

The Lennox Berkeley Centenary

Peter Dickinson

In many ways 2003 has already proved to be a centenary year worthy of Sir Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989) who made a unique contribution to twentieth-century British music. Composers need outstanding interpreters who understand the music and can realize all its implications in performance. Berkeley usually wrote for the finest performers of his time but, of the present generation, Richard Hickox is now fulfilling this role in the fine series of Chandos recordings devoted to father and son, Lennox and Michael. Earlier recordings of works such as the Serenade for Strings and the Third Symphony, both under Berkeley himself, were valuable at the time and some have been transferred to CD. These are naturally of documentary value, but the insight of a later generation has given a new thrust to Berkeley's personal language.

Hickox has also directed many fine live performances including a double bill of operas, which triumphantly concluded the Cheltenham Festival on July 20th and is coming to the Linbury Studio Theatre, Covent Garden, on September 28th. The semi-staged performance of *Ruth*, based on the Old Testament story, was a revelation. The vivid choruses of reapers, with the well-named Joyful Company of Singers, formed an ideal backcloth to admirably characterized roles by Pamela Helen Stephen (*Ruth*) and Mark Tucker (*Boaz*). The story proceeds at a contemplative pace with opportunities for expressive arias en route, all in Berkeley's most suave melodic vein. *Ruth* was preceded by *A Dinner Engagement*, the sparkling one-act comedy which, in spite of valiant and mostly successful attempts to deliver the text, suffered from the cavernous acoustics of Cheltenham Town Hall. Both these operas are about marriage — *Ruth* serious, directly expanding the religious idiom of the *Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila*, and *A Dinner Engagement* witty throughout in a tradition that goes back to French *opéra comique* and Gilbert & Sullivan. In both works the handling of the chamber orchestra is masterly and the scores are replete with memorable tunes. At last these two operas will be recorded.

At the time of writing, Berkeley's spacious choral and orchestral

Magnificat is awaited at the Proms on September 5th but the Aldeburgh Festival, where Britten put on more works by his friend Berkeley than by any other British composer, responded minimally with the *Five Poems of W.H. Auden*, performed by Robert Tear and Stacey Bartsch.

There is no longer any need to dwell on Berkeley's perfectly assimilated French connections, although his friendships with Ravel and Poulenc were influential. Berkeley was partly French anyway and, like Copland, found in Nadia Boulanger the ideal teacher and in Paris a stimulating place in which to develop. No need either to emphasize Berkeley's aristocratic ancestry — his near-miss earldom — or his reserved and modest personality, even though the picture of the man, which is emerging from the book by Tony Scotland now in progress, is intriguing. The music is what counts and it includes a series of works which ought to be recognized as masterpieces with every note in the right place and every nuance calculated to perfection — like Mozart, whom he idolized.

Although some of the early works from the 1920s and 1930s have been revived, Berkeley's real stature was established in 1940 with the *Serenade for Strings*, a classic in this medium. Many of his works are on this level through into the 1960s. Orchestral pieces such as the *First Symphony* and the *Diverimento in B flat*; the concertos for solo piano and for two pianos; chamber works such as the *Flute Sonata*, *String Quartets Nos.2 and 3*, *String Trio and Horn Trio*; a rich legacy of piano music, arguably the finest in twentieth-century British music, now available in a new collected edition; works for guitar, including the late concerto for Julian Bream; and songs, both individual ones and cycles to both English and French texts.

Although Berkeley excelled in short pieces, he was thoroughly at home on a large canvas, such as the first movement of *Symphony No.1*, the scherzo of the *Divertimento*, the spacious theme and variations which forms the last movement of the two-piano concerto, or some of the operatic ensembles. What unites his music for all media is his individual use of melody and harmony allied, at times, with a light touch. It is not surprising that Britten admired his harmonic palette and Boulanger said he had no need to attend harmony classes, although she put him through her usual penitential strict counterpoint. Like most composers of his generation Berkeley owed something to Stravinsky but his roots go further back to Mozart and Bach. His operatic command of ensembles where each character takes an individual line stems from Mozart and his love of counterpoint goes back to Bach.

Those who know Berkeley's music find a spiritual depth, which has drawn listeners to John Tavener, a Berkeley pupil, or Arvo Pärt. Berkeley was brought up as an Anglican but became a Roman Catholic in his mid-

twenties. Nowadays he makes regular appearances in cathedral service lists to the point where he is as familiar as Britten or Howells. Berkeley's religious faith was at the core of his life and work and his liturgical music is an essential part of this. There is a perceptible difference between composers setting religious texts through commission or tradition and those for whom every word is part of a living faith. Berkeley belongs to the second category and the spiritual sources of his music are evident even in his purely instrumental slow movements. Often these consist of perfectly poised melodies such as the slow movements of the Flute Sonatina, the String Trio and the Piano Concerto, the last of the Six Preludes or, much earlier, the second of the Three Pieces, Op.2. Vocal melodies with the same personal qualities include the central section of the *Festival Anthem* — the G major setting of a George Herbert poem, also arranged for cello and piano and for organ — and pre-eminently the third of the *St Teresa* poems, as well as songs and arias from the operas. Many of Berkeley's melodies are particularly memorable.

Future opportunities to build on this busy centenary year include the grand opera *Nelson*, well received at Sadler's Wells in 1954 but not revived apart from a BBC recording and a concert performance in the 1980s. The bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005 would be an ideal opportunity to see *Nelson* back on stage. In the meantime one of the most encouraging developments has been the progress of the Lennox Berkeley Society, founded by Kathleen Walker and Jim Nicol. This has brought together performers, writers and enthusiasts in a productive range of continually expanding activities, which augurs extremely well for the future.

A new edition of Professor Dickinson's definitive study, *The Music of Lennox Berkeley*, extensively revised and enlarged, was published in April by Boydell & Brewer Ltd., PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF; price £25.00.
Website: www.boydell.co.uk

The Collected Works for Solo Piano, edited by Peter Dickinson, CH66187, is published by Chester Music, 8/9 Frith Street, London W1D 3JB; price £19.95. Almost all of Lennox Berkeley's music is published by Chester.
Website: www.chesternovello.com

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