

Discovering Erik Chisholm by John France

Introduction

The exciting new release from Hyperion Records of Erik Chisholm's orchestral music is an excellent introduction to the music of a composer once described by Arnold Bax as "the most progressive composer that Scotland has ever produced". Despite many subsequent advanced Scottish composers such as Thea Musgrave, Iain Hamilton and James MacMillan, this opinion, I believe, holds good to this day. Chisholm was a great innovator as well as a synthesiser. His main achievement was the fusion of Scottish Bag Pipe Music and Hindustani Ragas with mainstream European modernism. In this sense, he mirrors Bartok's success in assimilating the music of the Balkans to his own genius.

Listeners will discover in Erik Chisholm a composer who is bursting with energy, conscious of his own unique voice and commanding a wide-ranging palette that successfully coheres, despite the seeming disparities of styles and musical influences.

This new CD cements the "Chisholm Triangle" of influences in listeners' minds: Scottish, Hindustani and Modernist.

Life and Times

There are now several helpful sources for establishing a biographical understanding of the composer's life and achievement. The easiest to access are the excellent [webpages](#) maintained by the Erik Chisholm Trust. John Purser's *Chasing a Restless Music: Erik Chisholm: Scottish Modernist 1904-1965*, (Boydell and Brewer, 2009) is more detailed and makes essential reading. There are the usual references in the various musical dictionaries, and the inevitable [Wikipedia](#) entry.

Erik Chisholm was born on 4 January 1904 at 2 Balmoral Villas in Cathcart, an attractive suburb of Glasgow. His father, John Chisholm, was a master house painter. His mother was Elizabeth McGeachy Macleod. At the age of thirteen, he left the local Queen's Park School due to ill health. Anecdotally, Chisholm had begun to compose music before he could read. Later, he was writing poetry and "novels". Between 1918 and 1920, he studied at the Glasgow Athenaeum School of Music (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) with Philip Halstead. His musical education continued with Herbert Walton (1869-1929) then organist at Glasgow Cathedral, and with the Russian composer and pianist Leff Pouishnoff (1891-1959).

In 1926 Erik Chisholm moved to Nova Scotia, Canada, where he held the post of organist and choirmaster at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, New Glasgow. He was also Director of Music at Pictou Academy, a secondary school. Three years later he returned to Scotland, where he accepted the post of organist at the United Free Church of St Matthew's, Glasgow, and supplemented his income by teaching. Because he lacked formal musical qualifications, Chisholm studied at Edinburgh University with the legendary Donald Tovey (1874-1940). He received his Bachelor of Music in 1931 and his D.Mus. in 1934. In the years after his return from Canada, Chisholm was the conductor of the Glasgow Grand Opera Society. During that period, he oversaw British premieres of major European operas, including Berlioz's *The Trojans* and Mozart's *Idomeneo*. One other important work he introduced was Edinburgh composer William Beaton Moonie's (1883-1961) *The Weird of Colbar*. This was given at the Glasgow Theatre Royal on 22 March 1937. Moonie is a composer ripe for rediscovery.

Erik Chisholm set up several societies during that period. There was the Scottish Ballet Society, the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music, and the Barony Musical Association. He was also music director of Celtic Ballet, based in George Street, Glasgow. Additional income was provided by music criticism written for the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* and the *Scottish Daily Express*.

During the Second World War, Chisholm was conductor of the Carl Rosa Opera Company and director of ENSA in South East Asia. He was a conscientious objector, but was subsequently declared unfit for service due to a twisted arm and poor eyesight.

In 1946, Erik Chisholm moved to South Africa, where he took up an appointment as Director of the South African College of Music in Cape Town. There he set up the university opera company and the opera school. During that period, he began to compose a series of operas, some of which were performed there.

On 8 June 1965, Erik Chisholm died of a heart attack in Cape Town. He was only 61 years old.

Getting to Grips with the Music

An examination of Chisholm's music catalogue reveals a daunting quantity and variety of compositions. It is a truism that the piano works provide continuity through the composer's career, but there is music in virtually every genre. This included eight ballets, many operas, two symphonies, four concertos, numerous orchestral works, choral and chamber music.

