

DAVID EARL

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

A composer overdue for recognition is the South-African-born David Earl.

He was born on 5 October 1951 in Stellenbosch to Herbert Vivian, who was known as David, and his mother, Alaire. Herbert was born in Cardiff in 1908 was a boy chorister and became an aeronautics engineer. He studied at Repton School and married Alaire MacDonald Nelson who was born in Pretoria in 1926. She was a kindergarten teacher and an amateur pianist. They were married in Cape Town in 1949.

David is the eldest of five children, the others being William (b. 1954), Steven (1959), Roland (1961) and Lucia (1963). They all love music but are not musicians.

At an early age, probably four years old, David was awakened to music by listening to LPs of Tchaikovsky. At the age of six, the family moved to Cape Town and David was at Rosebank Junior School (1957-1960) and then at Rondebosch Boys' Preparatory and High School until 1969 where he showed ability at English and Music. He had had his first piano lessons at the age of six. Very early in his life he was captivated by ballet, opera and the theatre and determined to enter this exciting world. At the age of thirteen he began piano studies with Sonia Whiteman. She was born Sonia Eavestaff and studied with Tobias Matthay and married Michael Whiteman and settled in South Africa in 1939.

David briefly studied the bassoon but had made his debut on South African radio, after an audition, playing the piano in works by Bach, Chopin and Chabrier. He was sixteen. The following year he played Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto no. 1 with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra. He also played the first two concertos of Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky one shortly before he moved to London in September 1971, after enduring a short stint in the South African Army, national service being compulsory in those days.

He studied at Trinity College of Music, the piano with Jacob Kaletski and composition with Richard Arnell. 'Tony' Arnell has been composing for fifty years and more and his work is tonal, rich, romantic with magnificent orchestration in a rich, luxurious sound. While all his symphonies are exceptional, the Fifth is a work of sumptuous melodies and harmony. This style has influenced David Earl.

He was 22 when he gave his first Wigmore Hall recital playing the Bach-Busoni Chaconne, Mozart's K.331, John Joubert's Sonata no.1, Chopin's Sonata no. 2 and Liszt's Second Polonaise. This was arranged by Ibbs and Tillet and was followed by a live radio broadcast on BBC Radio Three. The Greater London Arts Council selected him as one of its Young Musicians of the Year in 1975. He won first prize in the South African Broadcasting Company piano competition in 1976 and gave annual recitals both at the Purcell Room and Wigmore Hall to acclaim and excellent newspaper reports.

His career as a composer was launched in 1977 with his Piano Suite no. 1 Mosaics which he premiered at the Wigmore Hall that year. Many of his other piano works were also premiered in London. It was in Cape Town in 1980 that he gave the first performance of his fine Piano Concerto no. 1. The conductor was Christian Badea. The Scottish Ballet commissioned a ballet score and, as a result, he wrote Cheri in which he played the solo piano part in its premiere at the Edinburgh Festival. This he considered his first success.

Two further ballet scores were commissioned by South African ballet. Rebecca West's novel *The Return of the Soldier* was followed in 1985 by *Abelard and Heloise* which included a choral part in the score.

The Ballet de Santiago in Chile commissioned a ballet based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. David had met the choreographer Andre Prokovsky who had previously worked in Chile. Earl's excursions into opera are his two-act opera *Hamlet* of 1984, *The Go-Between* of 1991 and he is currently working on an opera with a Buddhist theme.

In the years 1982 to 1987 there were several projects for television for which David Earl wrote the music. He owes this introduction to the director David Puttnam to whom he had written indicating his interest. The

opening week of Channel Four produced P 'Tang Yang Kipperbang by Jack Rosenthal and was directed by Michael Apted and starred John Abineri, Abigail Cruttenden and Alison Steadman. Another film, Arthur's Hallowed Ground, was also notable for the cinematography of Freddie Young which film starred Jimmy Jewel and Jean Boht. There was also a six-part series The Price, a Irish political drama starring Peter Barkworth and Harriet Walter.

