IAIN HAMILTON

by Dr David C F Wright

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In the 1950s and 1960s there were three British composers who were regarded as the most interesting and exciting composers of their time. They were Humphrey Searle, Peter Racine Fricker and Iain Hamilton.

Iain Hamilton was a distinguished composer. The expression 'distinguished' is used too often, but what it means in this present context is that he understood music and had an enviable gift for structure and form which may have been enhanced by his extensive studies as an engineer. His Scottishness gave him a fine sense of humour and an appreciation for all types of music.

He was a cosmopolitan composer living for twenty years in New York and enjoying the bustle and dangers of its streets and even the alarming crime rate. He was a most congenial man, a pleasure to talk with and to be with. His homosexuality created some problems but, as far as I was concerned, this did not deter me from both liking him and admiring him and much of his music. Like the other two composers who make up the great trio of British composers of that time, namely Fricker and Searle, all their respective scores are of quality and invention. They do not show the weaknesses and mistakes you will find in some other British composers. This amazing trio had all the essentials of musical greatness namely originality and evolving styles and even if you do not respond to their music, its intellectualism and integrity cannot be questioned. They did not churn out the same recipe all their respective lives just as, of course, the masterly Vaughan Williams did not do so. His symphonies are so diverse (as are those of Sibelius) and it is this evolving style that shows progression and not staleness and is a prerequisite for greatness in music.

As with many composers, Hamilton's first attention was to the orchestra because orchestral music is still the most popular among music lovers. His opus 1 is Variations on an original for string orchestra and it is masterly. Please note it is not Variations for strings but Variations for string orchestra. It avoids all the cliches of string orchestra music including nauseous slush and Edwardian pomposity and arrogance with its ghastly stiff upper lip caricature of the British immoralised by one composer in particular who is not worthy to be mentioned here alongside Iain. Hamilton's music is more akin to that of the finest composer of music for string instruments, Bela Bartok, with a glowing intensity. And it does not set out to show off. It is a finer piece than Tippett's splendid Concerto for two string orchestras because it avoids the inherent sentimentality; it is unlike Britten's Frank Bridge Variations because it is so much better written and avoids the empty gestures. The other fine composers of music for strings apart from the trio we have mentioned are Bliss, Elisabeth Maconchy and the sublime Gerald Finzi whose Die Natalis must be the finest British song cycle in the diatonic tradition with a sumptuous string accompaniment.

Iain Ellis Hamilton was born in Glasgow on 6 June 1922. He moved with his family to London in 1929 where he attended Mill Hill School. His parents were very supportive both in his musical and design ambitions and were somewhat embarrassed at their son's stunning ability. He was a popular student.

He began piano lessons rather late, at the age of ten in fact. His family were neither musical nor had any thing to do with art. Iain told me that he practised the piano most during the war and often during air raids. He was apprenticed to be an engineer up to 1946. It is this strictness of engineering training that infuses his music and he always said that engineering was not dull as was the musical profession. He said that most people in the arts, with the exception of orchestral players, are absolutely phoney, with sickening egos and this was most prevalent among conductors and some composers. He hated arrogance and conceit which was rife among British composers and conductors between the wars. He had respect for unpretentious businessmen. He once said that he would rather be a civil engineer or a businessman than a composer. Architecture was the only art form that really interested him. He also agreed with me that the lives of some composers were far more interesting than their music!

Hamilton was a honest man stating that his early works were to solve problems which explains the influence in these works. Curiously he began to write serial music at the same time that he began to write his best light music. Tonal music can never be satisfactorily original these days. It will always sound like something else. He also hated the snobbery of those who look down their noses at light music or good jazz (however, there is a lot of awful jazz about). However, neither of us liked groups where the double bass player only plucked and plucked and plucked! Iain said, “A double bass is to be played not slapped!”

