

ROBERT SHERLAW JOHNSON

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"Contrary to public belief it is not that composers are ahead of their time, it is that the music public are 50 years behind the time."

Edgar Varèse

Robert Sherlaw Johnson was born in Sunderland on 21 May 1932. His father, Robert, was a chief engineer in the Merchant Navy and appreciated music having a vast collection of operas on disc. His wife, Helen, was an amateur pianist and gave her son his first lessons. He was educated at Gosforth Grammar School from 1943 and, from 1950, King's College, Durham, studying philosophy and music and achieving ARCM. In 1952 he achieved his LRCM. In 1953 he was successful with his BA in music from King's College, Durham, winning a scholarship to the Royal Academy to study piano and composition with William Alwyn, Howard Ferguson and Alan Bush. His piano tutor was Max Pirani. It is reported that he converted from his mother's Presbyterianism to Roman Catholicism in 1952. In 1957 he won the Charles W. Black Award and went to Paris to study for a year with Nadia Boulanger and Jacques Fevrier. He also attended some classes given by Messiaen. He achieved his BMus from Durham in 1959 which was also the year that he married Rachael Maria Clarke a violinist and violist, the date being 28 July and the venue being St Peter's RC Church in Winchester. For this occasion RSJ wrote his Wedding Introit for string quartet.

They had five children. Rebecca was born in 1960 and is an alternative therapist and writes novels none of which have yet been published. Christopher was born in 1962 and is a researcher at University College, London, and a keen amateur musician playing the flute and piano as well as singing and conducting. Austin was born in 1964 and specialises in manuscripts and works by British composers of the 20th century. Griselda was born in 1966 and is head of printed music at Blackwells in Oxford. Edward was born in 1976 and is a chef and horticulturist. In 1961 RSJ became assistant lecturer in music at Leeds University and in 1963 director of music at Bradford Girls' Grammar School. In 1965 he became lecturer in music at York University and in 1969 won the Radcliffe Award for composition with his String Quartet no. 2 premiered on November 1, 1969 at the University of Sussex by the Allegri Quartet who recorded it in 1971. The String Quartet no. 1 was completed in February 1966 and premiered by the Arriaga Quartet at the Stour Valley Festival on 24 June 1996. Its dedication is to the memory of Edgar Varèse. However there is an even earlier String Quartet which bears no number, written in 1959.

The year 1960 was the date of RSJ's first acknowledged work, Resurrection for soprano, mixed chorus, piano and string orchestra. The final pages were revised in 1967.

In 1970 he was awarded his MA from Oxford and was lecturer in music at Worcester College, Oxford. Further success came his way when Leeds conferred upon him a doctorate in music.

He was always impressed with the music of Messiaen and it is largely due to RSJ that Messiaen's music was first heard in Britain. Often excruciatingly difficult to play, RSJ made a name for himself in playing this difficult repertoire. In 1975 his book on Messiaen was published.

On 1979 he became vice-chairman of the Composers' Guild of Great Britain which post he held until 1981. In 1985 he was visiting professor of composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Oxford University conferred a doctorate of music upon him in 1990.

His association with the North East was important to him as shown in his opera, The Lambton Worm of 1978, the Four Northumbrian Tunes for piano and his Northumbrian Symphony of 1999 which includes the Northumbrian Pipes on which he was a very able performer himself.

The opera, The Lambton Worm is in two acts with a libretto by Anne Ridler. It was begun in April 1976 and was premiered on 14 April 1978 at the Oxford Playhouse by the Oxford University Opera Club, who commissioned it with funds from the Arts Council and it was conducted by the composer. Such was its success that the composer considered another opera based on Mary Webb's Precious Bane but that did not materialise.

The award-winning String Quartet no. 2 is serial in content, a system of composition decried by many composers simply because they are unable to compose with the required discipline that this style demands.

When in 1970 he was made a Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford and introduced electronic music setting up a studio there. He composed several works for the Fairlight Contemporary Music Institute.

It is also clear that the music of Pierre Boulez influenced Johnson and he recorded the Frenchman's Piano Sonata no. 2 and John Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano. He also recorded much of Messiaen's piano music including the complete Catalogue d'oiseaux and recorded Messiaen's song cycles such as Harawi, Poemes pour Mi and Chants de Terre et de ciel with the soprano Noelle Barker. Johnson wrote works for Noelle Barker himself including the Liturgia Redemptionis Nostrae for soprano and chamber orchestra premiered by Miss Barker and the ECO conducted by John Carewe in March 1965.

Messiaen's fascination with birdsong may have inspired RSJ to write his sonatina known as the Blackbird Sonatina based on a song a blackbird used to sing outside RSJ's study.

