



Christopher Shaw

CHRISTOPHER SHAW (1963)

David Drew

This article appeared in the July 1963 issue of Musical Times, whose regular choral music supplement of that month was Christopher Shaw's anthem for chorus and organ A Lesson from Ecclesiastes. It was the first writing of substance to appear about this composer, and very nearly the last to date.



Christopher Shaw was born in London in 1924 and read music at New College Oxford (1942–1944) under R. O. Morris and H. K. Andrews. He began his career as a composer by writing film scores – documentaries for the Crown Film Unit and Rank's *This Modern Age*, and a feature film *Fly Away Peter* (1948). He had been introduced to the film world by Vaughan Williams, to whom he had played an enormous Piano Sonata (1945) that rambles round E flat (Dorian) minor like a friendly but puzzled bear. A very VW-ish *a cappella* setting of 'Death be not proud', a Passacaglia for Orchestra on a theme of Wilbye, and two song cycles (T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell) also belong to Shaw's student period.

Shaw began to find himself as a composer with his discovery of modern music. A set of Piano Variations on *Mikrokosmos No. 100* was written in six days toward the end of 1947. More relevant to his future development was a neo-classical keyboard suite (Prelude, Allemande, Gavotte with Musette, and Gigue) composed the following year. The Suite is in the key of E, and the opening superficially resembles the Stravinsky of the Piano Sonata. But in fact the whole work is methodically 12-note and serial. It owes nothing to Schoenberg, and more to Bartók than Stravinsky. Although it would seem to be an exercise rather than a fulfilled work, its integration of tonal with serial methods established a course of action which Shaw has followed in almost all his subsequent works. It is worth recalling that in the England of the late 1940s the 12-note method was still generally regarded as an exotic growth which had never promised much and had now died a natural death. Shaw must have been one of the first English composers of the post-war generation to reject this idea.

After the Piano Suite, Shaw wrote a number of pieces in quick succession. The Suite was immediately followed by a much less 'strict' and rather more characteristic work, the cantata *Ode to Evening* for high voice, two clarinets and piano. The winter of 1948–9 saw the composition of a Concerto for Orchestra and the inception of the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, completed later in 1949. The Sonata is the first of Shaw's mature works, and nothing he had done previously gave reason to expect so remarkable a forward stride or such unity within different characters – the long lines of the opening allegretto, the faintly Schubertian grace of the scherzo, the eloquence of the slow movement, and the wit of the finale.

The Sonata was published (by Novello) soon after its first performance, but has had far fewer performances than it deserves (as an attractive if slighter alternative to, say, the Hindemith Sonata). The next two works were even less favoured. The neglect of *Croagh Patrick*, a

cantata for speaker, contralto, baritone, strings and timpani, is perhaps understandable, though there are some touching things here, such as the folk-like alto solo, 'Blessed is he that begets beauty'. But the attempt at a poetic chronicle of saintly work is uncomfortably reminiscent of Britten's *Saint Nicolas*, even if the music is not, and the lack of tempo or character contrast further weakens a design already threatened by the prominence given to the speaker's role.

The fate of the *Four Poems* by James Joyce, for high voice, flute, harp and string quartet, is more surprising. First performed in public at an SPNM concert in November 1956, the work was warmly received by audience and critics. In a notice published in *The Musical Times* two months later, Donald Mitchell wrote:

These songs proved to be exceptionally sensitive and distinguished music which should claim the immediate attention of a publisher It would be unduly ironic if one of the very rare occasions on which the Society unfolds a real talent were to have no positive consequence.

The songs did not find a publisher, and they have had only one subsequent performance. While it is true that works involving instrumental combinations of this kind are hard to place, there is a place (in certain types of chamber programme) for music of this quality. Melodically it is closer to Britten than to Central Europe, but harmonically it has certain affinities with the early 12-note Dallapiccola.

