

## MICHAEL HURD

Reminiscences

Ian Venables

It was at the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester in 1998, that I first met Michael Hurd, having been introduced to him by Anthony Boden, the then chairman of the Ivor Gurney Society. I was immediately struck by Michael's warm-hearted and kind nature, as well as his brilliant conversation: one that bristled with intellectual banter and showed an endearingly self-deprecating wit.

As our friendship developed, he became more candid and began to adopt a delightfully avuncular manner towards this younger composer! I felt instantly drawn to him and from the outset it was clear that we shared many similar musical and aesthetic interests.

Michael was through and through a gentleman and his engaging old school demeanour did not bring with it any stuffiness or affectation. He revelled in musical 'gossip' and anecdotes, and he had an armoury of bon mots at his disposal, which he would drop casually into our conversations. However, one would always have to be on one's toes, as he would often make references to scholarly classical or literary allusions! His knowledge of minor English composers was quite remarkable and he could regale one upon the many little known facts about the lives of these fascinating characters. To those who did not know Michael very well he might have appeared rather aloof or even shy. He was certainly a very private man and he would often use humour as a foil to parry those who tried to pry.



However, the more one got to know him, the more he let down his guard and the more friendly he became. The mask he wore in public hid a rather sensitive inner life - a life that he revealed only occasionally on a personal level, but one that is perhaps more fully understood when one listens to his 'serious' classical works, and especially his intimate songs. One could argue that his music reflects the two sides of his personality. On the one hand, his jazz, operatic and stage works projected the comedic qualities that he enjoyed so much in life, while on the other, his serious compositions were reserved for his most personal and reflective thoughts. Indeed, he admitted as much when I pressed him on this point. When discussing the slow movement of his 'Sinfonia Concertante', he said, 'I'd certainly own up to a vein of melancholy - but it's all part and parcel of being English. And I suppose that frivolity is simply the same thing in reverse'.

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His off hand dismissal of any suggestion that he might be able to express deep thoughts as a composer was part and parcel of his absolute honesty and his self-criticism as a composer. Having said that, reading through our correspondence, it is striking to note how many times Michael makes reference to his compositions and his obvious pride in his achievements. In this brief reminiscence, I have selected from his letters some of the musical highlights and other observations that Michael related to me about his life and music. I think they bring a fascinating insight into this wonderfully engaging musician - a man whom I can say, it was a great privilege to have known. One of his earliest letters dated 2nd November 1999, contained the sad news about the death of his friend, the composer Howard Ferguson. 'You will want to know that Howard Ferguson died on 31st October, ten days after his 91st birthday. Peacefully in his sleep - marbles intact, and (apart from age) completely healthy. As good a death as anyone could wish for'. Michael went on to conclude, 'I shall miss him, though. A really lovely man. And the one composer - whose musical advice could always be relied on for sympathy and sanity. He was also good for gossip about what our musical ancestors used to get up to. You'd be surprised....'

Early in our friendship Michael and I would send one another recordings of unusual pieces of music that we thought neither of us knew. This was always great fun! One such recording he sent was a complete CD of orchestral works by the Australian composer Michael Easton. I had not come across his music before, but it was very enjoyable and I could definitely see why Michael was attracted to it. In this connection, Michael was very proud of being the originator of a summer music festival in Melbourne. The festival was called the Port Fairy Festival, and he described how it came into being in a letter dated, 1st November 2000:

‘The Port Fairy Festival [was] named after the ship ‘Fairy’, that discovered it to be a safe anchorage in the 1840s... I am proud to say that it was my idea. Michael [Easton] had organised a Melbourne production of my chamber opera ‘The Widow of Ephesus’, and we decided to take the cast of three down to Port Fairy, where Michael had a small house, in order to rehearse in a concentrated fashion. I fell in love with the place – mid 19th century and quite unspoiled – a bit like the Wild West. It turned out to have a couple of nice churches, a disused cinema, several useful hotels, a decent school hall, and what amounted to a miniature theatre. It occurred to me that it was just like Aldeburgh when it first started, so I suggested that it would be just the place for a Festival – a concentrated weekend of all kinds of music, from classical to jazz, ballet, chamber opera, etc. Michael [Easton] took the bait and devoted all his energies and enthusiasm to setting it up. That was 12 years ago and it has been a great success in every respect. I’ve been to four Festivals and have written two operas for them: a three-act version of Henry James’s ‘The Aspern Papers’, and a little one-actor ‘The Night of the Wedding’ (black humour, like ‘The Widow’). It’s a marvellous weekend, and the standard very high; international figures, such as Ian Partridge and John McCabe, Marion Montgomery and Laurie Holloway, as well a lovely Aussies’

With regards to his own music, Michael mentioned in a letter dated, 9th February 2000 having composed a new choral work and then went on to say that ‘there are rumblings about another commission. I sort of hope that it will fall through. I find it more and more difficult to write anything that convinces me. And as to finding new words to set – I mean, words that are suitable for choirs and which haven’t been set already, either by me or anyone else whose work convinces me so that I dare not court comparison – its almost impossible. And I have a library of nearly 300 volumes of poetry!

Michael’s comments about courting comparison resonate with the sentiments he expressed in the very first letter he sent to me. He also gave me one of the kindest compliments I have ever received, and is yet another example of the kindness he would often show towards younger composers.

‘I’ve been meaning, for some time now, to congratulate you on the CD of your songs – please excuse the delay.... As it is the earliest of your settings, you probably won’t want to hear that ‘Midnight lamentation’ is a masterpiece – the sort of song that is absolutely ‘right’, and therefore warns every other composer off that particular poem. (By the way: I like your additions to Mr Monro). Can anyone obtain copies of any of the songs – ‘Midnight Lamentation’ especially? For ready money, I mean’. [7th October 1999]

Some of Michael’s most amusing asides were often reserved for fellow musicians and especially music critics. On this subject we were both in agreement and held the same opinion that Sibelius did, who once said, that no one has ever raised a statue to a music critic. In the extract that follows, I will leave blank the name of the offending critic!

‘Once [Mr X] has freed himself of the limitations in appreciation that come with the ‘Sell-by Date of Music Criticism’, he is (as he should be) quite complimentary. They can’t seem to see that it is what you say and not the vocabulary you choose to say it that matters. But it’s like the Accountancy School of musicology. Hopeless!’ [3rd May 2000]

Michael was clearly delighted by the renewed interest in his music and by the raft of commercial recordings that were soon to be released.

‘The recordings will emerge at some time, as yet unspecified. The Sinfonia Concertante’ as part of a

Naxos 'English String Miniatures, Vol 3', and the Concerto da camera' on an ASV label along with other oboe concertos by Rawsthorne, Leighton, and Gardiner. I'm very pleased with the first edits – though God knows what the critics will make of music that could have been written in 1900... To make matters worse, it seems likely that my 'Overture to an Unwritten Comedy' and 'Dance Diversions' are to be smuggled into two more compilation disks. I am therefore looking at the possibility of a complete Hurd disc to contain vocal music, since that is what I'm mainly known for (the opera 'The Widow of Ephesus', the 'Shore Leave' song cycle, and a choral work 'Music's Praise' – which I consider to be my best pieces). Money, of course. But, you can't take it with you; and, according to the bible, I'm already past my sell-by date. If all this comes to pass I shall be One Happy Bunny. But, as I say, I cannot imagine how the critics will handle it – should they deign to. Nothing like trailing your coat and offering hostages to fortune! [3rd Oct. 2000]

By the end of 2001, all the above recordings had either been released or were soon to become available. Michael was clearly pleased with them.

