

“John Gardner – his life and music” an illustrated talk by Chris Gardner

The British Music Society, 9th October 2007

I have found preparing for this talk unusually difficult. Not that I am short of things to say about John Gardner and his music, but I have had to ask myself whether my enthusiasm for his music is because it is good music or because I am simply biased. I'll be playing enough examples tonight for you to be able to form your own opinion, so it's not a question I'm going to dwell on. In any event, I agree with Martin Anderson who described him as “a composer whose music ought to be much better known”.¹

I think this is the first BMS talk to be given about a living composer. And what is slightly unnerving me is that this living composer is in the audience. I had to give some thought to how to refer to him in this talk. “Dad” might have ended up annoying you, I've never called him “John” or “Gardner”, so I have opted for the abbreviation “JG”.

If I had been asked to do this talk ten years ago, there would have been practically no works I could have played you – the unaccompanied choral work *A Latter Day Athenian Speaks* and the *Theme and Variations* for brass quartet had both been issued on Argo LPs, but apart from that all we could have listened to was a dozen or so recordings of *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day*. Which leads neatly to my first musical example, which is JG's “greatest hit”. It appears every year without fail at Christmas, though it is not exclusively a Christmas text. It really needs no introduction, and if you don't already love it, I am sure you will after hearing it.....

1 Tomorrow shall be my dancing day, Op.75 No.2

Performers: Eton College Choir, Ralph Allwood

Album: *Christmas Music from Eton College*

Catalogue No. Resonance CDRSN3076

That setting of the Mediaeval poem “tomorrow shall be my dancing day” was written in 1965 for the girls of St Paul's Girls' School. That performance was by Eton College Choir, conducted by Ralph Allwood and performed at something like the right tempo for JG's liking, which is a bit slower than most people take it. This carol has found its way onto more than 30 CDs, it has sold tens of thousands of copies of the printed music and regularly appears in the ClassicFM Christmas chart. One should be grateful for this degree of success, but I can't help thinking of Elgar, who came to be haunted by the popularity of *Land of Hope and Glory* and that piece of film where he says to the orchestra “please play this tune as though you had never heard it before”. I want people to know that there is a lot more to John Gardner than *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day*.

Let's go back to the beginning...

JG was born in Manchester on 2nd March 1917. People have assumed this makes him a “Manchester Composer” (in inverted commas), but he was born in Manchester simply because his mother couldn’t bear her husband’s family, and just before the birth had travelled to Manchester to avoid them being involved. The Gardners were a family of Doctors based in Ilfracombe (North Devon), and JG’s father and grandfather were both also amateur composers. His grandfather, John Twiname, wrote light music (parlour and music hall songs), but JG is fairly scathing of his rudimentary grasp of harmony. A lot of his music was published and some of it has been performed and recorded in recent years – I know of two titles *Pullman Express* and *Cunard White Star*, although I have been unable to track down any recordings to play you tonight. JG’s father, Alfred Linton Gardner appears to have been a more considerable musical talent, and JG is far more complimentary about his compositions, which still exist in manuscript. However, he was in the Army Medical Corps and like so many of his generation was killed in France in April 1918, so we shall never know what he would have accomplished musically.

JG was therefore brought up by his mother, in Ilfracombe. Ilfracombe is a coastal town on the north coast of Devon and, amongst other things, was an exciting railway location. You can’t get it to it by train anymore, but my father did take me in 1965 to Ilfracombe on what was advertised as the “last steam train to North Devon”. Actually, it was so popular that they organised a second “last train” a fortnight later! In JG’s day Ilfracombe was a popular holiday destination, and on a Summer Saturday would receive a procession of trains via the Southern and Great Western routes to Barnstaple. Heavy trains would need 3 locomotives to get them over the summit at the Slade Reservoir, and the 1 in 36 incline down into Ilfracombe was the cause of a number of accidents. The Station was perched at the top of the hill and had carriage sidings, and a turntable and an engine shed which were put in in 1924. One of the memorable events of young JG’s life was on 30th January 1926 when a train ran away and crashed through the buffer stops, ending up perched perilously above the town below.

