

JAMES ILIFF

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

James Iliff was born on 4 January 1923 at Wolverhampton Hospital to William Marklew Iliff and Elsie nee Marshall. The Iliff's had other children, Philip William, born 1909, who was a solicitor and a pianist of moderate ability.

And then there were the twins John and Richard born in 1912. John was training to be an accountant but when in the RAF he was lost in action during World War II and Richard became a solicitor. Neither of the twins had any musical ability. James is the only brother still living.

At the time of his birth, James's family lived in Oaken, a small village in Wolverhampton. Father had been a farmer in his youth and then became the General Secretary of Sunbeam Motors but retained his farm in Oaken.

James went to school at The Downs, Colwall (1933–1936) and to Bryanston (1936–1939). He had piano lessons at both schools with Alex Field, the wife of the art teacher, and John Sterling respectively. Iliff went up to the Royal Academy of Music in London in 1939. He studied the piano with Harold Craxton with a Henderson scholarship and composition with William Alwyn. He was awarded his BMus from the University of London in 1944. Although James does not regard himself as a proficient performer, he did play Chopin studies from Opus 10 and Opus 25 as well as Beethoven's Sonata in A flat Op 110 to secure his Henderson scholarship.

There were many composers that appealed to him in his student days such as Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin, which shows his catholic taste. Literature that he enjoyed included the works of Rabelais, H.G. Wells, G.K. Chesterton and M.R. James.

His first composition was a Cello Sonata long since forgotten. His first success was a String Quartet which has had a more recent performance in 2004 by the Singh Quartet in St Cadog's Church, Llangadog.

The Piano Sonata is a very important work. It is dedicated to Kyla Greenbaum one of the finest pianists of a bygone age. Like the violinist Maria Lidka, who seemed to premiere all the new violin concertos, Kyla, and Margaret Kitchin seemed to premiere all the new piano works including concertos. Kyla belongs to James's generation, married a distinguished doctor and her daughter married a gentleman from the West Indies. As a youngster, I adored her playing and the new music to which she introduced us, There will be those who will regard the first movement of Iliff's Piano Sonata as Stravinskyian but it is more akin to some of the Debussy Preludes such as the Dance de la Puck. It is not a dry piece but requires judicial pedalling. It is an expressive piece. When I heard it I was bowled over by the sheer scintillation of the first movement and the aggression of the second movement. The final two movements belong to each other and the final movement is somewhat bleak and there is a brief quote from Sibelius's Symphony no. 4.

James talks about Sibelius in a very informative way which is refreshing. He considers Sibelius to be a student of Beethoven and, to some extent, he is the Finnish Beethoven. As to the symphonies he expresses his honest opinion that not all of them are successful but admires the Seventh Symphony particularly in the recording by Koussevitzky. He also enthused about Beecham's performance of the Symphony no. 4.

He makes the interesting point that Sibelius's Symphony no. 7 is both classical and non-classical. He explains that what makes music classical is its strict adherence to the beat and what makes a piece non-classical is its lack of adherence to the beat. In this, therefore, the Symphony no. 7 is both classical and non-classical.

We agreed that the tone poems of Sibelius are superior to those of Richard Strauss and that Tapiola is a masterpiece.

James' early works show "reminders of Stravinsky" but are more dissonant and mercurial and there is some influence of Walton and his latter works may show admiration for Harrison Birtwistle.

He retains his love for Beethoven and Chopin. He admires Mozart's Magic Flute because it is all inclusive. He rightly points out that Schubert's music is marred by distressing obsessions. Mahler's music makes Iliff want to run a mile and Britten writes two-dimensional cardboard music. Ligeti can be wonderful.

James smokes a pipe and explains that this eases the pain of thinking. He composes very slowly.

To this end I set out details of his output:

Three pieces for clarinet and piano (1949) for Georgina Dobre and Alex Kelly

Saturday afternoon, a promenade
 Daydream
 Allegro barbaro (Homage to Bartók)
 Bach Contrapunctus XIX completed (1946–1993)
 Five studies in Expression for piano (1949)
 String Quartet (1950–1999)
 Piano Sonata (1951–2003)
 Syzygy for oboe and piano (1952)
 Note Piece for piano (1966 rev. 1995)
 Trio for organ (1969 rev. 1975)
 Allemande for cello (1973)
 Ave Maria Stella for organ (1974 rev 2002)
 Two fugues for keyboard (1974 rev. 1995)
 Duo for cello and double bass (1980 rev. 1992)
 Gone, gone again, song for soprano and violin (1992)
 Three short pieces for cello and double bass (2001)
 Fugue for violin and piano based on The Teddy Bear's Picnic (2003)
 Andante and Allegretto for piano (2003)
 Four Dreams for unaccompanied SATB (2004)
 A curious fable for solo flute (2005) commissioned by Edward McGuire Y Dref Wen for SATB and chamber orchestra

To return to his early works in order to consider them. In 1945 he wrote two clarinet pieces, Saturday Afternoon and Daydream and such titles were popular at that time. The String Quartet was begun about this time but took many years to complete. In 1949 he wrote five piano pieces entitled Studies in Expression.

James's wife is Mary, born 7 January 1942. She was educated at the High School in Truro and at RAM where she met James. She became a piano teacher in various schools and as a private teacher. Now that she is almost retired she wants to take up painting again. With her husband she has an enthusiasm for botany, recording plant life for the county of Carmarthenshire and they enjoy their "wild" garden.

When it comes to politics, James believes that the Green Party is the only valid opposition party.

In 1945 James began his association with Benjamin Britten, who asked him to be the repetiteur at Sadlers Wells for his opera Peter Grimes. The following year, Iliff was repetiteur at Glyndebourne for Britten's Rape of Lucretia which he rightly describes as a damn awful opera. In 1949 he taught adult education extension classes at London University. From 1950 to his retirement in 1988 he taught harmony and composition at RAM and harmony classes at Morley College.

For the last fifty years he has been researching and preparing a definitive classification for the South American Dwarf Opuntias.

He has written three major articles. In Autumn 1963 there was published his Index of Symmetrical All-Interval Series which appeared in the magazine The Composer. The other two articles are on botany. In Spring 1991 in the BSBI Welsh Bulletin there appeared his essay The Clubmosses in North East Carmarthenshire and, in 2002, he published a classified index of the Andean Cycindropuntias in Succulent Plant Research.

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