only architecturally but in the sounds that are made in it) would be a better place for more performances of his work.

Stevenson on Scots Music

Heifetz in Tartan

from *The Listener*, Vol. 83, No. 2131, 29 January 1970

For my money, the most incredible musical bonanza of 1969 was – no, not Bob Dylan playing to 250,000 on the Isle of Wight, nor the Rolling Stones playing to 500,000 in San Francisco, but a stageful of Scots fiddlers (musical, not financial) performing in a packed City Hall in Perth, Scotland, on 28 November. The incredibility of this event impinges all the more powerfully on anyone who remembers Hugh MacDiarmid's *obiter dictum*, 'Scotland is the most backward country in Western Europe, aesthetically speaking' (and MacDiarmid is a Nationalist at that). In *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, MacDiarmid, divinely drunk, falls into a ditch and contemplates a thistle: transmogrified by moonlight, it assumes (among a thousand other things) the form of 'Heifetz in Tartan'. Here he was again in Perth: Heifetz in Tartan. Or rather, a hundred Heifetzes in Tartan.

To be precise, 116 of them. Frae a' the airts o' UK they came. I had been prepared for intonation as out of tune as a cat with flu: instead, what I heard was intonation as clean as neat whiskey. What began as a cultural merger between the BBC and the City and Royal Burgh of Perth, 'to encourage and perpetuate the art of playing Scots music (airs, strathspeys, reels, etc) on the violin', ended as a display of expertise unsuspected by the culture-vultures who swooped on Perth expecting to find a feast of scraggy bones. Arthur Robertson from Lerwick was awarded first prize (£100 and three paid engagements, two on radio, the other on TV); Willie Macpherson came second (£50 and a broadcast); Mrs Burns and Mr Cameron tied for third place (£25). All played so splendidly that the judges – Watson Forbes (Chairman), Hector MacAndrew, the doyen Scots fiddler, James Hunter of the BBC Aberdeen, and Yehudi Menuhin himself – must have had their work cut out.

Menuhin made a speech as urbanely virtuosic as his own fiddling. He described himself as 'a domesticated animal' compared to the Scots fiddler. He developed the metaphor: 'the kennel dog always has a yen for his friend the prairie dog'. And, even without his Stradivarius, Menuhin delighted the audience with a bonus performance of a Scots fiddle tune by humming it. He did this to demonstrate the innate rhythmic sense of Scots fiddlers who, reading notes of uniform rhythmic value, inject them with a catchy irregularity. He found 'a characteristic freedom of expression' in this and compared it to the modern musicologist's discovery of the *note inégale* in the music of the French clavecinists. Menuhin enthused in that almost boyish way of his about the *style* of the Scots fiddlers: 'Don't give it up for a ready-made suit!' he exhorted. He stressed the value of indigenous culture as the grass roots of all lasting art.

Just how indigenous is Scots fiddle music? The Finnish ethnomusicologist Professor Otto Andersson postulates that Scots fiddles and their music originated either in the medieval Irish *fídal* or the Welsh *crwth* as a Celtic background, or in the Scandinavian bowed harp. His namesake, the contemporary Shetland composer-fiddler, Tom Anderson, avers that a number of Shetland fiddle tunes are of Irish origin and he himself, visiting Ireland, was able to join in with Irish fiddlers when they played these tunes.

Grieg developed the indigenous Norwegian peasant fiddle in his *Slåtter* op. 72 for piano solo, amazing and too-little-known masterpieces, which in some passages are as exploratory in both rhythm and dissonance as Bartók at his most pungent. And contemporary Norwegian composers such as Harald Saeverud, Poul Rovsing Olsen, Klaus Egge and Geirr Tveitt, have continued Grieg's interest in Norwegian fiddle music; Tveitt has even written two concertos for the indigenous Hardanger fiddle and orchestra. Idealisation of peasant culture by urbanised composers is bogus. But so is urbanisation of peasant culture. And make no mistake about it, Scottish culture is still peasant over the country as a whole. This anachronism is not without blessings. It has preserved the pibroch and the fiddle music almost intact. The problem is how to bring a transformed Scots fiddle music into Scottish symphony concerts, as Grieg brought a transcendentalised fiddle music of the fjords into Norwegian concert halls; or as Bartók did in Hungary.

Gaelic Music

from *The Listener*, Vol. 86, No. 2208, 22 July 1971

On holiday in the Hebrides, my only contact with broadcasting a transistor, I carried out an experiment. What broadcasts, I asked myself, were immediately relevant to the Gaelic-speaking community? This restricted my listening to Radio 4 (Scotland) and, reduced to basics, meant: how much Gaelic music was broadcast in the week's music? Damned little. Precisely one hour and 25 minutes out of a total of 119 hours of broadcasting time. The most recent statistical estimate I have to hand is that there are 82,000 Gaelic speakers out of Scotland's total population of five million. But the significance of the Gaelic language and its song is out of all proportion to the paucity of its speakers and singers. Sorley Maclean, who is held by those with authority to judge such matters as the greatest contemporary poet in the Gaelic language, has written acutely about Gaelic song. He maintains that if the greatest of all Scottish works of art is not *Cumha na Cloinne* – the 'Lament for the Children', the seventeenth-century pibroch by Patrick Mor MacCrimmon – it is surely one of those Gaelic songs of the two-and-a-half centuries between 1550 and 1800. He describes these as 'songs in which ineffable melodies rise like exhalations from the rhythms and resonances of the words, songs that alone make the thought that the Gaelic language is going to die so intolerable to anyone who knows Gaelic and has in the least degree the sensibility that responds to the marriage, or rather

the simultaneous creation, of words and music'. The disparity between this description and most of the Gaelic songs broadcast is such as to induce total disbelief. From a vast corpus of song a selection is made – with unerring misjudgment – of the least representative and most deleterious. We could have songs ranging from the four-note scale of some of the most ancient waulking songs of South Uist to the almost orientally elaborate melismas of the 'long psalms' of Lewis. ('Waulking' is the hand-shrinking of wool; and the 'long psalms' are strangely serene psalm tunes with no less than half a dozen, and sometimes more than a dozen, notes to each syllable – such long-linked melismas as occur in no other Western European song, suggestive of those curious, involuted knot designs of mediaeval Celtic carvings, brooches and crosses.) We could have *puirt-a-beul*, or 'mouth music', unaccompanied songs of virtually instrumental agility and virtuosity. And we could have tunes based on quartatonic, pentatonic, hexatonic and heptatonic scales. We *could* have, but we don't have. What we have instead is a macaronic of mediocrity.

Every weekday after *The World at One*, Radio Scotland features ten minutes of Gaelic song – what you might call the half-world, or the no-world-at-all at half-past one. A boxy acoustic ruins many of the recordings, as though they'd been made in a small studio. Piano accompaniments are gauchely played (by a non-BBC pianist? Honky-tonk kings of the ceilidhs?) Far too many songs are accompanied on the piano when they would be better unaccompanied. The piano is out of tune as often as not. When the piano is well-tuned, the singing is often out of tune. Actually, this is perfectly understandable, because of the inevitable disparity between the genuine folk-singer's natural scale and the piano's tempered scale. Sometimes we have to suffer (or switch off) out-of-tune singing to an out-of-tune piano. Then there are those tasteless arrangements of good tunes – like wholesome food execrably cooked. Accordion bands are the chief but not the only offenders. 'Technicolor' scoring is another – flute arabesques and other aberrations erasing a simple tune. And so on. Such is the Rape of Euterpe (Caledonian style). It hardly mitigates the situation to say that in the middle of the week there was a well-produced magazine programme for the piping fraternity, *Chanter*. But why no pibroch recitals of that classical music of the Highland bagpipes which, in its intricacy and spiritual elevation, vies with the best of Hindu Raga music?

Fortunately, on my Hebridean holiday, I was privileged to hear some genuine Gaelic folk singing: much preferable to the radio examples. I felt like Brillat-Savarin when he was once offered grapes for dinner. '*Non, merci, je ne prends pas mon vin en pilules*' ('No thank you, I don't take my wine in pill form').

Harp of their Own Sort: The Clarsach

from the *Newsletter* of the Ronald Stevenson Society, September 1997. A revised version of a lecture given on 27 February 1981 in collaboration with Savourna Stevenson, clarsair, at the opening of the National Library of Scotland's exhibition of Scots harps.

It was George Buchanan, the sixteenth-century Scottish scholar and divine, who, in the *History of Scotland*,¹ wrote of the inhabitants of the Western Isles that 'They delight very much in music, especially in harps of their own sort...'. But the harps that have come down to us from that time, and before then, were Irish. The two now in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland are the Lamont and the Queen Mary harps, probably both sixteenth-century. They are low-headed harps with a one-piece soundboard of hornbeam: not a wood indigenous to Scotland. Also, the rubbings on these instruments suggest they were played in the Irish manner, held on the *left* shoulder. They are pre-dated by the so-called 'Brian Boru' harp. It is of the same type, and housed today in Trinity College, Dublin. The British Museum manuscript about it traces its vicissitudes. The King of Munster in the eleventh century is said to have presented it to the Pope. A later Pope presented it to Henry VIII. It resided, like many discarded toys of Henry, in the Tower of London, till it passed into possession of the Earl of Clanricarde and so to Ireland. When Henry VIII became overlord of Ireland, though not king, the Irish harp was added to the English arms. An Irish melody reputed to be from the time of Henry VIII is 'The Coolin'.

Ireland's seminal influence on early music is still too little known. The introit *Salve Sancte Parens*, composed in the fifth century by the Irish Shiel (Latinized 'Sedulius') is still included in the Roman Gradual. The seventh-century Irish monk St Gall founded the Swiss monastery of Sankt Gallen, which had a flourishing music school and an internationally famous library, whose vellums depict early Irish harps. The ninth-century Johannes Scotus Eriugena was the first to allude to descant and organum. St Helias, another Irish monk, was the first to introduce plainsong at Cologne in the eleventh century.

In his treatise on music, Vincenzo Galilei, sixteenth-century father of Galileo Galilei (the founder of the science of dynamics), quoted Dante's authority for the Irish having brought the harp to Italy.² The celebrated *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* includes three Irish folk songs whose fame would certainly have travelled with itinerant Irish harpers: The 'Ho-Hoane' (or 'Ochone'), 'The Irish Dumpe' – both dirges – and 'Callino Casturame'. This last, which sounds Italian, is actually an attempt to render phonetically the Irish Gaelic for 'young girl, my treasure', 'Coleen og a stair me'. Shakespeare alludes to it in *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 4, where

¹ George Buchanan: *Rerum Scoticarum historia*. Edinburgh: Apud Alexandrum Arbuthnetum, 1582 (translation: J. Gunn, *Enquiry*, 1807).

² Roslyn Rensch: *The Harp: Its History, Technique and Repertoire*. London: Duckworth, 1969.

Pistol addresses a French soldier: 'Quality! Calen o custure me!' – a line that gave English commentators mammoth migraines!

The Commonplace Book of Robert Edwards, minister of Murroes Parish Church, Angus, ca 1650, gives some melodies which afford an aural glimpse of the kind of thing that Scottish clarsach players would be playing at that time, such as 'The Laydie Louthian's Lilte'.³ The harmony is rudimentary, but it has a certain winsome charm. Dwelly's *Gaelic Dictionary* gives the root of 'clarsach' as 'a board or plank', referring to the soundbox. Old Gaelic poetry refers to it as 'sounding strings', the 'sounding' also meaning the soundbox.

Roderick Morison – Rory Dall, the blind harpist – was born in 1656 in Lewis and died ca 1714, probably in Skye. His biographer William Matheson describes him as 'the only known example of the minstrel in Gaelic Scotland'.⁴ He has been confused with an earlier Irish blind harpist, Rory Dall O'Kane, but William Matheson has unravelled this confusion and has published the Gaelic texts of Morison's songs. The tunes to which he sang these poems were probably his own versions of tunes which drew on both folk and cultivated sources. The MacLeod retinue at Dunvegan Castle in Skye included Roderick Morison as harpist, Patrick Og MacCrimmon as piper and James Glass as fiddler. In such a *milieu*, musical borrowings would occur.

Take Rory Dall's song about the lost harp key. Not only the *key* was lost, but in time, the song's *tune* was lost also. But pipers know the tune 'Lament for the Lost Tree of Strings' (that is, the harp). This doesn't make sense until one realizes that the Gaelic word for 'tree' is very like the word for 'key'. Furthermore, this pipe-tune fits the words, if the accentuation is reshuffled. This is a real piece of musicological discovery on the part of William Matheson. I would only add that, instead of his suggestion of accentuating some normally unaccentuated notes, the tune be notated with the accentuated notes on the strong beat of each bar. This would suggest that the pipe tune was notated incorrectly.

An instrumental piece that may be ascribed to Rory Dall Morison is 'The Fiddler's Contempt', i.e. 'Contempt for the Fiddler' (who thought harp music was better on the fiddle). One of Rory Dall's characteristic sarcasms has been bequeathed by aural tradition: 'If fiddling is music, that's enough of it'. 'Fiddling' used in the sense of 'trifling'. The ascription of the tune 'The Fiddler's Contempt' to Rory Dall is supported by the vein of invective that swells in his verse, and by the simple fact that this particular tune sounds much more majestic on the clarsach, with its bardic chords, than it possibly could on the fiddle.

³ Kenneth Elliott, ed.: *Early Scottish Keyboard Music. Ten Pieces by William Kinloch, Duncan Burnett and Others, Together with a Short Selection of Scots Airs for Cittern and for Violin*. London: Stainer & Bell, 1958.

⁴ William Matheson: *The Blind Harper: The Songs of Roderick Morison and his Music*. Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1970.

Turlough O'Carolan, Rory Dall's contemporary, was the last Irish harpist who was also a composer. He was born in 1670 and died in 1738. He took up music as a youth, blinded by smallpox.⁵ How does a blind person compose? Carolan is said to have done it on the buttons of his waistcoat, as a kind of braille. His patrons among the Irish landed gentry provided him with a harp, a horse, and a guide. He enlivened their banquets, not only by his music but by his poetry and his gift of quicksilver repartee. His gift for extempore verse made him a kind of Metastasio of Dublin. No wonder that Goldsmith wrote Carolan's biography. Great traveller and wit as Carolan was, he made a perfect foil for the satiric author of *Gulliver*, Dean Swift, whom he met frequently in Dublin. One day Swift reproved him for drinking. Carolan – talk-tapes loosened – immediately rejoined with an impromptu verse in Irish Gaelic which translates as:

Ye clergy who never give way to drink,
But censure our errors from last to first,
However severe your correction, I think
That none of yourselves ever died of thirst.

The Dean compensated his rebuke by a tip of silver.

The first of Carolan's 200 compositions is reputed to have been 'Sheebeg and Sheemor', suggested by an Irish legend from County Leitrim. Folk heroes had been buried on opposite hills – the big and little hills of the title 'Sheebeg and Sheemor'. Fairies rose from time to time from the cairns of the heroes and continued the battle.

Much Italian music was performed in Dublin in Carolan's time. The Corelli pupil Geminiani lived and died there. Tartini called him 'il furibondo Geminiani' – 'the furious'. This vivacity must have appealed to Carolan. Geminiani was also the author of the first violin school to be published. Carolan emulated the Italian manner in his best known piece, *Carolan's 'Concerto'*. Beethoven, commissioned by George Thomson of Edinburgh, arranged some of Carolan's compositions.

Handel loved the harp. He was a precursor of Gluck in introducing it into the orchestra (though Monteverdi had used the *arpa doppia* in his *Orfeo*). Handel's oratorio *Esther* of 1732 employs the harp with the lute – a masterstroke of instrumentation – in the accompaniment to the aria 'Breathe soft, ye winds'. Ten years later, Handel was in Dublin for the première of *Messiah* in 1742. He interested himself in Irish folk music and sometimes sat in Sam Lee's music shop in Dublin's Little Green, listening to itinerant folk musicians. Handel's Sketch Book, preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, contains his notation of the Irish folk-tune 'The Poor Irish Boy'.

⁵ Donal O'Sullivan: *Carolan. The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.

