
Obituaries

Alan Bush

22 December 1995 should have been the 95th birthday of Alan Bush, who died at 94 on 31 October in Watford General Hospital, after a brief illness.

Aficionados of music in the inter-war metropolis remember Bush as a handsome, Warlockian bearded figure at the grand piano or on the rostrum; or, as Felix Aprahamian remembers him, showing his children round London Zoo. Those who knew him only after the 2nd World War remember him as a magnificent Handelian figure (Handel without his wig, when he took off his habitual broad-brimmed black hat).

When Busoni died, Samuel Langford in *The Manchester Guardian* wrote that 'if musicians could be asked whom among them they would most delight to honour, they would answer with one voice, "Busoni"'. I should guess that the same thing could be said about Alan Bush. Even musicians who disagreed with or were amused or annoyed by his left-wing politics would nevertheless with one voice admire his mastery of composition, his consummate technique as a master-builder in sonic structure.

There is another link with Busoni, apart from the Bush Piano Concerto's being the only other one with a choral finale. It is this: Bush was one of the noblest and purest among men. I write the word 'purest' fully knowing the cynicism that greets it in our present amoral climate. Van Dieren wrote that Busoni was 'one of the few great artists who never suffered from any venereal disease'. Similarly, I know that Alan Bush led an exemplary life; one that can be a model both aesthetically and ethically to the young.

I'm reminded of Schumann's aphorism: 'Be diligent in the study of life, as well as of the arts and sciences. The laws of morality are also those of art'. The aesthetic ethic, with Bush, had a Ruskinian, rather than Marxist basis. I refer to the Ruskin versus Whistler court case (possibly the *fons et origo* of the argument about 'modern art'). Ruskin's main criticism of Whistler's art was that his work was not informed by labour. To Ruskin – and more to Bush – the act of labour at an art was related to the greater political Labour movement. To quote Busoni again (somewhat like a Proustian third bell-stroke): '*Arbeit, heilende Welle, in dir bade ich mich rein*'. ('Labour, healing

wave, in thee I bathe myself pure'.) – from the libretto of Busoni's *Doktor Faust*.

Bush's music has ample evidence of his great labours. But it also has a *passion* that is rare in English music: a passion cognate with the flamboyance of Jacqueline du Pré, whose 50th anniversary would have fallen in Bush's 95th. On one of his frequent visits to my Scottish home, in my music study, Alan croaked out for me, in his composer's voice accompanied by *martellato* pianism, his song *Africa is my Name*, an anti-apartheid anthem. He sang it with tears rolling down his cheeks, but tears through which burst a wonderful smile. I was reminded of William Blake's adage: 'A tear is an intellectual thing'.

Bush is a unique figure in British music. He cannot be contained in a brief necrology. I hope to contribute an assessment to a future issue of *Tempo*.

Ronald Stevenson

Christopher Shaw

British composer, and frequent contributor to *Tempo*; born London 30 July 1924, died on holiday in Scotland, 27 September 1995.

Exactly 20 years ago, the last of the 13 LPs in the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundations's 'Music Today' series was released on Decca's Argo label.* One side of the LP comprised recent works by Dallapiccola, and complemented the earlier Dallapiccola disc in the same series; the other was conceived (with Dallapiccola's express approval) as an epilogue to the series as a whole: ideally – but with no realistic hopes – as an epilogue that might also serve as prologue to quite another kind of series.

For the 'other' side was in the starkest contrast to a series devoted to previously unrecorded works by eminent modern masters and emerging composers of the younger generation: it presented four unpublished works by an almost unknown composer already in his late forties. The composer was Shaw, and the main work was his cantata *Peter and the Lame Man* for tenor and bass soli, chorus and orchestra.

* The Dallapiccola-Shaw recording on Argo ZRG 791 was released in 1974 as no.11 in the 'Music Today' series. Its two numerical successors were re-releases of the original EMI recordings.

