

Edouard Michael

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This article would not have been possible without the generous and patient assistance of Isabelle Aubier, whom I want to thank most heartily. She was the first person who drew my attention to this neglected British composer and she was most helpful in providing me with information on the life and work of Edouard Michael, with scores and tapes of his music.

Edward Michael was born in 1921 in Manchester. He spent his childhood and adolescence in several Middle-East countries. These early years would prove most fruitful to him in his later years both as a man and as an artist. In 1939 he came back to London. At the outbreak of World War II he enlisted in the RAF. A chaplain's wife, who was a musician, noticed the young man's passion for music and began teaching him the basic rules of composition which he obviously assimilated quite rapidly for he seems to have composed quite a number of works at that time. Most of these pieces were later discarded by the composer. However the chaplain's wife entered a score by Edward Michael in 1941 or 1942 at a competition in London. This piece, the scherzo *Les Dyonisies* completed in 1942, was awarded a prize and was consequently performed at the Royal Albert Hall by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by John Hollingsworth. The late Howard Ferguson was impressed by what he heard and wrote: "... it is exciting to come across a work that shows such certainty in its handling, both of the orchestra and of its material ...".^[1]

After the war Edward Michael enrolled at the Guildhall School of Music, where he was quickly granted a scholarship to continue his studies in composition and, somewhat later, in conducting. At the same time he studied privately with Berthold Goldschmidt and Mátyás Seiber. He also had some violin tuition from Max Rostal. While building and performing a sizeable repertoire of violin works, he composed a good deal of music, some of which was played at SPNM concerts and recitals. Indeed the period from 1946 to 1950 was quite prolific, for he composed *inter alia* the *Rhapsodie Concertante* (1946 - violin and orchestra), *Le Rêve d'Himalec* (1946 - orchestra), *Chant d'espérance* (1947 - cello and piano)^[2], the song cycle *Les Pléiades* (1948 - soprano and piano) to words

by Housman, a *Symphony* (1948 - large orchestra) and a *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* (1948).^[3]

The *Rhapsodie Concertante* is scored for violin, double string orchestra, celesta and percussion. It was performed in London and received its French première in 1967, the French Radio Orchestra being then conducted by Raymond Chevreux. *Le Rêve d'Himaléc* was also completed in 1946. *Chant d'espérance* for cello and piano was first performed in London by Pauline Sadgrove and Cecil Belcher. It is a very fine piece of some substance which, to my mind, may rank with some of the best British cello works such as Frank Bridge's magnificent Sonata or John Ireland's Sonata. It is laid-out in two movements. The first movement *molto largo* is a heartfelt elegy evoking some dreamy visions, whereas the second movement is some sort of "*chevauchée fantastique*" from darkness to light. The piece is conceived on a grand scale (it lasts about twenty minutes) and is very taxing on both players. The piano is the cello's equal partner and the piano part is thus far more demanding than a mere accompaniment. *Chant d'espérance* is unquestionably one of Michael's finest pieces to date.

In 1948 Michael completed his song cycle *Les Pléiades* to words by Housman. However, significantly enough, I think, the composer did not add to the many *Shropshire Lad* settings already in existence. Rather he chose to set fairly short poems published in *More Poems* and in *Last Poems*. These texts have a quite different ring from those from *A Shropshire Lad*, and their almost elliptic conciseness as well as their more philosophical stance must have appealed to Edward Michael. These eight short songs reflect on various aspects of humanity and human life, as apprehended by a rather pessimistic mind (Housman's) which Michael tries to see more positively, and he consequently closes his cycle with a somewhat more optimistic poem :

*When green buds hang in the elm like dust
And sprinkle the lime like rain,
Forth I wander, forth I must
And drink of life again.

Forth I must by hedgerow bower
To look at the leaves incurled
And stand in fields where cuckoo flowers
Are lying about the world.*

From *More Poems IX*

The other major works written at that time, the *Symphony* for large orchestra and the *Violin Concerto*, both of 1948, have apparently remained unperformed and unpublished, so that I can only mention them in passing. However, Michael has apparently performed the concerto on several occasions, though with piano accompaniment.

