

The piano music of Mervyn Roberts

by Eiluned Davies

England and Wales are now wide awake to Euterpe; first England roused herself, and then Wales, from a long period of complacency, to pay their long-neglected respects to the muse. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when much of the initiative of the British people was directed to the acquisition of an empire, little music of note was created, and that of our Golden Age lay, unsung and unplayed, in the great libraries of the land. Many factors contributed to this sad state of affairs, but suffice it to say that the ambience was not right for the flowering of native talents.

By 1900 things had changed, largely on account of the determined efforts in the educational field of such people as George Grove (1820-1900) and the composers Hubert Parry (1848-1918) and Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) to provide conditions more conducive to creative work. The miracle of Elgar (1857-1934) and the acknowledgment of his greatness by the Germans helped to bring back the confidence of the British in their native composers. The renaissance movement of British music was, indeed, well under way.

The next generation included Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), a pupil of both Parry and Stanford, Gustav Holst (1874-1934), Frank Bridge (1879-1941), John Ireland (1879-1962), E. T. Davies (1878-1969) and Arnold Bax (1883-1953), with Frederick Delius (1862-1934) and Walford Davies (1869-1941) coming in between.

The third generation included Gordon Jacob (b. 1895), Edmund Rubbra (b. 1901), William Walton (b. 1902), Lennox Berkeley (b. 1903), Alan Rawsthorne (1905-1971), Benjamin Britten (b. 1913), and at this stage a whole group of Welsh composers helped to sweep the movement on to its present flood. To this group Mervyn Roberts belongs, some of his contemporaries being David Wynne (b. 1900), Grace Williams (b. 1906), Daniel Jones (b. 1912) and Denis ApIvor (b. 1916).

The Honourable Mervyn Roberts was born in 1906 at Abergele, the youngest son of the first Lord Clwyd and brother of the present Lord Clwyd. Like Parry and Vaughan Williams, he received a generous measure of education: at Gresham School, Holt; at Trinity College, Cambridge (where he did not read Music but took an honours degree in English and History); and at the Royal College of Music, where he studied theory, composition and orchestration with R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob and piano with Arthur Alexander, gaining several diplomas in music. R. O. Morris, whom he regarded as "... one of the greatest teachers produced by this country", generated his desire to devote himself chiefly to composition.

On completing his studies at the R.C.M., he lived mostly in Wales, composing and doing musical journalism, except for a period in the Civil Service

during the last war. The schools at which he taught later were Clarendon School, Abergele (1953-1956) and Christ's Hospital, Horsham (1963-67).

The piano has held an important position in his life and, as a composer, he has a predilection for it. His feeling for the instrument was fostered early by his first piano teacher, Elsie Owen, daughter of Luther Owen of Llanelly, a musician well known in South Wales. Although chiefly a violinist, she was also a pianist and, in the composer's own words, "... her teaching was a potent factor" in his musical development. All along the line he was fortunate in having excellent piano teachers; between Elsie Owen and Arthur Alexander there was Walter Greatorex at Gresham School. His marriage, later, with the accomplished pianist Eileen Easom proved an incentive for writing two-piano works, which he and his wife performed publicly together. It was his Piano Sonata, composed in 1934, revised in 1949 and first performed by Helen Perkin, which won him the Edwin Evans Prize in 1950. The three judges were themselves experts in piano-writing – Bax, Ireland and Rawsthorne.

When the Piano Sonata was published by Novello in 1951 it was, I believe, the only one in print by a living Welsh composer. Now there are a considerable number, but none more elegantly pianistic.

This full-scale Sonata, *Four Preludes*, the Sonatina, *Summer's Day* and *Wind of Autumn*, all published within a few years of one another, manifest a true and intimate understanding of the instrument and a love of its *cantabile* rather than its percussive nature; all are rewarding to play.

From the composer's chronological position with regard to the renaissance movement of British music as a whole, it was by no means predetermined what his musical style would be, since the composers of his generation showed a considerable divergence of style. Many were influenced by the continental giants of the turn of the century – Bartók, Stravinsky and Schönberg. But not so Roberts. Although the influences of certain French and Russian composers are discernible, notably those of Ravel and Rakhmaninov, it is clear from his idiom that he has firm roots in British soil. Some of the previous generation of British composers, who themselves had assimilated European romantic trends, cast their spell upon him. Indeed, he recently wrote: "It is to the works of Delius, Ireland, Bax and Bridge that I most often turn for solace and refreshment".

