

CHRISTOPHER HEADINGTON — INTERVIEW

Terry Barfoot

Christopher Headington is a musician of many parts. He was educated at Taunton School and at the Royal Academy of Music, where he was a Composition Scholar, but where also, as a pianist, he won a prize as best instrumentalist of the year. During National Service in Germany, he gained his first experience of broadcasting and of writing about music. On demobilisation in the early 1950's, however, he decided against the considerable uncertainty of a career as a composer and pianist, turning instead, albeit with some reluctance, to teaching. After three years in Scotland, he took up the post of Deputy Director of Music at Lancing College in Sussex, with the encouragement of his former teacher, Lennox Berkeley, and of Benjamin Britten. He remained at Lancing until 1964, when he took charge of Music Presentation at the B.B.C. in London. The following year, he returned to the world of education as Tutor in Music in the External Studies Department of Oxford University.

During all this time, composition and the piano had continued to feature in his musical life and these, together with other activities such as writing and broadcasting, increasingly took his time, so that finally, in 1972, he reduced his Oxford work to a half-time basis. Since then, Christopher Headington has been semi-independent as an all-round musician, author, and broadcaster. In 1978, he was awarded a major Arts Council bursary for composition. His own compositions include concertos for violin and piano, two string quartets and a piano quartet, two piano sonatas, the orchestral song-cycle *The Healing Fountain* and the cycle *Reflections of Summer* written for Dame Janet Baker.

Christopher Headington has served on the Executive Committee of the Composers' Guild of Great Britain and the music panel of the Southern Arts Association; he is also a member of the Solo Performers' Section of the Incorporated Society of Musicians. Apart from the enormously successful *Bodley Head History of Western Music*, he is the author of a book for young people, *The Orchestra and its Instruments*; he has contributed also to *A Dictionary of Composers*, edited by Charles Osborne, and to *Lizst: a Symposium*, edited by Alan Walker. He has compiled an *Illustrated Dictionary of Musical Terms*, and written *The Performing World of the Musician*, while his most recent book, a biography of Benjamin Britten, received uniform critical acclaim.

Composer, writer, broadcaster, performer, teacher: Christopher Headington has achieved a considerable success in all these fields.

TB: Your career has been extremely varied. Do you feel there have been any benefits or drawbacks because of this?

CH: Probably it has helped my work as a broadcaster to be a writer, and it has helped my work as a writer that I have been a teacher. It's a help that a composer should be a performer and vice versa. This division is in fact very new, and did not exist at all for Bach or Mozart or Beethoven, or, closer to our own time, for Britten

or Bernstein or Boulez. Being composer and performer together can only fertilise and stimulate my work, just as it does that of my friend John McCabe. I think there are drawbacks, though one drawback is connected with a benefit: doing a lot of different jobs has allowed me to have a degree of independence and to make time to do the things which I really care about most, which of course are making music, writing it and performing it. But the danger is that if you divide your skills and your time between too many activities, you don't get on sufficiently well with the activity which you perhaps are best at. I think there is a danger, for a composer particularly because of the difficulty in making a living from that activity alone, to get involved in teaching to the extent that the composing gradually withers and dies away. Having said that, one can point to examples of composers such as Mahler, Borodin, and Ives who had commitments which did not prevent their compositions from being written.

TB: Can I take up one point out of that? I mentioned amongst those things that you have done your role as a performer, and having heard several of your recitals, I feel that you could well have made the grade as a concert pianist. Do you have any regrets about that?

CH: I don't think so, because I think I probably wouldn't have made the grade as a concert pianist, not necessarily because I don't play well enough, but because my repertory is not wide enough. I remember as a student thinking that I didn't have the kind of very broad taste which a concert pianist needs, especially at the beginning of a career when there is a need to cover a very wide range of music. When I was a student a lot of the standard repertory appealed to me less than it might have, and I don't think I was sufficiently endowed in this particular direction to have built up a very big repertory from memory of all the standard classics. My abilities as a pianist are best in a small field. I never forget reading that Claudio Arrau is supposed in his 20's to have been able to play any one of 70 recital programmes; I could never compete with that.

TB: Are there any projects for writing that you currently have in hand?