Though British by birth Edward Michael has long been attracted by French culture and music. Pieces such as *Chant d'espérance* and *Les Pléiades* often recall Debussy, Ravel and French Impressionism, particularly by way of their modal harmonies. In 1950 he decided to leave London to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He was to study with her for two years, and Nadia Boulanger was impressed by his achievement enough to secure the first performance in 1956 of Michael's *Messe*.^[4] This was his first large scale piece composed after his move to France and remains one of his finest statements so far. He later recalled that while going through the score of the *Messe*, Nadia Boulanger kept saying "*que c'est honnête*". Nadia Boulanger remained one of the staunchest supporters of this beautiful work. Though a profoundly religious work, the Mass is also an essentially human piece in which one feels that Man, whatever his faults and shortcomings, is still an integral part of Michael's faith. The music is built on ancient modes which aided by the choice of instruments (double string orchestra, celesta, harp, glockenspiel and percussion) lend an extraordinary, almost otherworldly, quality to the music. At times one may be reminded of Holst and of his *Hymn of Jesus*, but on the whole Edward Michael's *Messe* is an impressive, deeply personal statement of faith which carries inner conviction from first to last. It certainly is one of these now long forgotten masterpieces that badly deserve to be revived, and a recording of it is undoubtedly long overdue.

At about the same time, he composed a *Psaume* for male voices which was awarded the Prix Vercelli in 1954. In the meantime poor health compelled Michael to give up his career as violinist and to concentrate on composition. He nevertheless managed to conduct a number of performances of his works, though he had also given up conducting as an alternative career.

But he went on composing, and in 1956 his *Nocturne* for flute or ondes Martenot and orchestra completed in 1955 was awarded the Prix Lili Boulanger. Among the jury were Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, Alexis Haieff and Stravinsky. The latter is reported to have considered Michael's *Messe* as one of the most beautiful and original works he had ever heard.

In 1956 Michael composed *Kamaal* (*conte féérique* for narrator and orchestra, words by the composer). The piece might to a certain extent be compared with, say, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* or Poulenc's *Histoire de Babar*, but on closer acquaintance, particularly with the text, *Kamaal* stands out as a much more serious work than either of these. Nevertheless, *Kamaal* is a good example of Michael's orchestral writing which often conveys mystery, meditation and lyricism in clear, subtly refined textures enhanced by the frequent use of harp, celesta, piano and tuned percussion. The composer conducted the first performance of the

work in Paris in 1958 when it met with a considerable success.

The decade 1950-1960 was particularly prolific and is, it seems, the period during which Edward Michael wrote most of his mature large scale and important pieces. In 1957 he completed the *Elegie, Op.9* "A une âme exilée".^[6] This is a beautifully lyrical, deeply moving work, and its scoring is really magical (it also exists in a shorter version for ondes Martenot and piano).

It may be worth mentioning that Michael wrote quite a number of works for ondes Martenot, either alone or with some accompaniment, such as *Chant arabe* (1958 - two ondes Martenot), *A travers un vitrail* (1958 - ondes Martenot and piano), *Suite brève "Gurumati"* (1961 - ondes Martenot, piano and percussion) and *Trois rituels* (1962 - two ondes Martenot and percussion). Some of these pieces also allow for some alternative instrumentation, e.g. the flute part of *Nocturne* may also be played by ondes Martenot, whereas *Rite de la Lune* (1960) for solo oboe and *Deux Esquisses* (1960) for flute and piano may also be performed on ondes Martenot. This liking for the ondes Martenot may be fairly easily understood by the very sound quality of this instrument that imbues music with a mysterious aura suggesting either infinite space or ethereal mysticism. It must also be remembered that many French composers (among others Messiaen, Jolivet, Landowsky, Bondon, Chaynes) wrote a good deal of sizeable pieces for the ondes Martenot frequently first performed and championed by the late Jeanne Loriod, who really did much to promote the instrument of which she was an undisputed master.

Le Jardin de Tinajatama: suite exotique, Op.10 and *Fata Morgana, Op.15* were also completed in 1958 and are yet other examples of Michael's attraction to all things oriental or mysterious, which he always dresses up in highly idiomatic scoring. These pieces were repeatedly performed then. *Fata Morgana* was first performed in Liège (Belgium) in 1960 while *Le Jardin de Tinajatama* was first performed in Lille the same year; the conductor in both cases was Victor Clovez who also conducted several performances of *Elégie* both in France and in Belgium. Clovez also conducted the first performance of *Initiation* for string orchestra completed in 1959. This piece has also sometimes been referred to as a symphony for strings.^[6] *L'Oracle: Symphonie archaïque pour cordes* also dates from 1959, as does the vocal cycle *Les soirées de Tedjlah* (also sometimes referred to as *Cinq Vocalises*) which is scored for wordless mezzo-soprano, two flutes, piano and strings. This piece was nominated for the Prix Vercelli.

