



Music For A While

A concise survey of
music and musicians
in the British Isles

June Pepin

'MUSIC FOR A WHILE'

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by

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Résumé

Not intended as an academic survey this modest volume is useful as a summary for the student, whilst also aimed at the curious pauper, who may at least have a pocket into which this might fit, and who may therefore find some answers to questions that have always intrigued.

The book begins with an insight into *how the composer works* and *how the performer relates to and interprets the composer's music*, i.e. the *creators* (composers) and the *recreators* (performers). We trace important events in our story, with little peeks into the society of the time. From the earliest recorded beginnings, we travel through changing scenes of history, and all the way to the new millennium. On the journey we see our beautiful islands' folk culture, intriguing instrumental development, the essential printing revolution, the splendour of the Golden Age of the Tudors, Puritan England, Charles II's restoration, the advent of Handel and his ebullient influence, the arrival of the pianoforte and equal temperament, the influx of foreign musicians, the printing of music scores, and the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Two World Wars seem not to diminish our islands' musical productivity. Many young composers flourish despite deprivations and extreme hardship, and concerts continue defiantly as the bombs fall. A new Elizabethan age is born.

The closing years of the twentieth century reveal that we have come a long way from St. Augustine's plainsong, yet music is still a great healer and reconciler of nations. The concert began as an entertainment for princes and England once bore the title 'Das Land ohne Musik' (the land without music). Today we have undoubtedly proved that not to be the case! The title of the book is from a song, words by John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee, set to music by Henry Purcell, one of England's most prolific seventeenth century composers, and which so aptly summarises the effect of music on the soul of man, '*Music for a while shall all your cares beguile*'.

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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

To write a book on this ever expanding subject, which would be fully comprehensive, is of course impossible within the limitations of a volume this size. Besides, it has already been done, by Sir George Grove, that dedicated self-taught musician, born in 1820, who spent many years from 1877 to 1890 producing the famous 'Dictionary of Music and Musicians', which in 1981 was updated and reissued as one of the world's most comprehensive works of its kind... in twenty volumes!

This modest little volume is but a selection, and it will therefore omit far more than it can possibly include, so I trust that the reader will not be disappointed to find maybe that particular favourites are not here. This is therefore a condensed survey of the development of music and musicians in these islands of ours. Much of the history will appear to centre upon London, and this is inevitable since many events of importance gravitate to the capital city, though this does not imply that other main cities do not have their own important part to play. For the new music and new performer the capital city is where they must eventually make their mark.

The diverse nature of our islands with their strong history of Celtic cultures gives a tradition of folk music second to none, whilst England, especially during the Tudor period, held a great attraction for musicians from abroad, so that they were drawn to settle here and give us the benefit of their talents.

Music has always been a means whereby the innermost longings and praises of man can be expressed in a way that surpasses words. Long before music was ever notated, who knows what sounds the hills and valleys of our islands witnessed? No doubt the men of Stonehenge and Avebury made 'music' in song and dance, whilst the Celts surely exulted in battle chants, probably with the aid of primitive instruments. The details we will never know for sure, as this 'music' was never written down. The earliest preserved examples we have of notated music date only from about the ninth century. Yet it would be logical to suppose that since man has from time immemorial possessed a voice, however primitive, the sounds emitted by barbaric man were to him 'music'; a means of expression and consolation.

Just as the inner vision of humanity has expanded so has the style of musical expression. Early peoples thought the world was flat and if they went too far they might fall over the edge. Today our intellects have grown to enable us to encompass vast cosmic revelations, with the equally staggering knowledge that there is infinitely more than we will ever comprehend. Our musical understanding and creativity have kept pace to the extent that now it seems that the inner

discontent of twenty-first century Homo sapiens is reflected in the restless experimentation for a new means of musical communication.