'I don't want to frighten you, but my COMPLEAT (sic) ORCHESTRAL WORKS are now available on CD. Relax! 'Compleat' means only four pieces – I don't suffer from Havergal Brian Syndrome... The orchestral recordings have startled me somewhat, in that they all seems so cheerful. I appear to have weathered three- quartets of an alarming century without the slightest sign of angst. Evidently I have the genes of an ostrich. The most I can manage is wistful and mildly melancholy. Deep emotion eludes me, evidently...' [19th Sept. 2001]

A leitmotiv running through many of our letters was the question of whether music can express, in an autobiographical sense, a composer's deepest thoughts and emotions. For my part, I argued that it was possible and so raised the issue in connection with his 'Sinfonia Concertante' 'I'm afraid that the slow movement is not a plaster on some emotional wound – at least, if it was, I cannot now remember the circumstances. I don't really think that music works that way. Emotion recollected in tranquillity maybe, but seldom specific. I'd certainly own up to a vein of melancholy – but its all part and parcel of being English. And I suppose that frivolity is simply the same thing in reverse... Thinking back on that slow movement. I rather fancy that the passacaglia element was dredged up from some earlier work. Best not to ask how things come about – the answer is nearly always mundane and cold-blooded than the romantic in us would like to think. And so much is down to the performance (which pleased me greatly, by the way), so it is all rather puzzling. [28th November]

Like a 'dog with a bone', I pressed the point again, which was answered in a follow up letter dated 6th December. In discussing Michael's song cycle, 'Shore Leave' I felt that there was an autobiographical element to it. Michael's response was typically elusive. 'I'm glad you found the songs of some interest. They are not specifically autobiographical – save that by my time of life you have experienced most of the feelings and events the poems touch upon. Melancholy seems endemic in English composers – probably the weather! But my life is not in the least bit sad – comic, if anything, and certainly nothing to complain about. And most of my music is quite cheerful – though one responds, of course, to the moods of the poets one chooses to set... I know what you mean by the mixed emotion one gets from clapping eyes on the truly beautiful: transfixed with wonder and gratitude, but saddened to think that it will fade. Maybe it is this that brings melancholy to the music?'

Some of our letters touched upon the process of musical composition. Michael's perceptive description of his approach seems to me so true that I feel that I could have written it myself! 'I find I tend to like what I am writing when I'm writing it, but then fall into doubt and general gloom for a while. It does take time for any sort of perspective to form – a good performance helps. First performances are nothing but apprehension – slow journeys in the tumbril! The best work seems to come when one is completely lost in the act and time stands still (rather like sex, in fact!), but it doesn't happen often, alas. I suppose that the Beethovens and Wagners of this world were always away with the fairies. Permanently high on self-absorption'. [28th November 2001]

Further reflections on musical composition came out of a discussion about some of my own music. I had just sent him a recording of my Piano Quintet and String Quartet. His reply was as always honest and very gracious.

‘I greatly enjoyed and admire the Quintet and Quartet, and certainly think it would be good, and well justified, to get them on a professional label. What about SOMM?... Both works strike me as being true chamber music. And both, alas, arouse a certain envy in me, in that I do not see myself being able to grapple successfully with the enormous challenges such works entail. A solo instrument and a piano I can manage, but four naked lines exposing every last weakness of musical thought!!! Oh dear!

Towards the end of this letter, Michael returned again to the perennial question of emotions and music. ‘Although I can concede that emotional events can prompt an immediate musical response, that emotional state does not last during the lengthy period of actual composition, so it inevitably becomes a recollected state of mind. Tchaikovsky is very firm on this point when pouring oil on the troubled waters of Madam von Meck’s reactions to his music. And my admired Strauss (R), points out that the head that wrote ‘Tristan und Isolde’ must have been ‘as cold as ice’. Think of controlling such a gigantic score as it unfolds without a hitch! But this does not mean that one cannot get ‘lost’ in the process of composition – so absorbed that time stands still. It doesn’t happen with every work, but when it comes it is marvellous – as beyond time and place as good sex.’.

One of the more unusual topics we discussed was whether sexuality had any bearing upon creativity, especially in music. [Interestingly, I also had this same discussion with the American composer, Ned Rorem]. Michael believed that creativity was the product of an artist’s fundamental dissatisfaction with the world as they found it.