It is not easy for me to understand why America and New York fascinated him so but they did. America lagged behind in contemporary music but not in art or sculpture. Yet students began to seek new horizons and when America discovered the genius of Webern, the dam burst. Unlike Europe, America had few, if any composers of note until Roger Sessions, Walter Piston and Irving Fine came on the scene. Iain saw how the Americas hated homosexuals and how the nation were therefore somewhat dismissive of Copland and Virgil Thomson and, on a separate issue, it was said, with some truth, that everything Roy Harris wrote was “almost the same”. But the anti-homosexual feelings waned and this explains why Ned Rorem was more acceptable and his song cycles are superb.

But Hamilton was right when he said that Europe had a strange outlook on music and that this often erupted into fury over trivial matters, or that Europeans were blase in their attitudes. And the Viennese orchestras had such a thin sound. Iain adored Webern, as all genuine music lovers do, with his “magnificent balancing of passionate content with economic and finely controlled form with its superb sensitivity and intellect moulded by genius”. But the Viennese orchestras could not play his music. It was beyond their skill, musicianship and intellect at the time.

It was Hamilton’s quiet confidence that contributed to his great craftsmanship. He did not compose at the piano but would check details at the piano. Despite what is asserted elsewhere Britten composed at the piano. I saw him do it. John Ireland and Egon Wellesz always composed at the piano and there is nothing wrong with that! Hamilton would through-sketch something out in full as if they were complete plans for a proposed building. Then he would compose the foundations and the superstructure and on completion reassess the work. He seldom revised a work although he did so in 1971 with his Piano Sonata Op 13 of twenty years earlier. He also withdraw a couple of works. He was not concerned with how much he wrote in a day. Composition was not the 3.30 at Newmarket with a prize both for the jockey on the fastest horse and the horse’s owner.

One of the many things that drew me to Iain was that three of his all time favourites composers were also favourites of mine. We were both committed Beethovenians. Iain was incensed at Britten’s absurd remarks about the crudity of Beethoven, whose music Britten said was haphazard. Britten also said that the variations in Beethoven’s last Piano Sonata were grotesque! For Hamilton, Webern and Schoenberg were exemplary composers, with which I agree but I could not share Iain’s enthusiasm for Berlioz! I still find the Fantastic Symphony very boring!

Another great asset of Hamilton’s character was his honesty. He had a compulsion for honesty and integrity in music. He would say that certain events or experiences could move a composer to put this into his music but that he did not write under any such impulse directly. He could be moved by the sight of a fine building just as Berg was moved by the physical beauty of the tragic 18 year old Manon Gropius. Iain loved the sea and yet you would be hard pressed to find a sea influence in his music apart from the magnificent cantata The Bermudas. He had visited the West Indies several times in the 1960s. But his honesty went further when he said that some modern composers accept other styles and yet have no style of their own. He would quote composers, whom I will not name here, as having no style of their own. And, furthermore, they had no originality. What they did have was an understanding of current fashion by which they could milk the public and attain fame, which accolade was not based on the quality of their music.

It may be just as well that Iain lived in New York for many years since his honesty did not always endear him to the British music establishment. He revealed the truth about Britten allegedly not being allowed to study with Berg. Britten claimed that the Royal College of Music was against this as Berg was considered immoral whereas Britten was a practising homosexual and therefore immoral himself since homosexuality was a crime in those days. Britten was also sexually attracted to boys. Iain never hid his sexual orientation or made excuses or apologies for his own homosexuality and this is another reason why we deeply respected him. He was an honest man.

Hamilton began his music studies at the Royal Academy of Music in 1947 studying composition with William Alwyn and the piano with Harold Craxton. William Alwyn was a professor at RAM from 1926 to 1956 during which time he wrote his first three symphonies, although he began life as a flautist. His symphonies are fine, the third and fourth being rather special, if unashamedly conservative. Harold Craxton was a legendary piano teacher and therefore I need say no more here.

On leaving RAM, Hamilton was awarded the Dove Prize, the highest award given to any student at the Academy.. He also obtained a BMus at London University in 1950.

After the success of Hamilton's opus 1, there appeared Clarinet Quintet no. 1, Op 2, which was well received and this was followed by two major works the Symphony no. 1, Op 3 of 1950 and the Piano Concerto, Op 4. The Symphony no. 1 was premiered in December 1952 with the BBC Scottish SO under Trevor Harvey and it was taken to Switzerland in 1953 under Colin Davis.

