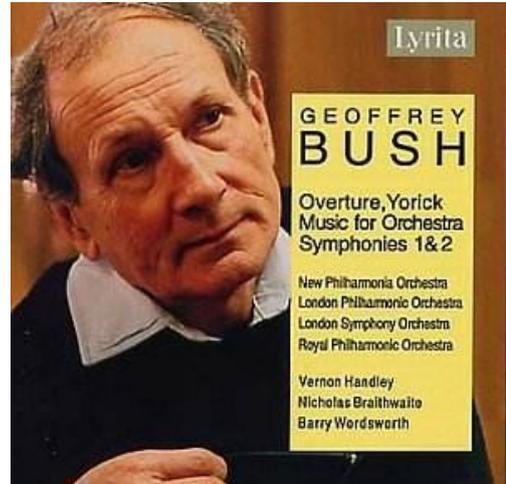


Celebrating Geoffrey Bush's 100th Anniversary

by John France

Geoffrey Bush (1920-98) is largely the preserve of enthusiasts of 20th century British music. He is never heard on Classic FM and rarely features on Radio 3. Despite composing many outstanding orchestral works, he has had only three 'done' at the Proms, the most recent being 1958. Occasionally, his music is heard at concert and recital performances.

Geoffrey Bush's catalogue is extensive and includes two excellent symphonies, several operas, incidental music for stage, a large amount of chamber music, and many choral and vocal works. As a composer, Bush was most comfortable writing songs and opera. His interest in English Literature is obvious in the wide-ranging selection of texts chosen for his many settings, yet he was often discouraged by the lack of interest in these songs; singers had not heard of most of them, never mind committing to giving performances. He is now (possibly) best recalled for his *Overture: Yorick* and his *Christmas Cantata*.



Stylistically, Bush writes in a conservative and straightforward style. He sometimes looks back to earlier composers with such pieces as the archaic *Consort Music* and the *Matthew Locke (1621-77) Suite* for piano and orchestra. Another side of Bush's achievement was his skill as a musical editor. There are definitive editions of songs by Hubert Parry, Charles Villiers Stanford, and John Ireland to his credit.

A brief biography

- Born at 84 Strode Road, Kilburn, London on 23 March 1920.
- A chorister at Salisbury Cathedral for several years.
- Entered Lancing College in 1933.
- Received the Nettleship Scholarship in 1938 to go up to Balliol College, Oxford, where he completed his B. Mus in 1940.
- During the Second World War, a committed pacifist.
- Employed as a warden at a hostel in Monmouth for 'difficult' evacuees in lieu of military service.
- Studied with John Ireland after the end of the war.
- Composed his best-known work *Overture: Yorick* (1949).
- Married Julie Kathleen McKenna on 15 April 1950.
- Premiere of the *Symphony No.1* at the 1954 Cheltenham Festival.
- Employed as Staff Tutor in music at London University for 35 years between 1952 and 1987.
- Later appointments included Chairman of the Composers Guild of Great Britain and service on the Arts Council, and the Performing Right Society.
- Wrote *Symphony No.2 'Guildford'* in 1957
- Completed the score for his opera *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime* in 1972.
- Edited music of several other composers including the Songs of Stanford (1986) and Parry (1982)
- Wrote many articles and broadcast talks on musical subjects.
- Died on 24 February 1998 at his home, 43 Corringham Road, Golders Green, London.

Six key works

I have selected six contrasting works that can be heard on CD or download. It seems a bad idea to recommend pieces that cannot be heard. It is unlikely that the listener will be in the right place at the appropriate time to hear a live performance of Geoffrey Bush's music.

There are several other works that demand interest and possible professional recording. I note these as at the end of this list.

- *Christmas Cantata* for solo voices, choir, oboe, and orchestra (1947) (Saydisc CDSDL352)
- *Overture: Yorick* (1949) (Lyrita 252)
- *Symphony No. 1* (1954) (Lyrita 252)
- *Concerto for Light Orchestra* (1958) (Lyrita SRCD 341)
- *Concerto for trumpet, piano & strings* (1962) (Lyrita REAM1131)
- *Consort music for string orchestra* (1989) (Naxos 8.555068)

A fair selection of his music has been recorded, but like most composers, there are still large gaps in the catalogue and it must be hoped that some of these are 'plugged' in the coming years. My personal 'wish list' would include *Rhapsody for clarinet and strings* (1940), *Music for orchestra* (1987) and a new edition of the *Concerto for oboe and strings* (1948). This latter work was recorded by John Barbirolli and Evelyn Rothwell in 1956 and has been released on CD (SJB104546).

Bibliography

There is no formal biography, however, the composer's two semi-autobiographical volumes, *Left, Right and Centre: Reflections on Composers and Composing* (London, 1983) and *An Unsentimental Education and Other Musical Recollections* (London, 1990), were both published by Thames. Apart from that, the interested listener must rely on the usual encyclopaedia and dictionary entries as well as CD liner notes, obituaries, and record reviews, several of which are available online. There is an entry in the *National Biography* prepared by John Warrack.

If you can listen to only two CDs featuring Geoffrey Bush's music:

The two following CDs present a large proportion of his orchestral works and form a splendid introduction to his music:

- *Yorick Overture, Music for Orchestra, Symphonies 1 & 2* - Lyrita SRCD252 ([review](#))
- *Small Pieces for Orchestra* - Lyrita SRCD341 ([review](#))

Finally, if you have time to hear only one work:

This is a difficult question. On the one hand, I would recommend the *Yorick Overture* composed in 1949. This is a delightful piece of 'light' music written for the National Association of Boy's Clubs to commemorate the death of their patron, the radio and stage star Tommy Handley. *Yorick* is 'a deft and ingenious little piece which young people of all ages could enjoy without any kind of effort...'

On the other hand, a deeper response to Geoffrey Bush's muse would be the *Symphony No.1* completed in 1954 and first heard at that year's Cheltenham Festival. It certainly inhabits a different sound world from *Yorick*, yet, as *The Times* (9 July 1954) reviewer noted, '[It is] a sane work that refrained from making heavy weather with modern anxieties.' From the dark hued opening movement, to the 'poco lento e con malinconia' taking its point of departure from Constant Lambert's *Elegiac Blues* for piano, to the concluding 'Commedia dell'Arte' mood of the finale, this work never fails to impress. The *First Symphony* may not be a major twentieth century masterpiece, but it is a great work which does not deserve the neglect it has had over the past sixty-five years or so. It is a hugely positive example of the unfairly derided 'Cheltenham Symphony.'

To answer the question, it depends on the listener's mood, but I guess I would eventually plump for the sheer vibrancy of the *Yorick Overture* if I could hear only a single piece by Geoffrey Bush. Despite its general mood of gaiety, there is enough reflection in the middle section 'funeral march' for 'That Man Again' to gain an impression of the composer's more serious side.

Both works can be heard on the above mentioned Lyrita SRCD 252 issued in 1995. They have been uploaded to YouTube ([Yorick](#)) and ([Symphony No.1](#))