

GEORGE LLOYD – CELLO CONCERTO

Still writing tunes in 1997!

On 28th May in St John's Church, Waterloo Road, London (opposite Waterloo Station) I will have the privilege of conducting the English première of George Lloyd's Cello Concerto, with cellist Bartholomew LaFollette and the orchestra Philharmonia Britannica. You can find details of the concert at www.ph-br.co.uk.

It was just in November of last year that I received an email, quite out of the blue, from Mark Newberry. Mark had discovered Lloyd's music fairly late in life and - by the sort of serendipity usually found in fiction - came to know him in the last years of his life as a fellow resident in Marylebone, central London. Mark's email said that he was "looking to keep this neglected yet very accessible British composer available on the concert platform." I racked my brains. George Lloyd was a name I knew (and I wasn't confusing him with Lloyd George!), but I couldn't think why - and could I recall any of his music? Then I remembered I had a disc of a symphony which I pulled out and listened to. It was the 9th. A good start: I liked it. I was intrigued by the mixture of lyricism with some more 'modern' elements (for example, the violent dischords at the start of the 2nd movement). But what about the work that Mark had suggested as a possible first piece to perform, Lloyd's cello concerto? I found it online and downloaded the mp3 version. I was amazed. Here was British music which didn't have its natural home on Radio 2, nor was it wall to wall folk tunes. Not that there is anything intrinsically wrong with either Radio 2 or with folk music. But I have often bemoaned the paucity of British classical music with depth (i.e. will bear repeated listening) which is accessible both to the player and the listener. Here was music with great melodic invention, harmonic and rhythmic depth, and wide ranging emotions. In short, very fine music. I was then intrigued to note that it had been written in 1997, just a year before the composer died. People were still writing wonderful tunes in 1997? Extraordinary! I was further astounded to find that this fine piece of music had only been performed three times before - and never in Lloyd's native land of England. I then read more about Lloyd's life, and it all started to make sense.

Short biography

George Lloyd was born in St. Ives, Cornwall, in 1913. Rheumatic fever saw to it that he had little formal schooling, yet he began playing the violin at the age of five and writing music at ten. Later he studied the violin with Albert Sammons (who made the first full recording of the Elgar concerto) and composition with Harry Farjeon (the youngest ever professor at the Royal Academy of Music). By the age of 20 Lloyd had already written three symphonies. In 1934 he completed his first opera 'Iernin' which was staged at Penzance, Cornwall, and subsequently at the Lyceum Theatre in London (with Lloyd conducting). The Times gave it a glowing review. In 1938 a second opera, 'The Serf', was scheduled for The Royal Opera House under the baton of the distinguished composer-conductor Albert Coates. The stage was set for a glittering career. But that evening in October didn't go well. Coates (according to Lloyd) made a terrible mess of it. "Then the war came", said Lloyd, "and that was the end of everything for me."

It very nearly was, in the most literal way. He was in the Royal Marines as a bandsman and gunner aboard HMS Trinidad. On an Arctic convoy in 1942 Trinidad shot a faulty torpedo which homed back on the ship. 32 men were killed. Lloyd saw many of his colleagues die, drowned in oil. The experience shattered him emotionally and physically and he was invalided out of the Marines that same year. He was capable of very little for the next 3 years. At the end of the war he travelled to Switzerland with his Swiss wife Nancy, who tirelessly supported and nursed him through this traumatic time. Whilst in Switzerland he gradually began to compose again, producing two of his best symphonies - one of which, the 4th, is entitled 'Arctic'.

He returned to England and despite continuing ill-health wrote a new opera, 'John Socman', for the Festival of Britain. There must have been a sense of déjà vue for Lloyd as the performance was chaotic. It was all too much and he decided to abandon music altogether. For 20 years he and Nancy worked on a market gardening business, growing carnations and mushrooms. He didn't, however give up composing entirely - he wrote four more symphonies and four concertos during that period - but was rarely able to find any interest in his works. Musical fashions had changed, and in the 1950s music like Lloyd's (tonal and tuneful) was passé. Scores he sent to the BBC were often returned without comment.

By 1977 Lloyd's health had improved hugely and for the last two decades of his life he enjoyed something of an Indian summer. Edward Downes premiered his 8th Symphony in that year with the BBC Northern, and subsequently seven other symphonies were performed by the BBC. In 1981 his 6th Symphony was played at the Proms and in 1984 Lloyd took to the podium again. Then, in 1987, Peter Kermani founded the American label 'Albany Records', and his enthusiasm for Lloyd's music resulted in many recordings with the Albany Symphony Orchestra and with them came a whole new American audience. Works new and old were recorded, new commissions arrived. A remarkable turnabout in fortune for a man who was never a dedicated follower of fashion, saying "I just write what I have to write". He died just a few weeks after completing his Requiem in 1998.

Not long before that Requiem, in 1996, Lloyd had suffered heart failure, and was treated in hospital for a number of weeks. He was determined to carry on working however and within a year had completed his cello concerto. The strain of that work caused further deterioration in his health and almost certainly hastened the end of his life.

Yet, despite that 'Indian summer', performances of Lloyd's works are still rare. Most musicians to whom I mention Lloyd's name look very blank – even if they've heard the name they have usually never heard any of his music, and have certainly never played any.