A slow and even harmonic pulse and a minimum of rhythmic or contrapuntal development were appropriate to the brooding introspection of the Joyce poems; but, as *Croagh Patrick* had shown, a mood could also become a habit: compositionally, a habit of taking things too easily. It was perhaps out of a desire to counteract these tendencies (which, after all, had been the blight of much modern English music) that Shaw wrote his *Three Pieces for Orchestra*. Dallapiccola's somewhat reserved comment when shown the opening movement – 'it *might* work' – went further than the composer himself was prepared to go, in retrospect. Convinced, I think rightly, that it *wouldn't* work – at least in the sense that the material was unequal to the kinds of structural stress aimed at – he discarded the Concerto.¹ Yet this 'failure' proved necessary and useful, for his next substantial piece, the Concerto for Strings, showed that the disciplines of the *Three Orchestral Pieces* had helped him to escape from the nostalgic stasis of *Croagh Patrick* and the *Joyce Songs*, and recover the energies of the Clarinet Sonata. The Concerto remains unperformed, for which there is no musical justification, whatever the limitations of the piece.

After another set of experimental pieces (*Inventions for Piano*, dating from 1955, the time of Shaw's first discovery of Messiaen) which, like the earlier orchestral pieces, were discarded, Shaw embarked on his most ambitious work to date – an opera based on an episode from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The influence of Britten, which had been evident in his music for some years, now came to the forefront; obviously under the immediate impact of *The Turn of the Screw*. Britten's declamation, melody and texture provided a 'tradition' through which Shaw could

¹ There seems to be a non-sequitur here in the text as printed: does the author mean Shaw abandoned the (supposedly previously-composed) Concerto for Orchestra, or – as the sense seems to demand – the *Three Pieces*? Uncertainty is compounded by the fact that another Concerto makes its appearance in the following sentence. In fact, however, according to a worklist communicated to me by Christopher Shaw in 1990, all three works were eventually destroyed, though two sections of the Concerto for Orchestra were re-used in *Incidental Music*, which is extant, for a production of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* for the Oxford University Festival of 1951. The orchestral Passacaglia on a theme of Wilbye was not destroyed, but is noted on the same list as having been lost. (Ed.)

develop his own rather different and hitherto un-operatic procedures. The first act was ready in short score by the end of 1957. But at that point, and without warning, composition came to a dead stop. Why? I suspect that it was not a matter of conscious decision. But any composer who shows as much instinctive feeling for the theatre as Shaw does in the first act of his opera may fall silent when, on turning some dramatic corner, he discovers that he is on the wrong theatrical lines. The end of Act I marks just such a turning point. Whether he 'knew' it or not, the rest of the libretto lacked that progression to a point of absolute finality which is essential to all opera. A composer less honest or self-critical than Shaw might have proceeded without further scruple, hoping at least to cash in on what had been achieved in Act 1. The result might have been a passable imitation of opera, and better than many that reach the stage; but it would not have been truthful. Shaw's renunciation of a project that had already inspired some of the very best music he had yet written (in both its buffo and its lyrical veins) commands respect. Yet there still remains an alternative. Although the task of re-engagement and reconsideration would not be easy after so great a lapse of time, distance might provide a basis for objective criticism, and thus prove rewarding. The modern theatre can ill afford to lose music of genuine quality.

A set of *Seven Folk Songs from the Island of Chios*, done with great tact and sensibility in the Britten manner, are almost the only substantial outcome of the period of frustration following the abandonment of the opera. (A second set, *Four Greek Songs*, is, I think, less successful, though the fourth song is attractive, and the second, a deliberate homage to Messiaen, is something of a *tour de force*.) Two small choruses date from the same period. One of them, *The Shepherd's Wonder*, to a profoundly wise poem by Sidney Godolphin, was of necessity kept within a narrow technical compass, as it was written for the Imperial College's Commemoration Day concert at the Albert Hall. The second and more complex chorus, *The Year's Christmas* (Edwin Muir) is dedicated to Imogen Holst (who had conducted the first performance of *The Shepherd's Wonder*). It was first heard at a concert by the John Alldis Choir at Holy Trinity, Kensington, in October 1962.