His preparatory school was Eagle House, in Sandhurst, Berkshire, which meant at least 6 long train journeys a year. It was run by a family called Lockhart, and JG remembers it as a primitive establishment, the lavatories still being of the old “earth closet” type, many years after they had been superseded elsewhere. Life at the School at that time was described by John Bruce Lockhart, who was the headmaster’s son, in Barry Johnson’s anthology, *Unwillingly to School*,

“The daily routine was remarkable. We woke around seven. Every boy then had to plunge into the swimming-bath, led by my grandfather – summer and winter. I remember clearly on several occasions my grandfather jumping in to break the ice and make a hole for the others to follow. After this, the whole school, again led by my grandfather, ran around the boundaries. Then came ten minutes chapel, then breakfast, which was simply porridge in large quantities, bread and butter with milky tea.

High tea [was] just bread and butter and milk. The food was very bad. I don’t remember ever having fruit. After tea, we had forty minutes of relative civilisation in the big hall: a large fire, a billiard-table, and lots of old illustrated books all around.... Then prep, 75% of which was Latin; then bed, after a cup of soup or sweet tea. We

were quite unsupervised. Bullying in the dormitories was a constant threat...It was a rough, tough place.”

JG had clearly inherited his father’s musicianship. He wrote his first music at the age of seven. He says of it “It's illiterate, but it still is an attempt at music”ⁱⁱ. At the 1928 Eagle House Christmas entertainment he was the first turn, playing Roger Quilter’s *Children’s Overture* on the piano. Later in the same programme he played *Noël* by Balfour Gardiner and *Bank Holiday* by E.J. Moeran, before changing quickly to appear as a policeman in Masefield’s play *The Sweeps of '98*. From Eagle House, he won a music scholarship to Wellington College. His contemporaries there included Anthony Lewis, Philip Cranmer and the composer John Addison. The school records show that in 1932 Addison and Gardner took part in the curious sport of competitive music and competed for their house in the "Dormitory Music Cup", playing JG’s *Rondo for two pianos*. The same year Gardner is noted as having performed the first movement of Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2* with the school orchestra, Anthony Lewis playing the last movement and T.J. Hetherington the middle movement. JG is also listed as a ‘cellist in the school orchestra.

From Wellington he went to Oxford, as the Organ Scholar of Exeter College. His contemporaries included the philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno, the composer Geoffrey Bush, harpsichordist George Malcolm, violinist Harry Blech, and Ted Heath (the Prime Minister, not the bandleader). Biographies always reel out lists of teachers, presumably to add to their subject’s credibility. JG’s list includes Sir Hugh Allen, Ernest Walker, R.O. Morris, and Thomas Armstrong, but his own comments are revealing and dismissive, "Well, they gave me lessons, yes, but they weren't lessons in composition. It was how to pass B.Mus. exams - that's what the lessons were in; they weren't really in music.” About R.O. Morris he said he was, “Dull. He was a very good musical craftsman, but he was awfully bored by teaching me; he was always about to catch a train.” Far more influential was Adorno, of whom JG said “I was a friend of his. I didn't have lessons, but I was always going through music with him at Oxford... We played piano duets a lot, and we talked about music. He was an advanced student at Oxford when I was an undergraduate.... He was very good company, actually.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Through his mother’s friendship with Edith Sitwell, JG came into the circle of Hubert Foss, the founder of Oxford University Press’s music department. Foss had persuaded OUP, then the biggest book publisher in the World, to invest heavily in setting up a Music Department. He made it his business to know every living composer of significance, and to encourage the development of new talent. Composers whom he published for the first time in the early 1930s included JG, Alan Rawsthorne, Phyllis Tate and Benjamin Britten. His most successful signings were Walton and Vaughan Williams, but after publishing a number of Benjamin Britten’s early works he dithered over signing him to a long term contract, eventually losing him to Boosey & Hawkes with the words “it may be worth while to let Boosey waste some money on him so long as we can keep his more remunerative efforts”. Very much a case of famous last words!

