

JEFFREY LEWIS

Dr David C F Wright

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Jeffrey Lewis was born in Neath Hospital, South Wales, on 28 November 1942. His father, Thomas John, was a steelworker and his mother, born Kathleen Teresa Power, was a housewife but her antecedents came from Southern Ireland. She had learned the piano as a child. The family home was at Port Talbot. A brother of Thomas John was a well-known boy soprano, Cyril Lewis, who made recordings for Decca. Jeff has a brother, Anthony, born 19 August 1935, who is a retired Ford Motor Company executive. As a boy, Anthony also learned the piano and sang in the church choir.

Jeff's awakening to music was from singing in the selfsame church choir, St Mary's, Port Talbot from 1949 onwards. He learned the piano privately and was taught the violin at school and played in the Youth Orchestra. His schools were Mountain Primary School and, at the age of eleven, he won a scholarship to Dyffryn Grammar School in Port Talbot eventually achieving his A levels in English, History and Music.

The organ was his greatest love which instrument he began to learn in 1952 and his teacher at St Mary's was Colin Jones who had studied with Herbert Sumsion at Gloucester cathedral. Within three years, Jeff was the assistant organist at St Mary's.

On leaving school, he went up to Cardiff University studying the organ with Robert Joyce at Llandaff cathedral and composition with Alun Hoddinott. For his BMus, Jeff had to submit an 'exercise', which was a large scale orchestral composition, as well as two instrumental studies for piano and organ respectively. In his student days, his 'Chamber Concerto' and 'Fanfares with Variations' were performed by the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra under the direction of John Carewe. Jeff was involved with the founding of the 66 Group and, as a pianist, he played in his 'Epitaphium – Children of the Sun' for chamber ensemble, at the Cheltenham Festival in 1967.

His second degree was a MMus which he completed in Cardiff submitting a portfolio of compositions.

In 1978 the University of Wales conferred upon him a PhD in music and composition.

In 1967 he entered a Welsh Arts Council Competition for Young Composers writing his 'Trio for flute, oboe and piano.' He won this competition in which the adjudicator was Michael Tippett who recommended that Jeff be awarded a Welsh Arts Bursary for foreign study which he took up for the academic year 1967- 8. He studied composition with Boguslaw Schaffer in Krakow and compositional analysis with Stockhausen and Ligeti in Darmstadt. At the Warsaw Autumn Festival of 1967 he met two of the most outstanding Polish composers of their time, Tadeusz Baird, who initiated this annual festival, and Grazyna Bacewicz. He also had a period in Paris as the pianist of the New Music Ensemble specialising in modern works.

He received second prize in the International Organist-Composer Competition held at Zwolle in Holland for his 'Mutations II' and first prize in the Stroud International Composers' Competition for his 'Tritoma for horn, violin and piano.'

Of particular interest from this time is his setting of Samuel Daniel's 'Care-charmer sleep' for unaccompanied chorus of 1968. In this work, and many others, he is concerned with matters of timbre and unusual scoring. It is true that time, sleep and infinity are all issues that concern him and this is inherent in his music.

His first marriage was to Ann Airton in 1970 at a time when he was a lecturer at Leeds College of Music as Lecturer in 20th century composition techniques, a post he took up in January 1969. He and Ann were divorced in 1975 and there were no children of the marriage. His second marriage was to Sheelagh Hywel in 1983. Richard was born in 1984 and he graduated with a degree in sports science in 2005 Sarah was born in

1985. Her birthday is the same day as her fathers. In 2005 she went up to university to read sociology and criminology.

In 1971 Lewis composed his Duologue for violin and piano, a thoroughly convincing and appealing work. Later he was to compose Scena for the same forces which is a work of urgency and tension.

From 1973 Jeff was a lecturer in the University of Wales in Bangor, subsequently becoming senior lecturer in music and composition..

His orchestral work 'Memoria', written in memory of his mother, was premiered at the North Gwent Festival in 1978 by the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra under Boris Brott. What makes this work so important is its originality and perhaps one could call it radical. It reveals again his interest in sleep, time and infinity. Its originality, as it is with any great composer, is an essential for composers. It is a work of stunning calmness and serenity and only Boris Blacher's Study in Pianissimo can compare with it. The difficulty with works of this stillness is that cynics can dismiss them as uneventful pieces as if they were boring slabs of gray or discoloured concrete. The music has to be listened to, not just heard and if this discipline is put into practise it will reveal fascinating textures and harmony and some interesting orchestral colour.

