

REGINALD SMITH BRINDLE

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Among British composers of the twentieth century Reginald Smith Brindle was undoubtedly the most outstanding radical champion of new music; so much so that writing about him, his music and his unassailable knowledge of music presents well nigh insurmountable difficulties; to give a truly adequate account of his exceptional and innumerable qualities in simple yet adequate terms would itself almost require a genius; as for his own genius, it is such that he was diffident when talking about his music since people tend to "see things that are not there or miss what is really there". He arrived at a penetrating view on the work of other composers and, in fact, all aspects of music. He was outspoken as only a man of his comprehensive and encyclopaedic knowledge can afford to be. He said of Mozart that a few works are superlative; the rest an assembly of conventionalities; that Bach is, amazingly, both prolific and profound; that Beethoven wrote some tremendously likeable pieces but other pieces are too mechanical and predictable; that Wagner is "great stuff" but can be too rhetorical and long-drawn-out in the operas; nor did he much care for the over-romantic brand of classical expression to be found in Brahms though he held the Clarinet Quintet in high regard. As for English music he found Britten too contrived and idiosyncratic - a "parochial" composer writing for "his own parish", while Tippett was so complex that if there is a message it is missed, and Elgar was expressive but too Edwardian.

One might be forgiven for believing that Smith Brindle was over-critical and arrogant yet, surprisingly, he was self-effacing even though his critique of any subject is soundly based since it is born of impeccably informed value judgements.

His father, Robert Smith Brindle, was a horse and cattle-breeder in Lancashire, one of England's loveliest counties. He possessed a good baritone voice; had an instinct for harmony and played the cornet. His wife, Jane, played the piano albeit indifferently. Into this environment Reginald was born on 5 January 1917 at Cuerdon, near Preston. His first school was Lostock Hall and, when he was six, he began to learn the piano although his first musical awakening was on hearing the playing of the flute by a schoolmaster. As a schoolboy he took clarinet lessons with J V Abrams, a very fine flautist, who, at one time, played in the Preston's Theatre Royal Orchestra. Later, Reginald played in the Hutton Grammar School Orchestra which may have been some solace to him since he claims to have had no academic strengths at school. From the clarinet he graduated to the saxophone by the time he had left school in 1933. His other musical fascination was the guitar with which he has had a very long and happy association since the time, in fact, that his eldest brother purchased one only to lose interest in it. Not only did Reginald take it up, he taught himself to play it and surprised himself by winning the guitar prize in a Melody Maker band contest.

His parents discouraged a musical career. In fact, his father insisted on a profession and his son therefore began to study to be an architect. While he enjoyed this in the main, he did not care for the periods of confinement to an office. This boredom prompted him to develop a second career as a professional saxophonist since he was interested in jazz, particularly such artistes as Django Reinhardt, Coleman Hawkins and the incomparable Duke Ellington; but he certainly did not undervalue other music. In his teenage years he found much to admire in the works of such composers as Delius, Moeran and Debussy. His direction, however, was changed in 1937 upon hearing the organ of Chester Cathedral. He was so impressed that he began training to become a church organist; he felt that he had discovered a unique instrument embodying a sound-world all its own which called for the total involvement of mind and body in playing it. It so inspired him that his first attempt at composition was an untitled organ piece dating from 1938.

The war came and ended all these aspirations. For seven years he was in the army mostly in Africa and Italy and he submerged himself into his responsibilities as a sapper. In his first year of wartime service his musical activity was negligible. In the following years he was in the Western desert of Egypt and Cyrenaica and heard no music at all. He enrolled in some music correspondence courses run by the Army Education Corps, and it was the pressing necessity of hearing musical notes in strict counterpoint which led him to rediscover the guitar. As he said, "Strict counterpoint is based on abstruse renaissance theories on the movement of voices. It is more like chess than music." In exchange for cigarettes an Italian prisoner gave up his steel-

strung guitar made in Catania. It and its new owner were inseparable. Finding a book of renaissance lute music in Florence in 1944 edited by a fellow architect, the musicologist, Giuseppe Gullino began a great friendship since Gullino lived in Florence. The Englishman's passion for the guitar became insatiable. He eagerly sought out players and guitar manufacturers as well and transcribed out the Suite in A by S L Weiss by playing an old gramophone recording of Segovia, using wooden toothpicks as needles. This labourious exercise was extremely beneficial.