JG’s first published work in 1935 was a sensuous *Intermezzo* for Organ which had been written in 1934 whilst he was at Wellington. In the early 1980s I remember meeting an organist who was proud to say he still had it in his repertoire and

performed it in Church as a voluntary every couple of years or so. Arthur Benjamin was helpful to the young composer, earning the dedication of the *Rhapsody for Oboe and Strings* which was performed by Alec Whittaker (principal oboe with the BBC Symphony Orchestra) and the Hirsch Quartet at the Wigmore Hall in 1936. Harry Blech took JG's 1938 *String Quartet in G minor* to Paris where he performed and broadcast it with his quartet in 1939. Geoffrey Bush remembered a drinks party in Oxford to celebrate the occasion as resulting in "one of the worst hangovers of my life". In 1937 George Malcolm (piano) and Elizabeth Kitson (oboe) gave the first performance of a delightful *Serenade* for oboe, piano and string orchestra. JG's final performance at Oxford was the cantata *Salute to Summer* which he conducted at Exeter College in the Summer of 1939. (BMS members note: this included a setting of words by Geoffrey Bush.)

The pre-war works are now effectively withdrawn, and JG has resisted any attempt by me to get them performed. However, one of them has survived, albeit in a changed form. The first 34 bars of the Symphony No.1 which was written in 1946-7 were originally a piano piece, dating from 1938 or 1939. Patric Standford described the opening of the Symphony in these terms, "Vital as it is to capture full concentrated attention at the very beginning, this quiet mysterious opening, its distant horns and luxuriantly spread strings develops with true symphonic perception."^{iv}

2 **Symphony No.1 in D minor, Op.2**

I Lento e grave - opening to bar 34

Performers: Royal Scottish National Orchestra, David Lloyd-Jones

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. Naxos 8.570406

As JG would now admit, these 34 bars do not make a satisfactory piece on their own, but as the opening of a symphony they set a suitably spacious tone for the epic piece which is to follow. But we're in danger of rushing on.... As a recent graduate from Oxford in 1939, JG had to make a living and what could a young composer do but teach? He made his way to Repton School in Derbyshire as Director of Music. By his own account it wasn't a successful appointment. BMS members might be interested to know that John Veale was a 6th former during JG's brief tenure as Director of Music, and acknowledged the encouragement he was given by JG.

After two terms at Repton JG signed up for service with the RAF. He passed the audition as a bandmaster and was put in charge of the Fighter Command Band. This was a time when the best jazz musicians in the country were available, and his idea was to take on dance band musicians so that he would have a band which could function in two capacities. Hence musicians such as trumpeter Kenny Baker, trombonist Harry Roche, the "whispering" tenor sax of Aubrey Frank, and many other luminaries of post war jazz joined the band. He auditioned Malcolm Arnold. In the Arnold biography (Anthony Meredith/Paul Harris) they describe how "After he had played through a series of trumpet exercises with great nonchalance, they asked him to busk a chorus of *Lady be good*, and he did so in the distinctively fluent style of Bix Beiderbecke. He was offered the job and accepted"^v. But a few days later, Arnold got a better offer and turned JG down.

After a while JG tired of music in the military context and signed up for active service, joining Transport Command as a Navigator. Apparently, although he was trained in techniques such as ded. reckoning, he did most of his navigating with reference to railway lines, stations and junctions, of which he had an encyclopaedic knowledge. He still owns a book of track diagrams that he compiled as a boy. He was posted to the Far East and South Africa, amongst other places. In Cape Town he conducted the Cape Town Symphony orchestra in a performance of his *Prelude on "Das Alte Jahr vergangen ist"*. One of his RAF contemporaries got in touch recently, "My name is Cliff Robertson and I met John in 1944 at 42 Air School RAF at Port Elizabeth, South Africa. At the end of our training, we spent a month or so in Capetown awaiting the ship home, during which time a few of us attended several concerts by the Capetown Orchestra conducted by Dr. Pickering. This is all vividly still in my mind because at one of the last concerts, after the interval Dr Pickering returned to the rostrum and announced that the next item would be a first ever performance of Variations On An Old German Chorale, conducted by the composer John Linton Gardner. On to the stage walked John, picked up the baton and took the orchestra through a wonderful piece of music." This seems to have come as quite a surprise to some of his colleagues.

