

Mátyás Seiber and the Dorian Singers

Alan Gibbs

Mátyás Seiber was born on May 4th 1905 in Budapest, where he became one of Kodály's pupils at the Academy of Music. As well as composition, he studied the cello, at one time playing it in a ship's orchestra, and later joining a professional quartet. Progressive in his serious music, he nonetheless made a point of exploring other types. In the 1920s he established the first-ever conservatory course in the theory and practice of jazz, and later (as G.S. Mathis) wrote a tutor for the accordion, as well as getting a popular song into the Top Ten. By then he was living in London, where he had settled in 1935, and became a much sought-after teacher of composition, his pupils including Fricker, Milner, Wood, Banks and Gilbert. Tippett recognized his value by inviting him to join the staff of Morley College in 1942.

I visited him at his Caterham home for composition lessons from February 16th 1957 until 1960, the year of his tragic accidental death on September 24th. I was treated as a friend, shared the China tea which he drank exclusively because of his ulcer, and enjoyed pleasant conversation with him and his wife Lilla — sometimes with their young daughter Julia in attendance — until making my way reluctantly back to my Streatham lodgings.

As a teacher, his eclecticism made him ideal, as the wide range of styles among his pupils' work indicates. He felt, indeed, that composers could be too obsessed with style, although he deprecated the still fashionable tendency to perpetuate the outmoded pastoral idiom of Vaughan Williams. He thought posterity would judge the validity of new styles, and was amused that the English should confuse those of Bartók and Kodály while

He would not include his own music in our discussion until I prevailed upon him to do so. Although he was careful to point out my divergencies from strict twelve-note technique, his own healthy approach is summed up in his contribution to the appendix in Rufer's book *Composition with 12 Notes*. After describing his methods in *Ulysses* and other works, he comments:

"I suppose after all this, orthodox twelve-note composers and theoreticians will say that this is not 'proper' twelve-note music. That seems to me not of the least importance at the moment; the only thing that interests me is whether I succeeded in writing some real music."

He once said wryly to me that composers should just get on and write the music, and let the theorists argue about it afterwards! All credit to Antony Hopkins, by the way, for devoting one of his broadcast talks about music to *Ulysses* with only his voice and piano to provide the illustrations, there being no recording.

My interest in choral music prompted me to ask Seiber whether I could attend his Dorian Singers rehearsals. In fact, he allowed me to join, recognizing the possibility that my sight-reading and familiarity with modern idioms could be of assistance to the choir, which was a mixture of semi-professionals and amateurs. They included a bank manager, teachers, doctors, civil servants, a cultural attaché at the Iraqi embassy, a professional violinist and employees of the *Daily Mirror* and Sun Engraving Company. Tenor would be the most useful part for me to sing, but as I was more of a baritone, Mátyás advised, for a particular recording:

"If any of the Tenor entries are uncomfortably high, leave them out and sing the Bass instead. Perhaps you could place yourself strategically between the two voices. Try to look through the score with this in mind."

Meticulous care in the preparation of concerts and broadcasts was characteristic. Even professional singers and instrumentalists were not allowed to get away with faults of intonation, as you would expect of a pupil of Kodály. Dorian rehearsals began with tuning exercises, before which he would amuse us with his standard request to "*Try to stand!*" This, like his occasional use of the wrong past tense, was a rare lapse from his generally excellent English. In fact, he was fluent in at least five languages.

The Singers were founded in 1945. They were originally members of the Fleet Street Choir, a first-rate group whom I remember singing Rubbra under their conductor T.B. Lawrence. When

Lawrence allegedly became involved with a female in the choir, a number of singers broke away and, after first approaching Michael Tippett, were eventually launched with Mátyás as their director. Under his guidance, they gained a reputation as interpreters of new music, with reinforcements when required: Michael Graubart, who inherited the musical directorship of Morley College, and Ian Humphris, conductor of the Linden Singers, were two such. One of the regular members, I recall, religiously transcribed all these works into Tonic Sol-fa, much as had Gertrude Herbert Jones the new works of Holst and Vaughan Williams for the Gregynog Choir of Wales in the 1920s!

