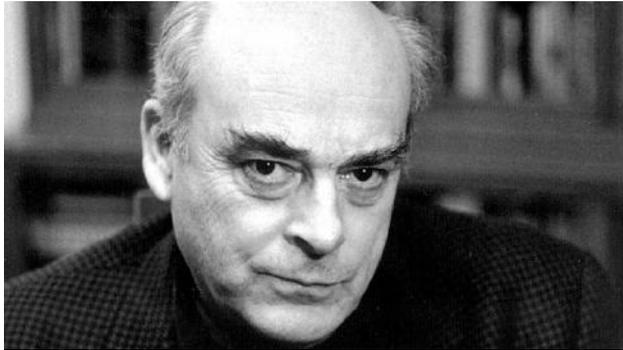


Gerald Larner (1936-2018)

Longstanding Music Critic For The Guardian And Times Newspapers



Throughout the second half of the last century, Gerald Larner, who died late last year, aged 82, enjoyed a successful career as a writer and music critic, being intimately associated with *The Guardian Newspaper* for more than thirty years. As individual in print as he was in the flesh, whether his views excited approbation or provoked indignation, the quality of thought behind them meant that they could never be ignored. In addition, he supplied the

libretto for John McCabe's 1960s operatic version of C. S. Lewis's famous novel, *The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe*.

The younger son of a local government officer, born in March 1936, Gerald Larner spent his formative years in the Headingley district of Leeds. Educated at Leeds Modern School, there his prodigious talents, both academic and musical flourished, subsequently winning him a coveted scholarship to read Modern Languages at New College, Oxford. In the interim, he had undertaken his National Service with the Royal Air Force. It was while at Oxford that he took his first tentative steps on a journalistic career, contributing concert reviews to *The Cherwell*, the student newspaper.

Having met Celia Ruth White while at Oxford, the couple married in 1959. Twelve months later they moved to the north west where Larner took up an appointment as an assistant lecturer at the University of Manchester. While bringing up their two daughters, Larner and his wife became avid collectors of anything to do with the Glasgow school of design, and in 1979, published a lavishly illustrated tome on the subject entitled, *The Glasgow Style*. By now, Larner himself had left the world of academia far behind and was increasingly beginning to make his mark as a music critic.

Joining the staff of *The Guardian* in 1962, initially as J. H. Elliot's assistant, three years later he then took over as the newspaper's Northern Music Critic. Though noted for an unfailingly intellectual approach to his role, which outwardly manifested itself via a rather brusque manner, as a critic when at his best, Gerald Larner was masterly. Sitting in the corner of a pub after a concert, he could rapidly compose a notice that read the next morning as a vivid, clearly argued, fair, yet provocative account of what had taken place. If and whenever challenged, he would always defend his cause.

Becoming yet another in a distinguished line of *Guardian* music critics, Larner wasted no time in making his mark, replacing such as Colin Mason in the minds of many of the Manchester public as "the scourge of the Hallè." Never slow to criticise, as this 1968 pointed review of *Pelleas and Melisande* makes clear, "Much of its inspired and prodigious orchestration was lost in the obscurity caused by inaccurate ensemble and insufficient technique." But like Johnstone and Cardus before him, as a zealous guardian of standards, he always insisted that only the very best was good enough.

Later that same year, Larner was commissioned by Manchester Cathedral Festival to create a libretto for the composer, John McCabe's first stage venture, a setting of C.S. Lewis's Christian allegory, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Scored for two adult soloists, nine children and a large chamber orchestra, this operatic setting in four acts with a prologue and epilogue, was designed as a viable alternative to Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*. Cleverly and economically adapted for the stage by Larner, his swift moving libretto is so admirably captured by McCabe's eclectic and allusive score.

First performed by the pupils of Chetham's School, Manchester, on 29th April 1969, conducted by Gerald Littlewood, with Patrick McGuigan as Aslan and Caroline Crawshaw as the White Witch, the work made an immediate impression. Specifically designed to be sung and played by amateur and youth performers, both Lerner and McCabe had high hopes for future of the work. However, following the acquisition of the rights to Lewis's book by the Walt Disney Corporation, their labours ultimately fell foul of an all-embracing copyright restriction that forbade any future performances.

While also serving as Artistic Director of the Bowdon Festival from 1980 until 1984, Lerner contributed a wealth of finely written critiques to a wide range of journals, including *The Listener*, *Records and Recording*, *The Gramophone* and *The Musical Times*. In addition, his programme notes increasingly graced the record sleeves of all the major record labels. Moving to *The Times Newspaper* in 1993, having translated Hugo Wolf's comic opera *Die Corregidor* into English, in 1996, he distilled his extensive knowledge into a scholarly study of the French composer, Maurice Ravel.

Divorced In 1987, two years later Lerner married Lynne Walker, then the marketing manager for Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre, who also enjoyed a successful career as a freelance critic and broadcaster. Together, based in Cheshire's Golden Triangle, they ran Edgewise, a highly successful arts consultancy that provided informative programme notes for concert halls and festivals nationwide that included London's Barbican Hall, the Edinburgh Festival, the Wigmore Hall and the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts. Walker died in 2011, following a ten year battle with cancer.

Kenneth Shenton