

Naresh Sohal (1939-2018)

Revered Indian composer whose output transcended national boundaries

An obituary by Kenneth Shenton



Naresh Sohal, who has died following a heart attack, aged 78, on 30 April, remains one of the very few native Indian composers to have succeeded in making a significant impression in international musical circles. Largely self-taught, being the first such composer to receive an Arts Council Bursary, over the course of more than half a century, his often formidable and extensive output successfully blended many of the sounds of his native subcontinent with European harmonic traditions. While often less visible than many, nevertheless his talents proved no less influential.

The eldest of four children, born at Harsipind in the Punjab on 18 September, 1939, Naresh Kumar Sohal was initially destined for a career in mechanical engineering, studying science and mathematics at D.A.V. College in Jalandhar. First coming to this country in 1962, he began his professional career as a copyist for

Boosey and Hawkes, while studying at the City Literary Institute. When contributing library music to his employers, he undertook a composition course at the London College of Music. He later continued his studies becoming a private pupil of Jeremy Dale Roberts.

Sponsored by the Society for the Promotion of New Music, Sohal first made his mark in this country in January 1970, with a performance at the Royal Festival Hall of *Asht Prahar for Soprano and Orchestra*, given by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Norman del Mar. A further SPNM commission was *Kavita 1*, settings of Tagore for soprano and eight solo instruments which was premiered in Birmingham six months later. In the interim he had completed a virtuoso *Concerto for Harmonica, Percussion and Strings*. Written for Larry Adler, sadly it remains still to be heard.

In 1972, becoming the recipient of an Arts Council Bursary, Sohal was able to move to the University of Leeds to undertake an intensive course of study in micro intervals, all under the guidance of Professor Alexander Goehr. Compositions from this period include a *Cello Concerto*, memorably performed at the Round House by David Atherton with Thomas Igloi as the impressive soloist, *Shades 1 for Soprano Saxophone*, *Indra Dhanush for Orchestra* and *Dhyan 1 for cello and chamber orchestra*. While still a student he met his future partner, Janet Swinney. They married in 2013.

Returning to his North London base, now much in demand, Sohal enjoyed a prolific few years. Works from this period include *Aalaykhyam*, performed by Andrew Davis and the English Chamber Orchestra, *Kavita 111*, written for soprano Jane Manning with Barry Guy on amplified double bass, while *Asht Prahar* was recorded by Andrew Davis and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. Chosen as one of the BBC's entries for the prestigious 1975 International Rostrum of Composers held in Paris, *Kavita 11* saw the composer now beginning to attract international attention.

During 1983, the couple relocated to live and work in Edinburgh. Twelve months earlier at the BBC Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, his setting of an old English poem, *The Wanderer*, was premiered by David Wilson-Johnson, the BBC Singers and the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Andrew Davis. Slightly warmer in feeling, *Three Songs from Gitanjali*, featured further settings of Rabindranath Tagore, first performed in New York by Zubin Mehta three years later. Originally created for Kyung Wha Chung, the challenging *Violin Concerto* was eventually premiered by countryman, Xue Wei.

Sohal's television credits include the score for *Sir William in Search of Xanadu* for Scottish Television and three episodes of Granada Television's 1985 *End of Empire* Series. Further examples can be heard throughout the 1988 television programme, *Monarchy-The Enchanted Glass* and, from later the same year, *The World at Your Feet*. He also wrote and directed the film *Simla-A Summer Place*, made by his own production company in association with Scottish Television for which he also wrote the music. Long overlooked was his score for *Manika*, the film still awaits a general release.

In 1987, Sohal became the first non-resident Indian to receive the Padma Shri, The Order of the Lotus, presented by the Indian Government for his services to Western Music. That same year, commissioned by the BBC, he completed a ballet, *Gautama Buddha*, scenes based on the life of Lord Buddha and choreographed by Christopher Bruce. Premiered in Houston, two years later, it formed the centre piece of that year's Edinburgh International Festival. Powerful and cogently argued remains *Lila*, Sohal's orchestral representation of enlightenment as described by Hindu philosophy.

In 1997, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence, the London Symphony Orchestra commissioned, *Satyagraha*, its title translating as, *Insistence on Truth*. First performed by Zubin Mehta at the Barbican in March of that year, the work opens with wind variations on Mahatma Gandhi's favourite song of prayer, *Ram Dhun*, gradually overwhelmed by the massed brass forces of *Rule Britannia* in a competing key. After the two have done battle, with *Ram Dhun* inevitably winning the day, a Nielsenesque closing section comes to symbolize India's glimmering *New Dawn*.

A long-standing member of the BBC Central Advisory Committee and its Scottish equivalent, Sohal returned to England to live in 1994. Notable among his more recent works was *Reflection*, written for Chinese harmonica Virtuoso, Jia-ye He, and a further commission to celebrate the 70th birthday of Zubin Mehta. His last major undertaking was *The Cosmic Dance*, an extensive orchestral extravaganza based on the Big Bang Theory and Creative mantras and performed at the 2013 BBC Henry Wood Promenade Concerts by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Peter Oundjian.

Today, no composer of comparable importance is perhaps so poorly represented in musical literature and on record, with the result that he is seldom encountered in the repertoire either. For all his great range of gifts Sohal was a composer obviously more interested in sitting down with some work rather than cultivating any kind of public profile. To the end, while constantly attempting to bridge the chasm between musical cultures, he persisted in writing challenging and distinguished music. There is much here that both affection and judgement demand shall live.