CH: Several, actually. There's a chapter on *The Rape of Lucretia* for a Britten Companion to be published by Faber in 1982. There are several contributions on composers for *The Fontana Dictionary of Contemporary Biography*, and a chapter on 'Lennox Berkeley on record' for a Berkeley Symposium, plus *The Listener's Guide to Chamber Music*, already at the printers to be published by Blandford Press. There is no other full book presently planned.

TB: Do you envisage spending very much time writing?

CH: Yes, I do. Probably, in realistic terms, I shall spend as much time writing books and articles as I do composing because I enjoy it and it's easier than composing. Also I need to do it to earn a living.

TB: Is there anything you'd especially like to write?

CH: Bryan Northcott, reviewing my biography of Britten, said that what we really still need is a book pin-pointing Britten's compositional achievement. If I were asked to write a book of that kind I would thoroughly enjoy doing it. I would like to write about the music of certain composers: Britten would be one, Debussy another.

TB: In which direction do you intend to pursue your career from now on?

CH: In composition principally; though playing the piano remains important, but I've always thought of myself as a composer first, and that is what I'd like to be remembered for. I have had an immensely strong sense of vocation about that since I was about 13 or 14 and the whole point of my moving, as I am, out of my salaried teaching job at Oxford is to concentrate on composition. Obviously I will continue to do other things; I will need to from a purely economic point of view. I shall continue playing, writing, broadcasting, and doing some teaching. Essentially, though, I am changing the balance of my musical life towards more and more composition, my next ten years is very strongly mapped out in that direction.

TB: Bearing that in mind, do you think that modern composers in general, and yourself in particular, are given sufficient opportunity of performance?

CH: I don't think any of us really have any cause to complain. The world is a competitive place, and there are a lot of people who feel they have abilities and want to reach an audience with their creative work. One can't sit back and expect to be given things. When you are already established and well-known that begins to happen, but until you are you have to work to achieve that. But many composers, including myself, are rather reluctant to rush around saying, 'You must play my works or you must commission works from me'. You must hope that someone else will do that for you, like a good publisher and if they don't very little happens.

TB: Have you ever become depressed about the lack of attention your music has been given? Take, for instance, your first String Quartet (which I find very attractive), which fell into virtual oblivion after getting good reviews.

CH: Yes, I have been depressed about that. One can get depressed by not being performed, but that is quite an easy thing to live with because you can always blame it on other people. Much worse, and I've been through this too, is the lapse into despair of the writer who does not write — the feeling that one has something to say but somehow it does not materialise. Not being able to write is even worse than writing and not getting performed.

TB: One of the clearest examples of a composer facing this problem of not getting performed was Mozart, but of course in his day the music of the present was what people would expect to hear. Nowadays, that's far from the case. Do you feel that the public is now anti modern music?

CH: It's certainly fairly indifferent to modern music, but not necessarily to all modern music. People aren't against all that's new; Lloyd-Webber's *Variations*, albeit a slight piece, quickly became popular. But that could link up with the commercial world and the ephemerality that implies. The problem seems to me that the public has been alienated by the kind of new music which critical opinion

has rated highly. But people can be reached by new works, provided their minds have not become closed in principle.

TB: Do you feel there is a problem in being able to reach them in the first place? The marketing of music is crucial; if for instance the Headington Violin Concerto were put in a concert programme rather than the Beethoven, the audience might not be so large.

CH: That's very true. I can tell you a little anecdote about that very point. When my Violin Concerto was due to be performed by BBC Symphony Orchestra at the 1980 Cheltenham Festival, and the concert was cancelled because of the industrial action which took place at that time, I went to the concert which replaced the one at which my concerto was due to be played. As I walked in, I was behind a local dignitary and his wife, and I heard him saying, 'I must say I'm rather glad we don't have to listen to that modern programme after all'. I fully saw his point of view. He might not have liked my music, whereas with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Dvorak's *New World* Symphony he was fairly confident, and after all he's the chap who buys his ticket (although in that particular case not!).

TB: What do you think is the composer's role in society today, and what has he to say that is of value?

