

IAN PARROTT

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Britain has produced some fine musicians in the academic field but often this aspect of their lives has overshadowed their other achievements. Such a case is Ian Parrott who has won major prizes for composition including the first prize of the Royal Philharmonic Society in 1949 for his *Symphonic Impression: Luxor*, the Shakespeare Prize for the *Solemn Overture: Romeo and Juliet* of 1953, the Jasper Rooper prize in 1983 for the *String Quartet no. 2*, which had been composed in 1956, and the British Music Society Prize in 1985 for his opera *Once Upon a Time* which dates from 1959.

He has a long list of musical works to his name; eight books on music, including one on orchestration and another about Elgar for the Master Musician series, and countless articles written over the last fifty years or so, and it is worth noting that his awards are for three basic but varied musical media the orchestra, chamber music and opera. That, in itself, indicates an overall grasp of the whole spectrum of music, demonstrating Parrott's competence and versatility.

There are five symphonies; five concertos, including the *Concertino* for two guitars and orchestra of 1973; four operas; five string quartets, in addition to some attractive chamber music and an impressive output of choral and vocal works.

He was born in Streatham, London on 5 March 1916 to Horace Bailey Parrott, a civil engineer whose wife, née Muriel Blackford, had studied the piano and, at the appropriate age, began to teach her son. Concerning another family matter it is believed that Robert Perrott who died in Oxford in 1550, and was a Doctor of Music, may be an ancestor.

Ian began to compose as a boy of seven, and at the age of twelve he composed his *Siberian March* for piano, This was about the time that he briefly studied composition with Benjamin Dale while on holiday, such lessons having been organised by Mrs Parrott. Dale was both an encouragement and stimulus to the twelve-year-old boy, whose first musical heroes were Bach and Wagner. In his adolescence the admiration shifted to Holst. Literary works gradually appealed to his inquisitive mind and among these were the works of Aldous Huxley, Joyce, Blake, James Elroy Flecker and the philosophical writings of Berkeley.

In 1931, Parrott had piano and organ lessons with William Pullein of Calne who said that the pianist's technique could be founded upon two composers namely Bach and Chopin. From Harrow School, which he attended during the years 1929 to 1932, Parrott went to the Royal College of Music where he remained until 1934; his studies included piano with Hilda Klein, organ with Henry Ley, singing with Manuel Garcia, aural training with Percy Buck, the history of music with H.C. Colles (who wrote a standard musical history *The Growth of Music* now hopelessly out of date) and conducting with various mentors including Reginald Jacques.

From RCM, Parrott progressed to New College, Oxford, taking Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Music degrees in 1937. Musical studies continued with Sir Hugh Allen, Thomas Armstrong and Ernest Walker. The examiners met under a painting of John Stainer and when one of Parrott's exercises was being considered Allen said with typical humour, 'I think we might call this Stainer's Crucifixion!' Allen, however, provided invaluable encouragement and was a man of his time, encouraging performances of the latest works of Bliss and others.

First performances were always an exciting event to Ian Parrott; he vividly remembers the first London performance of Bartok's *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* under the direction of the magnificent Herman Scherchen in 1938.

Between 1937 and 1939 Parrott taught at Malvern College as assistant director to J.A. Davidson and occasionally journeyed to Worcester to play the viola in Sir Ivor Atkins's orchestra. Parrott had learnt the violin at school and studied the viola at Oxford with André Mangeot and with Frau Studeny in Munich on a vacation visit.

He had little time for composition in the 1930s but in 1935 wrote his Minuet for oboe and piano which was broadcast on 9 December 1949. In 1936, when he received his ARCO, his Scherzo no. 1, written in 1933, was premiered in Oxford by the Isis Orchestra conducted by John Runge who, strangely enough, was to become Parrott's commanding officer in the North African desert before El Alamein. In fact, it was as a member of the Royal Signal Corps that Parrott saw war service in the Middle East including North Africa.