The identity of the conductor of the performance recorded with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and chorus was not revealed, and according to the liner-notes, anonymity was required 'for contractual reasons'. However, the note-writer very properly provided the further information that the same soloists, chorus and orchestra had recently been responsible for the cantata's first performance – in a broadcast from the BBC's Maida Vale studios – and that the conductor on that occasion had been Colin Davis (who in his early years as a clarinettist had given the première of Shaw's *Clarinet Sonata*).

Prior to the broadcast performance, Davis had remarked that it was a rare pleasure to rehearse a relatively complex new score which reflected the composer's intentions so precisely that no corrections or adjustments had had to be made. There was of course more to the cantata than mere craftsmanship. Next morning, a colleague of the composer received a call from Alan Frank, the then Managing Director of the Oxford University Press's music-publishing division. Declaring that the cantata had impressed him deeply, Frank expressed a keen interest in publishing it, together with any earlier works that seemed appropriate.

Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, the only stumbling block proved to be the composer himself. Despite a sense of commercial realities that was regularly refreshed by study of the financial press, Shaw favoured an almost Schoenbergian intransigence in his artistic dealings. Together with the other pieces he deemed worthy of publication – in the full knowledge that they would never be commercially viable – *Peter and the Lame Man* remains unpublished to this day; and its first performance has, to date, remained its only one.

Who cares? The question is more relevant than lamentations about the state of today's music-market; and the answer to it, when it comes (as it surely will), is by no means a foregone conclusion. But if *Peter and the Lame Man* is a 'Sermon, Narrative, and Prayer' with echoes of Schoenberg's Moses as well as his Aron, its successor, *In memoriam Jan Palach*, is closer to the spirit of Stravinsky's *Abraham and Isaac*, though structurally and technically far removed from it. Until the closing pages it is music of such unremitting severity that it seems almost to embody the image of self-immolation which it eventually transcends. Already out of tune with its own time, and today utterly at odds with ours, *In memoriam Jan Palach* still awaits its first performance – scornfully but without impatience.

For it is not the work of an other-worldly,

disengaged, or impractical artist, still less an unsociable or embittered one. At once considerate and decisive, affable and stern, Shaw was among other things a superlative coach. In that field his prowess was recognized early on, when he began his long association with the choir of Imperial College, London – and it was soon to win him the admiration of many equally exigent musicians, among them, Imogen Holst and Sylvia Fisher (with whom he worked for many years as coach and accompanist).

Opera and music theatre of every sort were special loves. From Mozart to Britten and beyond, as from Offenbach to Sondheim and back again, Shaw's practical knowledge and experience of the repertory were immense. He was a gifted pianist, with an exceptional and composerly ability to evoke from the keyboard something of the orchestral realities so often disguised by recalcitrant vocal scores. In the field of touring opera – notably in his far-reaching association with The Opera Players – he was an immense asset. No-one lucky enough to hear him at the piano in performances of, say, *Il Seraglio* or *La Cenerentola*, will ever forget the sheer sorcery of his playing.

Equally unforgettable to the young singers and players from the Britten-Pears School must have been the coaching and guidance he provided throughout the rehearsals for the School's 1992 performances – conducted by Stuart Bedford – of Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and *Happy End* music. The occasion was notable among other things for the première of an orchestration by Shaw of Lucy's Aria, a number cut from *The Threepenny Opera* and subsequently published by Weill in vocal score only. Commissioned by a major recording company but rejected by their conductor, Shaw's orchestration was the product of careful research, long consideration, and profound understanding.

In that respect it was representative of Shaw's many other services to a composer whose true importance he recognized long before such recognition became general on either side of the Atlantic. Perhaps his most substantial contribution to the Weill literature is his orchestration of four numbers and much supplementary material for the unfinished operetta *Der Kuhhandel*. A model of its kind, it was undertaken with the same rigour and sensitivity, the same meticulous respect and affectionate homage, that was to inform his last completed 'work' – his version for a 12-piece chamber orchestra of Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*. For that, his principal source was the autograph score in the British Library. Examining every facet of it in the minutest detail, he

discovered among other things several hundred errors in the standard orchestral parts.

The *Belle Helène* reduction was commissioned for Opera Players, and first performed in Chelmsford in June 1995. At rehearsals, Shaw was his usual lively self, and no doubt delighted that the English version of the book and lyrics which he and his wife Jean had prepared for Opera Players 20 years before had at last found a complementary orchestral score.