La vision de Lamis Helacim completed in 1959 is scored for large orchestra. Manuel Rosenthal conducted the first performance in 1962 at the Théâtre des Champs Elysée with the Orchestre National de l'ORTF

and this was, as far as I am aware, its only performance.

The early 1960s were also very prolific and saw the completion of quite a number of orchestral works, *Trois Tableaux* (1960), *La Reine des Pluies: poème chorégraphique* (1962), *Le Festin des Dieux* (1962), *Les Eléments* (1962), *Au seuil de Persépolis* (1962), *Trois mondes* (1962) and *La légende de Gampong* (1963) for narrator and orchestra on words by the composer, as well as chamber works, including a number of pieces with ondes Martenot already mentioned earlier and the *Petite suite antique* for flute, violin, cello and piano written in 1960 and first performed in 1962 in Switzerland by the Ensemble de Paris. Mention must also be made of *La quête de Koussouda* (1960) for harp and string orchestra.

Up to the early 1960s Michael's compositions were comparatively frequently played, but Michael's tonal-modal idiom was soon considered as out of fashion at a time when new musical trends imposed a more radical view of what music should be. These were the years of Darmstadt, Boulez and his Domain Musical concerts that banned a great number of pieces seen as old-fashioned or even reactionary. These were also highly controversial years characterized by Boulez's intransigent approach and avowed intention to forget tradition with a view of establishing his own tradition. If this radical approach to musical creation was undoubtedly a useful, almost inevitable, step towards a renewed freedom that presently culminates in what may be seen as the most overtly pluralistic period in music's history, it soon became evident that this attitude, if kept inflexible, was leading straight into some sort of suicidal stylistic deadend. The consequences of this renewed conscious reappraisal of certain musical values have been manifold. Composers who enjoyed some publicity during the radical serial period simply disappeared from the map. Those who, in spite of their earlier radical attitude, were too musical to be engulfed by mere musical slogans are still with us now. They still write music that nevertheless can appeal to wider audiences, for all its technical motivations and complexity. Others tried to reach new audiences either by adopting a simpler view of music or by compromising. However in the midst of this huge turmoil, some composers, who had been neglected, resurfaced and their music was soon appreciated for what it was really worth, whatever the idiom or the techniques used.

Nevertheless, this decade almost silenced a number of composers; some of them even stopped composing and embarked on new careers totally unrelated to music, others simply went on writing seemingly unconcerned by what was going on about them with the certainty that their day would eventually come.

After 1960 Edouard Michael concentrated on chamber music and com-

posed a number of shorter piano pieces, of which *Cinq stèles antiques* (1974) may be singled out as one of his finest achievements. This suite is a telling example of what can be achieved with simple means. It uses the white keys of the keyboard and has been devised in such a way that it may also be played on Celtic harp. The music is still mainly modal and recalls Ravel and Debussy again as lasting influences on Michael's work.

Cinq stèles antiques and *Conte de lumière et des ténèbres*, both from 1974, are likely to be his last pieces, for ill health and old age have brought Michael's composing career to a stop. Thanks to Isabelle Aubier's tireless and wholehearted commitment, his music has — at long last — reached some new, though inevitably limited, audiences.

The sole ambition of this admittedly incomplete, sketchy article is to draw attention to the life and work of a most distinguished composer, whose beautifully crafted music should appeal to unprejudiced audiences, were it given a chance to be heard again.

Notes

- [1] Letter dated 1943 from Howard Ferguson to Edward Michael
- [2] Sometimes referred to as *Sonata in B flat "Pathétique"*
- [3] In an article published in 1948 in *Music Chronicle*, the anonymous writer mentions quite a number of pieces that were apparently discarded some time later, *inter alia*, several string quartets, four (?) symphonies, a piano trio, a piano quartet and about twenty (?) sonatas.
- [4] Orchestre National de la RTF conducted by Eugène Bigot, 1956. Bigot conducted another performance in 1963 which was broadcast on several occasions in 1968 and 1988. The *Messe* was also performed in Germany in 1967 (Radio Berlin).
- [5] The works published by Ricordi have an opus number; it seems however that Michael ceased numbering his works later.
- [6] An article in *Musique et Radio* published in 1961 mentions two symphonies for strings which might eventually be *Initiation* (1959) and *L'Oracle* (1959).

