

## **ADRIAN VERNON FISH**

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

Adrian Vernon Fish is a prolific and eclectic composer.

In some prejudiced quarters an eclectic composers receive censure which is grossly unfair. To quote but one example, Stravinsky was eclectic. He wrote a gloriously romantic Symphony in E flat, the neo-classical Dumbarton Oaks Concerto, which is basically baroque in style, some telling atonal music and music in the serial method which is very disciplined and, of course, a demanding style beyond lesser composers. He was an eclectic and versatile in many forms of music.

There is something that has to be said about composers who churn out music, all in the same style since they never progress and so, it could be said, that they are stuck in a rut.

Adrian has said that to cultivate one's own style is tantamount to cultivating one's own museum and he certainly does not want that since composers have to move away from anything that belies a trademark for his work. A similar explanation can be given to performers. The great concert pianist Peter Katin had a trademark in that he was typecast as a player of the great romantic concertos. He had to break that misconceived mould and played more Beethoven, Mozart, Clementi, Scarlatti and William Mathias' Piano Concerto no. 3.

To stand still stylistically is not to go forward. Adrian is as happy writing a cabaret song as he is writing a harp sonata.

One of Adrian's teachers, Alan Ridout, said of him, "He is a composer with his own vision, capable of turning out pieces which are simple to the virtuosic and high-flown." The prolific composer, Alan Hovhaness, wrote that Adrian was a composer of innate spirituality.

Then why is he not widely known?

The first reason is that he is both an honest and modest man. He does not push himself forward with Elgarian arrogance. He is not ruthless and unpleasant in getting his works published or performed since he is no Benjamin Britten. A few years ago Adrian made the decision not to have any of his works recorded. This was not because he thought them to be unworthy; rather he believed very strongly that music must be live. Adrian now feels that he perhaps shot himself in the foot and, in recent years, he has given way somewhat on his original decision.

He is an extraordinary person and certainly not a run-of-the-mill person and has had a fascinating and eventful life. He has a passion for Greenland and, in common parlance, is a honorary Eskimo having successfully achieved an initiation ceremony by succeeding in walking to the shop and back without falling over on the ice, despite wearing sealskin boots. This was on Boxing Day 1997 but it should be said that there is no such person as an official honorary Eskimo. Since 1991 Adrian has undertaken eleven concert tours of that vast land and it has inspired him, and he has said that in particular the far north of that amazing land gives him a sense of his own mortality and insignificance and this has been a major influence of many of his recent works. He spends much of his time giving informative talks about Greenland. Adrian is known in Greenland as Tulussuaq: The Big Englishman.

His fascination for Polar regions grew in to an obsession with Greenland in the 1970s. From 1980 he had a pen-friend in Greenland.

Greenland is the size of western Europe and has a population of 56,000. The capital, Nuuk, has a population of about 12,000 and has a few shops for food, which has to be shipped from Denmark, clothes shop full of essential furs and hardware shops replete with hunting gear. In the remote areas shopping is hunting. It is not jumping into your Toyota and going to Tesco's. Hunting may call for 25 minutes to get into all your many layers of furs, it is probably forty degrees below zero, getting the dogs and sledge ready or, if you have a snow scooter making sure it has fuel. But few Eskimos can afford this. Fuel has to be shipped in, and, consequently, is very costly.

The people of Greenland are very naive. They have no orchestras but, perhaps, a town band of a few players. There are schools but they are very informal. During a lesson some children may go out to play and come back ten minutes later. In the rare concerts in Greenland people will walk in and out. Adrian recalls one day when he was playing an organ concerto by Handel, as a solo, of course, the people got up and danced, or shuffled, in the brisk finale. As Adrian points out, "You can't put an Eskimo into a dinner jacket."

It should also be remembered that 93% of Greenland is uninhabitable.

In August 2001 Adrian suffered a burst aneurism in his brain and underwent major surgery. It was a

dangerous operation but he survived. It has been remarked that the “best” composers die in their thirties (Purcell, Mozart, Schubert) or, failing that, they die after they have completed their ninth symphonies. At the time of writing Adrian is working on his Symphony no. 13.