In January 1787, Mozart was in Prague to hear his *Figaro*. Niemetschek wrote of its success: enthusiasm among the public was unprecedented. It was soon arranged for every possible combination of instruments. Its songs were heard in the streets, in public gardens. Even the wandering harpist at the tavern door was obliged to strum out 'Non più andrai' if he wanted to gain an audience at all. One of those wandering folk harpists, a Czech named Josef Häussler, played his own 'Fantasy on *Figaro*' in the guest house where Mozart was lodging (appropriately named 'At the sign of the Golden Angel'). Mozart asked him to go to his room with him. He played Häussler a minuet and asked: 'Will it do as a theme for harp variations?' Häussler did indeed compose three variations on this theme.⁶ Mozart was evidently irritated by the pre-Erard imperfections of the concert harp (when he was composing his Concerto for Harp and Flute), but this encounter with Häussler proves his love of the folk harp. This small harp of the late eighteenth century would have hand hooks to change the tonality. These hooks were a Tyrolean invention. There is an engraving of Häussler playing his small harp – a kind of Czech clarsach! – and actually tuning a thumb-hook.

Only five years after Mozart met Häussler, a young Belfast organist Edward Bunting was engaged to notate the tunes played at the four-day Clarsach Festival in Belfast in 1792. He also made notes on the performance-style he heard. He wrote, for instance, about the *vivacity* of some of the figuration. This material was incorporated in Bunting's *Ancient Irish Music*, published in 1796, 1809 and expanded in 1840. Of all the clarsairs he heard, only one, the blind 97-year-old Denis Hempson, used the old fingernail technique, necessary to the brass-strung older instruments.⁷ Hempson's harp, the 'Downhill harp', is today the property of Messrs Guinness of Dublin. It is a large, low-headed harp made by Cormac Kelly. Its alderwood soundbox is inscribed:

In the time of Noah I was green,
 Since his flood I had not been seen
 Until seventeen hundred and two I was found
 By Cormac Kelly underground.
 He raised me up to that degree
 The Queen of Musicke you may call me.

Those clarsach festivals encouraged the early nineteenth-century Dublin harp makers John Egan and Francis Hewson to make new harps. They were much more lightly constructed than the old clarsachs. Their soundboxes were modelled on those of the pedal-harp. Thumb levers replaced the Tyrolean hook-mechanism.

⁶ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart/Josef Häussler, ed. Zdenek Culka: *Téma s variacemi*. Prague: Supraphon, 1976.

⁷ Joan Rimmer: *The Irish Harp*. Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1969.

The traditional Irish clarsach had a fan-like arrangement of strings, which made the top strings very short. Bunting's accounts speak of the contrast of resonant bass-notes and rapid treble-notes: the rapidity compensating for the lack of sonority.

In 1914 Patuffa Kennedy-Fraser, daughter of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, took up the clarsach to accompany her mother's recitals of 'The Songs of the Hebrides'. She played a small, green-painted clarsach made by George Morley of London, a harp-making firm founded in 1816. They had been making the small, gut-strung Celtic harp for the Irish market since the 1890s. Lord Archibald Campbell, first President of *An Comunn Gaidhealach*, instituted a clarsach competition at the first Gaelic Mod in 1892. Patuffa Kennedy-Fraser's arrangements from her mother's collection are the last glimmerings or gloamings of the Celtic Twilight. Just before World War One, the clarsach competition in the Mod languished. So Patuffa Kennedy-Fraser's advocacy kept interest alive. A revival was assisted by Duncan MacLeod of Skeabost, Mrs Hilda Campbell of Airds and the Royal Celtic Society in the Twenties.

Then, in 1931, the Clarsach Society was founded, at the suggestion of Mrs Duncan MacLeod. The year 1981 is the society's half-century and the *raison d'être* of this exhibition. Mrs Campbell of Airds was the first President. On her retirement, she was succeeded by General Sir Phillip Christison, a clarsair of prowess himself, who retired as President in November 1980 and was succeeded by the Honourable Lord Birsay. Soon after the founding of the Clarsach Society in 1931, Henry Briggs of Glasgow, a Yorkshire-born luthier, began making clarsachs, encouraged by Mrs Campbell. He incorporated the 'Highland hump' or 'harmonic curve' in the cross-piece. This rising curve afforded an increased length of string in the treble register and a consequent improvement in resonance. Briggs died in 1963. The former Edinburgh firm of Sanderson and Taylor continued his sterling work.⁸

Francis George Scott made an arrangement of a Gaelic song, 'Oran Mór MhicLeoid', published by the Clarsach Society in 1933. In the 1940s and early '50s he wrote a set of unpublished piano pieces, *Intuitions*. These include a number of pieces entitled 'Urlar', the pibroch ground. One of them, composed in 1946, seems even better conceived for the clarsach than for the piano.⁹ Francis Collinson – to whom students of the history of the traditional and national music of Scotland owe so much – has also composed for clarsach, notably in his incidental music to Robert Kemp's *The Man among the Roses*.¹⁰ Jean Campbell was the clarsair. She

⁸ A recent innovation in clarsach construction is Mark Norris' enhanced semitone mechanism. See the article in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* under *clarsach*. [RS] Stevenson here refers to the 1980 edition of *Grove*; he himself wrote the 'clarsach' article for the most recent edition. London: Macmillan, 2001.

⁹ In the manuscripts of the Francis George Scott Collection in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow. [RS]

¹⁰ Francis Collinson: *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

was a great enthusiast. The memory of her is cherished by her numerous pupils. That prolific composer Thomas Baron Pitfield has recently written a Sonatina for clarsach. This is precisely the kind of activity which will contribute to giving the instrument its rightful place and the serious consideration due to it.

Edward McGuire, the young Glasgow-based Scoto-Irish composer, has included the clarsach in works for chamber ensemble and in concerts by his folk group, 'The Whistlebinkies'. John McLeod, the Edinburgh-based composer, has included the clarsach in the choral score of his *Hebridean Prayers*. Seán Ó Riarda, the Irish composer, was the instigator of the Irish folk group, The Chieftains, whose clarsair is Derek Bell. The clarsach is being played increasingly furth of Scotland and Ireland: Ank van Campen is a leading exponent in Holland, as Alan Stivell is in Brittany.

The clarsach has possibilities denied to the pedal harp. On the pedal harp, one pedal changes the pitch of every octave. On the clarsach, one single note can be changed by the blade, without changing its octaves. It can therefore play more complex harmonies than the pedal harp. The clarsach's harmonic vocabulary ranges from medieval modalism to twentieth-century bitonal or polytonal dissonance. My miniature 'Country Tune' (published in the *Clarsair Annual* No. 1, 1980) exploits harmonies playable on the clarsach but not on the pedal harp. My album *Sounding Strings, Music from the Six Celtic Countries Arranged for Clarsach* (London, 1979), utilizes other possibilities (percussion on the soundbox, harmonics, etc.).

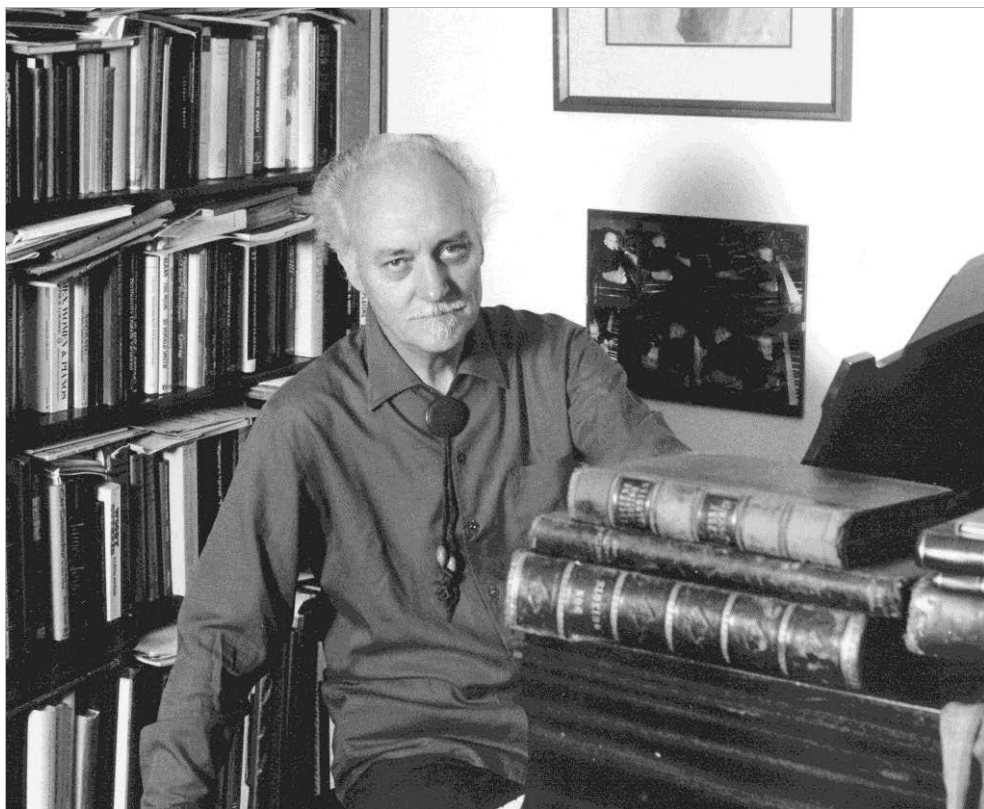
In his lecture on the 'Duende' (the indefinable sable sorcery behind Spanish folk art), Federico Garcia Lorca speaks of 'the stretched bull-hide' of the Spanish plains. Dylan Thomas, in his story 'A Child's Christmas in Wales', writes of 'the harp-shaped hills of Wales'. It is not only the poets who have read the morphology of folk art into their landscapes: the topography of Scotland is strewn with place-names commemorating harpers, bestowed by acronyms. Mull has its Harper's Pass; Urray in Ross and Cromarty its Harper's Field; and near Eglintoun Castle in Ayrshire there's a Harperland. A Scots Dylan Thomas might in dreams behold the harmonic curves of Hebridean hillsapes. Place names commemorate the past; but today the clarsach is sounding again in ceilidhs up and down Scotland. Young fingers are thrilling the old sounds into new life. Whatever frustrations and contradictions beset current Scottish politics, the nation's cultural life is stirring into a rediscovered sense of nationhood. It may be a fancy of mine – and it may be dismissed by a cynical smile – but I like to think that the clarsach's lesser music of the spheres may be the singing of the morning stars, heralding a quickening of Scotland's cultural conscience.

The Perthshire poet William Soutar once wrote in a letter to Christopher Grieve (*aka* Hugh MacDiarmid), considering the necessity of literature addressed to

children, that 'If the Doric is to come back alive, it will come first on a cock-horse'.¹¹ The nineteenth-century American poet James Russell Lowell wrote:

Who deemeth small things are beneath his state
Will be too small for what is really great.¹²

And the Australian composer/pianist and genius folklorist Percy Grainger wrote, 'Is there any more golden musical gift than this: to express much in little?'.¹³ If there is to be a real renaissance of Scottish national music, it may be that it, too, will come first on that musical cock-horse, the clarsach.



Ronald Stevenson in his 'Den of musiquity' at Townfoot House

¹¹ Charles King, ed.: *Twelve Modern Scottish Poets*. London: University of London Press, 1971.
¹² Vance Thomson: *The Life of Ethelbert Nevin, from his Letters and his Wife's Memories*. Boston, Mass.: s.n., 1913.
¹³ Percy Grainger: Preface to Sparre Olsen's *Norske Folkeviser*. Oslo: Norsk Musikforlag, 1946.

Stevenson on the Continental Traditions

Franz Schubert

from *The Listener*, Vol. 80, No. 2063, 10 October 1968

Hats off to whoever conceived the idea of a trilogy of Schubert programmes on BBC 2's *Workshop!* Although the second programme in the series, a symposium of experts, was cancelled, it was replaced by a Schubert recital, with Clifford Curzon, Fischer-Dieskau and Gerald Moore. Curzon's performances of the Impromptu in A flat op. 90, No. 4 (D 899), and the last Sonata in B flat – played with tenderness, wit and nobility – flanked the *Schwanengesang* ('Swan Song'). Dieskau's account of 'Der Doppelgänger' was the most memorable of his contributions, and Moore's masterly accompaniment made him (in spite of his avuncular exterior) truly a 'ghostly double' to Dieskau. This song intones the midnight stillness of deserted streets and declaims the remorse of a man antagonised by a vision of himself and his beloved in the irretrievable past. Dieskau's face was transfixed into a mask of fear. Dread was in his voice.

Schubert himself was a *Doppelgänger*. A ghostly *alter ego* casts a shadow and a shudder over some of his most refulgent inspirations. It took Liszt a three-movement symphony to characterize Faust, Margaret and Mephistopheles; Schubert somehow suggests all three in a short song, his setting of Goethe's 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' ('Margaret at the Spinning-Wheel'). Incredibly, this was composed when he was seventeen. It plumbs a Plutonian psychology. Nothing is further from truth than the notion that Schubert's music was all love-in-lilac-time. He was ahead of his period in his awareness of the artist's dilemma in bourgeois society. He is reported to have told a friend, over a glass of punch: 'The state should support me in order that I might compose free from all care'. It may also be no accident (though admittedly a moot point) that in setting the Catholic liturgy, he omitted a dogma. In his last year, Schubert, syphilitic, went completely bald, though his hair grew again. However unpleasant the thought, if the Schubertian iconography included a drawing or painting of him in this state (Dürer drew himself as a syphilitic in his *Schmerzemann*), we might have a different (and truer) impression of how Schubert's blessed spirit journeyed in the valley of the shadow, instead of imagining him as a kind of cherubic *Biedermeier* Dylan Thomas. But we hear it in the music, in those harmonies which seem to disclose sudden insights into death itself.

In his last piano sonata, written less than two months before his death, he does not abdicate from life by becoming mystical or contrapuntally cryptic, as Beethoven

did and as Schubert might understandably have done. His song is still very much of this world. Beethoven has often been apostrophised as music's prophet of democracy. But when (and if) greater social justice is gained, Beethoven's anger and pain may seem remote, whereas the psychological shadows of Schubert's music should always find response. It is, in the best sense, people's music. His spuriously entitled *Mourning Waltz* ('Trauerwalzer') enjoyed such currency that his Viennese contemporaries assumed it was a traditional dance which had welled up from popular culture (in a sense, it had).



Stevenson in Wagner's house at Tribschen, 2005

If anything is a miracle, Schubert's melody is. And he wrote well over a thousand melodies in his thirty-one years. The ratio between his short life and his productivity is even more phenomenal than it was in the case of Mozart. Yet such was Schubert's humility that, in the last weeks of his life, he approached a theoretician,

Simon Sechter, for lessons in counterpoint and fugue. There is little artifice in Schubert's music. True, there are fugues in his Masses: he evidently thought them music's proper ecclesiastic habit. He also wrote instrumental fugues: an early fragment and a late, finished specimen for four hands, written in friendly competition with a fellow composer. But one Schubert melody is worth a ton of counterpoint. He has a greater variety of melodic types than any other composer. And his melodies have finer 'diction' than all others: they not only sing to us, they *speak* to us. In the last works the phrases 'speak' in few notes. Profundity necessitates brevity. Schubert's 'heavenly length' of formal structure so often receives adverse comment that it is well to point out that, within the large structures, there is laconicism. For such a spendthrift lyricist to have learned that, is the most eloquent testimony of his genius.

Robert Schumann's Romantic Selves

from *The Listener*, Vol. 82, No. 2121, 20 November 1969

In his exquisitely outrageous volume of essays, *Down Among the Dead Men*, the late Bernard van Dieren had something to say about 'Schumannikins and Mendelssohnies'. He wasn't attempting to devalue those two great composers but rather to expose their imitators, who were legion in the last century. In the *present* century, Mendelssohn and Schumann have often been – often are – undervalued by supercilious musicians. Let's consider Schumann, since he was last week's composer in the daily morning series on Radio 3. The producer evidently had the idea of presenting lesser-known works. Six of the eight main works chosen were relatively unfamiliar. The only really well-known things were the Piano Quintet op. 44 (Artur Schnabel and the Guarneri Quartet) and *Papillons* op. 2 (Wilhelm Kempff). The policy of broadcasting in *This Week's Composer* a preponderance of a familiar composer's unfamiliar works may be justified, as long as the result indicates the composer's main contributions to music history. In this case it didn't. And there was a bad slip in the introductory note to the Second Symphony. This was erroneously described as the *Spring* Symphony. The *Spring* is No. 1, not No. 2. Trustful listeners must have thought that Schumann had a queer notion of what was spring-like, when the autumnal strains of his Second Symphony came over the ether. And yet, paradoxically, it was a blunder with a right side to it. For Schumann's life-work begins with a promise of spring, only to end in a prematurely blighted harvest.

