

Malcolm Lipkin 1932-2017 – An Obituary by Paul Conway

Malcolm Lipkin, who died on 2 June 2017 at the age of 85, belonged to a generation of composers who came to prominence in Britain between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. Several of these, including Thea Musgrave (b.1928), Bernard Rands (b.1935), David Blake (b.1936), Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012) and Gordon Crosse (b.1937), began their careers exploring the newly-discovered range of technical and formal innovations before later forging their own relationship with tonality. In Lipkin's case, early influences such as Bartók and Stravinsky were gradually assimilated into an original voice as his scores moved from long, lyrical lines and motor-rhythms to tiny motifs and rhythmic cells in a more dissonant style. His skill at building convincing structures out of flexible, protean material guided him towards traditional instrumental forms. Hence, his output contains several examples of sonatas, concertos and symphonies, in all of which he had something unique and worthwhile to say and his impressive technique ensured those ideas were conveyed with the utmost clarity and conviction.

He was born on 2 May 1932 in Liverpool where he had piano lessons with Gordon Green between 1944 and 1948. At the Royal College of Music he studied piano with Kendall Taylor and composition with Bernard Stevens (1949-53). In 1949 and 1950 he attended the summer school of music at Bryanston, where Boris Blacher's strict teaching had a profound effect on his creative methods.

Lipkin first came to critical notice when, at the age of nineteen, he played his Piano Sonata no.3 (1951) at the Gaudeamus Foundation Music Week in Holland and, in the following year, at a Macnaghten Concert in London. Reviewing the latter, *The Times'* critic described the score as 'remarkably purposeful and arresting for a composer of only 18 and its three movements, while well contrasted, really have the impression of belonging to each other'.

In 1954 he was awarded an Arts Council grant enabling him to study privately for three years with Mátyás Seiber. Under Seiber's guidance, he developed and further refined his compositional technique. Both the Fourth Piano Sonata (1954) and the Piano Concerto (1959) enjoyed critical success at their Cheltenham Festival premieres, while the First Violin Sonata (1957), which was written for Yfrah Neaman and Howard Ferguson, quickly garnered over one hundred performances internationally.

In the late 1950s, he met and established an enduring friendship with Christopher Finzi, the son of the composer Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) and his wife Joy. Lipkin was encouraged to get away from the hubbub of the metropolis and join Christopher and his family in the tranquillity of their country home on the Hampshire Downs. It was in this idyllic setting, composing in Gerald Finzi's music room, that Lipkin wrote the Suite for flute and cello (1961), written to celebrate the marriage of Christopher to the flautist Hilary du Pré, the *Pastorale* for horn and string quartet (1963) and the String Trio (1964), which is dedicated to Joy Finzi.

In the 1960s three large-scale works secured Lipkin's reputation: the Violin Concerto no.2 (1960-62), the slow movement of which is a lament for the early death of Mátyás Seiber; *Sinfonia di Roma* (1958-65), featured on a recent Lyrita release (SRCD.349), and a setting of Psalm 96 for chorus and orchestra, commissioned by the John Lewis Partnership in 1969. Another key piece from this period is *Mosaics*, for chamber orchestra (1969).

Vocal and chamber works dominate his catalogue from the 1970s, including *Four Departures* (1972), a setting for soprano and violin of poems by Herrick which the composer himself regarded as the first piece where he found his own authentic voice, shorn of any influences. Other works of note from that decade include *The White Crane*, an entertainment for children to sing and play scored for chorus, narrator and instrumental ensemble (1971); *Metamorphosis*, written for the harpsichordist Heather Slade in 1974; *Interplay*, for treble recorder, viola da gamba, harpsichord and percussion (1975), requested by Carl Dolmetsch, and *Five Songs of Shelley*, for soprano and piano (1978). Scored for wind quintet and string trio, *Clifford's Tower* (1977) is a characteristically robust response to man's inhumanity to man: this dark and uncompromising score takes its inspiration from William of Newbury's account of the brutal massacre of the Jewish population of York in the twelfth century. In 1979 he completed his Second Symphony 'The Pursuit', a compact one-movement work concerned with the concept of time and distance (Lyrita SRCD.349).

