

SEBASTIAN FORBES

Dr David C F Wright

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Sebastian Forbes is a serious, old-fashioned composer with his own brand of modernism and yet his music is never wholly atonal. He believes that all music should be structured and logical. He is not a limited musician, as some are, but an all-round musician, a composer, a performer, a conductor, a teacher, a university lecturer and a concert organist. He has also been a producer of Compact Discs.

He had a very good start in life in that his celebrated father was Watson Douglas Buchanan Forbes who was the most distinguished viola player of his generation. He was a member of the Aeolian String Quartet from 1932 to 1964, probably the finest quartet of its time, who premiered many outstanding works and were probably the first British quartet to perform/ record all the Haydn quartets. Watson Forbes was also a teacher and an arranger and the Head of Music at BBC Scotland from 1965 to 1972. His wife was Mary Henderson Forbes, a piano teacher from 1961-1982 who enjoyed choral singing with the Hampstead Choral Society. They were married at Chelsea Old Church on 19 April 1937.

As well as Sebastian, who was born on 22 May 1941, they had another son. Rupert Oliver was born on 27 January 1944 and is a singer, originally a baritone, and later a tenor. He is a teacher of singing and a choral conductor in Edinburgh. He married Elisabeth Burnett on 10 July 1976 and they have two sons Bruce, born 17 August 1980 and Andrew, born 11 January 1989.

Sebastian was born at Chalfonts Nursing Home. His parents were living at 13 Haslemere Avenue, Hampstead, London at the time. He went to Canberra School, Hendon from 1945 to 1948 and then University College School, Hampstead. He was in the junior school from 1948 to 1953 and went up to

the seniors until 1958. He may admit that his schooling was not extraordinary but he did take Music at A level and Latin and Greek. He had begun piano lessons when quite young and organ lessons from 1956 with Martindale Sidwell who was probably the most important mentor in his life outside of his own family. He attended the Royal Academy of Music from 1958- 1960 studying the organ with C H Trevor, composition with Howard Ferguson, piano with Robin Wood and singing with Bruce Boyce. He went up to Kings College, Cambridge in 1960 obtaining a first class BA and a BMus in 1964. Thirteen years later he was awarded a DMus for composition.

As a young man he was impressed with church music stemming from his very active career as a chorister in Hampstead under Martindale Sidwell which included much solo work. Learning the organ and the works of J S Bach was also a major inspiration as was watching his father perform with the Aeolian String Quartet tackling modern quartets which, among other things, generated his enthusiasm for Alan Rawsthorne.

In his youth he was not enamoured with Mozart or any pop music. Literature did not appeal to him although latterly he has had some interest in the classic of Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Virgil and Livy.

In his youth he was more interested in Meccano, designing cars, cranes and slot machines. As a child he enjoyed singing especially in the church choir. At the age of six he had composed his first piece, a minuet in two-four time (!) but did not attempt composition seriously until he was seventeen.

He considered his first composition to be a success was his Theme and Variations for clarinet and string quartet of 1960. He was 19 at the time. In 1962 it won the McEwen Prize from Glasgow. His Piano Quintet of 1959-1961 won the Clements Prize the following year in 1963.

The shallow music lover tends to judge others by what they like and if those likes agree with them, then friendship and respect can follow. Sebastian Forbes ranks Haydn above Mozart which is very understandable.

He prefers late Schubert having conducted his symphonies numbers 7, 8, in the four movement version, and number 10. He considers Beethoven's chamber music and his last quartets to be his best work but admits that Brahms is his favourite which is, in itself, very refreshing to hear, as Brahms is unfairly maligned. His chamber music and choral music particularly the vocal quartets with piano he regards highly stating that these are under-rated areas of his output. Sadly, he finds Liszt boring apart from the impressive Piano Sonata. Mahler probes the spirit and he is a composer who admits his inner conflicts. The first movement of the Symphony no. 9 is greatly appreciated. Although Mr Forbes has performed Britten he is not gripped by his music. As for Tippett he can only find some affinity with the Piano Sonata no. 2. He selects some works of Ligeti as having much merit.