Perhaps here is an opportune moment to list his symphonies:

1. Pange Lingua for large orchestra including ondes martinot (1978)
2. A Little Orkney Symphony for chamber orchestra with the addition of harp, organ and, optional accordion (1979–80)
3. Ilulissat for oboes, horns, vibraphone, percussion and string orchestra (1983)
4. Oqaluttuat Misigisallu for baritone, male speaker, mixed chorus, wind sextet, gallery brass, piccolo, horn, bass clarinet, double bassoon, 2 harps, piano, timpani, percussion and string orchestra (1981-3)
5. Trisagon for piccolo/flute., clarinet/ bass clarinet, violin, viola, piano/ harpsichord/ celesta and percussion (1984)
6. Ordulf for full orchestra with mandolin and optional organ (1986)
7. Three paintings of Keith Shackleton for two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, bells, string orchestra and tape (1988)
8. Maigh Eo for chamber choir, bassoon, brass, string orchestra and tape (1988)
9. Granite Slate for full orchestra including organ (1989)
10. A Little Christmas Symphony for trumpet, bells and string orchestra (1989)
11. (the only symphony without a name) for solo trombone, baritone, chorus, celesta, string orchestra and tape (1990)
12. Ajoqinnguaq for wind, harp and percussion (1996)
13. Apocalyptic Symphony for baritone, male speaker, mixed choir and large orchestra (1990)

To return to his eclecticism. He has made many arrangements of popular songs for SATB and piano including songs associated with John Barry, Barry Manilow, Enya, The Bangles, The Bee Gees and Neil Sedaka to name but a few. To the Puritans this may appear unseemly but there is both a need and a call for such arrangements. While so-called serious music is superior it does not mean that light music or popular songs should be castigated.

When he was a child he stood at the back of a stage at a performance of The Gondoliers and since then had the desire to communicate in the future joy and excitement to audiences with his own music. As a teenage composer brought up in the Methodist tradition and composed hundreds of hymns tunes in a traditional style. When a student at Dartington he was given great impetus and composed graphic scores, electronic score and orchestral scores some with built-in choreography. He formed the short-lived New Music Consort giving concerts in the south and west of England which were greeted with some confusion.

He believed it was right to present audiences with challenging music and not anachronistic music. Between 1974 and 1986 he composed complex works for chamber ensemble culminating in Moraine of 1985-6 a thirty five minute work of great complexity. By the mid 1980s he rethought his composition procedures and recalls Herbert Howells advice in 1976, “Write what is in your heart!” This seemed to go against the grain of challenging an audience but gradually Adrian began to “purify” his style. But in the transition period came Valley of 10,000 smokes for violin and piano and the Symphony no. 6. The Finnish pianist, Suvi Niemi, referred to his piano work Agichook as beautifully spiritual.

For almost ten years, Adrian was an in-house composer for the publisher Kevin Mayhew.

As mentioned, the composer Alan Ridout described Adrian’s work as “from the simple and practical to the virtuosic and high-flown.”

In 2000 the violist Sarah-Jane Bradley said to the audience about his viola sonata Qaanaaq that the slow movement was the most beautiful she had ever heard.

Some of his work has become so simple in design that it has an innocence and naivety, including the Piano Sonata no. 3 which is not a sonata but five very short movements.

He has a great enthusiasm for organ music having composed about fifty pieces for the king of instruments including an arrangement of his Symphony no. 1 Pange Lingua. His massive Kalaallit Nunaat of 1980 lasts for about 71 minutes and is in ten movements and was his first work inspired by the landscape of Greenland. Septa Verba lasts for about forty minutes. He has written hymn tune preludes following in the footsteps of composers like Alec Rowley. There are 12 preludes on the hymns of Greenland and an intriguing Sonatina for pedals alone requiring three players.

He has written much choral music and about seventeen hymn tunes which genre one does usually identify with a “serious” composer. I have been privileged to hear Ukiap Seqerna Pukkilissoq, settings of traditional Greenlandic songs arranged for choir and orchestra. Their simplicity and beauty is quite superb and the Greenlandic singers perform in a simple unaffected way which could be compared to the natural singing of those in the South Sea islands.

Adrian was born on 20 January 1956 at Southmead Hospital, Bristol. His father, Harold Alfred Christopher Fish was a civil servant and born in St Johns’ Wood, London on 26 June 1922. Adrian’s mother was born Freda Jagger in Swinton, South Yorkshire on 17 December 1917. Harold married Freda at Westbury-on-Trim Methodist Church on 19 August 1952. Adrian is an only child.

His parents were not professional musicians but engaged in amateur operatics and they were stalwarts of the Methodist Church.

Adrian went to school at Westbury C E Primary School from January 1961 to July 1966 and to Queen Elizabeth’s Hospital School from September 1966 to July 1973. He had no real strengths at school except for an ability to play the piano and the organ. He claims to have been academically useless at school and hated sports in one of those many snobbish boarding schools that were sports mad. It was in 1967 when his school appointed Peter Fowler as head of music that things changed. Adrian won many prizes for music and in 1973 won the award for services to music at the school.

He had begun piano lessons with Gwyneth Maine when he was six and his first organ lessons were with Garth Benson at the organ of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol. Piano lessons were abandoned in 1968 but his organ lessons continued with Gary Desmond in Bristol and then with John Wellingham at Dartington (1974–1975) and Nicholas Danby at RCM (1975–1978). Adrian also undertook harpsichord lessons with John Wellingham and with Ruth Dyson at RCM (1975–1976).