Works from the 1980s include *Naboth's Vineyard* for recorders, cello and harpsichord (1982); Trio for Flute, Viola and Harp (1982), and the Wind Quintet (1985), commissioned by the BBC for the Nash Ensemble. Included on Lyrita SRCD.349, Symphony no.3 'The Sun' (1985) is a powerfully concentrated score; the composer dedicated it to his wife Judith, whom he had married in 1968. The Piano Trio (1988) was written at the behest of the English Piano Trio: they gave the work's first performance at the Purcell Room and subsequently recorded it on the Kingdom label (KCLCD 2029). *Prelude and Dance* for cello and piano was written in memory of Jacqueline du Pré and premiered by Robert Cohen and Alan Gravill at the City of London Festival in 1988. A major chamber piece, *Variations on a Theme of Bartók* (1989) was first heard at the 1992 Newbury Spring Festival, played by the Delmé Quartet; another notable performance of the work took place at King's Place, London in 2012 by the Carducci String Quartet. Lipkin's music often springs from extra-musical associations and the Oboe Concerto (1988-89), which the BBC asked Lipkin to write, bears the inscription, 'Remembering Cambodia and the millions who died, 1975-1979.' A quotation in the concerto's finale from Bach's *St Matthew Passion* also conveys the tragedy of war.

Instrumental music prevails over Lipkin's scores from the 1990s. *Dance Fantasy* (1991) is an exacting work for solo violin which was commissioned as a test piece for the Carl Flesch International Violin Competition. *Five Bagatelles* for oboe and piano were written in 1993 for Nicholas Daniel and Julius Drake, who performed them at the Wigmore Hall. The Second Violin Sonata (1997), commissioned for Levon Chilingirian and Clifford Benson, was premiered in 1998 in Tunbridge Wells and received further performances at the Lichfield Festival and in London. *From Across La Manche* (1998) was toured successfully in South-East England and Northern France by the Primavera Chamber Orchestra, for whom the suite was written. It was subsequently recorded by the Royal Ballet Sinfonia (Naxos 8.557753).

Recent works by Lipkin include the Nocturnes 3-8, for piano (1999-2006), Piano Sonata no.6 (2002), *Three Pieces for Children* for instrumental ensemble (2003) and *Festivo* for string orchestra (2004). Two of his final scores made an indelible impression on the present writer. *Invocation* for double bass and piano (2013) was commissioned by Leon Bosch and received its first concert performance at the 2015 Swaledale Festival. This incisive single-movement span seemed to sum up the composer's virtues, being idiomatic and exacting without wasting a note. An imposing double bass soliloquy near the beginning of the piece and the impassioned harmonic chord sequence which dies away to nothing at the close both captured the potency of his writing for small forces. *In Memoriam*

John McCabe was premiered at an RNCM concert in October 2016. This jewelled miniature for clarinet, viola and piano was a beautifully simple expression of admiration and respect for a fellow composer. Its brief reference to a Haydn piano sonata deftly summed up in a single gesture McCabe's close association with the Austrian Master.

Few of Malcolm Lipkin's pieces are currently available to listeners: the 2015 Lyrita issue of the complete symphonies is the only CD in the current catalogue devoted entirely to his music. Individual works appear on the previously mentioned Naxos and Kingdom releases. A long-deleted 1986 Hyperion LP (A66164), consisting of *Clifford's Tower*, the String Trio and *Pastorale* for horn and string quartet all played by members of the Nash Ensemble has yet to make its debut on compact disc. This general neglect in the recording studio of the composer's music is in no way indicative of its quality. He followed his own path steadily and regardless of passing trends to create a rewarding body of work of impeccable integrity which largely awaits rediscovery. As Christopher Headington wrote of Lipkin in a 1989 *Tempo* article, 'Musically, he is a force to be reckoned with, and it is high time that we did something about it'.

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