To me, Schumann seems more symbolic of the whole Romantic era than any other composer – yes, even more than Berlioz, though he is not as grandiloquently quixotic. Let us consider Romanticism. Though books have been devoted to it, not many twentieth-century composers have been. Romanticism has often been jettisoned without consideration. Few have had the wisdom of Landowska – Landowska, the champion of Classicism – who, in her last years, wrote: 'What a

pity that I shall not live long enough to witness the return to Romanticism!' But there were actually two kinds of Romanticism in the nineteenth century: progressive Romanticism, which found its impetus in the ideals of the French Revolution and the many successive revolutions; and reactionary Romanticism, which represented an escape from those ideals. These two kinds exist together in all, or nearly all, nineteenth-century Romantics, with differences of emphasis. Schumann well knew his own dual nature as dreamer and man of affairs. He even christened these two 'selves': Eusebius and Florestan. Those were his *noms de plume*. Eusebius sat apart in a corner of the coffee-house, lost in pipe-dreams. Florestan edited a music magazine. This duality eventually led to schizophrenia, attempted suicide and death in an asylum. Hence the 'blighted harvest' I spoke about earlier. So the dichotomy of the whole Romantic era was symbolised in Schumann.

Did schizophrenia influence his compositions? Only in a general way, I think. It's evidently possible to paint in a psychotic state – Van Gogh gave vent to suicidal motives by slashing pigment onto canvas with a palette-knife. But it's not possible to compose in that way. To compose, you've got to *be* composed. There's too much involved in the mechanics of composition, especially in an orchestral score. Schumann's Second Symphony, which was broadcast last week, was conceived in December 1845, when Schumann was experiencing the onslaught of schizophrenia. An unusual feature of this symphony is that each of its four movements is in the same tonality of C. In a general sort of way, this could mean that Schumann needed anchorage to fight his affliction. But historically it relates to the common tonality of the suite-form in which the symphony had its embryogenesis. It also relates to an insistent will, and a parallel can be found in Beethoven's so-called 'Moonlight' Sonata.

Schumann's most significant contributions to the development of a music of ideas were his explorations of the psychology of woman, in his song cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben* (*A Woman's Love and Life*), and his understanding of the world of the child in his music for children. Nothing of this was included in last week's programmes.

Discovering Meyerbeer

from *The Listener*, Vol. 84, No. 2174, 26 November 1970

Meyerbeer: to many young musicians the name might as well be a liquor label. Yet Heine wrote – scarcely exaggerating – that Giacomo Meyerbeer's mother was the second woman in history to see her son accepted as divine. Reflection on the vicissitudes in the posthumous reputations of celebrities is hardly edifying. One wonders to what footnotes much-vaunted contemporaries of ours may be reduced by future historians. Some of them will even earn oblivion. Meyerbeer doesn't. Last

week I switched on to Radio 3 and heard the full five hours (five acts) of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*. The performance was from gramophone records and the opera was sung in French. Richard Bonyngé conducted the Ambrosian Opera Chorus and the New Philharmonia. I followed it from an old calf-bound folio edition of the vocal score, and found a marvel on nearly each of its 448 pages. But the marvels were in the music more than in the performance. It was a good performance, in parts very good. But such superlative music brooks only superlative performance. The legendary productions at the Metropolitan at the turn of the century were known as 'nights of the seven stars'. The constellation included Melba, Nordica, the De Reszkes, Plançon, Maurel and Mantelli. Such constellations are now extinct. The broadcast did, however, include Sutherland as Marguerite de Valois; and Sutherland is about as near as we can get to opera-as-she-used-to-be. It also included Anastasios Vrenios as the Huguenot Raoul, and a very fine tenor he is. He took his high D flat in the love duet (perhaps the finest love duet in all opera) with élan and seeming ease. He and Sutherland, of all the singers with florid roles, were the only ones who sang all the notes in the score. The others, though (by present standards) outstanding singers, omitted many notes by resorting to such simplifications as sustaining a high note instead of executing a sequence of hazardously brilliant scales. The disparity between what I read in that old folio and what I heard over the air had me chuckling.

As a discoverer in music, Meyerbeer has yet to be discovered; and by 'discovered' I don't mean written about, but played, sung and produced. His grand sense of theatre calls for a second Gordon Craig to stage it. His musical innovations were prodigious. He intensified musical dramaturgy by chorus-writing in octaves: Verdi inherited this. Before Meyerbeer, the ensemble froze the action. He brought the ensemble into the action: Mussorgsky inherited this. Meyerbeer was both gourmand and gourmet. His orchestra was huge: its deployment, selective. His innovation of accompanying an aria by a solo instrument is precursory of Mahler. His progressions of unrelated harmonies (like the E major to A-flat chords in 'the blessing of the swords' in the *Huguenots*) were the *fons et origo* of uncanny passages in Busoni and a few other twentieth-century composers.

The *Huguenots* appeared in 1836, during the reign of Louis-Philippe, the 'bourgeois king' who was swept onto the throne by the July Revolution of 1830. The grandiosities of the five-act opera flattered the prosperity of the entrenched bourgeoisie, but at the same time, Meyerbeer again and again voiced an intense humanity far removed from the smugness and plushness of the Opéra's clientele. Just as Scott founded the historical novel, Meyerbeer, with the Rossini of *Guillaume Tell*, founded historical opera. This was a milestone on the way to realist, socio-political opera, whose few masters so far include Charpentier (*Louise*), Berg (*Wozzeck*), Hindemith (*Mathis der Maler*) and Bush (*Wat Tyler*).



Ferruccio Busoni and family, ca 1900

On the Nature of Music: Towards an Understanding of Music in Relation to the Absolute

by Ferruccio Busoni, translated from the German by Ronald Stevenson¹

from *The Music Review*, Volume 17, No. 4, 1956

As I have continued my reflections on music, I have come gradually to realize that our comprehension of the quintessential nature of music still remains fragmentary and obscure; that few people are aware of it, fewer still understand it, and no one can explain it.

My earlier idea of the unity of music may serve to foreshadow the ideas which I am about to express; ideas which, up to now, have been suggested more by philosophers

¹ Translator's note: The original German version of this essay, 'Vom Wesen der Musik', was first published in *Melos, Zeitschrift für Musik*, Berlin, on 1 August 1924, and reprinted in the second edition of Busoni's Collected Writings, *Wesen und Einheit der Musik*, published by Max Hesse's Verlag, Berlin, January 1956. Busoni's manuscript is dated 8 June 1924 – less than two months before his death at 58 years of age. Thus this essay presents his ultimate reflections on the nature of music. [RS]

than by practising musicians, as philosophers, having no practical concern in music, possess for this very reason a less biased outlook upon it. Such a disinterested mind aided me the other day in my endeavours to express my thoughts clearly. A proposition in my *New Aesthetic of Music* (1907) – ‘That the content of a piece of music exists completely and unchangeably before and after its performance’ – hints at the views expressed in the following passage from a novel by Anatole France.²

In the French author’s novel, a young playwright is anxiously awaiting the end of the première of his play, and a doctor talks to him in the following manner:

– ‘Do you not know that that which is to happen has already occurred?’

And, without waiting for a reply, he adds:

– ‘Even though the world-phenomena come to our knowledge in a certain sequence, we should not conclude from this that they are in reality successive, and we have still less reason for thinking that they are produced at the moment wherein we perceive them ... The universe seems to us forever incomplete, and we have the illusion that it is forever unfolding itself. As we perceive the phenomena successively, we believe that in effect they succeed each other. We imagine that the things we see no more are past and the things we have not yet seen are in the future. Yet it seems feasible that beings may exist who possess the power of perceiving simultaneously that which for us is the past and the future. One can similarly imagine beings who perceive phenomena in retrograde order and see them unravel from our future to our past. Let us, for example, consider creatures so different from us that they can move with a speed greater than that of light; they would have a conception of the succession of phenomena very different from that which we have ...

‘We ourselves, on a clear night, when we look up at the Spica or Ear of Virgo which throbs above the top of a poplar tree, see at the same time that which was and that which is. And one can equally claim that we see that which is and that which shall be. For if the star, such as it appears to us, is the past in relation to the tree, the tree is the future in relation to the star. Meanwhile, the constellation from afar, which shows us its fiery little face, not as it is today, but as it was in our youth, maybe even before our birth, and the poplar, whose young leaves tremble in the cool evening breeze, reunite in us and are witnessed by us at the same moment of time.

‘We say of something that it is in the present when we perceive it clearly. We say that it is in the past when we preserve only an indistinct memory of it. A thing that happened millions of years ago, provided that we receive of it an impression of maximum impact, will not be something past for us: rather will it be for us something present. The sequence in which events revolve in the unfathomable depths of the universe is unknown to us. We know only the sequence of our perceptions. To believe that the future does not exist because we do not know it, is to believe a book is unfinished because we have not finished reading it.

² See *Histoire comique*, chapter XIX (first published 1903), in Vol. XIII, pp. 318-322 of Anatole France: *Oeuvres complètes illustrées*, published by Calman-Lévy, Paris, 1927. [RS]

'Through inexorable fate, the universe is constructed like a triangle, of which one side and two angles are given. Future events are determined. After that, they remain only to be fulfilled, terminated. They are as if existing. They exist already. They exist so certainly that we know them in part. And, if this part is infinitesimal in comparison with the whole, it is yet relatively quite considerable when compared with the limited knowledge of past events which we are capable of comprehending.

'It is surely permissible for us to say that the future is not very much more obscure for us than is the past. We know that generations will succeed generations in work, joy and suffering. I visualize beyond the duration of the human race. I see in the sky the constellations slowly changing form, which had seemed immutable. We know that the sun will rise tomorrow, and, through dense cloud or light mist, will rise every morning for a long time to come.

'We see the next new moon. We do not see it as distinctly as tonight's new moon, because we do not know in what grey or roseate sky it will appear ... Could we but get an idea of the next new moon such as we have of tonight's new moon, the one and the other would be equally present for us.

'Knowledge of a thing is the only reason for our believing in its existence. We know certain events which will come to pass. We must therefore regard them as real. And if they are real, they are realized. Therefore, it is feasible, my dear man, that your piece has been played through a thousand years ago, or half-an-hour ago, which really amounts to the same thing. Think thus and you will be calmer.'

In the course of translating those fragments, I remembered that I had, some time ago, written something that resembled this concept of Time; for, wretched humans that we are, we all reach similar conclusions after our individual strivings. In themselves incomplete and unoriginal, these ideas are concerned nevertheless with the same eternal truths with which I am now dealing.

A definition of the nature of music can be settled superficially by using a *cliché*. We can say, for aught I care, that: music is the art of tone in the movement of time. Or: in the unity of rhythm, melody and harmony. And so on. Once I even read that: music consists of harmony and melody; this for the left hand, and that for the right! Then there are those well-meant poetical effusions – 'Music is an envoy of heaven', and its multifarious variations – which say nothing, of course, but draw rather nearer to fathoming our argument, perhaps, than 'talking shop' about music does. This facile playing-with-words has assumed an importance in our 'histories of music', whilst really such catch-phrases are only labels which we have given to the details of theoretical composition and without which we would find it difficult to survey the evolution of music through the ages.

Just as electricity has existed since the beginning of time, long before we discovered it, just as everything that has not yet been discovered really exists already, so is the cosmic atmosphere completely filled with collective forms, motives, and combinations of past and future music.

A composer seems to me to be like a gardener who has been allotted a little plot of land to cultivate on an extensive estate; it is his task to gather, to arrange in order,

and then to make up a bouquet from whatever flourishes in his locality; when flowering-time has come, to plant a garden. It is this gardener's duty, then, to amass and fashion whatever is within reach of his eyes and arms (and his discretion). Likewise even one of the initiated, one of the anointed, a Bach, a Mozart, views only a fraction of the entire vegetable creation and knows how to handle it and point out its beauties; a tiny fragment of that blossoming foliage which covers our planet and weaves over an enormous area, some too far away, some unexplored, beyond the achievement of an individual man – be he even a giant. And still the analogy is weak and inadequate, in so far as the vegetable creation is merely a clothing, whereas music, invisible and inaudible, traces through and penetrates the whole expanse of the universe.

Even the great giant must remain confined by the circle in which he pursues his activities. However much even he is able to comprehend, it must become a negligible little distance in relation to the infinity from which it is derived; just as even the highest mountain brings us no nearer to the sun! Within the limitations of this 'personal sphere' imposed in time and space by the accident of birth, the individual personality feels especially attracted by intuition to distinct thought-patterns and formations, while his temperament runs in close relationship, due to similarly constituted elements. The creative artist favours these impulses in so unequivocal a fashion that he readily returns to them again and again in his work; in such a way that we come to recognize him by them. – Just as we, from seemingly accidental (though in reality predetermined) meetings with a few women, form ideas on love and never comprehend above and beyond these events (love understood as mutual attraction for mankind and for creatures through infinity and eternity), so it is through a similar mediation that we think we have beheld the nature of music through our knowledge of a few composers. What we thereby actually behold are mere idiosyncracies and mannerisms; characteristics which are handed on from the greater to the lesser composers, until a new greater one shall arise and give fresh direction and impetus; and so music will take another step forward. This new composer will be hailed as a genius. In reality, he will owe his importance to the accident of his birth in the coincidence of time and place.

The nature of music is merely surmised from a few of its components; most people do not understand it or misunderstand it. It is as if we were trying to acquire a picture of the architecture of all ages and nations from the few foundation-stones that we have managed to assemble. On the contrary, such sporadic and fragmentary knowledge only dims and diminishes the true picture, a picture which is there to be glimpsed by one possessing the true vision.

When we listen (in deepest reverence and highest admiration) to a movement by that demi-god Mozart (one of those rare minds who often came near to expressing the very essence of music), we must confess, all the same, that he fell short of expressing the innermost spirit of music in the following ways:

1. We perceive unhesitatingly the *ethos* from which his music springs, its relation to the then-prevailing social and historical conditions.
2. The master's selection; what he favours and what he rejects; what lies within his personality.
3. The frequent repetitions and emphases of his preferred thought-patterns.

What nature gave him so liberally for his own, is in these three ways lessened and limited by personal colouring. Thus the master presents us with a limited choice of those innumerable forms in which music surrounds us everywhere and at all times; from this choice he again draws an even more limited selection, to which he returns often and dwells upon because it pleases him to do so and because he feels it expressive to do so. Since he has a vocation for his task, credit for carrying it out is not due to himself but rather to fate; on the other hand, I should deem it tantamount to a criminal offence if someone without any vocation were to try and undertake work of this order. Even he who has the calling cannot exceed his own limitations. Let no one envy a genius, for his is a most arduous and responsible task; and yet he is in no way able to decrease the distance that separates us from the essence of music.

This distance will not be decreased by our attempts at inventing new methods or by individual discoveries. It will be decreased gradually by a constantly accumulating collection of all that has been achieved and all that is yet to be achieved; and at the same time our so-called 'individual importance' must give precedence to the untiring and inexhaustible development of the objective values of music itself. – Just as to the astronomer the greater part of the firmament must ever remain hidden, so we never completely grasp the essence of music. Our progress towards the ultimate goal is frighteningly dilatory and most hazardous to follow, and the situation is not helped by the 'plebeians' in the world of music who dare to speak and behave as freely as the 'aristocratic leader'. Progress is constantly being delayed by errors: both those that have already been committed and those that are now being advocated.

What is the nature of music? Not the virtuoso's performance, not the Overture to *Rienzi*, nor the harmony text-book, nor yet the nostalgic national songs of nations separated by their gaily-painted frontier-posts (the very fact that nations are so separated is itself a denial of the spirit of music). Although each of these examples contains a grain of the ultimate truth, in that music is made up of varying elements, the very fact that music can be so divided renders it liable to being subdivided and analyzed beyond recognition; as if the canopy of heaven were being cut up into tiny strips. What can one individual achieve when faced with such an immense wealth of material? We ought to be grateful to the core of our soul for being privileged to see a few of the elect, who have been able to set up, as it were, a miniature model of that sphere from whence flows all beauty and power; even though their model be on a minute scale, through inspiration and technique it has been created with style and form.

People will never be able to understand the nature of music in its genuineness and wholeness. If only they would learn to separate the wheat from the chaff! Yet it is we musicians who prevent this happening, in the same way that dogma hinders faith.

Sometimes, in very rare cases, a human being has overheard the rather unearthly nature of music: it flows to the hands, then recedes as soon as one snatches after it; it becomes lifeless when we wish to translate it into our human world; becomes tainted by our human touch and loses its lustre; fades as soon as it has pierced the darkness of our mentality. And yet sufficient still remains that reminds us of its divine origin, that it appears to us as the highest, noblest, and fairest of all that is high, noble, and fair that is given to us to know.

Not that music is an 'envoy of heaven', as the poet meant. But the envoys of heaven are surely those elect who are born to the high office of bringing to us a few rays of primordial light through immeasurable space. Hail to the Prophets!