CH: The composer is no different from any other creative person. Shelley said that poets were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world', and Britten said that art could enrich people's lives. I think if you produce something of beauty (which of course begs the question as to what is beautiful) and it gives people satisfaction, you are doing something socially valuable. A work of art should give people a window into a world of spiritual values which cannot be measured in material terms. These are difficult to verbalise but nevertheless are very real for people who experience them. If I can write a piece of music which gives people some kind of satisfaction, which makes them feel that life is just that little bit more meaningful, then certainly that is a valid social function.

TB: In that sense, where do you stand in relation to the musical trends of the 20th century?

CH: I used to think I was fairly conservative, except that all the new music I hear today seems to be more conservative than mine. I heard a piece last night called *3D* by Simon Thorne, broadcast from Scotland, which although agreeable listening, seemed to rely heavily on later Debussy. It was a work which sat so firmly on tonics that it would have seemed in the 1960's very far indeed from the post-Webern style. Even Stockhausen, in *Stimmung*, is prepared to spend 70 minutes on one single chord. My attitude to tonality, which by comparison with early Maxwell-Davies or Goehr would have seemed rather conventional, now seems rather progressive again because composers seem to be going back to a somewhat naive language. My own musical language is perhaps sophisticated, but all I do is what comes naturally.

TB: Perhaps going beyond our century, although not necessarily, which composers do you most admire?

CH: It is dangerous to allow impressions to be taken too far in this context, but having said that, there are certain composers for whose music I have had a very deep affection for a long period: Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartok, Ravel and Britten were all early enthusiasms which have remained. More recently, Sibelius and Shostakovich, whilst as a pianist I could hardly be indifferent to Chopin. I am very deeply fond of the music of Mahler, but less attracted to Richard Strauss. I have an enormous respect for Wagner, but don't often listen to his music, and the same is true of Beethoven. Of Baroque music, I am attached to Vivaldi even if in stature he does not approach Bach. I come back to music which has a directness; the composers I am not attached to are those who have a very strong personality but whose emotions are alien to mine: Schoenberg is one, Messiaen is another although that certainly doesn't mean I dislike all Messiaen. And I don't feel quite so pious about Baroque music and performance as some others do.

TB: A question which inevitably follows on from this, but which is significantly different: Which composers have most influenced you?

CH: Bartok is a profound influence on a lot of my music; the immediate inspiration behind my Violin Concerto was hearing a performance of the Bartok Viola Concerto. The Bartok quartets, and the first two of Britten, influenced my own quartets. as did Shostakovich, although not just his works in that form. Debussy had been an inspiration in the sense of wanting to express strong emotion with the minimum of notes. I find Debussy's music very moving. Stravinsky's marvellous vitality has been an inspiration; it is full of inner life.

TB: It seems to me that there is a danger in discussing one composer's music in terms of another's. Do you feel, as a composer, that this is too readily done?

CH: Yes, it probably is. A composer becomes a composer because he wishes, and indeed is somehow compelled to find his own individual voice. I remember this same point being made in relation to Mahler. Although at given points you could hear the influence of, say, Wagner or Schubert; yet the Mahler personality is so strong that it is always clear and can be felt itself in the music of others, on the closing page of Britten's *Death in Venice*, for instance. But this remains true to Britten's own language. I don't feel that influences are important except for scholars.

TB: For anyone on the outside of the business of composition there is a lot of mystery. How do you approach the task of composition?

CH: The first thing is to know what sort of piece you're writing, and that is already a creative decision. If I'm writing a piano sonata, and not a prelude and fugue for organ or an opera or a song, I have already defined something about the composition, and really the process is one of increasing definition until the thing finally becomes totally in focus and the notes are all there. The first decision concerns what sort of piece it's going to be, and then how long it is going to be, how many movements, the character of the movements. In a sense, one can almost write a programme note for the composition before one has even written a single note of the music. It's not the way I used to work. I used to sit down and look at a piece of

manuscript paper and think 'how do I start?' That is one way, but now I prefer to define the character of the music before I write any of the notes. Of course there can be lots of changes along the way, and, as E. M. Forster said of the novel, at some point the characters (musical ideas) should be allowed to take over. Sometimes I try to work away from the piano, although if I were writing a piano piece there would be no virtue in doing so.