In 1980 the Shaw team ventured further afield, with an English singing version of Igor Markevitch's own text for his oratorio of 1935, *Le paradis perdu*. Even without the composer's imperious interventions it would have been a formidable task for anyone, let alone for another composer who recognized that the quality of Markevitch's invention was not always equal to the originality and intensity of his inspiration.

Shaw the critic was to some extent the making of Shaw the composer, but also his undoing. He knew the repertory; he knew, from the inside, why the 'great masters' were great and the lesser ones less so, and in varying degrees he admired and loved them all. Having examined and discounted the false antinomies of earlier generations, he was impervious to those of his contemporaries, and remained to the last an essentially pragmatic and intuitive critic, rather than a theoretical or intellectual one. But the standards he admired in others – whether in Britten or in Messiaen, in early Stockhausen or late Stravinsky – were those he demanded of himself; and it was those that often silenced him.

Invited by Geoffrey Connor to compose for an anniversary concert a companion-piece for the original version (with two pianos and harmonium) of Rossini's *Petite messe solennelle*, Shaw happily and promptly obliged with a large-scale 'choral suite' in which every number, whether serious or playful, was a form of homage to a favourite composer. Having thereby distanced the work from his 'own' language of the time – which could have been quite inappropriate to the occasion – he modestly entitled the cantata-suite '*Garden Songs*'. After its successful première he rewarded it with a lavish orchestration for which

there was neither a commission nor an occasion – naturally, it has never been performed – and then turned to more 'serious' matters.

They did not come easily, and never would. 'And how have you been these past weeks, Christopher?' asked an unsuspecting friend one summer's day many years ago. 'Never felt better', replied Shaw with a broad grin – 'given up smoking; given up composing'.

Behind the clipped hedges of his words lay the private battlefield of a creative artist for whom composing was no pastime. Far from self-indulgent, and furthest of all when it was self-denyingly restricted to 'garden songs' or their equivalents, composition was for him a form of addiction only in the sense that the tortured victor of El Alamein was addicted to fighting. Had the Shaw of the later years chanced to be mistaken for some Modern Major-General in mufti, he would have been much amused and perhaps even flattered. Fortunately his victory over the cigarette packet was as complete and permanent as his abstinence from composition was not. Exactly how often and to what effect he failed to 'give up' composing has yet to be determined (though the lapses became frequent during the final years, when he was engaged on a large-scale piano cycle).

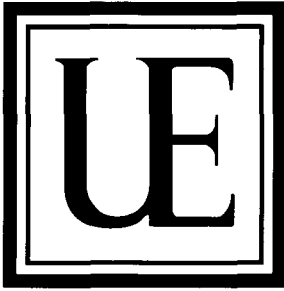
For the time being, our first responsibility is surely to remember what Shaw stood for. Our next, therefore, will be to demonstrate it through performances and recordings of the two late cantatas, the *Garden Songs*, and a representative selection of the shorter vocal, choral and instrumental works, including the masterly and typically admonitory *Lesson from Ecclesiastes*:

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter *any* thing before God: for God *is* in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice *is known* by a multitude of words.

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for *he hath* no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

David Drew



Universal Edition London Ltd

48 Great Marlborough Street

London W1V 2BN

David Sawer rejoins UE

*Universal Edition is proud to announce the signing of a new contract with David Sawer. David has just been awarded the Arts Foundation's annual Composer Fellowship. His term as Composer-in-Association with the Bournemouth Orchestras is to be extended by a second year. His 1992 Proms commission, **Byrnham Wood**, which was recorded by Andrew Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, has just been released by NMC.*

Solo piano (1983)

Etudes (1984)

Cat's-Eye (1986)

Take Off (1987)

Food of Love (1988)

Good Night (1989)

Songs of Love and War (1990)

The Melancholy of Departure (1990)

The Panic (1991)

Byrnham Wood (1992)

The Memory of Water (1993/5)

Trumpet Concerto (1995)

*For further information please contact Miranda Jackson
on 0171 437 6880*