Sergei Rachmaninov. Nightingale and Raven

from *The Listener*, Vol. 90, No. 2323, 4 October 1973

The Boris Karloff of the concert platform, or the ghost of Palm Court, Grand Hotel: two views of Rachmaninov, the popular one and the snobbish one. They gained currency because Rachmaninov was personally as uncommunicative as Poe's raven, while melodically as voluble as Keats's nightingale. If he'd been a compulsive talker who had enlarged on his theories of composition, and if he'd been sterile as a melodist, the critics would be having a field-day. It's so much easier to write about theories of composition than about good tunes. But Rachmaninov had his priorities right. And his public respects him for it. After all, a critic's typewriter makes a pathetic patter compared to the public's applause.

Thursday's Rachmaninov programme was the last in a Radio 3 series featuring records made by great pianists in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties. In the present period of *Urtext* fetish, when so much performance is correct, brilliant and faceless, it was good to be reminded of the conviction of a master pianist who was also a master composer (even if a minor one). He played his own transcription of Bach's Prelude from the Partita No. 3 for violin, Borodin's Scherzo in A flat, Schumann's *Carnaval* and his own Fourth Piano Concerto (with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy); and it was as much Rachmaninov when he played the other composers as when he played his own music. The Bach was as if Gustave Doré had engraved a design of Rubens. The Borodin was full of Gogolesque quips and quirks which refute the legend of the unsmiling Rachmaninov. Heaven knows what Schumann would have said about his *Carnaval* in Rachmaninov's interpretation! He would have been astounded, that's certain. Where it is so often *gemütlich*, Rachmaninov made it monumental; where we expected it to be

whimsical, it was grotesque. But on its own terms it was integrated. It convinced. That is the crux of any performance. When the master comes, he silences dissent. In retrospect, Rachmaninov's Fourth Piano Concerto doesn't seem to be the peer of his Third or his Second, yet this comparison never occurred to me during the broadcast, because the performance riveted.

In my view, Rachmaninov is a great composer. (I don't mean he's in the Bach or Mozart class: I said 'great', not one of the greatest.) One requisite of a great composer is surely uniqueness, the ability to embody in sound one aspect of life more memorably than anyone else has done. This is the great composer's 'message', his main 'theme' which, though conveyed through his melodic themes, is larger than these. And he returns to this 'theme' repeatedly in different works. For example, with Mahler it is valediction; with Delius, it is the transience of human life. I'm not saying that music is capable of being translated entirely into verbal language. If it were, why express it in music? But I do believe that certain areas of musical thought overlap with verbal thought. And I suggest that a great composer's main 'theme' can be expressed in a word or phrase. Rachmaninov's music expresses somnambulistic nostalgia more memorably than does any other music. It expresses this nostalgia through long melodic phrases and his treatment of cadences. Cadences are music's harmonic punctuation: where some other composers write short musical sentences, Rachmaninov writes long sentences of music punctuated by many commas or semi-colons, as it were. This produces a psychological paradox: as the music drifts on, forward in time, the listener's mind drifts backward in time, as we sense the ache for long-lost things. If it were *all* nostalgia, it would be spineless. But this dream world also includes the phantasmagoric, projected with a *diablerie* controlled by an iron will. 1973 is the centenary of Rachmaninov's birth. Though it is 30 years since he died, he is still, through his masterly recordings, our contemporary.

Szymanowski at the Piano

from the *Godowski Society Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1983

On a wall of Karol Szymanowski's log cabin in Zakopane in the Polish Alps, just to the right of his modest, upright piano, hung a framed photo of a sculpted head of Chopin, a detail from Chopin's monument in Warsaw's Łazienki Park: Chopin sitting, listening, under a bronze tree; the winter wind has blown and frozen both hair and branches. It was the work of Waclaw Szymanowski (1859-1930), the composer's uncle. Chopin was the *éminence grise* behind Szymanowski's mission to forge again the lost consciousness of Poland. Even the titles of music by the two composers are identical: Preludes, Etudes, Mazurkas.

In front of Szymanowski's piano was his writing table. On it stood a small, oval-framed photo of Paderewski: in some ways the only link in the chain that

Szymanowski would forge from Chopin to Poland's musical future. Paderewski as Premier of the resurrected Poland after World War I – the white eagle become phoenix – was a symbol of his country's rebirth. As composer and pianist he was a symbol of the conservation of a great tradition. Paderewski encouraged the young Szymanowski, and recorded and frequently performed his early Etude in B flat minor op. 4, No. 3.

Szymanowski's family circle numbered so many pianists as to predestine him to compose piano music, if he were to compose at all. The composer's father was himself a pianist as well as being a scientist, and made copper-plate copies of his son's early compositions. There were five children: two boys and three girls. Karol's brother Feliks was an even finer pianist than Karol himself, and Feliks also composed operettas and became an opera répétiteur. One of the sisters, Stanisława, became an opera singer.

One of Karol's early music teachers was Gustav Neuhaus, father of Heinrich (Harry) Neuhaus, who later became Director of the Moscow Conservatoire and one of the great piano teachers, his students including Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels and Radu Lupu. Harry Neuhaus's uncle was Felix Blumenfeld,³ pianist, composer and conductor, who taught first in St Petersburg, then in Moscow, and was the teacher of Horowitz (whom Szymanowski met and liked, later). Blumenfeld wrote a Study in A flat for piano, left hand solo, dedicated to Godowsky. It was through Blumenfeld that Harry Neuhaus studied with Godowsky in Berlin and Vienna just before World War I; and Neuhaus introduced Szymanowski to Godowsky in Vienna in 1912. From Vienna on 3 February 1912, Szymanowski wrote to a friend: 'Our only really friendly home is Godowsky's; the place oozes love towards us'. Godowsky asked Szymanowski to write a piano concerto for him. He began it in 1914 – sketches are extant – but, always a Chopinesquely fastidious composer, he never finished it.

Another bosom crony of Szymanowski's from early on, and a fellow-member of the Godowsky circle, was Artur Rubinstein, dedicatee and performer of a number of Szymanowski's works; as was Jan Smeterlin, another pianist-friend. So Szymanowski was, as it were, 'enscaled' by pianists! His professor of composition at the Warsaw Music Institute was Moskowski, a pupil of Moniusko. Another student of Moskowski, Ludomir Rózycki, remembered the young Karol working on his First Piano Sonata: 'I often found him at the piano, studying meticulously the structure of Chopin's and Scriabin's piano passages'.

The librettist for Szymanowski's opera *King Roger*, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, recalled overhearing the composer at work in an adjoining room: 'He always worked at the piano, striking a few notes from time to time, from which one couldn't really form

³ [Original editor's footnote:] Blumenfeld taught the Russian pianist Iso Elinson, who in turn taught Ronald Stevenson.

any definite impression of how the music was growing; and he sang softly in a characteristic falsetto, as he played’.

Szymanowski was born in 1882 to a cultured Polish family of the landed gentry in the Ukraine. During the October Revolution, a gang of marauding Bolshevik soldiers sacked the family estate. Seeing two grand pianos as hateful symbols of affluence, they lugged them into a nearby pond. Szymanowski never owned a grand piano again: he hired an upright, or played a friend’s piano. He was mainly a private pianist. His was no virtuoso temperament to exult in public applause, though he could conceive virtuoso music in the privacy of his study. His *Symphonie concertante* op. 60 (1932) was the nearest he came to writing a piano concerto, though it was something less than that, something not too difficult for him to play in public; a score that *shielded* the pianist.

Szymanowski therefore belongs to that small, select group of piano composers which includes Alkan, Brahms, Franck and, in our time, Bax and Sorabji. Alkan, Brahms and Franck all retired early from concert-giving. Bax, reputed to have been a consummate score-reader, able to sight-read a huge full score and convey its content and colour in the black-and-white of the piano, nevertheless never had any ambition as a solo pianist. And Sorabji’s public performances and one single broadcast recital – now legendary – were abandoned very early. Sorabji and Alkan could boil their alchemical cauldrons of diabolical pianistic improbabilities in solitude.

Franck, the tyro-piano-virtuoso, went into the meditational retreat of his organ loft in Sainte-Clotilde, Paris. His few, late, great piano works sound like piano transcriptions from the organ. Two hands are expected to do what they can only do ideally with the addition of a pedal board. Could it be that Brahms’s notoriously awkward piano writing might have been more grateful if he’d had to play it in public? Might he have realised that the added tension and excitement of public performance demanded some pruning of textures? Compare the piano writing of Rachmaninov before and after he embarked on his virtuoso career (which he did late, in his forties): the earlier work is sprawling; the later, pianistically organised. Rachmaninov himself admitted this in an interview he gave to the American music magazine *Etude* in 1923.

A conjecture of mine is that the great virtuoso composer/pianist Godowsky was a main influence on Szymanowski. After all, they met. Szymanowski visited Godowsky, you recall, in Vienna; which means he would hear him play the piano, because Godowsky always practised, even with a room full of guests! (This may be verified in Mark Hambourg’s *Memoirs*.) Szymanowski also heard Godowsky play in public. Harry Neuhaus must have shown Szymanowski Godowsky’s *53 Studies after the Chopin Etudes*, which Neuhaus in his master-book *The Art of Piano Playing* describes as ‘absolutely transcendental in their difficulty and incomparable for musical humour and inventiveness’. He might have added: for their contrapuntal super-skill, also.

Szymanowski's first two Piano Sonatas aspire to Godowskian grandeur of pianism and polyphony. They have arguably a higher musical 'voltage' than Godowsky, but do not have his mastery of piano facture (scoring for keyboard, which includes that distribution of notes between the hands which best achieves the required tempo and dynamics). Certainly, Szymanowski's op. 33 set of twelve piano studies (1916-18) evinces much more sophisticated piano facture than his early op. 4 set (1900-02); and his third (and last) Piano Sonata (1918) is much more refined than the earlier two.

There is a parallel between the creative careers of Szymanowski and Godowsky: both began by writing monumental, polyphonic piano works; and both later embraced a highly individual quasi-oriental Impressionism, an art of transcendental arabesque. Listen to 'Shéhérazade' from Szymanowski's *Masks* op. 34 (1915-16) and then listen to Godowsky's International Piano Archive recording of his own 'Gardens of Buitenzorg' from the *Java Suite*. This Godowsky piece dates from 1925, so perhaps there is a *parallel* development at work here, rather than an influence. I doubt whether Szymanowski began to influence *Godowsky*. Szymanowski was the kind of composer who had to struggle through influences – Scriabin, Strauss, Reger, Polish folk music ... whereas Godowsky was sure of where he wanted to go from the start. Godowsky wrote almost exclusively for piano (as did Chopin and Medtner); Szymanowski wrote in every form and for most media – symphony, concerto, opera, ballet, quartet, choral music, songs and so on. Both Szymanowski and Godowsky evince a striking number of affinities (which have not been pointed out before, as far as I know): both Polish, both respecters of classical form and both masters of arabesque, voluptuous ornament.

The duality of Slav and Latin – the Polish birthright – is present in *all* Szymanowski's music; perhaps most potently in his opera *King Roger*, which presents the conflict of Christianity and paganism. Szymanowski's musical polarities are grace and fierceness. Szymanowski's grace reaches its apogee in one of his unique achievements: that of suggesting an *orchestral*, multicoloured, silken sheen as of an oriental carpet, on the piano. With him, the keyboard *becomes* an oriental carpet. No wonder the Parsi composer Sorabji so loved Szymanowski's music! More than any non-oriental – more than Messiaen – Szymanowski has transformed the keyboard into a casket of oriental jewels, a resplendent music-box that miraculously sings like the voice of an Eastern night.

The polarity, the fierceness, reaches its apogee in some of the Mazurkas op. 58, written in the 1920s. In his otherwise splendid, indeed indispensable, book *The Music of Szymanowski*,⁴ Jim Samson shows more interest in the complex music than in that of the nationalist period. This is a generally held view. It isn't mine. Szymanowski was writing Polish nationalist music long before the 1920s, as

⁴ London: Kahn & Averill, 1980.

Bogusław Maciejewski points out in *Szymanowski: His Life & Music*,⁵ and as I myself discovered when the BBC invited me to give a piano recital in their 1982 Szymanowski centenary series on Radio 3. The main work I recorded was the *Variations on a Polish Folk Song* op. 10 (1903), a work I didn't previously know; one that was a revelation in its poetry and magnificence. Though with the hindsight of my Godowsky studies, I discreetly re-wrote some few details in the pianistic facture that didn't obscure for me the greatness of this music. Indeed, some of the variations are worthy of Chopin at his best; and I have no higher praise. They sometimes – rarely – go *beyond* Chopin technically, in, for instance, one polyrhythmic variation which combines this contrapuntal technique with the most exquisite delicacy of texture and tone. The opus 10 also includes a funeral march of heroic nobility that uses the keyboard more extensively than Chopin's celebrated funeral march.

The Szymanowski Mazurkas are the wild music of the Polish Highlands, unlike Chopin's which are the melancholy-merry music of the Polish Plains. Szymanowski, who had a considerable gift as a novelist (!) and essayist, wrote a revelatory article on the *góral* music (the mountain music of Poland) which is published in English translation by Bogusław Maciejewski and Felix Aprahamian in their *Karol Szymanowski and Jan Smeterlin, correspondence and essays*.⁶ It should be read in full. Much British music criticism is uncomfortable with folk content in concert music. But Polish *góral* music, relative to Polish Lowland music, is as little known as, for example, Scottish Gaelic music (the great bagpipe music, the *piobaireachd*) relative to Lowland Scottish music. The musics of the Polish and the Scottish Highlands are complex and 'weird' and totally new to the outsider. The received parameters of 'nice', 'jolly', easy folk music simply do not apply. Both of these Highland musics warrant a great deal of study. Nearly all the musicologists I know are more innocent than infants about these questions. I remember practising some of the Szymanowski Mazurkas when a daughter of mine was a tiny girl. She bounced up and down with delight. Charming, an infant's wisdom. The child responds to 'strange' music, whereas the wiseacre's brain can be as still as his feet, addled in pseudo-academic neurosis.

Szymanowski's contribution to twentieth-century piano music is one of the most considerable. After all, two of the generally accredited 'modern masters' – Stravinsky and Schoenberg – have produced almost nothing of real import in solo piano music: certainly not great *piano* music. Szymanowski's masterpieces await discovery.

He died in 1937. His last wish was that a Polish Highland bagpipe band should play at his funeral. The first wreath – red and white roses (Poland's national colours) – was placed on Szymanowski's coffin by the friend of his youth – Paderewski.

⁵ London: Poets' & Painters' Press, 1967.

⁶ London: Allegro Press, [1970?].

Leopold Godowsky

from *The Listener*, Vol. 85, No. 2180, 7 January 1971

Mark Twain suggested that Shakespeare wasn't written by Shakespeare, but by someone else of the same name. You might bear this in mind in reading this review: the author shares the name of the pianist who commemorated the Godowsky centenary on Radio 3 last week. Stevenson introduced the programme and played five Godowsky pieces. If a Godowsky title cropped up in one of your Christmas music quizzes, it would be just the sort of thing to stump the would-be encyclopaedist. I suppose the usual response would be something like this: 'Godowsky – oh yes, he was one of the great Romantic pianists; but a *composer*? Oh well, probably a lollipop merchant, a writer of encores'. These assumptions couldn't be more wrong. Godowsky, Romantic or no, lived to the eve of World War Two. He was a relative (by marriage) of George Gershwin, and used to drop in on his friend Charlie Chaplin on location in Hollywood. Godowsky was born in 1870 in Vilnius, then in Russian Poland, though today the capital of Lithuania; he was largely self-taught, apart from advice from Saint-Saëns; stormed Berlin in 1900; emigrated to the US; suffered a stroke in the Thirties which terminated his concert career; gave master classes in Russia; died in New York in 1938.

'Hari Besaar' ('The Great Day'), from the *Java Suite*, opened the programme. Composed in 1924, it is a translation into pianistic terms of the sonority of the Gamelan ensemble, playing at the kermess or country fair. The second piece, 'Whirling Dervishes', for all its *allegro feroce*, isn't vintage Godowsky. But the next piece certainly is. It was Study No. 18a for left hand alone, one of the 53 *Studies after the Chopin Etudes*. With these works, Godowsky extended piano music's range of polyphonic, polyrhythmic and polydynamic possibilities. Their technical demands challenge any pianist alive. Their poetry puts them beyond the reach of whizz-kids; far beyond many pianists capable of negotiating the merely digital problems. I doubt whether any pianist today could perform them *in toto*. Godowsky could. That fact alone stakes his claim to supremacy in the pianistic galaxy. The study we heard contains an accompanied canon: a tune followed by its own shadow, so to speak, and set against an ornate background. It also employs unusual rhythms in irregular groupings, such as four notes followed by five then three. And this was years before Bartók employed such rhythms. Whereas Bartók got the idea from Balkan folk dances, Godowsky's rhythms were suggested by finger groupings in relation to the keyboard.