For a composer to have a symphony and a concerto among first of his first four works is some achievement and the works are very fine. Iain was particularly fond of the Piano Concerto. And to add to his accomplishments his String Quartet no. 1, Op 5, won the Clements Music Prize in 1950. I cannot think of any British composer who has written a first quartet notable for its great emotional depth and expressive power. His Nocturnes for clarinet and piano, Op 6 won the Edwin Evans Memorial Prize and the Symphony no. 2 of 1951 won the Koussevitsky Prize. It was premiered in Cheltenham in 1953 with the Halle Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult.

The Symphony no.1 begins with a call to attention with strong dissonant material of an epic nature. A rugged four note theme swaggers in music that is busy and full of life. The moments of repose are never dull but a relevant contrast and fit into the whole. At times the music is dark, perhaps sinister, but the high drama ranges from ebullience to the 'music of the cold heart'. There are passages of surprising lightness and cheerfulness. The orchestration is faultless and the final minutes in an ABA form have tremendous but natural power sandwiching a soaring melody. It is the splendid use of dissonance that creates the tension and, while I adore much early and romantic music, it is the dissonance that produces real tension and excitement. The second movement starts lugubriously. The brass have a quasi-chorale style which gives a feeling of eerieness and desolation as later portrayed with exceptional beauty by high strings. The timpani heartbeats about three minutes in add to this rich tapestry of emotional upheaval. The flute theme above the harp is so beautiful that words will not describe it. The brass continues the lament with glowing string accompaniment leading to a string theme of gorgeous beauty. The music seems to want to head for a climax and has a great feeling of danger about it, but this is avoided and an uneasy calm takes its place. The third movement is a schezo-finale with tremendous wit.

There is probably no more sublime work than Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for violin, viola and orchestra K 364. With this glorious masterpiece in mind Iain composed a work with the same title and for the same resources in 1950 as his opus 8. The following work was a Sonata for viola and piano, Op 9, showing the interest composers had in the Cinderella of the orchestra. Fricker was to write a Viola Concerto in 1952 and Malcolm Arnold had composed a a Viola Sonata in 1948. Following the Sinfonia Concertante and the Viola Sonata, Iain composed his Variations for solo violin, Op. 11 in 1951.

The Clarinet Concerto of 1951 won the Royal Philharmonic Prize.

In his early career Iain was associated with SPNM, the Society for the Promotion of New Music and at concerts David Dorward remembers that Iain would turn the pages for the pianist Margaret Kitchin who was married to Howard Hartog of Schotts who were Hamilton's publishers. At this time Iain was an intense young man, very talkative, indeed garrulous but his mind was densely packed with information. He had a fine mind and was a brilliant lecturer. All his lectures teemed with information, amazing insights and a masterful delivery.

As already stated,the Symphony no.2 was awarded the Koussevitsky Prize in 1951, two years before its first performance. It is, without doubt, a very fine symphony. The opening movement begins with an expansive lento, the material of which forms the main allegro section. The second movement, presto scherzo, is fleet of foot with a curious alla marcia section and a lyrical andante section before the main thrust returns. The third movement, adagio, is beautiful with a glorious subdued end. The finale is too relaxed for my taste but it progresses into a very exciting piece.

Iain's father died in 1951 and, as a memorial piece, Hamilton wrote his Violin Concerto no.1, which is surprisingly conventional with two allegros separated by a slow movement.

In March 1952 his ballet Clerk Saunders was a great success. Critics at the time spoke of its great originality. It is a work that was not given an opus number. And yet shallow music lovers and musicologists referred to Hamilton's work as austere and greatly influenced by Bartok and Hindemith. As I have often said there is a lot of rubbish talked about music and sadly some of it is believed.