As for composition lessons he studied with Richard David Haines at Dartington, with Alan Ridout at RCM (1976–1978) and occasionally with Herbert Howells during those same years.

Most music appealed to young Adrian particularly Mahler, Bartók, Shostakovich and Penderecki. Popular music did not have much appeal and, sadly, he did not enjoy Beethoven. He writes that pop music has no meat for the soul. Art and literature did not have a great appeal for him when he was young but he believes that music is reflected in art and architecture and he compares Couperin’s fussy and complex ornamentation with the furniture in the Palace of Versailles.

He describes Monteverdi’s Vespers as pure oxygen for the soul, Bach as the ultimate in precision though not always comfortable to listen to and not always personable. He finds Brahms to be like an old chocolate gâteau, luscious and beautiful but soon dry to the taste. Beethoven he finds difficult to come to terms with and he is honest about Schubert songs when he says that after the first half dozen, his songs become frankly dreary and his late piano sonatas are interminable. Schumann is not a favourite and Mendelssohn “does not reach the parts that Heineken does.” Bruckner has some magical and deeply spiritual moments but his music does not quite come off. Mahler is a clear favourite with his all-compassing philosophy and stunning transitions from darkness into light. Adrian told me that life without Mahler would be like living in a desert. Stravinsky is one of the most innovative and important composer as is Schoenberg but his serial music leaves Adrian stone cold. Berg has great moments and some boring ones. Elgar is a wallow, like sinking into your favourite dusty old sofa. Britten’s works leaves him cold as well. Tippett’s music is a curate’s egg of which Adrian is not that fond but he believes Maxwell Davies to be a composer of international stature.

As to Adrian’s own work it is difficult to determine what was his first success. He recalls a performance of his Organ Symphony at RCM in 1978 which received much praise. His first public performance was of a hymn tune in about 1963 which his grandfather sang at a Sunday service in Sidmouth while they were on holiday there. His later works may show some influences. Messiaen may be behind the early organ works and the influence of Hovhanes’ spirituality had a major effect on him in the 1980s.

Adrian married Margaret Crichton in Beltra Church, Sligo, Ireland on 19 August 1978. She was a student at Dartington when Adrian was there and later went to RAM. Throughout the marriage she was a violin and piano teacher and played in local orchestras in the various places where they lived including North Lancashire, Cornwall, West Devon, mid-Wales. They have two children: Patrick Christopher Vernon Fish born 26 February 1982 and Michael Alan Fish born 22 September 1991.

The marriage ended in a separation in August 2001, the very month of his serious operation, and his divorce followed in October 2002.

The trauma of a divorce and brain surgery led Adrian to seek a quieter life and so moved to Ireland. While he used to work about six hours a day on composition he can now only manage about an hour a day. He does not compose at the piano for obvious reasons. If he is writing a symphony or a string quartet and working it out on the piano the result could be a work for the piano. To write a string quartet you have to think in string quartet terms, not piano terms. Adrian does not have preferences in his work but he has expressed satisfaction with his String Quartet no. 2, his String Trio (Sermitsiaq), the Sonata for viola and piano (Qaanaaq) and his Symphony no. 12. It must also be remembered and born in mind that in 1977 he scrapped his previous work of about 200 scores.

He explains that the composer's function is simple and that is to give people an experience to which they would want to return. The composer's feelings and opinions are not that important as far as the audience is concerned. Adrian makes the bricks and the performers build the wall. It is true that a composer does reveal a lot about himself in his music whether wittingly or not. However, people interpret more than this in the music and they call themselves musicologists and experts.

Adrian does not smoke and rarely drinks. He does not have hobbies as such. His hobby, if that is what it is, is his involvement in Greenland. He is totally apolitical and avoids the subject at all costs. As regards religion, he was brought up a Methodist and then, at 18, became Church of England when he became the organist at a church in Devon. He does not favour organised religion. He can look out of his window in Ireland and see the beauty of creation, the mountains, the sea and blanket bog and the constant change of light and shade. The cathedral of the outdoors is his place.

His work has been played by many professional musicians but has not yet reached the general public.

Adrian would wish to be remembered for giving people a music experience to which they would return. As regards Greenland, he would wish to be remembered as being a cultural ambassador for Greenland. Currently, he gives lectures on Greenland throughout schools in Ireland and he trusts that the beauty of this isolated place will be encapsulated in his music. As with rural Ireland he loves Greenland for its isolation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that total freedom can only be achieved through total isolation.

But his musical output contains some gems and have given great pleasure, as any treasure does. His music must be made available. It will find many friends and has a tremendous value and appeal to would-be performers.

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