In 1940, Oxford awarded him a Doctorate in Music and on 1 June that year in Bromley he married Elisabeth Cox a gifted painter, especially of portraits. In 1969, her painting of a local Welsh coastal scene was presented to Prince Charles while he was a student at Aberystwyth; in 1971 another painting adorned a record sleeve of chamber music by Elgar. Mrs. Parrott also contributed two black and white illustrations for her husband's book on Elgar and her painting of Elgar's birthplace, Plas Gwyn, was presented to Sir Adrian Boult in 1979.

The year of his marriage saw the appearance of an appropriate song I heard a linnet courting, to a text by Robert Bridges, and the impressive piano rhapsody Westerham, one of a mere handful of quite splendid twentieth-century British piano works in a conventional idiom which demonstrates conclusively that Parrott is among that rare breed who can write successfully for the piano. His Theme and Variations of 1945 is another example, mercurially fluent and as good as the best piano music of its generation.

Three Thoughtful Songs of 1977, in spite of their anachronistic feel of Victorian parlours, benefits from a truly splendid piano accompaniment.

The year 1941 was a turbulent one in world history, but for Parrott it saw the award of a Master of Arts degree from Oxford and the following year the first of his two sons, Michael, was born. Currently, he is a 'cellist in the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. The second son, Richard, born in 1945, pursues a career in the Welsh Plant Breeding Station.

The burlesque opera The Sergeant-Major's Daughter had its premiere in Cairo in July 1943 and the following year the first of his North African inspired works the Symphonic Prelude: El Alamein was completed. It was given its first hearing in Guildford in October 1945 and was the first work of his to be broadcast by BBC North in October 1948. The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra also took it up in February 1950 indicating a growing interest in the piece. Humphrey Searle thought highly of it, preferring it to Luxor which has received more performances. Searle arranged further broadcasts of Parrott's work and a friendship, which had begun in the 1930s with healthy debates on such matters as polytonality, lasted until Searle's death in 1982.

Parrott became lecturer in music at Birmingham University in 1946 having duly served his country during the war in contrast to Britten and Tippett. Here, in the Midlands he taught harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, composition and the history of music. His Symphony no. 1 dates from this time and awaits its first complete performance although I believe the composer would prefer a revival of later works in this genre. The String Quartet no. 1 also dates from 1946 and had its first performance in London in May 1950. The Piano Concerto of 1948 has not yet been performed and the composer tells me that it is 'best forgotten'. He may well be wrong in his judgement although it has to be said that composers see defects in their own work which no one else recognises. Bearing in mind Parrott's exemplary writing for the piano it may be that the public should have the opportunity to evaluate his Piano Concerto.

In 1949, he was appointed an examiner for Trinity College, London. Sometimes this post has taken him to various parts of the world including Canada, New Zealand and Fiji. Although he is now retired he still adjudicates.

Luxor was composed during 1946-7 and was inspired by a visit the composer made to the temple at Luxor shortly before the battle of El Alamein when he was on leave. He was profoundly impressed, particularly by the excavations showing younger civilisations. At the head of the score he wrote, 'In three corners of Luxor temple, overshadowed by the ancient Egyptian structure stand a Roman temple, a Christian altar and a Mohammedan mosque' Brass instruments open the work recalling the splendour of Egypt's golden age, drums and low strings suggest sinister primitivism This notable work is superbly orchestrated with well-judged climaxes, shimmering strings evoke the hot sun glistening on the Nile and the work has a memorable theme although, as in Borodin's Symphony no. 2 in B minor, it is done to death and the ensuing material is too derivative; the music also meanders at times, Some of the string writing also recalls the heat of the desert, there is a telling passage in which low pizzicato strings support the superstructure of other material in the style of a slow march portraying the dignity and pomp of the Roman army. There is also a woodwind passage of great tenderness which hints at Mohammedan music typical of a cinematic Biblical epic; agitated strings support a magnificent chordal brass passage, one of many short-lived episodic sections which, however, to me at any rate, hinder the direction and continuity of the piece, although, to be fair to the composer, I have yet to hear a performance that does justice to this worthy score.