He is refreshingly honest. Take, for example, his comments about the symphony. It is not dead but composers today shun both the narrative and the structural requirements which are essential ingredients of the symphony. There are many works called symphony which are not symphonies at all.

His views on aleatory music are significant. He explains that recitatives in Monteverdi or Bach have elements of aleatorism and this is recognisable and accepted. But to the uninformed or misinformed music lover this is not a problem and yet modern composers who use aleatoric methods, perhaps in extended form, are not so accepted. Examples of extreme freedom as one finds, for example, in Stockhausen are termed as unacceptable. Serial music cannot be the subject of generalisation. As Mr Forbes points out, no work is great because it is serial or not serial. And people like Michael Kennedy are hopelessly wrong when they call serial music a scheme or a style.

To quote Mr Forbes again, "The role of a composer is to be genuinely creative and search for his own message and present it as he thinks best... never mind if nobody wants it!"

To return to his own work. After the two prize winning pieces already mentioned his true voice emerges in the orchestral suite Pageant of Paul of 1962-3, the Concertante for clarinet, bassoon, violin, viola and piano of 1963, and the Four Songs for mezzo, violin and piano of 1963

The first work that Mr Forbes values highly is his Piano Trio of 1964.

In the autumn of 1964 he taught at the Royal College of Music one day a week with giving 21 students each 20 minutes on harmony. On the following day he gave organ lessons at St Marks and St Johns in Chelsea and trained and conducted the choir at St Andrews, Kingsbury between September 1964 and August 1965. He joined the BBC as a producer in December 1964 where he stayed until June 1966 but continued part time until February 1967. During this time he was the producer of a series of 36 programmes about British cathedrals and their music, in which John Betjeman played the part of the visitor to each cathedral. Some programmes were later released on LPs.

From April 1966 Sebastian Forbes was the organist at S Giles, Cripplegate which stood in several acres of bomb sites. He founded the Aeolian Singers and was the first to record all the Bach motets which he paid for out of his own pocket borrowing money from his bank. He advised on the restoration and rebuilding of St Giles' organ.

By 1967 he was freelancing, but from January 1968 to the following September he was a Trinity College as a lecturer and was also the college organist. Then he went up to Bangor University as a teacher of composition, 20th century analysis and conducted the Seirlon Singers.

He married in 1968 and has two children from that marriage. Joanna was born on 5 December 1971 and was a singer with the Swingle Singers for six and a half years. She married Alexander L'Estrange, a jazz composer, and they have a son Toby born in 2006. The second Forbes child is Emily who achieved a Doctor of Philosophy at Oxford and is a social researcher. She married Rob Tanner, another DPhil, and he teaches physics at St Albans school. They have a son, Aidan.

The year 1968 was also the year of Mr Forbes' Gracious Spirit for choir and organ which has received much acclaim from the public.

In 1970 Reginald Smith Brindle left Bangor to take up a post at the University of Surrey. He was replaced by William Mathias who was in the Elgarian mould of being bossy, lazy and very self-important. A meeting with Smith Brindle led to Mr Forbes being tempted to join the University of Surrey in 1972. Smith Brindle, in his usual slow speaking voice, said, "We need some young blood!"

And so Sebastian Forbes went there in 1972 teaching many aspects of music, 20th century analysis, training students for BMus and developing new modules. He also conducted the choir and orchestra. He retired in the summer of 2006.

Sadly, Sebastian Forbes's first marriage was dissolved in 1977. In 1983 he married his second wife Tessa Brady and they have two children. Alastair was born on 11 October 1984 and studied music technology. Nicola was born on 9 September 1986 and read English at Exeter.

It was while Mr Forbes was at the University of Surrey that both his parents died within four years of each other. His father died on 25 June 1993 and his mother on 4 January 1997. They were a tremendous influence in his life and I am one of the many who admired the Aeolian Quartet who introduced me to many works. I had a brief but happy relationship with their cellist Derek Simpson who married another cellist, Fiona Cameron, and they had three children, one of whom was killed in an accident. When Watson Forbes retired from the Aeolian his place was taken by Margaret Major.

It appears that Mr Forbes is not a self-promoter but he is another example of a good composer whose music seems to languish in near oblivion.

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