List of Works

[NB: Bold type denotes published works and publishers' names]

- Les Dyonisies - Scherzo for Orchestra* [1942]
Rhapsodie Concertante, violin & orchestra [1946] **Choudens**
Le Rêve d'Himalec, orchestra [1946] **Transat.**
Sonata for Violin and Piano [1946, revised 1971]
Chant d'espérance, cello & piano [1947] **Choudens**
Les Pléiades, soprano & piano (A.E. Housman) [1948]
Symphonic, large orchestra [1948]
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [1948]
Three English Folksongs, mixed chorus [arr. 1949]
Six English Folksongs, soprano & piano [arr. 1950]
Suite de Noël, viola & cello [1953]
Psaume, male voices [1954] **Transat.**
Messe (op.7), chorus, double string orchestra, harp & percussion [1955] **Ricordi**
Nocturne, flute/ondes Martenot & orchestra [1955] **Transat.**
Petite Suite, female voices [1956] **Transat.**
Kamaal - conte féerique, narrator & orchestra [1956] **Transat.**
Élégie "A une âme exilée" (op.9), orchestra (ondes Martenot *ad lib*) [1957] **Ricordi**
Élégie, ondes Martenot & piano [1957] **Ricordi**
Le Jardin de Tinajatama (op.10), orchestra [1958] **Ricordi**
Chant arabe, two ondes Martenot [1958] **Transat.**
A travers un vitrail, ondes Martenot & piano [1958] **Transat.**
Initiation, string orchestra [1959] **Choudens**
Les soirées de Tedjlah, mezzo-soprano (wordless), two flutes, piano & strings [1959]
Transat.
L'Oracle, string orchestra [1959]
La vision de Lamis Helacim (op.14), orchestra [1959] **Ricordi**
Fata Morgana (op.15), orchestra [1960] **Ricordi**
Petite suite antique, flute, violin, cello & piano [1960] **Choudens**
Rite de la Lune, oboe solo/ondes Martenot [1960] **Lemoine**
Deux Esquisses, flute/ondes Martenot & piano [1960] **Lemoine**
La Quête de Koussouda, harp & string orchestra [1960]
Danse d'amour, piano [1960]
Trois tableaux, orchestra [1961] **Transat.**
Suite brève "Gurumati", ondes Martenot, piano & percussion [1961]
La Reine des Pluies - poème chorégraphique pour grand orchestre [1962]
Choudens

Le Festin des Dieux, orchestra [1962] **Choudens**
Les Eléments, orchestra [1962]
Au seuil de Persépolis, orchestra [1962]
Trois rituels, two ondes Martenot/two oboes & percussion [1962] **Choudens**
La barque enchantée, piano [1962]
Trois mondes, orchestra [1962]
La légende de Gampong, narrator & orchestra [1963]
Sonatine, flute & clarinet [1964] **Ricordi**
Au pays de Bharata - Five Pieces for Piano [1970]
Berceuse, piano [1973]
Two English Folksongs, soprano & piano [arr. 1973]
Cinq stèles antiques, piano/Celtic harp [1974]
Conte de lumière et des ténèbres, piano [1974]

Note

Editions Lemoine have also published two volumes of piano music for children of which the composition dates are not known.

Pour un Rayon de lune
Danse des Gardiens du Temple

Discography

Les Pléiades (soprano and piano)
Cinq stèles antiques (piano)
La Barque enchantée (piano)
La Légende de la fée d'un ruisseau (piano)
Sonata for Violin and piano
Chant d'espérance (cello and piano)

Anne Loubris (soprano); Eric Mélon (violin); Didier Poskin (cello);
Isabelle Aubier (piano)

René Gailly Productions CD 87 152

Note

This disc, recorded some time after a concert given by these performers, is now — unfortunately enough — no longer available, René Gailly Productions having gone out of business. Some copies, however, may still be found in Belgium. Anyone interested in having a copy of it may get in touch with the present writer.