These works, together with two more recent ones *A Lesson from Ecclesiastes* (this month's *Musical Times* supplement) and *Three Poems by D. G. Rosetti* (dedicated to Richard Wood and the Singers in consort, 1963) would seem to be studies for the first ambitious piece Shaw has contemplated since the opera – a sacred cantata, with instrumental interludes. The SATB carol *No Room at the Inn*, published by Novello, stands outside this development, and seems to have surprised even the composer – 'it just came out like that'. Not the least surprising thing in this type of musical context is the debt which the final *tranquillo* passage owes to the *Grand Chorale* in Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. But the thematic relationship between the *tranquillo* coda and the opening idea of the carol is, if I may say so, typically Shavian, and illuminates the shape and feeling of the whole piece.

In an age addicted to extravagant noises and correspondingly extravagant claims, a small but genuine voice like Christopher Shaw's may pass unnoticed. There may well be other composers no less worthy and no more published or performed than he; and to attach some portentous significance to his work would be a poor tribute to the modesty and reticence which are among its most valuable assets. (Here, the text of *A Lesson from Ecclesiastes*² is as relevant as the music.) Yet in our greed for

² Ecclesiastes V, 1–7: 'Let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God. For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few'. (Ed.)

major talents and the 'national' prestige they may bring, we are all too careless of the lesser ones, who, unless they are fortunately placed or else gifted with a shrewd sense of business, are denied the opportunity of regular performance and public scrutiny which is a necessary stimulus to any talent. Whether the work of a lesser talent will be a matter of concern to posterity is not the point; nor is it the function of criticism to stand in for posterity. What matters is that a musical culture should draw strength from all its available talents, rather than just some of them, chosen more or less arbitrarily.

Editorial Afterword:

Christopher Shaw (1924–1995) was an old and close friend of David Drew's. Highly self-critical, he had withdrawn most of the works mentioned in the article, including those published by Novello, by the early 1970s, though he had come round again to some of them – those that he had not lost or destroyed – in the years immediately before his death. The 'sacred cantata with instrumental interludes' became Peter and the Lame Man for soli, chorus and orchestra (1964–67, rev. 1970), which was eventually broadcast by the BBC and included on the eleventh LP release of the second Gulbenkian 'music today' series along with three smaller Shaw choral works: A Lesson from Ecclesiastes, Music When Soft Voices Die (1972) and To the Bandusian Spring (1974). Shaw shared the honours on that disc with Luigi Dallapiccola. On the inner sleeve it is stated that 'for contractual reasons' the conductor of Peter and the Lame Man 'must remain anonymous', though to the sharp-eyed the booklet's session photograph shows a blurred but reasonably recognizable back view of Colin Davis, who believed enthusiastically in the work but whom Philips had declined to release from his exclusive recording contract with them. (As a young clarinettist, Colin Davis had given the first performance of Shaw's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano.)

Most of Shaw's subsequent works were choral, the two largest being the cantata for soprano, bass and orchestra In Memoriam Jan Palach (1985; first version for speaker and orchestra 1969, destroyed) and the choral suite In Praise of Gardens (1975, with piano and organ; 1978–83, with orchestra). He also made many arrangements and orchestrations, including of various Kurt Weill pieces at David Drew's request; and in collaboration with his wife Jean translated a large number of French opera libretti, especially of Offenbach. But he also wrote a large-scale Fantasia for piano (1978–80) and Five Pieces for Wind Quintet (1982–3), and in 1989 embarked on a substantial cycle of Piano Pieces which remained unfinished (though six had been completed) at his sudden death, on holiday in Scotland, on 27 September 1995. David Drew contributed an Obituary to Tempo No. 195 (January 1996), pp. 19–21, which is in many ways a late counterpart to this early Musical Times article; and also a shorter and almost entirely independent obituary to The Guardian; subsequently he contributed the entry on Shaw to the revised New Grove (2000).