TB: How difficult is the process of getting the ideas from your head on to the page? I remember the story about Stravinsky writing the *Sacrificial Dance* from the *Rite of Spring*, and not knowing how to notate it.

CH: It can be difficult for some composers, particularly if they are innovating. If you want something that is rhythmically free, the system of Western notation can make it difficult to achieve. Fortunately, I am not a composer of such innovatory techniques that I have to invent new notation.

TB: What do you regard as the problems facing critics who write about new music?

CH: What the composer wants is to be loved; there's no logic in the composer's reaction to criticism. The obvious attitude for the composer is to say that if the critic doesn't like the music it is because he has failed to understand it. One's work is an aspect of one's behaviour. If a critic says that he finds the music very attractive, brilliant, and charming, virtuous and so forth, naturally one is pleased. If they say the music is boring, horrible, and thoroughly disgusting, one isn't. It's as simple as that. I have been fairly fortunate with critics; I have been very rarely on the receiving end of a bad review. As far as the function of the critic is concerned, this is quite a different thing. He doesn't write for the composer or performer so much as for the reader. All he can do is say what he feels, as objectively and truthfully as he can.

TB: Whom do you regard as the most significant composer in this country at the present time?

CH: There is no-one who in 1981 has the kind of position that Walton had in the 1930s or that Britten had in the 1940s, not in terms of stature but just in terms of exposure.

TB: Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?

CH: I think it's unfortunate that there is nobody of that kind of commanding personality. I don't think there's anyone who's being unjustly neglected (Headington! — TB) and we could certainly do with another mainstream composer of that calibre.

TB: Berlioz said that if all his works were to be destroyed he would beg only for the *Requiem* to survive him, by which people could judge him. Which of your works would you most value in this sense?

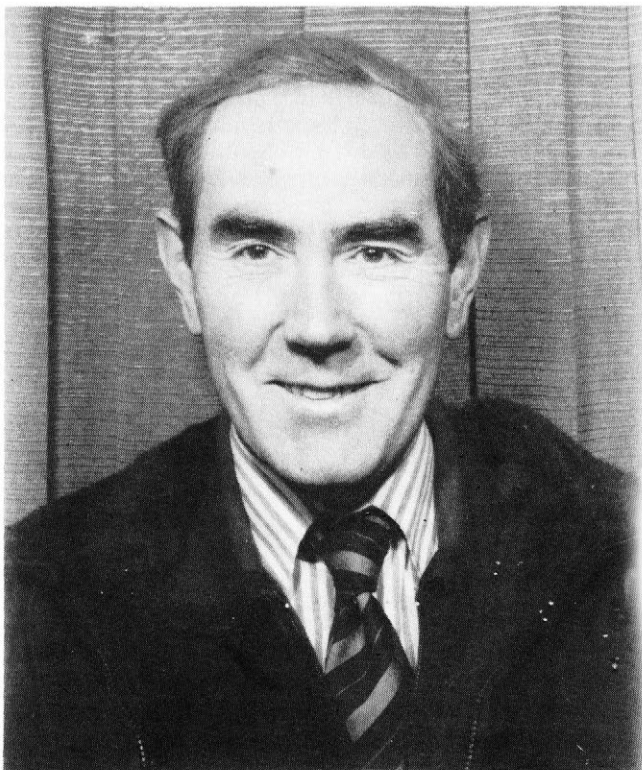
CH: If I had to select a single work, perhaps *The Healing Fountain*, which no-one has heard yet, is the one in which compositionally I have come nearest to achieving what I intended to achieve.

TB: What new plans do you have?

CH: There is a third quartet on the way, a commission from the Delmé Quartet for the Autumn of '82, and perhaps an organ piece also, but going beyond that I would very much like to write an operatic work. I have no particular subject in mind, however.

TB: Does this mean that you might envisage writing a major work without the distinct possibility of a performance?

CH: I don't think it's possible. I don't think I could give a year's work to an opera that wouldn't be performed. It's a pity the English Opera Group no longer exists; I think I'd be more attracted to a chamber opera than something more grand. My talents would be best suited to an opera along the lines of Holst's *Savitri*.



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Courtesy of Terry Barfoot