The Study was followed by Godowsky's free transcription of Schubert's 'Cradle Song' D 498 ('Schlafe, schlafe, holder süsser Knabe'). His declared aim here was 'merely to transplant the song from voice to piano; to comment and interpret it, in the manner of free variations'. Godowsky hoped that, to listeners who are open-minded, his Schubert transcriptions would proclaim his veneration for the composer and his immortal songs. Let's look a little more closely at his 'Cradle

Song' transcription. The original is so well-known as to be taken for granted. Ethnomusicology indicates that most tunes of such folk-like simplicity actually have their source in folk song. When Schubert wrote his 'Cradle Song', he was half-remembering some immemorial phrases. In a sense, he was transcribing phrases which were even simpler than his tune. And, of course, he clothed his tune in the harmony of his period and personal choice – a thing no folk-singer of long ago would do, for folk-song in the pre-electric-guitar era was unaccompanied. Godowsky preserved Schubert's tune with fidelity and, just as Schubert added his own harmonies to an essentially folk-like tune, so Godowsky adds *his* harmonies – of pastel-like subtlety. He also treats the tune in canon, a very insouciant canon: paradoxically, it is artless, guileless, though full of art. The echo-device of canon was as natural to Godowsky as echo is to the hills.

Schubert was also the inspirer of Godowsky's last major work for piano, his Passacaglia based on the first eight bars of the 'Unfinished' Symphony. This was composed in 1927, on the eve of the centenary of Schubert's death. It culminates in a monumental fugue, which Godowsky authorised for performance separately. The commemorative programme ended with this fugue.

Maurice Emmanuel: a Belated Apology

from *Music and Letters*, Vol. 40, No. 2, April 1959

των δ' αδοκῆτων πόρον ἤυρε θεός
(God has found a way – contrary to our expectations)
Euripides, *The Bacchae*.

We are in the court of Assizes in Limbo. (Both there, and in purgatory, lawyers practice for the Last Judgment.) There is mercifully no press, but we desecrate the ghost of Honoré Daumier in the corner of a bench, busy on a posthumous caricature. The case is queer: alleged shameful neglect of a certain French composer. On earth, no one ever bothers about such things. Do they in Limbo? There is no possibility of a writ of *habeas corpus* being served. The manner of the hearing is French and the shades of two music critics are engaged in hot dispute. Neither of them has read or heard a note of the composer's music. There is therefore every reason to debate it. If it provides a *point de départ* for airing their views, the composer may go to ----. But that is a matter for a higher court.

Daumier grins and stuffs his sketch-book in his pocket. The case is dismissed.

The case of Maurice Emmanuel is hardly less fantastic than that. If we were counsel-in-charge, our brief would read something like this:

1. 1945-1958. Emmanuel's music is transmitted three times by *Radiodiffusion Française*, and twice by the BBC.

2. 1950. The Committee of the Festival International du Demi-Siècle refuses to sanction performance of a short overture by Emmanuel, while dedicating whole concerts to other French composers.
3. December 1954 – September 1955 – December 1955. A certain British music magazine publishes three long articles on Olivier Messiaen.⁷ Emmanuel's name is mentioned once only – in Messiaen's *curriculum vitae*, a passing reference.
4. April 1955. Another British music magazine publishes an article on Olivier Messiaen,⁸ in which his main interests are enumerated as: Hindu rhythms, bird song and plainchant. No mention that Emmanuel, *the teacher of Messiaen*, as long ago as 1920 wrote a piano sonatina on Hindu modes, another sonatina based on bird song, and a book on plainsong.
5. 1956. Gallimard of Paris publishes Henry Barraud's *La France et la musique occidentale*. Emmanuel is cited once, erroneously – as a pupil of Franck!

These references to Messiaen are in no way meant as a polemic directed against him. With certain reservations, I admire his work. On 23 December 1956, I gave the first British broadcast performance of his 'Rondeau' for piano, transmitted in the BBC Scottish Home Service. But it does seem that future historians, writing the chronicles of French music for the first half of the twentieth century, may be unaware that their page on Messiaen is really a palimpsest from which an account of his teacher has been erased in order to make room for appraising the pupil.

Why is Emmanuel's music almost unknown? Surely because he gained eminence as a musicologist and therefore, in this age of specialization, could not possibly be considered as a composer. Busoni's was a similar fate: he was a great pianist, *ergo* he could not be a composer. The case of Rachmaninov may be cited to disprove my argument. Assuredly, Rachmaninov was recognised as pianist and composer. But he established himself as a composer before he embarked seriously upon a career as a concert pianist, which he did only in middle age. Emmanuel was a musicologist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of music. That is not the popular conception of a composer. He was also modest. Cynical professionalism may doubt whether honesty ever pays, but it will be certain that modesty never pays. And so Emmanuel went unpaid – twenty years after his death – insufficiently repaid for his labours; labours from which the younger generation can learn much.

Maurice Emmanuel was born on 2 May 1862, at Bar-sur-Aube – the same year as Debussy, for whom he often plied a generous pen. When he was four or five his family moved to Beaune, in the Côte d'Or. As he grew up there, he became an

⁷ Stevenson presumably means David Drew's three-part article: 'Messiaen: a Provisional Study' in *The Score*, No.10, pp. 33–49; No.13, pp. 59–73; and No.14, pp. 41–61.

⁸ Norman Demuth: 'Messiaen and his Organ Music', in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 96 (April 1955), pp. 203–6.

adopted citizen of Beaune, and later the town named one of its streets after him. From his earliest years he loved nature passionately, from its tiniest object to its most grandiose spectacle, from insects to mountains. Like Debussy and Bartók, he was something of an entomologist. As a child, he sang and danced with the vine-growers, and the church festivals at the well-known Hôtel-Dieu at Beaune remained an unforgettable memory for him.

His mother was a fine amateur landscape painter; his father and his maternal grandfather were printers; his aunt was Sister Jardeaux, nun at the Hôtel-Dieu. These quietly cultured relatives wisely fostered music in the little boy. Before him there had been no musician in the family. A local composer, the Marquis d'Ivry, also encouraged him. Having graduated as bachelor of literature and of science, he determined to study music at the Paris Conservatoire. His teachers were Savard, Dubois, Bourgault-Ducoudray and Delibes. From the first, Delibes disliked him, principally on account of the young musician's preoccupation with modal composition, which was anathema to the composer of *Coppélia*, whose ideas were firmly rooted in diatonicism. This antagonism went so far as to exclude Emmanuel from the *concours* for the Prix de Rome and ended in his being dismissed from Delibes's composition class. Next he pursued his studies in composition with Ernest Guiraud, the teacher of Debussy. He was present during the conversations between Guiraud and Debussy on the latter's return from Rome (1889-90) and was able to transcribe their arguments in shorthand, a vital contribution to the history of French music. From this period date Emmanuel's Sonata for Cello and Piano, which already shows the composer's mastery of modal composition, and the *Ouverture pour un conte gai*, which displays a rhythmic invention comparable to works written half a century later.

At the Conservatoire, in spite of his dismissal by Delibes, he was not hindered from taking his licentiate diplomas in 1886, but was discouraged from pursuing a career in music. Instead, he enrolled at the Sorbonne and at the Ecole du Louvre, and made rapid progress in the study of philology and ancient art, attending lectures on Graeco-Latin rhythm and metre by Louis Havet. Visiting Brussels about this time, he met once more the great Belgian musicologist François-Auguste Gevaert, who exercised a profound influence on him. In 1895 he submitted his thesis on the ancient Grecian dance. Still he hesitated to take music as his career. But he became friendly with the Marmontels (father and son), and it was they who helped him to regain confidence in his ability as composer.

Between 1880 and 1902, he supplemented his general education by long travels on foot in Brittany, in the French and Swiss Alps, in Hungary and in Austria. On these travels he exercised his facility in landscape and architectural drawing (a gift inherited from his mother). The carillons of the churches at Dijon and Beaune gave him the idea of his first Piano Sonatina, based on bell tunes. And the memory of a gypsy orchestra on board a steamer on the Danube stimulated him to compose his *Zingaresca* for 2 flutes, timpani, 2 pianos and strings (1902).

His reputation gradually grew, and in 1898 the professors of the Collège de France decided unanimously to create for him a complimentary lectureship in the history of music. But the chemist Berthelot, at a time when his own subject was undergoing a crisis, declared that he would quit the college if music entered it! And the budget committee, on this threat, supplemented his salary and left Emmanuel unemployed. But if the end of the year did not bring the end of pecuniary troubles, it did bring a joy which was to renew itself with every year of Emmanuel's life: on 20 December 1898 he married.

After many years of financial insecurity he was reduced to teaching the history of art in public schools for girls from 1898 to 1904. About this time he was appointed choirmaster at Sainte-Clotilde; but this appointment, welcomed at first, brought further difficulties. Emmanuel, as a disciple of the Abbé Moissener of Dijon, straightway attempted to reform the choir and succeeded in moulding it to the severe style of plainsong which he loved so deeply. This was achieved, only to meet with unimaginable criticism and, notwithstanding the 'Moto proprio' of Pius X in 1904 respecting the strict adherence to Gregorian chant, Emmanuel's duties were made so difficult to perform that he finally resigned. It is curious that, amid all this emotional disturbance, he was able to compose the most felicitous and brilliant of his instrumental works, the Trio Sonata for clarinet, flute and piano (1907). In February of the same year, his son was born. Also in the same year, Bourgault-Ducoudray proposed and obtained Emmanuel as his successor in the chair of history of music at the Paris Conservatoire, a post that Emmanuel occupied from 1907 to 1937.

Yet even this long period of relative security was troubled for him. His colleagues failed to understand his rare independence. They could make nothing of a man who, after teaching for years that C.P.E. Bach was the father of the bi-thematic sonata, one day deleted this from his lectures because one of his students discovered a bi-thematic sonata by Giovanni Battista Somis. Conventional professors could not account for a man who, before examinations, instructed his students not to repeat what he had told them, but to give him their own opinion. Yet much more disappointing to Emmanuel than all these petty misunderstandings was the almost total lack of appreciation of his own compositions, which he knew, for all his modesty, were good works.

In the absence of this appreciation, he was forced to devote himself (in order to provide for his family) to activities which left very little time for composition. He gave many public lectures on music, wrote numerous articles and seven major volumes,⁹ hundreds of programme notes for the Société des Concerts (which, if collected, would form a comprehensive history of the symphony); and, as if that

⁹ On such varied subjects as plainsong, Anton Reicha, César Franck, the Greek dance, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, polyphonic church music, and a most monumental 'Histoire'. [RS]

were not enough, he actively supported such organizations as the Société de géographie, the Club alpin français, the Société des Amis des Cathédrales, the Société des Naturalistes Parisiens and the Société pour la protection des paysages et de l'esthétique de la France. In spite of fragile health, he personally helped many young artists and concerned himself with social welfare. In this domain it was above all during and immediately after the First World War that he gave himself unstintingly – his First Symphony, composed in 1919, was inspired by the death in the air of a young aviator in the 1914-18 war.

Yet despite these almost overwhelming commitments, Emmanuel's corpus includes seventy-three compositions. Only thirty of these have been performed and, out of these, only twenty-one are published.¹⁰ He worked at these compositions by preference in the seclusion of his country retreat in Normandy, sitting at his small work-table under the lime trees. He would have preferred to die in the country of his childhood or birth (Beaune or Bar-sur-Aube), but when death came it was in Paris on 14 December 1938. His was a life of quiet passions and calm joys and, notwithstanding grievous disappointments, a life rich in friendship.¹¹

During his last illness, Emmanuel wrote some exquisite leaves, evoking childhood memories. In these pages he describes his maternal grandfather's home, where he spent his first years. He paints a delicately macabre yet fragiley beautiful picture of the old house of the master-printer and newspaper owner; a house of a thousand crooked shadows with a lovely garden with trees that partly hid the ugliness of the adjoining printing office. With gentle humour and sensitivity, comparable in English perhaps only with Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Emmanuel writes of his favourite apartment in the house, which for some reason happened to be the linen-cupboard room:

Furnished with wall-cupboards, with shelves and coats-of-arms, and perfumed by the lavender which my grandmother used to sprinkle liberally on the sheets, it overlooked the garden and, facing the printing office, served me as look-out. Down below, across from the lilacs, I could make out the swing of the Marinoni press, the rotation of its fly-wheel, and I tried to explain to myself how these movements were related to the sound of the cadences which fascinated me: it was a regular rhythm, thoroughly engraved on my childhood memory and fixed there ineffaceably. Four-square phrase as it was, its form suggested to me some scraps of melody, which I used to enjoy singing to myself. Each Saturday, the day on which they 'pulled' the 'Memorial' from the press, an old workman whom we called Nosey-Nosey, who was totally deprived of the appendage which his

¹⁰ In 1951, however, the Centre de Documentation de Musique International, Paris, included in its library microfilms of the two Symphonies, the *Zingaresca*, the *Overture pour un conte gai* and the posthumous tone-poem, *Poème du Rhône*. [RS]

¹¹ Among his friends were Paul Dukas, Gabriel Pierné, Louis Aubert, Marcel Dupré, Charles Koechlin, Paul Le Flem, René Dumesnil, André Levinson, Eugène Bigot, Ferruccio Busoni and the Rev. Dr Stewart of Cambridge; among his pupils he could count Robert Casadesus, Suzanne Demarquez, Maurice Duruflé, Marguerite Béclard d'Harcourt, Jacques Ibert, Yvonne Lefébure, Olivier Messiaen, Georges Migot, Jean Rivier, Alexis Roland-Manuel, etc. [RS]

nickname gave him twice over, yoked himself to the drudgery, assisted by an apprentice. Then it was that I would run to my look-out. Perched on a low cupboard, I looked with all my eyes, listened with all my ears. My family knew nothing of this fascination, and Nina, my governess, would come to look for me among the linen, when I was not to be found elsewhere. It was this Marinoni machine that first suggested music to me. And I regret that, when I installed myself in Paris, I did not enter into partnership with the big businessman who had supplied this press to my father, his cousin.

There were three influences behind Emmanuel's work: the music of Ancient Greece, plainsong and folk song. Unifying these influences was the idea of modality, common to them all. After having presented in 1895 two theses for his doctorate (*Essai sur l'orchestrique grecque* and *De Saltationis Disciplina apud Graecos*), Emmanuel was commissioned to write the important article on ancient music for the Lavignac Encyclopaedia. This article is long and compact; perhaps a little indigestible. Later it was incorporated into his magisterial 'Histoire de la langue musicale'.¹² In his address before the first 'Congrès du Rhythme' held at Geneva in August 1926, Emmanuel once more summed up his knowledge of Greek rhythm; and in his article 'La Polymodie', published in *La Revue Musicale* for January 1928, he summarized the essentials of contemporary knowledge of the Greek modes.

Of all these studies, perhaps the most original is Emmanuel's thesis on the Greek dance, which he published in book-form in 1896, under the title of *La danse grecque antique*.¹³ This was the product of a most intensive study, which took Emmanuel into the Louvre, to spend many hours scrutinizing and sketching the figures on antique vases. In the quiet of his study he pieced these fragments of information together with all the references to dancing that he could find in the plays of the Attic dramatists. Then his task was to reunite all this knowledge into a large and very intricate but superlatively beautiful mosaic. Aided by an exceptional erudition and patience, Emmanuel finally produced a veritable choreographic handbook of the Greek dance.

While on the subject of dance and rhythm, it is noteworthy that no less a poet than Ezra Pound has praised Emmanuel's knowledge of Greek rhythm (both musical and poetic) in such terms as these: 'The only book of any use on rhythm is [the] Greek section in vol. I *Encyclopédie de la Musique*, Laurencie et Lavignac' (postcard to Mary Barnard, written from Rapallo, 23 February 1934).¹⁴

¹² A whole edition of this book was destroyed during the last war, but the British Library has been fortunate enough to obtain a copy. [RS]

¹³ This exists in an English translation by Harriet Jean Beaulieu: *The Antique Greek Dance after Sculptured and Painted Figures*. London: John Lane, 1916 and 1927. [RS]

¹⁴ See Douglas Duncan Paige, ed.: *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*. London: Faber & Faber, 1951, p. 339.