An avowed traditionalist, but never an imitator, he writes with the conviction and eloquence of one completely at ease with his idiom and free to give form to his vision. A lively musical imagination is brought to bear on every detail of a work.

His piano music falls into two main categories: solos for concert performance and two-piano works. There are also a few pieces specially written for educational purposes, such as the five easy pieces, entitled *The Day Before Yesterday*, published by Joseph Williams in 1964.

In the first category, the Sonata is the work of largest dimensions. The *lontano quasi Corni* opening of its first movement sets the romantic mood of the first subject, a finely arched melody with richly contrapuntal accompaniment.

Inherent in the *tranquillo* second subject is the dynamism which drives through the passionate development; and the recapitulation is modified in a masterly way. As Busoni did in his *Sonatina seconda*, Roberts explores the lower registers of the piano with sonorous effect in many parts of this movement (*vide* Ex. 1). A hint of its second subject appears again, both in the lyrical middle movement and in the *alla marcia* second subject of the brilliant last movement. Pianists of calibre, able to produce a lustrous *cantabile* and to control the tonal balance of the work's complex textures, would find it a challenge to their skill.

Moderato e espressivo, sempre senza rigore

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is in 3/4 time and includes a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with accompaniment. Dynamics range from fortissimo (fff) to piano (p), with a 'poco' marking at the end. The second system is in 4/4 time and features a bass clef staff with a melodic line and a lower bass line. It is marked 'a tempo' and includes a dynamic marking of 'pp cresc. poco a poco'.

Example 1

The Sonatina is on a much smaller scale and has a certain Gallic delicacy. As a miniaturist, Roberts reaches perfection in the G sharp minor Prelude from the set of *Four Preludes*. Here the soaring melody has a wide span and is sustained by the syncopated triplets of the inside line, which interweave with the quavers of the left hand (*vide* Ex. 2). This piece requires a great deal of study but, however much one practises it to master the three levels of tone needed, it retains its spontaneity.

Allegretto piacevole

Example 2

The fine *Variations on an Original Theme* (Novello, 1950) and *Two Chorales* (Novello, 1947) are distinguished contributions to the comparatively limited field of two-piano music and in both works the influence of Welsh hymnody is strongly felt. The austere twenty-bar theme of the former work, made up entirely of crotchets and quavers, rolls along with lithe strength. Pairs of quavers are a feature, and these, occurring on various beats of the bar, form little motifs, easily remembered, which become the fabric of the subsequent free variations. The work has great vitality, a wide range of expression and a wealth of memorable detail. The tender Variation III and the *misterioso* Variation VII, leading to the *Allegro scherzando* Variation VIII, with its fascinating cross-rhythms, are outstandingly beautiful. At the end of the work, the sombre modal flavour of the theme is left starkly emphasized, after the chromatic harmonies of Variation IX and of the beginning of the final Variation have subsided.

It is surprising, now that duets for one piano have come into vogue again, that the interesting *Passacaglia* for piano duet (1960) has not yet found its way into print. From its short theme (*vide* Ex. 3), very adventurous contrapuntal and harmonic developments arise, such as Ex. 4.

Con moto

Example 3

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, labeled "Example 4". The score is written in 7/4 time and is marked "Lento". It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes a piano (I^o) part with two staves (treble and bass clef) and a piano (II^o) part with two staves (bass and treble clef). The piano part begins with a dynamic marking of *pp lontano* and includes a section marked "R.H." (Right Hand). The piano part concludes with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The Itrumpet part begins with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The second system continues the piano part with a dynamic marking of *p* and includes a section marked "R.H." (Right Hand). The piano part concludes with a dynamic marking of *p*. The Itrumpet part concludes with a dynamic marking of *p*.

Example 4

Confining himself to the media of solo song, part-song, chamber music and piano piece, Mervyn Roberts has not attracted the spotlight of publicity, which is directed, as a rule, towards composers of more spectacular forms, such as opera or ballet; accordingly, his works are not as widely known as they deserve to be. Moreover, his output is significant for its quality rather than its quantity.

Certainly in his piano music he has struck a rich vein of lyrical poetry.