Coronation year, 1953, saw his third set of variations, the Symphonic Variations which some writers have wrongly called a symphony. A symphony it is not. It is a group of twelve variations successfully exploiting the colours of the orchestra. It was premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in 1956 under Sir John Barbirolli which was a great mistake. Barbirolli was a very inept conductor and he was simply hopeless at contemporary works. He would enter into contracts to perform certain works but the back out of some ‘modern’ works simply because he was totally inadequate whereas George Weldon often came to his rescue and conducted the difficult works since Barbirolli was both useless and forlorn at difficult works..

For ten years for 1951 Hamilton lectured at Morley College (1952 -8) and at London University. He was Chairman of the Composer’s Guild of Great Britain in 1958 and from that year to 1960 Chairman and secretary of the Institute of Contemporary Arts and a member of the BBC’s Music Advisory panel.

Originality is always a concern to a good composer. The tonal system was very limited and so Iain turned to serialism, a form of composition still savaged by shallow music lovers and musicians alike. Some dismiss it as a system or a device, but then so is the fugue. The fact of the matter is that serialism is a highly developed craft, demanding the greatest skill from a composer, and a discipline not, or seldom, found elsewhere. People who ridicule this method do not understand it or cannot discipline themselves and are the poorer music lovers/musicians because of it. Walton tried it twice but it was beyond him.

Hamilton’s Three Piano Pieces, Op 30, of 1955, appeared in an album of piano pieces published by Schott which also includes pieces by Searle and Fricker. None of the works are easy (the Searle is very difficult) but Iain’s work is direct and economic and shows incredible self-discipline and skill.

The prejudice over serialism, born out of ignorance and abuse, was to be vented against Hamilton when his Sinfonia for two orchestras premiered at the Edinburgh Festival of 1959. Partly influenced by the composer’s admiration for Robert Burns and written in celebration of the Burns centenary the piece was unrelentingly tough and the audience hated it. They were expecting something light hearted as in the the composer’s popular Scottish Dances. The President of the Burns Society led a campaign denouncing the work with vitriol and gross invective. The conductor at the premiere, Sir Alexander Gibson was also subject to abuse but had the courage to perform it again.

During 1959 Iain Hamilton was one of the judges for the John Davis Prize which was won by David Dorward with his Diversions for six clarinets. Iain had greatly admired Dorward’s Cassation although the music critic Malcolm Rayment, who was a fan of Dorward’s work, did not like the piece.

In 1961 Hamilton moved to America taking up a teaching post at Duke University in Northern Carolina. He was distressed at the recent animosity towards his music in Britain which was grossly unfair. He settled in New York and the Americans loved him. Iain was an expert on many topics from art to literature, architecture to history and so he was called upon to give lectures and broadcasts on many subjects. He was professor at Duke during 1966 and 1967 and resident composer at Tanglewood in 1962 the year when Irving Fine presented his own amazing Symphony and died tragically nine days later from a serious heart ailment. Hamilton visited other universities and still returned from time to time to teach at Glasgow University. The British began to regret their mistreatment of him and in 1974 he was awarded the Ralph Vaughan Williams Award as Composer of the Year.

The American years brought forth many fine works. The Quartet no.2 appeared in 1965 and that year also saw a setting of Chateaubriand with the Dialogues for coloratara soprano and small orchestra. Britain, lamenting Hamilton’s move to the USA commissioned Cantos for the 1965 Proms.

Two remarkable operas were the products of the sixties, namely Agamemnon and the Royal Hunt of the Sun based on Peter Schaffer’s play, and this magnificent and dramatic opera was premiered at the London Coliseum in 1977. The operas have sunk into oblivion and while I realise the cost in mounting such a production these works are worthy of revival. They contain some of Hamilton’s more dramatic and inspiring music.

It is a pity to record again how some conductors are totally inadequate for the task of realising new scores. Barbirolli was inept and when the London Philharmonic Orchestra commissioned Commedia in 1973 for its fortieth anniversary it was premiered under Bernard Haitink who showed no understanding of the piece. This is why a premiere is so vital and the choice of conductor essential. If this premiere had been given by Del Mar or Pritchard it would have been successful.