An intimate study of the papyri containing the Delphic Hymns and the Hymn to Helios found at Delphi by the Ecole Française in Athens convinced Emmanuel that Hellenic music was the work of masters, with a 'harmony' contained within its monody. Obscure and largely conjectural as is the subject of music in the ancient civilizations, Emmanuel was able to illuminate at least a portion of the terrain; and, as always, the historian in him related his discoveries to later music and the composer in him related them to present-day compositional methods. In the Preface to his lyric tragedy *Salamine* (after Aeschylus), composed between 1921 and 1928 and performed at the Paris Opéra in 1929, he says:

It would be absurd and, moreover, impossible to try to imitate the music of ancient Greece ... But we know for certain some essential principles of the Greek art which are transportable into our musical system, without losing anything of their validity: the variety of expression obtained by the variety of modes; the employment of rhythmic patterns of a simple figuration. The frequency of rhythmic changes or modulations; the association of lyric strophes with couplets ... Such procedures are independent of musical law proper and are universally applicable to the popular art of all nations.

A practical illustration will render Emmanuel's method clear. In the first chorus of *Salamine*, Aeschylus in the original employed the ionic minor metre: N N - -. This the composer renders in his orchestral accompaniment by two quavers followed by two crotchets in triple time, the chorus singing a more supple rhythm above this background. Aeschylus maintains the ionic minor metre for four strophic couplets, but the composer evidently feels that this would weary modern ears. The first antistrophe is therefore accompanied by a much freer rhythm, dominated, however, by the fundamental idea of the ionic minor. The second strophe is in common time, but a bassoon counterpoint develops the ionic rhythm in diminution:



It was not only the Greece of old that engaged Emmanuel's interest: he was also enthusiastic about Greek popular song of more modern times. He valued highly the collection of Hubert Pernot, made on his scientific mission to the island of Chios in 1898, and utilized some of these melodies in his *Suite sur des airs populaires grecs* for violin and piano (1907). This suite will bear comparison with Bartók's *Rumanian Folk Dances*. Modally, it is far richer than the Bartók; its first piece, for instance, is based on a quasi-oriental mode (a chromatic tetrachord with augmented second).

Emmanuel never visited Greece, yet he was able, through his imagination, to recreate the spirit of the ancient civilization – much in the same way as Schiller wrote *Wilhelm Tell* without ever having seen the Alps.

Maurice Emmanuel's mental atmosphere was as clear as the purest Alpine air. He had his own mountain, as every thinker has. Around it wafted pure Hellenic

breezes and in it blossomed the flower of his melody, which so often recalled the singing of old Christian psalms, full of new joy. Thus Emmanuel distilled in music the essence of what have surely been the two most enduring influences on western civilization: Ancient Greece and Christianity.

His melodic contour retraces the sinuous yet unsensuous curves of plainsong. He was a passionate devotee of Gregorian chant. Aware of the prodigious researches of the Benedictines of Solesmes, he was not always in agreement with their conclusions. He felt that we lack the means of investigating the problem of plainsong so as to arrive at a definitive reconstruction of the chants. 'Will one ever be able', he asked, 'to fix the boundaries of the so-called Gregorian repertory; the matter of isochronism, of recitative *à vocalise* and of the pseudo-antique metre?' But Emmanuel considered Gregorian chant, even according to our present understanding of it, a thing of great beauty – on condition that the gracious nudity of its monody be unadorned by superfluous harmony. In spite of the praiseworthy admonitions of Pius X, it was the practice in many French churches at the beginning of the twentieth century (as indeed it is still in many *chapelles de village*) to assist the singing of plainsong by an organ accompaniment. As Emmanuel – and Joseph Yasser after him – demonstrated, this produced the monstrous incongruity of a melody of quartal harmonic complexion, accompanied by a tertian harmony, plainsong having evolved from pentatonic melody (which is essentially quartal by harmonic inference) and having been coloured by the subconscious memory of organum. Emmanuel realized that some French organists would go on accompanying plainsong, so he proved himself immensely practical and wrote a book showing how, if the dreaded thing were to be done at all, at least it might be done well. This book he entitled *Traité de l'accompagnement modal des psaumes*.¹⁵ In it, he demonstrated how and why modal harmony is the only possible accompaniment to plainsong, a harmony 'légère, furtive, comme une touche de couleur atténuée' ('light, furtive, like a touch of subdued colour'). He sent a copy of his book to Saint-Saëns, whose letter of thanks read, dryly: 'One does not accompany psalms'. To this, Emmanuel replied: 'If you had read my book as far as page 3 inclusively, you would have seen how I do not counsel accompaniment of the psalms, but that, if one must do it, one must employ the modes'.

An example of the influence of plainsong on Emmanuel is this passage from his Sonata for cornet or bugle and piano (1936), which shows the quasi-pentatonically treated Lydian mode with its quartal harmony (all parts are here written in C):

¹⁵ Lyons: Janin Frères, 1913.



In the same year as the *Traité* appeared (1913), its author also composed a collection of *Trente chansons bourguignonnes du pays de Beaune*, op. 15.¹⁶ With loving care and fine craftsmanship, Emmanuel here devotes his learning and his rare creative gift to the service of the humble anonyms who sang these lovely songs in the vineyards of his native Burgundy. In the long preface which the arranger wrote to this collection, he characteristically tells a story against himself. It appears that when he first began to collect the Burgundian folk songs as a young man, he once took down a tune and, singing it back to the old peasant who had contributed it, was informed that he had written it down incorrectly. The young musician was nonplussed, but, after a repeat, discovered he had set the melody in the major, when it was actually modal. Unwittingly he had made the air take on a refined accent foreign to its nature; he had narrowed the tones of the cadences into semitones, as if he would have narrowed the old peasant's fruity broad vowels into the lifeless thin accents lisped in society drawing-rooms; he had changed the patois for a mere patina or veneer; and in narrowing-down the tones and the vowels, he had tried to cage the soul of the old peasant, a soul that lived as free as the skies. This taught Emmanuel a lesson that he never forgot.

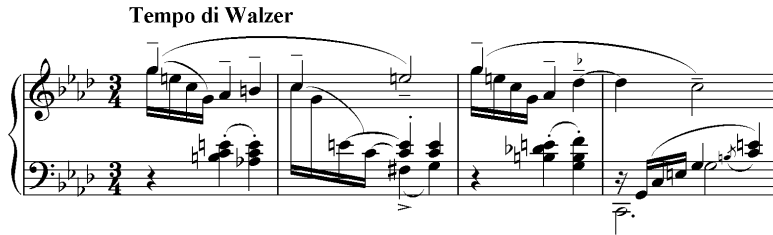
Always for him, music was no microbic thing in an intellectual vacuum; it was part of the very fabric of life. And so, when his collection of the Burgundian songs came to completion, he made it a true reflection of the people and the life he had loved so much as a boy. It is one of the most important of folk song collections. What Bourgault-Ducoudray did for Brittany, Maurice Emmanuel did for Burgundy. It was this collection to which Olivier Messiaen paid tribute, when he said: 'Je fus émerveillé et converti à la musique modale de même coup' ('I was at one and the same time filled with wonder, and converted to modal music').

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned Emmanuel's *Sonatina on Hindu Modes*¹⁷ as a forerunner of Messiaen's Hindu influence. The *Sonatina* was written on the suggestion of Busoni, to whom it is dedicated. In its time (1920) it was, I believe, an isolated example of an attempted fusion of occidental and oriental musics. The

¹⁶ Paris: Durand, 1917.

¹⁷ Emmanuel: *Sonatine sur des modes hindous* op. 20. Paris: Durand, 1923.

following quotation shows how naturally Emmanuel could think in terms of modes, even when Hindu and unusual, and how his rare lyricism enables him to forget the notes (a thing composers these days rarely achieve or want to achieve):



The Hindu Sonata was first performed by the composer's distinguished pupil Robert Casadesus, and has since been played by Yvonne Lefébure, Nadine Desouches, Léa Roussel and others.

In gratitude to Casadesus for the première of the Fourth Sonata, Emmanuel dedicated to him his next work of the same kind. Subtitled *alla francese* (1925), this is a work of rare charm, written as if in tribute to the old French clavecinists as well as to a modern pianist. It has the delicacy of French lace and the iridescence of the marginalia in some medieval Book of Hours. In the quotation following, note the asymmetric rhythm (always a favoured device of the composer) and also observe the rich variety in the melodic intervals. The bi-modal basis of this passage will also be apparent:

Vivace

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Vivace". It is written in 12/8 time and features a fast, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a complex accompaniment in the left hand. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some slurs and accents. The accompaniment is primarily chords and eighth notes. The score is marked with dynamics such as *mf* and *p*, and includes the instruction *f il canto* at the end.

It is the rediscovery of the significance of modal composition that is Emmanuel's particular contribution to twentieth-century music. If it is true that, about the time when he was writing his Cello Sonata (1890) or very soon afterwards, Fauré, Debussy, Pierné and Ravel were using modes in their compositions, it is also true that none of these exemplified such variety and breadth of vision as did Emmanuel.

Today, a young compatriot of Emmanuel's, Claude Ballif, is advocating what he calls 'metatonicity', an attempt at a tonal and polymodal solution of the atonal problem – this most acute problem with which Schoenberg has yoked young composers of the second half of the twentieth century, just as Wagner burdened the first half of it by bequeathing a whole estate of no-man's-land chromaticism. This is not meant entirely as a criticism of Schoenberg, for we of today owe him much; we must be thankful to him for the highly beneficial blood-transfusion with which he has brought new life to modern music. But this new life is apt to become morbidly lively, and one searches in vain for the psychological resting place. And to say that this restless music mirrors the times does not really convince and satisfy as an explanation, for, if it were true, how would it explain that, amid the most terrible treachery, murder, intrigues and poisonings of the High Renaissance, Italian masters were composing music of the most beatific serenity? Schoenberg himself must have felt the acuteness of the atonal problem towards the end, for a number of his last works are distinctly tonal by implication. We should be grateful for any attempt to arrive at a solution of what looms as one of the greatest problems of post-Schoenbergian music. Very few have essayed such a solution, and more is the honour due to Ballif for having devoted a whole volume to it.¹⁸ In Ballif's solution, the participation of modalism is an indication of Emmanuel's belief in the continued significance of that which has survived since the days of Plato.

In writing this article, I have not taken down some books and music from the shelf, blown off the dust and replaced them. What I have written will serve a useful purpose if it encourages somebody to perform Emmanuel's music. Is it too much to hope that we may translate him from Limbo?

Igor Stravinsky. Hedonist and Ritualist

from *The Listener*, Vol. 87, No. 2246, 13 April 1972

Igor Stravinsky: his monogram, a dollar-sign; his initials, almost the motto of Constantine the Great – *In hoc Signo vinces*. Stravinsky conquered, both in dollars and in religion. Only he could dedicate the *Symphony of Psalms* 'to the Boston Symphony Orchestra and to the Greater Glory of God'. We all know the might of the dollar and the power of Rome, but even most believers must find them jarring (with a Stravinskian discord), uttered in the same breath. I remember a film-shot of the aged Stravinsky – a Zurich gnome if ever there was one! – ribboned and starred in tails-and-white, kissing the Pope's ring. The screen was transformed for a second into a Francis Bacon canvas. This one shot epitomises Stravinsky's career: Success with a capital dollar-sign; canonisation during his lifetime. But in our day

¹⁸ *Introduction à la Métatonicité*. Paris: Richard-Masse, 1956. Claude Ballif was born in 1924 and in 1956 was awarded a scholarship of the Fondation Européenne de la Culture. [RS]

both the dollar and Rome are being devalued. The usual pattern of a composer's posthumous career is characterised by a period of devaluation. A year after his death, devaluation of Stravinsky has not set in. Achieving longevity through monkey-gland, he became a gargoyle ensconced in an Establishment niche. It is no surprise that the pillars of today's music Establishment – Boulez and Stockhausen – still uphold Stravinsky. It merely shows that these allegedly 'new' composers are already entrenched in the same Establishment to which he belonged.

In *Stravinsky died a year ago*, compiled and introduced by John Amis, fifteen of Stravinsky's friends and colleagues talked about the man, his work and its place in twentieth-century music. Throughout the programme, different excerpts from the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920) interspersed the spoken contributions. I've never heard a more creative use of music in a talk programme.

This programme brought clarity to my thoughts on Stravinsky. Before, I'd thought of him as a harlequin with a wardrobe of masks and mantles; has music, a motley of styles. Now, disbeliever in astrology as I am, I saw his sign – Gemini – as a clue to his twin nature: hedonist and ritualist. Elisabeth Lutyens revealed Stravinsky the *bon viveur* in a lightning sketch of a dinner with him at the Savoy in 1953, when she 'fell in love with his exquisite manners'. They remained in the dimmed ballroom, where Stravinsky, like some aged *commedia dell'arte* figure, demonstrated the choreography of *Agon*. The ballerino Balanchine added that the composer, with his wiry muscularity, could have been a dancer. The violinist Dushkin recounted his visits with Stravinsky to Russian churches and how he would not merely kneel but prostrate himself at the altar. The man of the world, a midnight dancer in the Savoy; the penitent at the altar. Everything Stravinsky wrote relates to that dichotomy, that paradox. Orgy and stasis.

This coalescence of opposites fascinates. But does it mark him as the arch-modern he is supposed to be, the innovator he thought he was? Schoenberg saw through this mask when he characterised him as 'little Modernsky'. The chic and chicanery, the plushness and panoply of the Diaghilev Imperial Ballet, the incense and hierophantic ritual of the *Symphony of Psalms* – these are held in contempt by today's youth, who despise imperialism and Western religion, suspecting that the one is the right arm of the other. Today's progressive youth are simply not prepared to shut out the ugly realities of Vietnam, Bangladesh and Ulster. In the Western world, they find these issues embodied in the symphonies of Shostakovich. In that context, Stravinsky appears decidedly unmodern.

GianCarlo Menotti's Seasonal Verismo

from *The Listener*, Vol. 81, No. 2075, 2 January 1969

Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (BBC 1) made an ideal Christmas Eve programme. It was one of those rare occasions when everything conspires to make it

memorable. Cedric Messina's production, Eileen Diss's designs, Philippe Perrottet's choreography, the New Philharmonia under James Lockhart, the Ambrosian Opera Chorus and the Donare Dance Group, all seemed to coalesce in a film-opera which captured some of the magic of hoarfrost and starlight. Paull Boucher, as Amahl, looked like a Millais and sang like a seraph. April Cantelo, as his Mother, was sympathetic and appealing, both in acting and voice. The Three Kings were Joseph Ward, Forbes Robinson and Don Garrard, and their page, Emyr Green.

In a simple shieling, Amahl, a lame shepherd boy, lives alone with his widowed mother. Amahl is a dreamer. The splendour of the night sky detains him outdoors. He pipes to the stars. His mother repeatedly calls him in to go to bed. Reluctantly, he obeys. The mother is exasperated by his fantasies about the stars. A knock at the door. Amahl goes. He sees – a king. The mother disbelieves him. Another knock. Amahl sees *two* kings. The mother redoubles her doubt. Again a knock. Three kings. They seek a new-born babe. The mother goes to the door herself. Awed, she offers hospitality. As there is little food or drink in the cottage, she sends Amahl to invite the shepherds to pay homage to the Magi. The shepherds bring gifts and entertain with dances. They depart and the kings sleep. The mother dares to take some of the royal gold for her child, but the page catches her. Amahl defends his mother. The kings tell her to keep the gold. 'The child we seek doesn't need it. He will build his kingdom on love'. The mother relinquishes the gold. 'For such a king I have waited all my life'. Amahl impulsively offers his crutch as a gift to the child. With this gesture he is cured of lameness. He wants to take his crutch personally to the child. The kings persuade the mother to let him accompany them.

With such stock *dramatis personae* as a lame boy and widowed mother, the opera could so easily have become a sob story. But Menotti (who was his own librettist) reveals his native Italian instinct for opera by making original dramaturgy out of the Epiphany legend. The plot contains a built-in dramatic contrast in the poverty of Amahl and his mother set against the regalia of the kings. But Menotti's theatrical invention makes something out of almost nothing. Take the entry of the kings: they don't all appear at once; the knockings on the door and Amahl's repeated opening of the door build up a dramatic structure. The touch of the theatre man is palpable behind every move. The tensest moment of the plot – when the mother crawls across the floor to steal the gold – is prepared by the crowd scene of the shepherds' dance. To follow this crowd scene by the sleep scene is the essence of drama. The counterpoint of action – when the mother steals the gold, is caught, allowed to keep it, but then, hearing of the King of Love, gives it back – is no mere stage-business. The mother's relinquishing of the gold suggests the climactic action, Amahl's impulse to give away his crutch. The *mise-en-scene* – the hearth and the heath – also contains a simple contrast – confinement and freedom – which echoes Amahl's translation from lameness to wholeness.