There is a work Sratos for chamber ensemble including a guitar, glockenspiel and vibraphone full of colour and a dreamlike quality.

Lewis is a very sensitive composer, a deep thinker and takes matters very seriously. He is not interested in being a showman or writing music of blazing brilliance some of which is not durable although it can be exciting. His music inhabits the world of stillness, a world that cries out for universal peace.

An impressive work is the 'Epitaph for Abelard and Heloise', a commission from the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff and first performed there in November 1979. Odaline de la Martinez and Lontano took it up subsequently. The work, which has a rare hypnotic quality, captures the tragic love story and the self-pity of the lovers and the music conveys the eternity of their love, its unconquerability even though Abelard became a monk and Heloise a nun. It is scored for flute doubling alto flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano and percussion and lasts about 18 minutes

A work of similar content exploring new timbres and sounds is 'Litania', completed in January 1993 and scored for two piccolos, percussion, harp and celesta. It is a work which further explores timelessness. It goes back to the twelfth century with a plainchant melody Jubilemus Salvatori and there is a fascinating sequence of chords with a marvellously sinister tread from the harp. The bell-like conclusion of the work may, consciously or unconsciously, signal the end of time.

There are also some choice instrumental pieces including two works for clarinet and piano, 'Sonante' of 1986 and 'Cantus' of 1996. 'Sonante', which word means resounding, was written for Thea King and Clifford Benson and dedicated to Jeff's daughter, Sarah, who was born in November 1985. It is a piece of uneasiness and agitation and the resoundings are in the sinister bass notes. The funds were provided by the Welsh Arts Council and Thea King and Clifford Benson premiered it at the Lower Machen Festival in 1986. The same beneficiary was behind 'Cantus' first performed at the Beaumaris Festival in 1966 by Peryn Clement-Evans and Harvey Davies. As originality is an essential for any composer, this work is certainly original since it juxtaposes the attack of the piano with the gentleness of the clarinet.

Another clue into Lewis's personality is 'Teneritas for flute and piano'. The word means tenderness. It was written for Jonathan Rimmer and Harvey Davies and premiered at Bangor University in 1998. The writing for the flute is exemplary. Every note counts.

Jeff has written a wide range of music. There is a 'Piano Concerto' of 1989 commissioned and premiered by Jana Franeklova with an orchestra conducted by Stephen Barlow and was later broadcast by the industrious

Martin Jones with the BBC Welsh SO under Nicholas Cleobury. There is also an impressive orchestral score 'Aurora', premiered by the late Akeo Watanabe and later revived by superlative Bryden Thomson, some splendid organ music admired by such performers as Gillian Weir, some engaging choral music, some of which is published by Novello, and a 'Westminster Mass' published by Goodmusic.

There are substantial solo piano works including the three movement 'Trilogy' of 1992 and 'Musica Aeterna' of 1997. The 'Trilogy' is another gentle work with outer movements of a sinister calm. The middle movement is an animated *vivo*. 'Musica Aeterna' was originally intended to be part of a set of piano studies but developed in a massive harmonic study lasting almost half-an-hour. Again these works are not showy although they call for a cool head and steel fingers but, as the title of the latter piece suggests, it is timelessness that is inherent in the music.

Comparisons are odious. Walton was incensed when the absurd nonsense that he was Elgar's successor was mooted. But the delicacy and beautiful textures of Jeff's music is reminiscent of the skill of that great composer of the Second Viennese School, Anton Webern.

Of exemplary note is that Jeff's scores are neat and precise and works of art in terms of calligraphy and preciseness.

At Manchester Cathedral on Saturday 18 February 2006 his 'Sacred Chants' for SATB choir and organ was given a successful premiere by the Alteri Chamber Choir conducted by David Jones with Jeffrey Makinson at the organ.

Another compelling work is *Silentia Nochs* (Silence of the Night) based on Helen Waddell's translation of Petronius.

He is another fine composer in danger of being forgotten. That must not happen.

And he is original!

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