Immediately after the war Smith Brindle made it his chief task to acquire an adequate technique to enable him in the shortest possible time to be a composer and to discover both his own aesthetic and his own natural form of expression. So much time had been lost. Hearing of the composition competition for the Rome Army Arts Festival of 1946, he submitted his Fantasia Passacaglia for string orchestra which he had originally written for the guitar. It won first prize and the composer was invited to Rome to hear the work's first public performance. Again life changed gear. Invited to an Arts Course in Florence he did, in fact, discover his creative abilities. He played the guitar in two concerts - acquired an Italian girlfriend, Guilia Borsi whom he was eventually to marry in 1947, and enjoyed life to the full following the bareness of the previous years.

Demobilisation meant a return to England. As he had been in the Army for over six years he obtained a rehabilitation grant for three years. From 1946 to 1949 he studied for his Bachelor of Music at University College of North Wales. Actually, the course was abbreviated by his passing the London external Bachelor of Music intermediary examination at the recommendation of Dr Parry Williams, a lecturer in music at Bangor. He joined the Philharmonic Society of the Guitar and met a schoolboy named Julian Bream for whom he wrote his Nocturne which Bream was later to include in his first public recital in Cheltenham. It was Smith Brindle's first published work. At Easter 1947 he married Giulia Borsi in Florence. On coming to Britain she contracted tuberculosis - a serious illness in those days - so she returned to Italy to recover.

In 1949 having been awarded a fellowship from the University of Wales, Smith Brindle went to study at the Academia Saint Cecelia in Rome where, eventually, he was presented with a special bursary and given the Don Sturzo Award by the Italian Government in 1951 as well as winning the Clements Memorial Prize for a chamber work he has since forgotten. Two significant events happened in 1950, he wrote the music for a documentary film produced by R B Films and the Italian State Istituto Luce in Rome. The film *Il Serchio* pictures the course of the river. He also met Segovia when he began his masterclass in Sienna. As they were staying at the same hotel the 'grande maestro' and enthusiastic pupil had ample opportunity to discuss many things. "What he taught me most," says Smith Brindle, "was that music is not just what is written on paper but what one creates oneself." Segovia could create nuances in almost every note, lending remarkable overall subtlety to his playing.

Idebrando Pizzetti was head of the Academia and its composition teacher so Smith Brindle automatically studied with him. Pizzetti was about seventy years old at the time and had lost interest in everything but his own work; he was very uncommunicative and, when it came to teaching, he was a generation behind his time. Two students who joined the composition class at the Academia were Franco Donatoni from Verona and Georges Sicilanos from Athens. These three students benefited from their close association since they looked to the future, whereas Pizzetti lived in the past. The mention of Stravinsky in class one day produced a violent outburst from Pizzetti but many years later when Pizzetti conducted the premiere of his opera *Ifigenia* in Florence, Smith Brindle was, at first, reluctant to go backstage but, when he did so, his master embraced him with tears of joy.

Reginald Smith Brindle was drawn to the Florentine Dodecaphonic School which boasted such figures as Bruno Bartolozzi, Busotti, Company, Benvenuti and Prosperi. There was a particularly close friendship with Bartolozzi although, artistically, they were poles apart. The Italian saw everything as a problem to be solved with the most complex and radical action. Smith Brindle wanted problems eliminated and aspired towards simplification; for example, Bartolozzi saw the possibilities of the woodwind as "an enormous problem to be solved" and, eventually, with Smith Brindle's help published his book *New Sounds For Woodwind*.

The great discovery for Smith Brindle was Dallapiccola's opera *Il Prigioniero* which gave him an enormous

insight into Italian thought. It is such a deeply expressive human work that it opened up a new aesthetic world discovering in it the secrets of a harmony for which the student was seeking who admitted that "it suddenly opened my eyes not only to the ways of modern techniques but made me see the rightness of modern ways of musical thinking".