In 1950, when Parrott went to the music department of University College, Wales, in Aberystwyth as Gregynog professor of music the number of full-time music students was under twenty. By 1980, there were over ninety including post-graduates.

The history of Gregynog is set out in Parrott's book *The Spiritual Pilgrims*.

Gregynog Hall is a country mansion house surrounded by woods five miles north of Newtown in Powys. In 1919 it was purchased by the Misses Gwendoline and Margaret Davies together with their brother. These two wealthy sisters had some musical ability and wanted to apply both their talents and money to good works and especially encouraging those concerned with the arts. A festival of music and poetry was held at Gregynog in 1932 and a choir was formed for this and subsequent festivals from the area. Mendelssohn's grandson was present at the third festival in 1935.

From 1918, the Davies sisters had been donating monies in 'staggering munificence' to UCW, Aberystwyth, and anonymously at that. When the source of such benevolence eventually became known it was decided that in the subjects of geography and music the respective professors were to be known as Gregynog Professors.

One of Parrott's first students in Wales was the tenor, Kenneth Bowen; another was William Mathias who played the piano part in Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande* brilliantly in December 1953 at one of the many concerts Parrott arranged. Mathias was to become a piano pupil of the superlative Peter Katin.

Parrott's series of post-war festivals between 1951 and 1961 attracted distinguished composers such as Bliss, Edmund Rubbra, Gordon Jacob and Mansel Thomas. The College orchestra had the honour of playing before the Queen when she opened the extension to the National Library of Wales on 8 August 1955. For this occasion Parrott composed his *Flourish for a Royal Visit*.

During the years 1951-3 he composed his second opera, *The Black Ram*, which was written to a bilingual text as a direct result of the composer's personal involvement in Cardiganshire; the score incorporates traditional Welsh melodies. Extracts from the opera were performed in Birmingham in May 1956 and the overture was broadcast by the BBC Welsh Orchestra under Mansel Thomas that

November. The broadcast of a concert version with its Welsh text in February 1957 was conducted by Arwel Hughes. Being received with genuine enthusiasm, a further broadcast was made on the Overseas Service of the BBC. Yet the work has not been taken up by any professional company. However, it did reach the stage in the King's Hall, Aberystwyth in March 1966. Large audiences attended for three evenings and again the work was very well received. This was also the composer's fiftieth birthday year when he was awarded the Harriet Cohen Medal for Musicology.

The founder of the Elgar Society, A. T. Shaw of Worcester, asked Parrott, who was now Vice-President of the Society, to give the first of many talks on the Enigma Variations in Malvern in 1968. This led to Jack Westrup asking him to write a book on this composer which was published as part of the Master Musician series.

Returning to the 1950s, several important works were composed including the prize-winning String Quartet no. 2 premiered in Swansea in 1956; the Concerto for Cor Anglais and Orchestra of 1954 which was first given by Roger Winfield and the Halle Orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli in July 1958. It was Peter Racine Fricker who can be credited with the first British Cor Anglais Concerto — his pre-dating Parrott's by four years. Parrott's String Quartet no. 3 of 1957 is a fine work: it is earthy, woody and mellow and it is refreshing to see a lion's share of the material given to the viola. The music has hints of Britten's Hymn to Saint Cecilia of 1942 particularly in the passage O wear your tribulation like a rose. The quartet is an introspective, well-knit piece but, as in other works of Ian Parrott, its episodic character gives it a tendency to tedium and perhaps, as a consequence, the work does not quite 'come off' — but it has some great moments. The same criticism has been made of the Solemn Overture: Romeo and Juliet, first performed in Bournemouth in October 1957 yet it often has a strange, individual beauty in keeping with the plot.