That he was a truly magnificent pianist is beyond doubt. He recorded many other incredibly difficult piano works including Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus and the most taxing works of Alkan and Liszt. There are many world-renowned pianists who turn their noses up at such music and condemn them, but the fact is that such works are far beyond their capability which makes performers like Sherlaw Johnson, who was never a household name, greater than many acclaimed virtuosos. His love for Messiaen was also enhanced because they both shared a strong Roman Catholic faith.

RSJ composed for the piano using all its possibilities. Many cynics will dismiss some of his requirements as ridiculous such as playing inside the piano, plucking the strings, using glissandi and drumsticks. Sometimes there are aleatory sequences which gives the performer freedom and which critics say does not constitute composing. But if go back to the Baroque and Classical eras many soloists improvised cadenzas for concertos and, in the broad sense, that is aleatory.

He had a very deep understanding of plainchant and Catholic liturgical music. He composed masses and other work for the Catholic church, some of which were for Easter weekends at Spode House in Staffordshire named after the potter Josiah Spode where RSJ was music director for some years. Later the Spode festival moved to Hengrave Hall in Suffolk and, recently, to Beechwood School in Tunbridge Wells. One of RSJ's masses, Mass for the Millenium, was his last major work and was performed at the Spode Festival in August 2000.

It is thought that one of his favourite vocal works was Carmina Veris et Amoris (Songs of Springtime and Love) for soprano, treble recorder, cello and harpsichord premiered on August 1998 by Alison Wells, John Turner, Jonathan Price and Keith Elcombe at the Lake District Summer School. The text is taken from Helen Waddell's Medieval Latin Lyrics and is in three short sections lasting about 13 minutes. Texts from the same set of Latin Lyrics were used in Carmina Vernalia for soprano and ensemble premiered by Noelle Barker in the Purcell Room in September 1972 There are only four mature purely orchestral works. These are the Dramatic Overture of 1957, Fugal Structures of 1961, Improvisation IV performed at York, and An Northumbrian Symphony in seven short sections premiered on 25 November 1999 at St Marys Church, Oxford with Pauline Cato playing the pipes The performance did not serve the work well.

There is a Concerto for piano and string orchestra, although there is only one movement lasting four minutes. This dates from 1953. The major Piano Concerto was a BBC commission of 1982 and premiered by the composer with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under György Lehel at the Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow on 14 February 1984. It is both a substantial and important work lasting some 25 minutes. Trika for piano and small orchestra was an earlier work premiered in March 1969. There is the Sinfonia Concertante completed on Christmas Day 1988 and scored for one each of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone and strings premiered at Peeble Mill, Birmingham under the direction of Nicholas Cleobury. The Christmas Introit for string orchestra was first performed in 1958 and 1986 saw the completion of the Concerto for clarinet, bass clarinet and orchestra.

There are no fewer than eleven masses, four of which are designed for congregational singing.

RSJ admired many composers. He wrote a work in memory of Edgar Varèse and arranged his Octandre for piano. He wrote Pour le tombeau de Messiaen and Homage to Haydn, premiered by the excellent John McCabe, an Elegy for David Barlow and Super Nomine Edmund Rubbra. The excellent Carmina Veris et Amoris was written in memory of Kenneth Leighton with funds provided by the Finzi Trust and Northern Arts.

There are three piano sonatas, impressive and challenging. John Ogden took up the Piano Sonata no. 2 being one of the few pianists who could play it. The third sonata dates from 1979 ten years after the previous one. Among his many chamber works, no less a clarinetist than the brilliant Janet Hilton took up the Quintet for clarinet, string trio and piano of 1974.

Many works and a few arrangements were unfinished.

Robert was a very likeable man. Despite his phenomenal talent he was a modest man with many hobbies and always finding new ones. He was a wine-maker and collected ancient, unusual and historic playing cards which took him to many collectors' forums where his skill as a card player was noted. Like Humphrey Searle and Alan Rawsthorne, he loved cats especially grey ones and his homemade wine was labelled Chateau Robert au domaine du chat gris. Latterly he became interested in computer-generated music and took up bell-ringing.

As with other composers such as Humphrey Searle, Gerard Victory and John Veale, RSJ was a brilliant man with an encyclopedian knowledge of a vast array of subjects combined with a modesty that was real. This quartet of composers were seriously embarrassed by the pompous, self-important composers. While they were circumspect in their comments they did not like Edwardian pomp and circumstance music and cringed at the very thought of it.

Robert's music is not sentimentally pretty or lush, thank goodness, but gritty and strikingly original and originality is the essential ingredient of a great composer.

In his late years, Robert regularly played the organ at St Hugh's RC church in Woodstock, Oxford. It is believed that his Woodstock Mass was his first work using Sibelius computer system or it could have been the Anagrams for cello and piano performed at Worcester College in June 1997.

It was on 3 November 2000 when he was bell-ringing in the tower of a church in Appleton in Oxford that he died suddenly. He was 68.

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