He graduated from the Academia in 1952, the year he completed his Cantata da Requiem which he had begun when with Pizzetti. It was performed on London's South Bank in 1954. The composer says of it that it is "possibly a solid, capable work". As he was living in Florence he considered a diploma in composition at the Florence Conservatoire but the syllabus was about fifty years out of date. Instead he went to Vito Frazzi's composition course at the Sienna Academia Chigiana Summer School but Frazzi was not a good teacher failing to help the student establish his own means of expression and exploit their own potentialities. Angelo Francesco Lavagnino, who found a career in film music, was also encountered. He had a more vital approach to music, but his teaching methods were disorienting and exhausting.

Smith Brindle went to study with Dallapiccola in 1952. The latter was a very serious teacher but more was learnt from reading his scores than from the man himself. Although they became close friends lessons were frustrating and eventually ceased from a lack of impetus; this was probably due to Dallapiccola's over-rational mind and his personal struggle to assimilate the style of Webern – after all, Dallapiccola was the most respected serial composer of the time.

About this time Smith Brindle undertook organ studies with Fernando Germani. They would meet at the Conservatorio Saint Cecilia, Academia Chigiana or on the great triple organ at Santa Croce whenever Germani was in Florence. The master's Bach interpretations were always in absolutely strict tempo but he was a great technician and taught his pupil many useful things especially a different pedal technique. During the Florentine years, 1952 to 1957, Smith Brindle played the organ at the English churches of St Marks and Holy Trinity "as and when required". He also taught organ, composition, guitar and theory; engaged in journalism; did clerical work for an embroidery firm and, as good translators were rare, was always in demand for translation work. He also composed, and serialism is used in all his work from 1954 up to Music For Three Guitars of 1970. As to the strictness of the application it is very variable since he is a composer who uses what "sounds well" choosing material that has good harmonic results. The Symphony No. 1 dates from 1954 and awaits its first performance. The composer dismisses it as "too rhetorical" but it has poetry and character. The theme of his orchestral Dallapiccola Variations of 1955 is taken from the Tre Laudi the same theme was used in his opera Volo di Notte both composed in 1937. His homage to another great composer of the twentieth century is seen in his Epitaph for Alban Berg for strings, which also dates from 1955. The following year saw the appearance of El Poliferino de Oro for guitar which the composer considers was his first public success; but perhaps the work that did most to bring him to the attention of the public was his second set of orchestral variations, the Symphonic Variations of 1957 first performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Walter Goehr in 1959. There are seven short movements which are "experiments as opposed to variations". The material is easily recognisable which enhances the work's unity. The scoring is economic but not sparse. Every note counts; every texture is meticulously conceived.

The pivot of the work is the variation highlighting the trumpet and piano which acts as a telling contrast to the introspective music preceding it. A more traditional treatment of the variation form appears in the last two movements and the closing pages have a very special serene beauty as was also to characterise the masterly Creation Epic of 1964.

In 1957, and in response to an advertisement, Smith Brindle secured the post of lecturer in music at University College, North Wales where he had been a student not so long before. "One had to be prepared to teach anything and I think I did - except counterpoint and fugue", he once told me. His stay at Bangor was to last thirteen years; he eventually became music professor and achieved a Doctorate of Music obtained canonically by submission of major compositions after ten years as a Bachelor of Music,

His association with the Ballet Rambert began in 1959 with La Reja. This was an orchestration and expansion of Scarlatti's harpsichord pieces. He arranged other scores and was paid a royalty until 1966 when the

company reformed. Unfortunately the dancers found his version of Les Sylphides too difficult, so his association came to a "catastrophic" conclusion.

His Welsh years produced many fine works. *Via Crucis* for strings and solo cello depict the fourteen stations of the Cross. It is music of a rare but impressively cold beauty which the present writer believes amplifies the text, "Behold and see. Was ever sorrow like unto His sorrow?" The solo cello in the fifth station seems almost literally to cry; the pain and anguish of the crucifixion scene is adeptly portrayed; in the final section *De Profundis*, the pizzicato strings suggest heartbeats anticipating the resurrection. The music which is concerned with "spiritual and emotional" issues and is not thus mere programme music, displays cruelty and a depth of feeling recalling the overt humanity of another masterwork, Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero*.