I would certainly agree with this view. One only has to remember what some of the great artists of the past have said on this subject - ‘I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made – A.E. Housman or ‘I had a lovers quarrel with the world’ – Robert Frost, are just two quotations that come to mind. I did, however, argue that sexual identity might have an influence upon certain aspects of a composers work. For example, the texts one might choose to set. Michael agreed that this might be true, but in the end he believed sexual orientation played a very minor role in creativity, if at all.

‘I’m not sure about the role of sexuality in music. Do you, in fact mean ‘sex drive’, or ‘orientation’? If the former. I think there may well be a connection. It is certainly true that the greatest music always moves towards climaxes of some degree or another. If there isn’t a visceral quality, it probably isn’t ‘great’ music. I imagine that the root of all creativity, at whatever level, is a fundamental discontent with the life-cards one has been dealt, and therefore a determination to reinvent the situation/condition more to one’s own taste. ‘Move over God, and let me have a go’. Then, with a bit of luck, we become our own therapists. For some, the Mahlers and Elgars, the therapy never ends. For others, the RVWs and the Strausses (R), it works but leaves a permanent afterglow of creative objectivity that can go on an on to ever greater things. I compose, therefore I am’. [28th December 2001]

Our last letters dealt mainly with an idea for a joint Hurd/Venables CD recording. Firstly, we discussed the possibility of a chamber music disc.

‘Trawling through my vast (!) oeuvre I find the only chamber works that might warrant inclusion on CD are:

Sonata for Flute and Piano 8 min.

Sonata for Violin and Piano 13 min.

Five Preludes (piano) 7 min (but these were written as pieces for amateurs. Even I can play ‘em!’)

[19th April 2003]’

We also explored the possibility of recording a selection of our songs, but Michael wanted his ‘Shore Leave’ cycle to be recorded in its original form, that is as a work for string orchestra.

'So far as songs are concerned (all for baritone) we have the following:

Shore Leave (5 Charles Causley) 10 min.

The Day's Alarm (5 Paul Dehn) 10 min.

Carmina Amoris (5 Classical texts) 10 min. [19th April 2003]'

Sadly, nothing came of either project. The main stumbling block with a joint song recording was that all three of Michael's song cycles were written for the baritone voice, but at this point in my career I had written relatively little for baritone.

Since Michael's death in 2006 the British Music Society created The British Music Society Charitable Trust. This was made possible by the generous bequest contained in Michael's will towards the BMS. As a consequence, the trust is making funds available for future recordings. One of the first to appear is a recording of the song cycle, 'Shore Leave' performed by Roderick Williams and the BBC Concert Orchestra, conducted by Martin Yates. This beautiful and finely wrought work shows the 'other' side of Michael's creativity. Whilst the overriding atmosphere of the music is wistful and resigned, Michael's lighter touch is still very much in evidence, especially in the fourth song, 'Able Seaman Hodge remembers Ceylon'. Having said that, at heart of the work is his setting of 'Shore Leave' – the cycle's title song. Here, melancholy gives way to something altogether deeper. A soul searching and contemplative engagement with the words has produced a powerfully moving song. For me, this setting alone puts pay to Michael's description of himself as a rather 'light weight' composer. I would like to end with a quote by Michael. Its amusing and self-effacing honesty is the way Michael saw himself and the way I wish to remember him.

'You think I'm 'inspired'!! No, dear. A dried out old husk. But cheerful, nevertheless, and grateful for a happy life.'

Michael Hurd (19.12 1929 - August 2006). Works include

Dance Diversions for orchestra

Overture to an unknown comedy

Concerto da Camera for oboe and small orchestra

Shore Leave, five song for baritone and strings or piano

Sinfonia for violin and strings

Sonata for violin and piano

Five Spiritual Songs for chorus

Five Preludes for piano

Missa Brevis for female voices and strings or organ

Music's Praise for chorus and organ

Shepherd's Calendar for baritone, chorus and orchestra

Music for young performers

Adam in Eden

Little Billy

Mr Punch

Mrs Beeton's Box

A New Nowell

Pilgrim

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