The comic opera *Once Upon a Time* based on a Russian short story was composed during 1958-9 and is scored for three voices and piano attracting the complaint that therefore it is not an opera at all. Its premiere took place in Christchurch, New Zealand in December 1960 while Parrott was visiting that country both as an examiner for Trinity College and as an external assessor at the University of Canterbury. The first performance in Britain was in Aberystwyth in April 1961 with a student, Amanda Williams, Kenneth Bowen and the distinguished baritone Redvers Llewellyn, then a member of the teaching staff, as the singers. Subsequent productions include those by Phoenix Opera, a Midlands group advised by David Franklin in Worcester, and fourteen months later at the Bromsgrove Festival in May 1975. Arena Opera took it up with great zest and toured extensively with it in 1979. Indeed this group were to premiere Parrott's opera *The Lady of Flowers* in Colchester in September 1982. Opera Libera performed *Once Upon a Time* in the marble hall of Clandon Park, Guildford in June 1985 as a 'British Opera in Retrospect' project organised by the British Music Society for European Music Year.

The Concert Overture: *Seithenin* was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast by the BBC Welsh Orchestra in December 1959. Five years later it was taken up by Sir Adrian Boult. A. F. Leighton Thomas likens it to Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, *Seithenin* is based on the Welsh legend of *Seithenin*, who failed to guard the sea wall for King Gwyddno, the result being Cardigan Bay! It deserves a revival.

The outward-looking *Symphony no. 2: Round the World* dates from 1960-1 and was broadcast by the BBC Welsh Orchestra under the dependable John Carewe in July 1969. The Cello Concerto otherwise known as the *Concerto Breve*, dates from 1961 and was first performed by the Hallé Orchestra under Barbirolli with William Pleeth as soloist. There are two movements each preceded by a short unaccompanied 'cello ritornello'. It is another work that suffers from constant changes of tempo in the eight minutes of the first movement highlighting the fact, perhaps, that episodic music may have many potential weaknesses; it may suggest poverty of the material, its lack of suitability for development, inadequate time given or being available to compose the work in question, or an absence of inspiration in the composer's mind.

The String Quartet no. 4, which the composer considers may possibly be his finest work dates from 1963 and seems to be searching for a personal idiom, a problem inherent in this composer since the 1950s, which difficulty was shared by such composers as Kenneth Leighton and Adrian Cruft. When they tried to sound modern in aspiring to originality they were not always successful and their work became stylistically at odds with their true nature and consequently hybrid.

However, as with all of Parrott's work that I know, his craftsmanship is never in doubt. This quartet is in four movements which appear to get shorter and more sparse, giving the work a valedictory character. It is the strength of the second movement that redeems the work. The Symphony no. 3, which calls for an obligato string quartet dates from 1966 and was first given at the Aberystwyth Centenary in October 1972. It is interesting in that its slow movement 'involved contemplating a single chord in Tchaikovsky'. The Trombone Concerto of 1967 has been recorded by William Shepherd and the Lima Symphony Orchestra.

In the late 1960s, Parrott met Rosemary Brown at Attingham Park, an adult college near Shrewsbury. Brown believes that when she was seven years old the composer Liszt, who had died about thirty years before she was born, made his first visit to her but she claims that, by this time she was already accustomed to seeing the spirits of the dead. She alleges that Liszt promised that when Rosemary was grown up he would dictate his new music to her. Mrs. Brown further claimed that twelve composers regularly appear to her, ranging from Monteverdi to Rachmaninov. Another visitor was Sir Donald Tovey who in January 1970 explained to her why these composers had chosen her to be their amanuensis. Like her grandmother, Mrs. Brown is what is called a psychic and this 'gift' extends to her own children. This extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance, spiritualism, or whatever name it is given, creates major problems. The idea that Sir Henry Wood declined to speak direct to Brown whereas Liszt would, Sir Henry having to go through another medium, Leslie Flint, stretches credibility. However, the BBC approached Brown in 1969 and a programme ensued in which Liszt 'dictated' a piece to her which he called Grubelei. The work was taken to the Liszt expert, Humphrey Searle, who told me that it matched the style of works Liszt produced in the last fifteen years or so of his life but it bore no resemblance to any actual piece composed by him. The famous concert pianist, Peter Katin, has recorded this piece and other 'astral' works. At the time of her book *Unfinished Symphonies* published in 1971 Brown had 'composed' four hundred pieces of music from composers beyond the grave. Ian Parrott wrote of this phenomenon, 'I don't think there is any cheating here. As a musician I am quite prepared to say that everything she has produced is stylistically possible.'