The Dorian Singers successfully performed works by Britten, Tippett, Fricker (who wrote his *Chanson de Roland* settings for them), Hopkins, Cox, continental novelties by Seiber's friend Erich Itor Khan, Lewkovitch and many another, as well as standards by Bartók, Kodály and Hindemith and the excellent Lajos Bárdos, little known here. We sang for the Society for the Promotion of New Music, which Seiber helped to found in 1942. His own music was sung, of course, his Yugoslav and Hungarian folksong settings being favourites with choir and audiences; there were also his more serious works, such as *Sirmio* and the *Missa Brevis*. He told me that one bar of *Sirmio* had taken him three hours to get right. The *Missa Brevis* is a model of expressive writing in two parts for a four-part choir, making a positive virtue out of doublings all too easily resorted to by the lazy.

Before my time, the Singers had participated in recording his music for the pioneering animation *Animal Farm*, one of a series of Hallas and Batchelor collaborations. He wrote many film scores, but found this activity at times frustrating. He would labour over a fully-scored passage for a battle scene, only to have it drowned out by the effects; or he would devise careful structural features and then find the logic had been excised along with cuts at the editing stage. Directors' peremptory requests for changes on set may account for pre-emptive alternatives in red made in advance on his scores, as Michael Graubart suggested to me.

I was with the Singers when they performed his second Joyce cantata, the *Three Fragments from a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1959, and subsequently in the Decca recording. But, as well as all this new music, Seiber's

acquired Englishness readily embraced the gems of our Renaissance like Byrd and Gibbons — well in the Morley College tradition since the days of Holst. The first piece I remember singing with them at my first rehearsal was Tomkins's *When David heard*: it was a total revelation to me then, and I still hold it in special affection. We sang exciting double choruses by Giovanni Gabrieli, as well as Scheidt in Mátyás's own edition. And there were the modern Holst and Vaughan Williams arrangements, with William Mace a regular tenor soloist in *Ca' the yowes*. Seiber's puckish sense of humour was in evidence even before he came to England, with arrangements of Morgenstern. The men enjoyed his jazzy *Zwei Schweinekarbonaden* to words by Ringelnatz, about the pork chops who returned to the butcher and told him "*You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting!*" He was bound to set Lear in due course, and Hoffnung drew on his talents in his famous festivals of nonsense. Mátyás told me how disappointed he was that his specially commissioned work for espresso bar was spoiled by Woolworths declining his request for a cash register, its part having to be played on a triangle instead!

We rehearsed on Wednesdays, the venue at one time being the Hungarian Club. We also gave a recital at the Embassy, with Paul Robeson and Harry Newstone in the audience. About the time of the Hungarian uprising, Mátyás helped Ligeti find a footing here, and one day a young Hungarian, with virtually no English, joined our rehearsal. This was László Heltay, and his English improved so rapidly that he went on to Merton College, Oxford, to undertake studies in musical history under Frank Lloyd Harrison. In 1960 I was there when he welcomed Kodály in person, to conduct his own *Budavári Te Deum*. Mátyás gave our rehearsals a high priority. He recognized the importance of punctuality, and set an example, even if it meant catching an earlier flight from a previous engagement. So he did not take kindly to late arrivals on the part of his singers, and once pointed out that he had refused a wedding commission in order to keep the evening free for the choir in his busy schedule.

The news of his death came as a great blow. One of the choir, Paul Shepherd, conducted us in the Memorial Concert in the Wigmore Hall on November 19th 1960, the programme including the première of Kodály's specially composed tribute, *Homo perpende fragilis*. John Gardner, who had already deputized at practices on occasion and was liked by the choir, took on the conductorship.

But shortly after the final concert, in the church of St. Mary Magdalene, Oxford, John resigned and the Singers ceased to exist in 1962. Among the survivors, I was sadly the only Dorian Singer able to make 80th birthday Memorial and Centenary Concerts at Morley: but there was no questioning the special combination of respect and affection in which we held him.



This memoir is based on a brief talk which the writer was invited to give at the Exhibition Private View which launched Morley College's recent celebrations ('Seiber 100 Years — From Blue Notes to Twelve Notes') on February 24th 2005. As well as the exhibition there were concerts, and lectures by Seiber pupils Michael Graubart and Hugh Wood. The music was provided by Morley's own resources under the direction of Dr. Robert Hanson (musical director), Paul Webster, Christopher Dawe and Julie North. The selection was representative of Seiber's various interests, culminating in a moving performance of his first Joyce cantata, *Ulysses*. A review of the Morley celebrations will be found in *TEMPO*.

The three quartets were excellently performed by the Edinburgh Quartet at Leighton House on May 6th. Graham Hair has written a book on Seiber's music which is to be published by Edwin Mellen Press, and Paul Szabo is preparing a programme for a Hungaraton CD and possible UK performance. For further details, consult: www.seiber2005.org.uk