One of the most stunning works was the Scena: Cleopatra for soprano and orchestra. It dates from 1977 and I was priveleged to be at its first perfomance at a Promenade Concert in 1978. It was impeccably and dramatically sung by Lois McDonall, and David Atherton conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra. It is a truly great work with a tremndous impact and musically as perfect as a piece could be.

Although living in America, Iain had been profoundly impressed by another dramatic scena for high voice and orchestra namely Oxus by Humphrey Searle premiered in a 1967 Prom with Gerald English and Norman Del Mar conducting, a work which Peter Pears said was impossible to sing. The fact of the matter was that it was beyond Pears's limited ability. Cleopatra is brilliantly written, totally satisfying both musically and aurally and it puts some much British music to shame. Unlike Elgar and Britten, who were not fluent in writing for the solo voice since they depended on predictabilty, sequences and lacked originality, Hamilton's vocal line is superb as it is, for example, in some of Tippet's song cycles. Cleopatra received an extended ovation and the rest of the programme was inconsequential. A truly great work!

The move back into a tonal tradition was a mistake. His atonal and, indeed, his serial works are his finest, but his later works may have been motivated by a series of religious choral works which he may have felt needed a tonal basis. The simplicity of the a capella works also lent weight to this formulation as shown in the Requiem of 1979 and the Mass in A of 1980. His final two symphonies are tonal or, rather, exploit tonal relationships..

However, the opera Anna Karenina of 1978 is a very fine achievement albeit limited by tonal restrictions. It was first produced in London in 1981 and it brilliantly highlights the emotional content of Tolstoy's novel. Anna was married to a man who loved her but he was dull and so she embarked on a torrid affair to obtain excitement being unsatisfied with her existing security. The affair dishonours her noble husband, brings shame upon her son, herself and the respective families. Eventually she realises that this utter disgrace is entirely her own fault, which it is, and commits suicide by falling under a train

The Symphony no. 3 was completed in New York late in 1980. It was premiered by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Roderick Brydon. It is also work of tonal relationships and may have its root in G. It is a lyrical work scored for double woodwind, two horns and strings. The opening movement is a leisurely allegretto followed by a scherzo in C with a waltz-ãÑike section. The andante is marked tenderly and sadly and the finale is mainly brisk. The work is lyrical and of a mainly gentle nature, sometimes serene, well written but lacking in any dramatic content.

The Symphony no. 4 was another commission and premiered in 1982 by the Scottish National Orchestra under Sir Alexander Gibson. It is a highly personal work dedicated to his special friend, Cass, as was his Requiem of 1979. The opening movement is a painful lament in which he pours out his soul in grief and in simple diatonic style. His sense of loss is also shown in the second movement with a very touching rocking sound, as one would nurse a dying child and there are heartbeat timpani strokes. Desolation continues in the third movement. This is no scherzo; this is no laughing matter. The finale begins with a funeral march and a solo trumpet seems to herald The Last Post. The music is both melancholic and, perhaps, slightly malicious. An andante passage follows based on material from the Lux Aeteram from the Requiem. This is a valediction to one he loved and to the symphony itself. It is very moving but uncomfortable and this may explain why it has found few friends. To add to its dismissal it was played at the Proms the evening after the premiere of Hugh Wood's Symphony which was comparatively cheerful and this added to the lesser reception of Iain's work which was traditional and was regarded as an anti-climax following Wood's symphony. Bad planning by the BBC!.

The return to his original style of atonal and dissonant music is shown in his truly superb Piano Concerto no. 2 of 1987. This was ‘ no more being Mr Nice Guy’ or kowtowing to the music public who want all their music to be tonal and safe. This is a tremendous piece of rhythmic drive and energy, unleashed power and demanding bravura. And it is a real concerto, where the piano sparkles and the orchestra has an integral part to play.

Iain wrote much fine chamber music. Of particular note is the Cello Sonata no. 1 of 1958. It is cast in seven sections of which sections one and seven are cadenzas for both instruments while the second is a cadenza for the cello and the third a cadenza for the piano. Its greatness lies, among other things, in its originality, and there are so many composers who show no originality in their works.