Originally produced in the United States in 1952, *Amahl* was the first successful TV opera. It adroitly avoids the main problem of the medium, which is how to

ensure that viewers are not perpetually contemplating the singers' tonsils. We tend to watch the limping of Amahl's fragile figure more than his singing mouth. The kings have their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The casket of gold particularly makes a good camera point. Visual contrast is predetermined by the three kings because, traditionally, one of them is black. But Menotti wants contrast also between the other two kings: he achieves this by making old Caspar slightly deaf. This necessitates gesture – the hand cupped to the ear. Caspar has a parrot, too: another good camera point. *Amahl* also has the intimacy of real TV opera. Its creator knew that there's no point in trying to squeeze vistas into the box. In *Amahl* the intimate scene – shieling and sheepfold – matches the spiritual intimacy of the Christmas story.

With this and his later stage works, Menotti has created a kind of *neo-verismo* style of opera. But he has a more delicate touch than the masters of *Cav* and *Pag*. He commands a gentler naivety, where they tended to be blatant. His score is a tenderly tinted illustration of the legend, like some of those masterly illustrations to children's books at the turn of the century (by such artists as Rackham and Dulac). *Amahl* abounds in insouciant folk-song types of melody. But it is only a *seeming* unconcern, for closer study of the score reveals the composer/librettist's care in creating simplicity in passages of isorhythmic settings of monosyllables (that is, one note per syllable, with no melodic embroidery). *Amahl* is instinct with song and dance. A work, not perhaps for all time, but for a season. Yet a season that returns and whose kindling spirit not even the most cynical commercialism can quench. Menotti celebrates the child. We need such artists.

An Introduction to the Music of Roman Vlad

from *The Music Review*, Volume 22, 1961

Roman Vlad is known in Britain for some penetrating articles contributed to *The Score* and *Horizon*, and for his stimulating seminars at the Summer School of Music, Dartington Hall. In Italy, his adopted country, at forty-one he is already a name to be reckoned with as a composer.

One of his best articles is entitled 'Busoni's Destiny'. However unfashionable destinies may be, Vlad has one also. Born in 1919 in Czernowitz, Rumania, in 1938 he settled in Rome. It is rather curious that the Italian for Rumania is *Romania*. In 1950 Vlad was naturalized, and became Roman in deed as well as in name. At eighteen, he enrolled at Rome University, and at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia studied composition and piano with Alfredo Casella. In 1941, he gained the master class diploma in piano. Since then, like a true contrapuntist, he has engaged in five concurrent careers: composer, pianist, critic, teacher and lecturer – the five species in one! He is perhaps the most energetic musician of my acquaintance. In recent years he has represented Italy on the panel of the

International Society for Contemporary Music, and in 1955 was nominated Artistic Director of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana. Not the least of his services to the art has been his promotion of many concerts of contemporary music at the Teatro Eliseo, Rome.

His public appearances as pianist have been few of late, though I believe he gave a brilliant account of his *Variazioni concertanti* for piano and orchestra at the Venice Festival of 1955. As a critic, apart from numerous articles in music magazines from various countries, he has published three substantial books: *Modernità e tradizione nella musica contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955), *Storia della dodecafonia* (Milan: Suvini Zerboni, 1958), *Strawinsky* (Einaudi, 1958) and *Luigi Dallapiccola*, an opuscle in English (Suvini Zerboni, 1957).

The little book on Dallapiccola consolidates Vlad's reputation as the outstanding authority on the subject; his *History of Dodecaphony* achieves greater comprehensiveness than the previous writings of Leibowitz, Rognoni or Rufer; and his book on Stravinsky¹⁹ is a unique commentary on that composer's *opera omnia*. The chapter on Chopin in *Modernità e tradizione* is perhaps the best example of Vlad's critical acumen. In it he makes some genuine discoveries: he finds Scriabin's famous 'synthetic' chord of superimposed fourths in bar six of Chopin's Etude in C minor op. 25, No. 12, and 'grafted bitonality' in bars 19-20 of Chopin's *Berceuse* (the scale of C in a D flat context).

It is Vlad the composer of whom I wish to write here. In that role, his meteoric rise secured him a contract with the Milanese publisher Suvini Zerboni and, despite a plethora of other activities, his output has steadily increased. His *Divertimento per 11 strumenti* has been published in Britain by Boosey and Hawkes. As this is the only score readily available in Britain, it could easily convey an inadequate impression of the composer. It is a lightweight piece, a *jeux d'esprit*, certainly expressing one side of Vlad's nature – but not even hinting at the substratum of philosophy that underlies the stream of his music. The geniality and candour of Vlad's personality, which so enlivened his visits to Dartington, hardly suggest his penetrating powers as a musical thinker. But the handful of Summer School students who were privileged to hear his discourse on 'Metaphysical Elements in Schoenberg's Poetic' were afforded a glimpse into the workings of an original mind. Like Browning's Galuppi, Roman Vlad is 'good alike at grave and gay'.

Here I shall comment on a representative group of five of Vlad's compositions written between 1948 and 1955. All except the *Divertimento* are published by Suvini Zerboni.

¹⁹ Also translated into English by Frederick Fuller. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Divertimento per 11 strumenti

In 1948, Radio Italiana commissioned five works for chamber orchestra. Malipiero wrote *Mondi celesti* (with voice), Milhaud *Apothéose de Molière*, Petrassi the *Sonata de Camera*, and Vlad wrote this *Divertimento*, which Hans Keller has epitomised as the 'Apotheosis of the diminished seventh'. It is scored for single woodwind, harpsichord, two violins, two violas, one cello and one double bass, and is in three movements: sonata, theme and variations, and rondo. The whole work is based on the diminished seventh and the two interlocked tritones that it contains. These elements are first presented melodically, then developed harmonically and contrapuntally, until in the last pages they become crystallised in one chord, fusing C major and F sharp major triads – yet another ramification of the famous passage in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.

The harmonic nucleus of the first page is two diminished seventh chords, a semitone apart. This semitone relationship is another pervading factor. In the first movement's recapitulation, it produces a fusion of oboe and clarinet on a semitone, with a soft harpsichord *tremolo* helping to create the acoustic illusion of a quartertone. The sonata displays typically classical formulae, such as the Alberti bass, *roulades* and colloquies of woodwind. It is the harmonic setting that makes the thing fresh. The scales which interlace the music with strands of subtly shifting colour have their historical precedent in the scalic passages used by Mozart in the statue scene of *Don Giovanni*.

The whole *Divertimento* propels a Latin breeze, and nowhere does it blow so freshly as in the second movement, the theme and variations. The theme is a supplication of suppressed passion, *tempo* fluctuating with mood. There are five variations: march, waltz, galop, ostinato and *largo*. In the march, the bemused spirit of Rossini indulges in mock militarism, brought off with great panache. In the waltz and gallop, Stendhal joins Rossini and arm-in-arm they deploy themselves in dancing to Chopin's harpsichord accompaniment. It is music that plays tricks with time – not the tricks of *rubato* but of anachronism: it winks at the past, accepts the present, and hints at the future. The 'ostinato' has some frankly bitonal passages with violins and *Flatterzunge* flute not pretending to harmonise in consecutive semitones. The *largo* solemnises the proceedings and recalls the theme in *tutti*.

The rondo subject, like other elements in the *Divertimento*, has a Mozartian source in the *fugato* of the *Zauberflöte* Overture, which itself was based on a theme from a Clementi sonata. And so we get back to Italy.

Vlad's predilection for the diminished-seventh chord, exemplified in the *Divertimento*, is related to the Italian way of thinking of all music, for whatever medium, as potentially operatic. It could be argued that Mozart often thought operatically in his quartets or concertos. As the diminished seventh appears elsewhere in Vlad's music, a word on his use of it may be apposite. The fascination

that this chord exercises on Vlad is not to be explained away as an 'obsession'. Comparable to the frequent employment of the added sixth in the music of Delius or Messiaen, Vlad's diminished seventh declares his freedom from harmonic inhibition. He is emphatically not one of those timid souls who persuade themselves that they can write 'up-to-date' music by strict avoidance of musical platitudes. Vlad knows that sliding chromaticism can be mysterious as well as maudlin; a common chord magical as well as prosaic; that when a sixth is added to a triad, the result need not be a mere cloying mixture, for he also knows, like the Abt Vogler, that out of three sounds may be framed, not a fourth sound, but a star. The diminished-seventh chord is the cipher of the dramatic in Vlad's music, but its ambivalent enharmonic nature and structural symmetry contribute as much to the music's form as to its emotional content.

Storia d'una Mamma: racconto musicale in un atto

Whereas the *Divertimento* was all brightness, with the one-act opera *Storia d'una Mamma* we begin to see the obverse of Vlad's coin. The libretto by Gastone di Venezia is based on a fairy tale by Hans Andersen. The 'Dormi Jesu' from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and a short poem by Giovanna Naldi are also utilized. There is only one singer (the mother), the other *dramatis personae* being mimed or danced. A spoken recitative, conceived for broadcasting, is incorporated in the score but is dispensable in theatre or concert hall, where action and scene compensate. This is the story:

One winter's night, a mother keeps vigil, singing to her sick child. She fears he may die. Someone knocks. The mother bids enter an old man covered in snow. She offers hospitality but falls asleep, singing a lullaby. The old man steals the child. The mother awakes. Desperate, she rushes out. In a snowstorm, Night, an old woman in black, promises to show the way if the mother will sing a lullaby. She must find a forest of firs, in the heart of which stands a barren briarbush at a crossroads. This briarbush promises to show the way if the mother will sing lullabies and melt his icicles by warming him on her bosom. She obeys and the thorns pierce her. The bush burgeons in midwinter and commands her to find a lake. The lake promises to show the way if the mother will weep away her eyes. They become pearls in the water. Then she is lifted up and set down on the far shore, where the Garden of Death stretches for miles. The Old Woman of the Tomb keeps vigil. She promises to show the way if the mother will exchange her black plaits for the old woman's white hat. She escorts the blind mother into the garden and explains how the flowers are really human beings. The mother stoops and, among a million heartbeats, recognizes that of her infant in a tiny drooping crocus. The old woman warns the mother not to touch the flower, and, when Death arrives, she must not let him touch it either. Death comes. The mother threatens to uproot two flowers if he refuses to restore her child. Death has found the two pearls in the lake and restores the mother's sight. In the lake's crystal, he reveals

two destinies identified with the two flowers: one blessed, one cursed. The mother prays that her infant may be blessed and would rather Death take him than that the child should live accursed. Death uproots the little flower and bears it away to the unknown country.

The story's symbolism is intimately connected with the music of the opera; indeed, the two exist in a symbiotic relationship. Death appears at the beginning and end of the story and in both places the tonal centre is clearly defined. The composer's direction for the singing flower garden – *quasi con magica fissità* (fixity) – is equally applicable to tonality and expression. On the other hand, the music for the mother's quest borders on atonality and one of the *berceuses* is marked *molto intenso, quasi 'espressionisticamente'*. The snowstorm is equated – not represented – by *canon perpetuus*. A fantastic geometry motivates both. And the *Ursymbol* of the lake is equated in mirrored canon cancrizans. In the *berceuse* 'Dormi Jesu', the reflected image of Christ in the child has its musical counterpart in the reflections of two triads of E flat and A major like distant harmonics, and closes with the pedal on the chord of A with the E flat chord above, completing the circle. The song is a kind of seer's crystal in music, reflecting harmonic images; a minuscule 'music of the spheres'. The structure of the opera is columniform. Eight ariettas sung by the mother are separated by spoken recitative, some of which is against a contrapuntal orchestral background. The mother's last arietta is preceded and followed by choruses: first, the chorus of flowers; the last, of angels.

Storia d'una Mamma is dedicated to the composer's mother. The most significant feature of the opera in relation to Vlad's development as a composer is the *canon perpetuus in moto perpetuo* that accompanies the final appearance of Death, because this canon was to be utilized in two successive works, the *Elegies* and the *Cantata Le ciel est vide*.

5 Elegie su testi biblici: per voce e orchestra d'archi

The *Elegies* and the *Cantata* were conceived from the same fundamental ideas: on the philosophico-literary plane, the idea of profound pessimism; on the musical plane, the idea of strict 'classical' twelve-tone technique. Vlad's first essay in what is somewhat loosely termed 'dodecaphony' was a set of piano studies composed during the war. After those pieces, he forsook the idiom for a while, electing to write in a pan-chromatic vocabulary. The *Elegies* and the *Cantata* again show him grappling with the problems of twelve-tone composition.

Technically, the *Elegies* are of classical severity. Monody participates extensively in the score. The orchestra too is monochrome (strings only) and for long stretches also consists of only one part. This monodic element demands, in the interests of variety, a deviation from the classical twelve-tone practice of basing a whole work on one series. This five-movement work is based on four different tone-rows,

a different one for each of the first three movements, and the same one for the last two movements, this last row also being used in the Cantata.

In his article 'Dallapiccola 1948-1955', contributed to *The Score* in March 1956, Vlad cites 'a curious example of independent parallel creation', referring to his own Cantata (he might also have included the Elegies) and the sixth *Lied* from Dallapiccola's *Goethe-Lieder* for mezzo-soprano and three clarinets. Both works have a common twelve-tone series. At the time of their composition, Vlad was on the Greek Island of Lemnos, and Dallapiccola was in America. It is noteworthy that Vlad characterizes the Dallapiccola song as expressing 'claustrophobia and inward oppression' and demonstrates the construction of the tone-row in question as containing the 'closest' intervals in the semitonal system, the minor and major seconds, evidently identifying the close interval with claustrophobia. This passage of Vlad's on Dallapiccola is fundamental to the understanding of Vlad's own Elegies and his Cantata.

The text of the Elegies is drawn from the Vulgate, mainly from *The Book of Job*. The Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Genesis are also drawn upon. The composer has chosen his texts with great appropriateness. This is evident in the Fourth Elogy, which is significant because it is precisely here that Vlad begins to use the tone-row which also occurs in the Cantata, and which Dallapiccola used in his *Goethe-Lieder*. Each of the first four lines of the Fourth Elogy is taken from a different page of the Bible, and yet these lines are chosen so well that they sound consecutive. They are: 'Quid est homo?' (Job 7:17), 'Quis est Deus?' (Job 11:15), 'Quid est? quod fuit?' (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and 'Quid enim novit Deus?' (Job 12:13). The music set to these words reappears in the Cantata at the words: 'Vater, wo bist Du?' In the one-act opera, the same musical material was used for Death's enigma of the two destinies. Following the opening of the Fourth Elogy, the string orchestra is treated in the pointillist manner that recurs in the Cantata, though there it is considerably developed because of the more ample resources of a large orchestra.

In these Elegies, the treatment of the vocal line suggests the ancient Hebrew cantillation rather than the Catholic plainsong. That is to say: it is rhapsodic and impassioned rather than meditative and serene, and moves by leap rather than by step, sometimes in augmented or diminished intervals suggestive of an indefinable atavistic orientalism. The Elegies are dedicated to the composer's wife. Perhaps we may here pay tribute to her devotion to him. An archaeologist, she is, like her husband, profoundly interested by philosophical and religious problems.

These Elegies stand in their own right, but their importance in Vlad's output is considerably increased when they are considered as preparatory studies for the large Cantata. The Fifth Elogy, a *canon perpetuus* that has its source in the opera *Storia d'una Mamma*, is transplanted bodily into the central movement of the Cantata. As if in visible token of the inner *nexus* linking the Elegies with the Cantata, the last Elogy has no bar-lines at its close. In a sense it has no close, for,

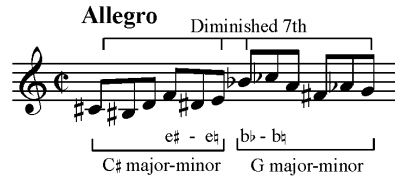
as the canonic voices are reduced one by one, it is as though the music gradually recedes from earshot and, reaching beyond the 'time-barrier', goes on in the continuum.²⁰

Cantata: *Le ciel est vide: per coro misto e orchestra*

The work can be performed either with the German text of Jean Paul Richter or its French translation by Gérard de Nerval. Perhaps the best English rendering of the title would be 'The Heavens are Empty'.