Just as William Byrd (1542) might have found it hard to comprehend the serialism of Schoenberg (1874), had he been able to transcend the time barrier, it appears to us that the art of music as we know it is reaching a crossroads... which road to take? The revolution of the microchip has already made its impact on the world of music, computers and keyboards capable, it seems, of 'composing' and arranging the music at the press of a key. Will the composer and performer soon become redundant?

Whatever happens in the next few decades however, the indestructible spirit of humanity will find a means of musical expression and will still strike an affinity with its counterpart in the listener.

Humankind's destiny is dependent upon response to the place and time in which they live. Our music is part of that response and necessarily reflects that environment. The land itself penetrates, and colours the inspiration. The hills and valleys, rivers and lakes, villages and towns, preserved ruins from ages past, speak to us and give us a glimpse into the minds of those long dead.

What then is this essence that is felt in the bones? Is it in the diversity of cultures inherent in the rugged strength of the early inhabitants of our islands? Is it the folk element in the tradition of song and dance handed down through the centuries? Is it in the mediaeval splendour of the abbeys and cathedrals of the land, where music and architecture go hand in hand to express our Christian faith? Is it in the castles and palaces of the Golden Age of the Elizabethans? Is it portrayed in '*Land Of Hope And Glory*', or '*Jerusalem*', the Elgar and Parry breadth of patriotic fervour? Or is it to be found in the wild solitude of the Scottish Highlands, or the mountains of Snowdonia, or the pastoral beauty of the mellow Delius English countryside, or the Fen country of Vaughan Williams? Where is it?

Perhaps the real heart lies in the soil, the waters, the rocks, the trees? Musical sounds existed before people with ears to hear came into being. Waves on the seashore, ripples on the lake, rustling leaves, sighing winds and raging storms all make music. The musical sand of Scotland's Arisaig was sighing for centuries, just as nature's organ in Fingal's Cave was sounding long before the name '*Llaimh Binn*' (Cave of Music) was given to it by the Celts. A young composer of the nineteenth century, Felix Mendelssohn, transformed these sounds into the marvellous orchestral tone picture, the Overture '*Fingal's Cave*'. As he himself said "the grandeur was like a Bach Fugue... it cannot be described, only played."

Musical inspiration can emanate from many sources. It can be a direct result of such a scene as that in the Hebrides, or from less tangible ideas as the spirit of patriotism in war and peace, religious fervour, or the literary works of great writers. Many things ignite the spark, and music being an international language that knows few barriers, is itself the connecting link between people of all countries.

What then is music? Without it the spirit is deprived; with it the impoverished soul can be refreshed, wounds healed, hope restored. Perhaps I may quote three other musicians whose words define aptly this elusive aural image. Dr. Kurt Pahlen: “to the prosaic it is an acoustic phenomenon; to the theorists a problem dealing with melody, harmony and rhythm; and to those who really love it, the spreading of the soul’s wings, the awakening and fulfilment of all dreams and yearnings”*(1). Hector Berlioz: “I saw Heaven open, a heaven of pure delight, purer and a thousand times lovelier than the one that has so often been described. Two powers can uplift Man to the most sublime heights and they need not be separated. They are the two wings of the soul”, (music and love). And thirdly an inspired passage from Sir Neville Cardus: “the world of music at times unfolds itself to the fancy in the shapes and altitudes of the physical universe. There in the upper ether reposes the mountain of Bach; farther away in a fiercer light, the peak of Palestrina pierces the heavens like a spear; in a middle height the warmth of a more humane air makes fertile the slopes of the Handel range; the volcano of Beethoven smokes ominously yet, but there are wooded uplands enriched forever by the lava of the first eruption. The enchanted lake of Debussy dreams in the distance; there are the courts and palaces and lawns of Mozart; there is the country estate of Haydn; there are the rocks and crags and thunder to the right, where the Wagnerian surge is never still. And standing aloof, rising from a plateau, is the cathedral of Cesar Franck.”*(2)

As a last thought the opening line of a most beautiful song, words by John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee, (two seventeenth century poets), and set by one of the greatest composers this land has nurtured, Henry Purcell, seems to answer all our questions:

‘Music For A While Shall All Your Cares Beguile’.*(3)

THE CREATORS AND THE RECREATORS

It is not only the creators of music, the composers, about whom this book is written, but also the all-important recreators, the performers, without whom the music could never be made a living sound. As a member of both branches of the art I am impelled to offer a humble exposition of how both composer and exponent function and their relationship one with the other. Unavoidably this is a personal testament and I trust that fellow musicians will accept it as such, and though some approaches will inevitably differ, the general view will I think bear something in common with all composers and performers. The aim is to give the reader something of an insight into the minds of musicians and what makes them ‘tick’.

The creators - the composers:

Inspiration is one of those intangible moments when to the exclusion of all else the seed of an idea begins like a pinpoint of light far back in the depths of the mind, sometimes just an atmosphere or sensation which will not go away. It begins to grow at a speed quicker than the intellect can sometimes keep pace with, and it can disappear as quickly as it came, never to return quite the same as before. So the desperate chase is set in motion to capture the vision before it fades back into the unknown recesses from which it came.

I do not presume to compare my own small contributions to those of the great composers, but I do know from my own experience what it is like to sit up through the night, (when it seems many of the best ideas come!) consumed with a musical idea which is not satisfied until it is out of one's self and committed to paper. Then and only then can one leave it alone... the birth is over. On such a night in 1965 did I compose my carol '*Let Us Light A Candle To The Christ Child*', a piece inspired by, and dedicated to, the choir of the Cathedral and Abbey church of St. Alban, and performed and recorded by them at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve. In the space of two hours, between 2.00am and 4.00am the words and music came to me simultaneously, so complete was the inspiration and total the vision that the finished version needed very little alteration.

Such times are however usually the exception, for with much of the work of composition only a small percentage is inspiration and the rest sheer hard work and careful craftsmanship. These experiences help one to feel an affinity with a man like Handel, and to understand in part what it was like to sit up night after night, consumed by an inner force, driving him on to compose his lengthy oratorio '*Messiah*'.

When all the visions are expressed as little black dots upon the paper, the music is born and the piece then exists by itself, an isolated entity separate from its creator, the composer.

Now it is time for the performer to take over.

The recreators - the performers:

Without the performer the little black dots on the paper are only potential music. The dots must be made to live, and to recreate the sounds and emotions that were in the mind of the composer when he wrote them.

This task needs considerable insight, coupled with the complete technical skill on the instrument in question, the mark of the true artist being the inspired performance that is wholly at one with the composer's original thought. A daunting task to be sure!

However, given adequate time and application the technical aspect of reconstructing the musical patterns of the little black dots is merely a matter of mathematical and methodical working out. That is to say, a note worth two beats, or a note indicating the pitch of G, can only be reproduced in one of two

ways; either correctly or incorrectly. Far be it however to denigrate the amount of labour involved in this process, for well I know the many hours of painful ‘slog’ through which the performer has necessarily to pass before reaching that blissful state of ‘knowing the notes’. As Rachmaninov said “we must work...work...work”, the length of time depending upon the complexity and length of the piece of music.

Having then reached that stage the performer is faced with the most difficult task of all - the interpretation of that reconstructed framework of notes. He has here the choice of infinite variances of nuance and speed, shaping of phrases, and hundreds of subtleties almost impossible to define, the ultimate selections of which make his performance of the piece unique from any other. Even his own repeated performances would never be identical, so elusive and intangible is the spirit that is brought to life from the mere ink and paper representation. The performer has to have both knowledge of the man, the composer, and the time in which he lived, coupled with that special quality of insight, which can reach into the mind of the creator and play as though he were that man, reproducing all this in the fleeting moments of the musical sound. His own mind must be an open channel through which the spirit of the composer can communicate to the listener.

So we are now ready to begin our journey through the musical heritage of our islands, and to discover something of the times in which our musicians lived and worked, their loves, trials, hardships, disappointments and successes.

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