The String Quartet no. 2 of 1965 is a classic example of how to write for this medium and the Octet of 1983 is notable for its immediacy and economy. Influenced by Searle's Variations and Finale Op 34 the first movement treats each player as a soloist. I was very aggrieved to read that someone had likened the piece to Schubert!

I suppose some people may claim that his Octet for strings of 1954 was influenced by Mendlessohn!

The String Quartet no. 3 is another fine work but its episodic nature blurs its overall structure. Sometimes brilliant craftsmanship gets in the way of inspiration!

There were a series of organ works – Fanfares and Variants of 1960, Aubade of 1965 and Threnos in time of war of 1966.

The return to tonality also introduced a few other weaknesses in Iain's music of which one is the use of quotes from other composers. In Circus for two trumpets and orchestra there are quotes from Berlioz, Liszt, Mahler and Paganini. Other works quote from music of the nineteeneth century. Shostakovich did this in his curious Symphony no. 15, and the only memorable moments are the William Tell extract. Incidentally, Circus is not a concerto.

In the last twenty five years of his life his main occupation was in writing opera. Tamburlaine dates from 1976, Anna Karenina from 1978, Raleigh's Dream was premiered in Los Angeles in 1983, Lancelot was commissioned by the Arundel Festival in 1985, The Tragedy of Macbeth in 1990 and London's Fair in 1992.

He did compose other things such as the Bulgarian Invocation for orchestra, The Wild Garden for clarinet and piano, London for piano and orchestra and Le jardin du Monet for piano premiered by the superb Katharina Wolpe. In 1995 he composed a fine orchestral showpiece The Transit of Jupiter for the sixtieth birthday celebrations of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. But, again for a composer dedicated to structural integrity, this piece is in eighteen sections lasting about sixteen minutes and it is somewhat dark and grim. It was premiered by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins and David Dorward, who was present, tells me that Hamilton took a bow on the stage 'looking old and very sad.'

I wish to re-emphasize Hamilton's honesty. There were certain composers he did not like and, indeed, postively hated because of the poor quality of their music. He drew my attention to the sixteen composers interviewed by R Murray Schafer in his book British Composers in Interview (Faber, 1960).

Iain said, "Between the sixteen of us we choose fifty one favourite composers and Elgar was not mentioned once in that list! Britten was only mentioned once and that by his one time friend Lennox Berkeley in a sycophantic way. The most admired composers were Bach, Beethoven and Schoenberg who between them had 27 per cent of the votes. All the rest were much further down the scale. That speaks volumes!"

For the last twenty years of his life Hamilton lived in a top apartment in Chelsea where I sometimes visited him. We shared many thing together. He was as honest as ever. He lamented conductors who took liberties with scores and were presented as film stars. He was irritated by the adulation given to British composers whose fame rested on matters other than their music. He was always interested in new music and was never a snob. Like me, and many others, he hated the music of Elgar and Britten for the obvious musical reasons and he also strongly disapproved of their sexual perversions… Britten with his fascination with the sexuality of little and teenage boys and Elgar with his fetish for all women having to wear navy blue knickers if they were to take part in any work or concert of his or his music! He would ask me to play some of his piano music to him. He took a genuine interest in my work and my writings about composers and warned me that my honesty would get me into trouble. He would ask for recordings of music that I wrote about. He was deeply moved by John Veale's Violin Concerto. "I could not write like that but I am glad someone has," he told me. His own Violin Concerto no. 2 (Amphion) is also a good piece. He found delight in rare modern music and wondered why it was not appreciated and performed more often when "so much rubbish is regularly performed and recorded commerically." He would talk to me for hours about a painting and analysed a Valsequez for two hours with me...simply fascinating! We did not agree on all things. He was not interested in the countryside, finding it desparately dull compared to the throb of a city.

He died in London on 28 July 2000. At his best he was a great composer but my own judgment is that he, being deeply offended by hostility which he received, felt he had to debase himself to write more acceptable music and return to tonality where his gifts of originality and drama could not be expressed as effectively. Generally speaking, his early works are his best.

This article was written over a period of twenty years

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