In 1963 Chisholm provided a stylistic overview of his compositional career on a scrap of paper. This virtually illegible note proposes four periods:

1. Early works 1923-1927
2. Scottish Music 1929 to 1940 (?)
3. Hindustani works 1945-1951
4. Operas 1950-1963

There is a danger of adhering to this classification in a rigid manner. It is a rule of thumb, and will assist the performer or the listener in approaching Chisholm's vast catalogue with some sense of purpose.

As a Scot, I tend to relate to the Scottish period of Chisholm's music more than that of the Hindustani works, but further investigation has revealed that there is a considerable musical similarity between these two traditions. Without being too technical, John Purser (liner notes) cites the Scotch snap, drones, use of grace notes and even the bagpipe itself as being common to both traditions. For the Western ear, the procedures of Hindustani music may be more difficult to come to grips with. It is a completely different musical culture. It utilises unfamiliar scales and tunings, instruments, textures and symbolism. I explain a little more about these influences in my comments about the violin concerto later in this essay.

Note: A Scotch snap is a *rhythmic feature in which a dotted note is preceded by a stressed shorter note, characteristic of Strathspeys*. A drone is where the three lower pipes of the bagpipe play a fixed three-note chord. Above this, the tune is played. Finally, a grace note is *an extra note added as an embellishment and not essential to the harmony or melody*.

The Chisholm Website sums up the composer's relationship to Scottish "traditional classical music": "He is also alone in his attempt to infuse into symphonic structure the forms of Celtic music-lore (e.g., the pibroch, a form of music for the bagpipes) as distinct from the introduction into present-day forms of merely discursive Celtic atmosphere."

I am not a fan of Scottish bagpipes: I do not mind hearing them from afar, but "a hundred pipers an' a'" is (for me) just a recipe for a headache. But I do like Jimmy Shand... We all have different musical tastes.

Some listeners may fear that Chisholm has infused his music with "tartanry", which is all too common in musical works composed attempting to evoke a Caledonian atmosphere. Despite the many

attractive Scottish and Celtic titles of his music, there is no pastiche of Harry Lauder or Rabbie Burns. Chisholm has taken up his native Celtic musical sounds and rhythms, and applied the technical procedures of modernism. In this sense, he is in a trajectory from the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók.

Digging Deeper

Listening to the vibrant Dance Suite (1932) on the new Hyperion CD of orchestral music (CDA68208), it is difficult to understand how this music has been ignored for nearly 85 years. The work was given a partial performance in 1933 by the Scottish Orchestra, at the Glasgow's St Andrew's Hall, conducted by John Barbirolli and with the composer as soloist. On 14 June 1933, it was heard in its entirety at the ISCM Festival in Amsterdam. The Concertgebouw Orchestra was conducted by Constant Lambert. The Suite comprises four movements, and is scored for piano and orchestra. It is not a concerto, nor even a concertante, but the piano does play a vital role in providing orchestral colour.



The opening movement is a reel. Not really a pastiche of the *White Heather Club* but more “generic”, making use of note patterns and rhythms viewed through the eyes of musical modernism prevalent during this period. It is exciting, wayward and largely chromatic, with much dissonance and bite. The orchestration is vivacious and colourful.

The second movement is a Piobaireachd (very loosely pronounced /peebarochk/) which literally refers to pipe music of the “classical school”. These musical events were presented as variations on a theme. John Purser, in the liner notes, explains that this traditional form fascinated Chisholm. There is, he writes, a strange and ethereal beauty about this movement. Certainly, the composer has not attempted to create an Edinburgh Tattoo version of the form but has created an almost Bergian interpretation of it. This is one of the loveliest pieces of Chisholm that I know. The March is a fun movement. There is nothing militaristic about it: just pure entertainment. The finale reverts to a reel, this time it does owe something to a Scottish ceilidh. All the exuberance of this unique social event is present. What Chisholm has achieved with this is to create an archetype (rather than an example) of the dance. It is sheer pleasure from end to end.

The Dance Suite was dedicated by Chisholm “To my dear wife”, who at the time of the Amsterdam performance was at home in Glasgow about to give birth to Morag, their first child, born on June 11.