However, none of these compositions allegedly dictated from beyond have caught on. There are no masterpieces or any works that have taken the world by storm, whereas if an authentic work by one of the great composers were unearthed the result would undoubtedly be quite different.

In 1976, Parrott orchestrated a movement from an F minor Symphony Beethoven is purported to have given to Brown. One wonders why Beethoven could not have communicated the orchestration direct to her. Beethoven knew what he wanted but did not know how to orchestrate this new piece! It seems to me that Parrott's fascination with ESP is at odds with his admission to being a very devout Christian, although he does add that he is '30% spiritualist, 30% fundamentalist and 40% independent at the moment!'

The Rosemary Brown claims are nonsense.

There is another disturbing feature to this, namely that Parrott's interest in such a subject has damaged his credibility and his music may find itself being assessed not on its worth but on these extraneous associations, just as, by converse analogy, Elgar actually gained some benefits through his toadying to royalty.

In July 1977, Parrott was responsible for organising the music at the installation of Prince Charles as

Chancellor of the University of Wales. The music before the ceremony included two items by the Welsh composer, Grace Williams, who had died earlier that year. She was a very fine composer of music which was both attractive and profound. Who could ever forget the lovely Janet Price singing her setting of Milton's 'Fairest of Stars'?

It is among the chamber music and music that employs the voice that Parrott's most attractive music appears — the superb Fantasy-Sonata for clarinet and piano of 1979 and the Autumn Landscape for oboe and piano of 1983 are good examples.

But, to my mind, and by far the most memorable work is Ceredigion for solo harp of 1957 with its rural nostalgia conjuring up visions of ancient Wales and its harpers. It is deeply felt music of the rarest quality and excellence which has been played in many parts of the world by distinguished soloists. When, as some suggest, harp music is an acquired and limited taste it may have to be admitted that if there is a finer work for solo harp then we must hear it.

His songs including I heard a linnet courting and In Phaeacia written five years later in 1945 seem, as with the Three Thoughtful Songs to have a vocal line at odds with the piano part. Among important choral works are Psalm 91 for chorus and orchestra dating from 1946; Jubilate Deo, a more substantial work which appeared in 1963, employs four soloists, chorus and orchestra which, in the words of Leighton Thomas deploys 'some novel effects of sonority; is both notable and moving; a good example of the composers craftsmanship and imaginative power.' The Song of the Stones of St. Davids of 1968 and the anthem Surely the Lord is in this place of 1974 are both immediately attractive. My Cousin Alice of 1982 for chorus and piano with a tape of bird song is novel and a good performance with well-judged balance would reveal the inherent beauty in this music.

In reviewing Parrott's Jubilate Deo Leighton Thomas writes, 'As a commentary on one of the major spiritual crises of our time, this cantata is both notable and moving.' This comment recalls Michael Kennedy who, in writing about the music of Edmund Rubbra, refers to its 'spiritual grandeur and substance which has not yet been recognised,' In private correspondence similar remarks have been made to me about the music of Ian Parrott.

In recent years, he has composed his successful Symphony no. 5 and Fifth String Quartet. In 1995, there appeared his Songs of Renewal for soprano, recorder and piano dedicated to his second wife, Jeanne. The recorder is also used in Awei Dyfi for solo recorder, Happiness for reciter and recorder, the Wrexham Pipers met the Machynlleth Marches for recorder and guitar, all works with the excellent John Turner in mind.

A comparatively recent work is Portraits in which five friends are recalled namely E J Moeran, Gerald Finzi, Bill James, David Cox and William Mathias. The finale is a postlude.

There is a need for Parrott's best works to become available including the uplifting Overture: Arfodir Ceredigion and the Symphony no. 4 as worthy examples.

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