A three-bar motto (*andante mosso*) prefaces the Cantata. Immediately, the spirit of negation that broods over the whole work is conveyed in one spoken word: *Nein*. This is accompanied by a *secco* chord for horns, woodwind and *pizzicato*. Then silence. Chorus and strings present the statement of 'es ist kein Gott' ('there is no God') in awesome octaves, the word *Gott* treated climactically in a *tremolo tutti*. Part I proper commences with the orchestra in canonic *ostinato* on this subject:

Ex. 1²¹



which represents the *Urmotiv* (the first three notes), together with its transposed retrograde and inversion and retrograde inversion; the last six notes being a transposed inversion of the first six. In choosing this subject and treating it immediately in *stretto*, Vlad sets himself a challenging task. He has so concentrated his initial material that its development demands considerable ingenuity. The confidence with which he responds to this challenge indicates his mastery.

On this theme is spun a delicate contrapuntal network, the bass in augmentation. The choir enters pointillistically, a different voice to each syllable. This facilitates a melody of wide pitch-range. The singing first proceeds in semibreves, and this rhythm is only gradually accelerated. It is as though the acceleration generates heat which solders the contrapuntal strands into formidable blocks of harmony. With this the motto is reiterated:

²⁰ Compare with what Vlad writes on Roberto Gerhard's String Quartet on p. 32 of *The Score* No. 17, September 1956 (Vlad's Elegies were composed before Gerhard's Quartet). [RS]

²¹ The examples of Vlad's music in this essay are given by kind permission of SUGARMUSIC S.P.A. (Milan).

Ex. 2

The musical score for Ex. 2 is a vocal setting of the German phrase "A - ber es ist kein Gott!". It features four vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is written in a 4/4 time signature with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are placed above the vocal lines. The Soprano part begins with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a dotted quarter note G4. The Alto part begins with a half note F#4, followed by a quarter note G4, and then a dotted quarter note F#4. The Tenor part begins with a half note E4, followed by a quarter note F4, and then a dotted quarter note E4. The Bass part begins with a half note D4, followed by a quarter note E4, and then a dotted quarter note D4. The music is marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The score consists of three measures, each containing a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line.

The latent diminished-seventh and major-minor dichotomy implied in Example 1 now becomes apparent. The words are repeated to an inversion of the phrase, as if to show that, wherever God is sought, in the heights or depths, the answer of negation is inexorable. It is shouted a third time before the music abates, exhausted.

The second section of Part I (*andante ma non troppo*) opens like a night sky sowing stars. Different instruments sound singly, points of sound like points of light; a pallid music of spheres. This pointillist orchestration shows much ingenuity, not only in the choice of instruments employed, but in the manner in which they are employed. Within a few bars, the treatment of the strings embraces *normale*, *armonici*, *tremolo*, *sul ponticello*, *col legno* and *pizzicato*. And imagination is added to ingenuity. Whilst the orchestra explores the sad heights, the choir bewails the descent into Hades. This creates an interior drama of its own. The cries are intensified, keeping the listener expectant, waiting to hear a still more shattering cry. Yet when the climax comes, it is the most distant whisper of a single voice from the *a cappella* choir: 'Vater, wo bist Du?' ('Father, where art Thou?'). This is the heart of the work. Single voices are gradually added to the solo voice, until the whole choir is asking the soul-searching question. Then each section of the choir is divided into six parts. This creates a feeling of outer distances.

A sudden orchestral *tutti* (*allegro furioso*) drowns the question like a deluge. The tempo slackens at 'Ich hör't' nur den ewigen Sturm' ('I heard only the eternal storm'). There is an added touch of drama in the choral writing: the tenors are divided into two parts, vocalizing in imitation on the 'o' vowel, and against this moaning background the rest of the choir sings the words. The score is gradually lightened to *ostinato* woodwind accompanied by string *tremolando*. A coalescence of tonalities (A flat with major seventh and B flat major-minor) ensues at the words: 'Und der Regenbogen stand ohne eine Sonne' ('and the rainbow stood without a sun'). A battery of percussion is brought into action and the orchestral mass surges up into a whirling vortex. This climax subsides slowly with the superb aural image of the rainbow drooping down into the abyss. A great arc is drawn by the descending thirds of the sopranos and continued by the slow-falling fourths of the basses. Annihilation seems inevitable, yet a soft chord on trombones, piano and harp hangs like a breath on the air, the chorus enters speaking, with all the

awesome solemnity of a Greek play, and we hear the words like the ghost of a breath: 'Der schimmernde Regenbogen aus Westen' ('the shimmering rainbow from the west'). We almost glimpse a promised paradise in this moment of transcendental insight. But the picture fades. Finally, the inevitable annihilation. The opening motto returns and is repeated again and again in hopeless yearning:²²

Ex. 3

Grave
A - ber es ist kein Gott, A - ber es ist kein Gott, es
(T 8va below S; B 8va below A)

5 ist kein Gott, es ist kein Gott, kein Gott

The word *Gott* vanishes into the infinite. A soft chord on harp, piano and low winds; and above, string harmonics shimmer like the last pale diaphanous image of the rainbow. The orchestration is gradually reduced until one deep note on the double bass stands isolated as a final symbol of spiritual desolation.

The following bar's silence is an integral part of the work. Part II hardly interrupts it, but grows out of it. The percussion instruments of indefinite pitch – the *tamtam grande*, the *gran cassa* and the *cassa rullante* – follow in that order, each part in successive diminution and each comprising six notes identified unmistakably with the six-syllable motto: *Aber es ist kein Gott*. The first timpanist takes the fourth entry, adding the element of definite pitch; and the second timpanist adds his roll to the first, forming a major seventh with it. The gradual piling-up of definite upon indefinite pitch, of volume and acceleration, works like some kinetic force imparting a new motion to the music.

Above the percussion rolls, *divisi* strings enter *pianissimo* in a twenty-four-part *canon perpetuus* on the subject of Example 1, transposed to G sharp in triplet semiquavers. The chromatic shiftings, the subtle pitch differentiations, add another new element to the monotone of the percussion. The following 240 bars in E consist of a single reiterated chord – surely the most sustained chord in the whole

²² The quoted passage is based on the idea of symmetrical inversion, first formulated by Bernhard Ziehn (1845-1912) in his *Canonische Studien*. Milwaukee and Berlin: Kaun, 1912. [RS]

Stevenson later edited Ziehn's book and published it in 1976. Bernhard Ziehn: *Canonic Studies*. London: Kahn & Averill, 1976.

of musical literature! This chord is repeatedly unravelled by the twenty-four canonic parts, like the untying of some curious knot. Vlad himself says in his preface (original in Italian): ‘The frictions of these notes are dissociated from the sonorous texture and reduce it to an undifferentiated “cushion of sound”: the maximum structural polymorphism is thus translated into absolute amorphism, symbolizing “Chaos, shadow of nothing”’.

Against this background, the chorus tells of seeking through the immense universe for the eye of God, but nowhere seeing it. The different bodies of the orchestra are set gyrating within the predetermined orbit of the canonic subject, first the woodwind in trills, then the brass in close twelve-part imitation on an augmentation of the subject. The ‘sounding brass’ vividly recalls Saint Paul’s *caritas* quotation and is reserved for the culminating cry of ‘Gott ist nicht’, though even there the brass is kept *sempre pianissimo*, utterly impassive, even when the cries from the chorus sound enough to bring down the walls of Jericho. A sustained *diminuendo* and gradual reduction in scoring seem to carry the assertion of God’s non-existence into the farthest distances, to reduce it to the nothingness of which it speaks. Once again we are left with a single deep note, this time the *Sprechgesang* of the bass voices, which is finally consumed in the sudden *fortissimo* violence of percussion, presenting the retrograde of the movement’s opening bars and thus dissolving into the silence whence it came.

The choral writing in this movement is as varied as the orchestral scoring was in the first movement. The various sections comprise: *parlato* (*sotto voce* and *con voce alta*); *cantando* – sometimes with open, sometimes with closed mouth, some sung phrases beginning and ending in humming and seeming to well up out of silence and to sink back into it; *vocalizzando* – to the vowel ‘o’ as a mournful background or the vowel ‘a’ to suggest wonder; and finally *Sprechgesang* at the dynamic climax.

Of Part III (*adagio – andante mosso e molto agitato*), the composer’s prefatory note says: ‘In contrast to the chaotic *perpetuum mobile* of the second movement, there is the immobile fixity from which the last movement seems to be born and into which it finally dissolves’. The words ‘Starres, Stummes, Nichts’ (‘Rigid, dumb, nothingness’) are intoned down the stations of the choir, from soprano to bass. The *a capella* choral writing is bare and stark. The rhythm is viscous, moving reluctantly in unvaried crotchets at the words ‘kalte ewige Notwendigkeit’ (‘cold, eternal necessity’). Here, the basic set is permuted and its four segments welded together in scalic rearrangements. A fifteen-bar *quasi corale* is built round the words ‘wahnsinniger Zufall’ (‘crazed chance’) and the viscous crotchet movement coagulates in heavy minims.

The orchestra is introduced very quietly. The four serial segments are presented successively by clarinet, two violins, piano and piccolo, above a *tremolando* background of strings, vibraphone, harp and xylophone. An extended orchestral *stretto* exploits various canonic developments of the four segments. On the choir’s entry, the tempo accelerates with the restatement of ‘wahnsinniger Zufall’. There is

a long development of the basic set, seconds now being inverted and stretched into sevenths and ninths. The choir is treated unmercifully, each part kept at breaking-point of *tessitura*, until the climax is very gradually reached. Then there is a brief *allargando*, and the orchestra reinstates the chorale idea. *Tremoli* shimmer, and the long scalic strands permuted from the theme weave across the choir as it again contemplates spiritual desolation.

Another chorale-like section of wounding poignancy recalls earlier questionings with it: 'O Vater, Vater, wo ist Deine unendliche Brust?' ('O Father, Father, where is Thine Infinite Bosom?') The choir is reduced by half. A great tremulous arc of sound is circumscribed from soprano down to bass to the words 'In ewiger Mitternacht ist keine heilende Hand' ('in eternal midnight there is no healing hand'). This recalls the earlier rainbow image. Reminiscence suggests valediction. The choir is reduced to a quarter - 'kein Vater!' - then only four singers, then two, then one - *allein, allein*.

The Cantata requires a chorus of at least eighty (twenty per part). In addition to the normal orchestra, it specifies two piccolos (also taking third and fourth flutes), cor anglais, bass clarinet, double bassoon, third and fourth trumpets, harp, piano, vibraphone, xylophone, celesta, and an array of percussion. This Straussian *grosses Orchester* is treated in a most un-Straussian manner. Rather is the scoring in the line of Mahler. The orchestral palette displays an uncommon variety of tone-colours, but the use of them is governed by a nice sense of selection. In Part I (forty pages), *tutti* occurs only three times, twice on the word *Gott* and once on *Du*; and only for one chord in each case. In Part II (twenty-nine pages), *tutti* occurs once only, again on the word *Gott* and only for one bar. In Part III (thirty-one pages), there are a dozen pages of *tutti*.

It would be erroneous to classify this Cantata as an ultra-modern work bearing little or no relation to tradition. The title of Vlad's book *Modernità e Tradizione nella Musica Contemporanea* rehearses his artistic *credo*, which is apparent on every page of this score. Vlad's choral pointillism is directly descended from *ochetto* in medieval music; his *canon perpetuus à 24*, with its repeated unravelling of the knotted twelve-note chord, is the legitimate heir to the *enimme* of the fifteenth-century Netherlands School; and his complex rhythms are extensions of the old *emiolia* principles of musical proportion.

His sense of proportion is architectonic. It is no accident that the twelve notes of the Cantata's basic set are translated into a time-scale of harmonic rhythm based on twelve as its common factor. For example, in the first movement, the choir is divided into twenty-four parts singing chords of twelve notes. Again, in the second movement the strings are divided into twenty-four parts (7:7:6:4) interweaving within the twelve-note chord; and it is not for nothing that this *canon perpetuus* lasts for 240 bars. The listener may be unaware of these things, but that does not mean that they are not contributory factors to the unity and indeed to the dramatic effect of the work. For, as every actor knows, counting is the art of

timing, which is the secret of the telling gesture. And Vlad's Cantata is eloquent with telling gestures.

The work exists in the same spiritual No-man's land as the paintings of Francis Bacon and the plays of Samuel Beckett. The justification of setting a nineteenth-century poem to music that belongs unmistakably to the twentieth century is explained by Jean Paul's capacity for creative vision, which his translator, Gérard de Nerval, shared; and by the fact that these two poets, like Büchner in his *Woyzeck*, projected their thought into our century. Their work is still valid.

Vlad's score of this 100-page Cantata constitutes his most considerable achievement to date. It is dedicated to the senior Italian music critic and editor of *La Rassegna Musicale*, Guido Maria Gatti.

Variazioni concertante per pianoforte e orchestra: sopra una serie di dodici note dal Don Giovanni, di Mozart

This work consists of twelve variations on the twelve-tone series unearthed by Darius Milhaud in his study of the statue scene from *Don Giovanni*. The structural plan of this work of Vlad is built on an *emiolia* principle of following two slow variations by three quick ones, repeating that order and completing the composition with two more slow variations. This plan produces variety and symmetry.

The music is based, not only on Mozart's twelve-tone series, but on the rhythmic ideas stated in the opening bars of the *Don Giovanni* overture. In fact, the beginning of Vlad's Variations is identical with the opening of Mozart's Overture, except that Vlad has embodied the twelve-tone series in Mozart's harmony. This conveys what we might call a 'surrealist' effect (though one uses the term with the understanding that Vlad is certainly not the sort of composer who can be said to belong to one particular school; and, in any case, I am not aware that there has been a 'surrealist' school of composers).

As the tone-row is embodied in the quoted overture, so the *Non si pasce* theme is incorporated in the first variation, instead of prefacing it; and on the theme's appearance, or rather emergence from the sonorous mass in which it was previously embodied, it is immediately treated in *stretto*.

There is some lovely melodic writing in the central variations. The series now becomes disembodied in an ecstatic lyricism. The tenth variation scintillates with a quotation from the Don's 'Champagne' aria, and this also is related to the *Non si pasce* series. The penultimate variation is an apotheosis of the first. The fundamental drama implied by the chords of tonic and dominant in Mozart's Overture is now intensified to breaking-point by extreme dissonance and the pitting of the piano against the orchestra. This variation stands in the same relation to the whole work as does the symphonic epilogue (the 'Invention on a key') in

Berg's *Wozzeck*. Each is a summing-up of the dramatic content of the entire work. When one realizes that they are both 'inventions' on the same key of D minor, one wonders if Berg's epilogue did not influence Vlad. The Dantesque D minor of the statue scene in *Don Giovanni* – Dantesque because of its unmistakable echo of 'abandon hope, all ye who enter in' and because of its superb gesture of scorn – is related to the extreme anguish of Vlad's *Elegies* and of his *Cantata*.

But at the end of the *Variations*, the last word is not with grief. Here, the demoniac is transformed into the angelic. It is as though a new innocence has been attained through the refining fires of experience. Vlad quotes the trio theme from the *Andante cantabile* of Mozart's Piano Sonata KV 330, thus reflecting the microcosm of Mozart's chamber music in the macrocosm of his operas. The music becomes transformed almost as if by an alchemical change:

Ex. 4

Calmo, con estrema, seppur contenuta emozione

When the music began, it was Mozart. It was and is not. Vlad has made it completely his own.

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Ronald Stevenson, born in Lancashire in 1928 into a family of Scots descent, is a pianist and composer in whom virtuosity and musicality are paired in equal measure. A regular guest at the world's leading concert halls and academic institutions from the Royal Albert Hall to the Juilliard School or the Shanghai Conservatory, Stevenson has played a major role in reclaiming for the repertoire the work of numerous composers, from Grainger to Sorabji and Czesław Marek. As a composer himself, he has worked in almost all genres except opera and is best known for his *Passacaglia on DSCH* – possibly the longest single-movement work in the piano repertoire, whose length is matched only by the scope of its invention. But Stevenson is also a scholar who for over fifty years has built up a body of writing no less impressive. During the 1960s and '70s, his weekly column in the *Listener* allowed him to reach a huge audience, while his articles in musicological journals such as the *Musical Times* and *Tempo* have given him the opportunity to discuss in greater detail the work of those composers to whom he is particularly drawn, such as Ferruccio Busoni, Alan Bush and Percy Grainger. The present volume offers a wide selection of Stevenson's writings: on his own works, on British music, and on the music of the Continental traditions. They display in exemplary fashion Stevenson's rare ability to combine erudition with accessibility.

Chris Walton is the managing director of the Orchestre Symphonique Bienne in Switzerland and an extraordinary professor at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