Describing Lloyd's music

What, you might reasonably be wondering, is George Lloyd's music like? The best way to answer that is to come to the concert on 28th May, another way is to search out recordings (Albany Records is a good place to start: <http://www.georgelloyd.com/albanyrecords/index.htm>). I have already given some clues, but let me say a little more. There are times you could swear you were hearing Shostakovich (especially when he gets his percussion going in some of the Symphonies!), at other times you can hear snatches of Elgar or Puccini or Walton. There is certainly a Britishness about his music, yet, especially in his symphonies, it is also firmly within the European symphonic tradition – as was indeed also true of Elgar. There's certainly very little Vaughan Williams in there (despite RVW being another fine tune-smith), and hardly any obvious similarities with Benjamin Britten. But despite any similarities Lloyd's is music that is very much his own – he is not for a moment copying another composer's sound.

Above all it is music that sings: music with tunes. And the best of them (for example the main tune in the first movement of the 8th Symphony) are tunes which you know you haven't heard before but have an inexorable logic which makes them quite inevitable and satisfying (like all great music). My sense is that, when composing, Lloyd was driven by melody – that the rhythms and harmonies derive from the tunes themselves.

Lloyd was once asked why he never embraced 20th century advances in composition such as Schoenberg's 12-tone technique. He summed up his opposition to that brand of compositional theory by saying: "It made composers forget how to sing." Music with novelties in all dimensions - melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and structural – is almost impossible to enjoy first time around, if ever. Lloyd's music demands just enough but never too much of the listener on first hearing, but it has sufficient depth in all the aforementioned departments to reward repeated hearing (I must have listened to the cello concerto at least 10 times so far and would be more than happy to do so again). And the essentially tonal basis of Lloyd's music, coupled with the satisfying arches of the tunes, has another effect - it is music that you will undoubtedly leave the concert hall feeling better for. Lloyd himself said "I often get letters from people who tell me that they have had trouble, even tragedy, in their lives - and that when they play my music they feel better." And if that is true of the recordings then how much more so will it be of live performances!

About the cello concerto

From a performer's perspective there are two problems with modern orchestral music. Firstly it is often dreadfully hard to play, and consequently requires large amounts of rehearsal time. Secondly it often requires lots of extra instruments (esoteric percussion instruments and keyboards of various types), and this is sometimes prohibitive. These problems are severely

magnified for non-professional orchestras (many of which are very good in this country and many of which would like to play more modern music). Lloyd's music is certainly not easy to play, but it involves none of the complexities of some recent music. He wrote in standard notation for one thing! And his 'unusual instruments' reach no further than the organ and the celesta.

Take the cello concerto for example, which I shall be rehearsing in just a few weeks time. The instrumentation is two of each woodwind part, three horns, one percussionist, and strings (three horns ... how well it would go with Beethoven's Eroica!). How hard is it? Well it's not at all simplistic, with a number of changes of key and time signature to keep us on our toes, but there are no ridiculously high/fast passages (for example) which will give an orchestra sleepless nights. We will have three rehearsals on it before the concert day, which I believe will be sufficient.

Rather than the traditional three or four movements the concerto contains a number of shorter sections (which often run one into the other). Therefore there's never any danger of feeling that one particular section has overstayed its welcome, as none are more than a few minutes long. It's also a wonderfully concise piece of composition. Right at the start you hear a tune in the accompanying string section which is a rising then falling arpeggio. It begins in the hypodorian mode, although it doesn't stick slavishly to it. Soon after that the cellist plays this theme to a quiet string tremolando. Indeed the theme holds the entire piece together. At times it is clearly audible, at other times just providing the bass line over which the cellist weaves fanciful lines, and at other times it is the seed for other melodic departures. Right at the end the violas and violins give one final echo of this arpeggio like theme with the cello sighing chromatically above it.

One fascinating and enigmatic thing about the concerto is the quotation given on the title page: "Have you no pity for those you'd destroy?" This has led to the title for our concert: 'Elgar and Lloyd: Two Enigmas'. Lloyd's nephew, William Lloyd, comments "I have never found an original source with that wording ... however ... I have always understood that the line is taken from *The Iliad of Homer*". He goes on to explain that its significance may be to do with wartime sacrifice, his uncle's difficulties in getting his music played, the way in which Princess Diana was treated by the media, or even events such as the bombing of the Royal Marines Band in Regent's Park. An interesting mixture of possibilities! Perhaps GL was rolling a variety of injustices into one. We may never know for sure, but there is certainly, at times, a feeling of painful questioning within the piece which fits the quotation perfectly.

Play your part

If we, in Britain, don't perform music like that of George Lloyd then who will? If when we do so people don't like it then let's put it away and not bother again. But we must give people the chance to hear it and make up their own minds. In the event I have every confidence that it will please both players and audiences and could become part of our staple musical diet.

For my part, if this concert in May is a success (in other words if the musicians enjoy playing it, and there is a good sized and enthusiastic audience) then we will perform one of his symphonies next year. Hard to say which at this point, although perhaps no.6 or no.8 are the most likely. I'm certainly keen to do no.4 at some point ... and no.11 is wonderful. The violin concertos, perhaps even one of the operas ... who knows where this could go? With your support in the audience anything is possible!

It would be criminal if such good music were left collecting dust. Come to the concert (and find me in the interval or afterwards to tell me what you made of it). Buy the CDs. Write to the BBC and tell them you want to hear some Lloyd in a Proms concert in 2013 (the 100th anniversary of GL's birth). In short – don't miss out and don't let others miss out!