I suggest that the listener next explore the three Preludes: *From the True Edge of the Great World* (1943). The title alludes to the Hebridean islands. Folklore sometimes regarded them as Ultima Thule or the Edge of the World. Certainly, since the time of the great Roman senator Publius Cornelius Tacitus, the Hebrides have been regarded as one of the limits of geography. As a tyro classical scholar I must add that the Romans probably knew of Iceland, the Faroes and possibly even Greenland. Chisholm originally composed a series of ten preludes for piano on this theme. I understand that nine of these were later orchestrated by the composer. Chisholm took his inspiration from Amy Murray's *Father Allan's Island* where he derived all the tunes. The listener is encouraged to regard these as mediations or improvisations on *elements* of the melody rather than a straightforward transcription for piano or orchestra. From the original twelve preludes, this Hyperion disc includes *The Song of the Mavis* [Thrush], *Ossianic Lay* and *Port a Beul*.

The Song of the Mavis certainly enters the world of the favourite bird. Historically, the original melody suggests the parent bird calling its young to mealtime. But this music does not parody birdsong: it is a paean to Spring and to the reawakening of life after winter.

Most Scots who take an interest in Scottish literature are aware of James MacPherson's (1736-1796) recreation of the Ossianic myth supposedly from ancient sources but more likely from his imagination or later retellings. Chisholm's *Ossianic Lay* is based on Amy Murray's *The Day we were at the hillock of rushes*. He has created an impressive (even if short) tone-poem for orchestra that examines this mythical exploration of the heroic days of Ossian. Forget the forgeries and the MacPherson scandals: this is a stunning portrayal of shadowy heroes from the distant past. It is a song without words, full of misty sea and remote islands and forgotten romance.

The final number on this CD is *Port [puirt] a beul*. Purser tells us that it means "mouth music". This is a Scottish version of scat sung by jazz performers. It is translated as "cheerful music" and is often represented by nonsensical vocalisations which parody the rhythms of the music. Chisholm's short study is breathless and downright fun.

The four-movement Violin Concerto (1950) is a remarkable work by any standards. Purser perfectly sums up the bottom line: this work displays "haunting lyricism, Middle-Eastern sensuality with Western formality: its sound world is unique". Now, I am not sure that geographically this is Middle-Eastern. The sources that Chisholm has mined for this work are largely Hindustani. This would seem to imply the northern areas of the Indian sub-continent, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and some states of the modern country of India. It is also known as North Indian classical music or Shāstriya Sangīt.

I have never been a huge fan of Indian classical music, although the late Ravi Shankar was (and remains) a generational icon. I do know that its appreciation and performance involves philosophy and cosmology as well as the musical notes.

What Chisholm has done is to fuse these Hindustani musical tropes into the modernist musical culture of Western Europe. To what extent this is successful will be up to the individual listener. The Eastern influence is most obvious in the solo violin part, especially in the first and third movements.

The composer has revealed his sources for the opening movement, *Passacaglia telescopico (in modo Vasantee)* and the third, *Aria in modo Sohani*. This implies that Chisholm used a special scale or raga that also carried symbolic resonances. For example, the *Raginee Vasantee* sings "of the spring, evoking images of a woman whose hair is decorated by peacock feathers and her ears ornamented with mango blossoms". The telescopic bit refers to the gradual shortening of the passacaglia theme, until nothing is left, and then growing it again to full maturity. It is a novel, wholly effective conceit.

The second movement, a scherzo, also uses this raga. Opening with aggressive war-like music, nodding to Holst perhaps, it is followed by the trio which is deeply contrasting and contemplative.

The following beautiful *Aria* is really the heart of the work. It is based on the *Rag Sohani* associated with night-time. The movement, downright romantic, features a love duet between the flute and the violin.

The finale, a *Fuga senza theme*, is a little unusual to say the least. There is a vibrancy and breath-taking energy about this music that seems to transcend any organisational principles. But there is a structure. What Chisholm has done is to dispense with the formal fugal subject and answer, and substitute it with half a dozen angular fragments which he seems to chuck about in various patterns. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Chisholm's Violin Concerto was premiered during the Van Riebeeck Festival by the violinist Szymon Goldberg in Cape Town during March 1952 and at that year's Edinburgh Festival.