Homage to H G Wells of 1960 was first performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under the composer's direction. As Bernard Rands wrote of this work in the *Musical Times*, "The musical ideas are presented with crystal clarity ... the textures are a subtle balance of delicately rich sounds, brittle and splintering sounds, and sonorous, dense blocks whose sheer weight and powerful presentation are impressive and exciting. He (Smith Brindle) has no equal among contemporary British composers in the sensitive handling of colour, sonority and effectiveness of orchestral sound. The music is rhythmically alive and vital".

The *Clarinet Concerto* of 1962 awaits its first performance but 1964 saw the premiere of *Creation Epic* given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer at a Promenade Concert. Here is a superbly atmospheric work evoking the Acadian Summarian legend of creation. If the music accompanied a well-conceived documentary on the subject of creation viewers would appreciate it; this apparent need for visual stimulus only highlights a widespread inability to value music which stands alone and denotes the prevalence of artistic poverty. While the complete work is intellectually stimulating and stylistically satisfying, there is, in the last movement a mysterious beauty which knows no equal in music of this kind. It is very, very special and it amazes me that the composer expressed doubts about this part, believing it could be naive. The *Three Japanese Lyrics* of 1966 for voice and ensemble is sensual and evocative; its different textures of sound marvellously blended and mutually integrated. It has a wonderfully emotive quality ranging from vocal agility to pregnant drama. As a bonus the percussion writing is memorable. The chamber opera *Antigone* appeared in 1969 and the following year Smith Brindle became first Professor of Music and Head of Department at the new Surrey University; the year which saw the completion of *Apocalypse* for orchestra which, like *Cosmos* for orchestra written some ten years earlier, was harshly reviewed by the critics.

As may have been already deduced, Smith Brindle's fascination with astronomy is reflected in some of his works. *Andromeda M31* for solo flute of 1966 is both rewarding to play and to hear and alternates poetic music with dazzling brilliance portraying galactic light. However, the finest work inspired by this hobby is *Worlds Without End* for female and male reciters, chorus, ensemble and electronic tapes. This dates from 1973 and is highly effective in that it is musically quite simple. It treats of life on other planets and in other galaxies and the problem of how our solar system will survive. The work is highly evocative and absorbing and the choral writing is uncomplicated and expressive.

Smith Brindle was also a magnificent writer on music. His four important books are *Serial Composition* (1966), *Contemporary Percussion* (1970), *The New Music* (1975) a study of the avant garde since 1945, and *Musical Composition* (1986). These works know no equal.

Among the many other "strings to his bow" is his painting. He studied watercolours with Tom Anderton of the Newlyn School in the 1930s and has since then gone through all the main techniques (oils, collages etc.) in various periods. He received many influences at the Venice Festivals during the 1950s. Since reaching the extremes of abstract art, he withdrew back into a conventional style of intensified watercolour and inks. He exhibited in local exhibitions.

He retired in 1985 although it was impossible for anyone like Reginald Smith Brindle to cease creative work although. In 1989 he completed his *Symphony No. 2: Veni Creator* which is an excellent further example of his clear textures, economic style and superb craftsmanship. He wrote to me to say that my encouragement

was the impetus for him to start composing again. He continued to add to the guitar repertoire and, to a slightly lesser but commendable extent, to the organ repertoire as well.

It is impossible to bring to an adequate conclusion a brief account of this remarkable composer and musician. I hope he will not suffer the fate of being venerated as if he were a museum piece or just be remembered for his innovations, techniques or idioms but for the very special emotive quality of his work.

He was a very caring man and a good friend. He was always upbeat about his heart problems and looked forward to our conversations. He was not arrogant or pompous. He was down to earth and modest . Latterly, he converted to Catholicism as his wife was of that persuasion.

He died at Caterham, Surrey on 9 September 2003

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