One of his many popular works is the Concerto for two pianos and orchestra first given in Cape Town in 1986 by David and Marilyn Horne with Enrique Garcia Asensio conducting. The previous year saw the completion of his Violin Concerto, a magnificent work with the glow of Berg, the beauty of the first violin concerto of Szymanowski and the rich orchestration of a Rachmaninov or Richard Strauss. It is a work of strength and ravishing beauty and it has been played by Tasmin Little to whom it is dedicated. It is not just a piece of music, but an enduring experience.

The year 1987 saw the completion of an important work, a choral symphony Trumpets from the Steep set for soprano, chorus and orchestra and based on Wordsworth's Intimation of Immortality. The title is a quote from the poem. Two concertos appeared in 1994 and 2006 respectively. The Cello Concerto of 1994 is an extensive work, somewhat introspective perhaps, but very well written and devoid of the nauseous sentimentality one associates with a particular English cello concerto. The Piano Concerto no. 2 of 2006 is a splendid work. It was premiered by the composer and the Cambridge Graduate Orchestra under Peter Britton and then in Cape Town with the Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Kern whose sister is the concert pianist Olga Kern.

In 2001 David Earl was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order and given the name Akashadeva meaning deity of etheric space. His political views are liberal. He does not smoke, is a moderate drinker and has many hobbies including reading, writing, cooking (he is single), walking, drawing and painting. He finds late afternoons and early evenings the best time to compose and may work up to three hours at a time.

It is only comparatively recently that Earl has specialised in composition and his career as a concert pianist is taking second place. That he is a magnificent pianist cannot be questioned. He has performed in the USA, Spain France Germany, Italy, what was called Yugoslavia, and Hong Kong. His repertoire is extensive including the classical works and he has performed the concerto by Bliss, arguably the best tonal British piano concerto, and the concerto by John Joubert. He has played much Chopin including the Preludes, and enjoys performing Rachmaninov and has an affinity with his Piano Sonata no. 1 and the Chopin Variations. He premiered Jonathan Harvey's Four Images after Yeats.

He is an admired teacher of private pupils up to Diploma level. Since 1989 he has taught undergraduates at Cambridge University. He has also been an adjudicator in various musical competitions

Piano Suite No 1 Mosaics (1977)

Piano Concerto No 1 (1977-78)

Ballet in one act: Chéri (1978)

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace – setting of St Francis of Assisi for SATB (1979)

Ballet in one act: Return of the Soldier (1980-81)

Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra (1983)

Ballet in one act: Abelard and Heloise (1983)

Ballet in one act: The Nightingale and the Rose (1983)

Incidental music for Dance of the Defectors (Lot's Wife) (1983-84)

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills – Psalm 121 for soprano and piano (1984)

Opera in two acts: Hamlet (1984)

Violin Concerto (1985)

Piano Suite No 2 Gargoyles (1986-89)

Choral Symphony Trumpets from the Steep (1987)

Opera in two acts: The Go-Between (1991)

Ballet in two acts: Macbeth (1991)

3 Intermezzi for Piano Caryatids (1991)
Sonata No 1 for Violin and Piano (1991)
24 Preludes for Piano Oxymorons (1993)
Man's Medley – choral and orchestral settings of George Herbert (1993)
Cello Concerto (1994)
Highland Journal – dance/theatre score with piano, tenor roles (1995)
Piano Suite No 3 Mandalas (1996)
To a Nobleman in Kyoto – settings of Kukai for baritone and piano (1997)
Sonata No 2 for Violin and Piano (1997)
Sonata for Cello and Piano (1998)
Invocation to Manjughosa – Violin and Piano (2002)
Theme and Variations – transcription for piano of the 4th movement from Tchaikovsky's Suite No 3 Op
55 (2002)
Trumpet Concerto (2005)
Piano Concerto No 2 (2006)
Praise the Lord for all our parents (SATB with organ; also SATB with orchestra) (2008)
Old Roses for solo piano (2008)
Clarinet Trio Piano Suite no. 4 (2008)
Piano Quintet (2008)

Notes: The Cello Sonata and Piano Suite no. 3 are available on a CD: Divine Art DDA 25060.

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