One reviewer (*The Times*, 8 September 1952) wrote that the violin concerto “offers few concessions... The ear cannot take in its subtleties of construction, nor without a clearer definition of the terms of reference can the manipulation of the...[ragas] be fully appreciated”.

W. R. Anderson’s thoughts (*Musical Times*, October 1952) most likely echoed public opinion at the time about this “difficult” work when he wrote: “... [Max] Rostal played a Mozart concerto and one by Erik Chisholm with Hindu thematic and rhythmic influences, of which I could make very little”.

Please, Listener, when exploring this outstanding Violin Concerto, do not feel that you need to understand the first thing about Indian/Hindustani music to appreciate this great work. If I had heard it, without knowing of (not even beginning to understand) its theoretical underpinnings, I guess that I would have thought that Chisholm was using synthetic scales of his own devising or some convenient devices found in Bartók’s music. Music is more universal than we give it credit for.

The sound quality of this new Hyperion disc is superb. I cannot fault it in any way. The liner notes, of which I have made extensive use, are written by Chisholm biographer, John Purser. This detailed essay is essential reading before and after listening to the music. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins are clearly enthusiastic about this music. They are perfect advocates of all three pieces. Danny Driver brilliantly plays the piano solo in the Dance Suite. He has already contributed a recording of Chisholm’s two stunning piano concertos on Hyperion CDA67880.

I do wonder if they could have squeezed another orchestral piece by Erik Chisholm onto this disc. 62 minutes do seem to be a wee bit mean.

I certainly hope that Hyperion will urgently follow this spectacular CD with more releases of music by Erik Chisholm.

Conversation with John Purser

JF

I asked John Purser about Erik Chisholm’s operas and if he felt that they are worthy of revival. I understand that the musical style does not always fit in with the Scottish or Hindustani dichotomy, but is often beholden to more traditional modernist or early music styles.

JP

Not only are the operas worthy of revival, they have proved it. *Dark Sonnet* (1952, after Eugene O’Neill) and *The Pardoner’s Tale* (1961, after Geoffrey Chaucer) were revived in Cape Town and were very successful. *Simoon* (1953) based on a libretto by Strindberg, was revived in Glasgow and both the single performance and the subsequent CD thereof have been highly praised. *Simoon’s* style has many connections with the Hindustani works and *The Inland Woman* (1951, after Mary Lavin) has Scottish elements. This opera may yet prove to be a match for Vaughan Williams’s *Riders to the Sea* which rather pushed the Chisholm out of the way. The completed Chaucer operas are intriguing.

The *Dark Sonnet* and *The Pardoner’s Tale* are only available privately from the Cape Town Opera School revivals. Both should be recorded.

JF

I asked which composers had a vital impact on Erik Chisholm, this being apart from the Scottish/Hindustani influences. For myself, I included RVW (4th Symphony), Arnold Bax, Alban Berg, Kaikhosru Sorabji and Béla Bartók.

JP

I agree with the importance of Béla Bartók and Alban Berg but would also add Karol Szymanowski and Johannes Brahms. John Blackwood McEwen, the Scottish composer and academic was an exemplar, in

particular. Erik Chisholm was eclectic and, as a pianist, performed an incredibly varied and extensive repertoire.

JF

Finally, I asked John Purser what other orchestral works demanded to be recorded: in an ideal world, all of them would be.

JP

There is a strong case for the revival of the third major Hindustani work—The *Van Riebeeck Concerto*—better to be known as *Concerto for Orchestra*, as Chisholm had little love for the motivations behind the van Riebeeck festival. And then the *Straloch Suite* and the remaining *Preludes* from *The True Edge of the Great World* in their orchestral dress. Finally, the music for the ballet, *The Forsaken Mermaid*, in its orchestral version.

JF

I would in my wish list also include *The Adventures of Babar: Suite* for orchestra, the Suite *Hebredia* and the Overture: *The Freiris of Berwick*.

With grateful thanks to John Purser for his assistance and interest in the preparation of this essay.

John France

Previous review: [Rob Barnett](#)