JG continued to compose fitfully in difficult circumstances, but was frustrated by the lack of opportunity to write at length, and mundane issues such as the availability of manuscript paper. This frustration would eventually break to the surface in the form of his *Symphony No. 1* once the War was over.

On demobilisation in 1946 it was again a case of finding a job. He had no desire to return to Repton and instead joined the Royal Opera House as a repetiteur, working for part of the time as Constant Lambert's assistant on *The Faëry Queen*, conducting the odd matinee and Schools' performance. His spare time in the harsh Winter of 1946 was occupied writing a Symphony. It had been forming in his head through the War years, and was built in part from much earlier musical material.

The symphony was taken up some years later by Barbirolli. Barbirolli had been working at the Opera House, where JG had played through his *Nativity Opera* to him. This has never been performed, and is considered by JG to be "unperformable", but Barbirolli was sufficiently interested to ask to see other works. He thought the 1st movement of the Symphony difficult to understand and asked for some changes to be made before introducing it at the 1951 Cheltenham Festival; the same year that Malcolm Arnold's 1st Symphony was first heard. It turned out to be one of the successes of the year, and doubly so because the composer was almost completely unknown.

I have already played the opening of the piece. It is a "conventional" four movement work with a scherzo following as the second movement. The slow third movement is the longest of the four. I am going to play from the beginning to Figure 13. The movement has a wonderful main theme, which is immediately followed by a beautifully scored variation of the main theme from the first movement, justifying Paul Conway's opinion that this is a "a superbly crafted work written by a subtle and imaginative orchestrator"^{vi}.

3 **Symphony No.1 in D minor, Op.2**

III *Lento* – opening to figure 13

Performers: Royal Scottish National Orchestra, David Lloyd-Jones

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. Naxos 8.570406

And finally from the last movement, I am going to play what I regard as the most exciting passage of the whole piece, from figure 26 to figure 36.

4 **Symphony No.1 in D minor, Op.2**

IV *Finale: Rondo* – figures 26 to 36

Performers: Royal Scottish National Orchestra, David Lloyd-Jones

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. Naxos 8.570406

The piece finishes with a majestic rendition of the main theme from the first movement and final resolution onto a triumphant D major chord. But you'll have to buy the CD if you want to hear it! Those recordings were by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, conducted by David Lloyd Jones.

One of JG's pre-War friends was Rolf Gardiner, who was the father of John Eliot Gardiner. At his farm, Springhead, in Dorset, Rolf founded The Springhead Ring which was (I quote from the "Utopia Britannica" website), "*centred around the young blond Rolf Gardiner, [who] wished to spark off a rural revival, 'from herb to the hymn', to restore England from the perilous state it had fallen into since the end of the First World War. This was no romantic rustic revival that was envisaged - this was hard-nosed pragmatism. The plan was to 'rebuild a hill-and-vale economy along modern organic lines', restoring the ancient breeds of sheep to the Downs and reviving rural industries along with the traditional rural festivals.'*"

Interest in Rolf Gardiner's work is currently quite high, firstly because he is seen as a forerunner of the "organic" movement, but secondly because of his involvement with European youth movements of the 1930s (and most notoriously the "Hitler Youth"). His motives have been variously ascribed to eccentricity, an obsession with neo-feudalism, and a dark and devious attempt to subvert rural England and prepare the ground for fascism.

I won't go into any of that, but for some years our family spent Whitsun at house parties at Springhead. The singing of unaccompanied choral music (such as Josquin, Schutz and Montiverdi) conducted by JG was interspersed with English country dancing (of the Playford/Cecil Sharp variety) on the lawn, and for tea there was the local delicacy, lardy cake. The croquet lawn and punt on the lake completed this rural idyll. It was a big treat to be collected from a school cricket match for the journey to Gillingham from Waterloo, with JG pointing out the points of interest en-route – in particular the junctions and sheds at Salisbury, and if I was lucky, we would have afternoon tea on the train. The house was in the village of Fontmell Magna. The springs in the garden are the source of the Fontmell Brook, which flows into the River Stour. They feed a lake, from which the brook then runs under the house via a mill which used to generate electricity for the house, but wasn't totally reliable.

One of the traditions at Springhead was the Christmas play, for which JG would sometimes write music. At least one piece has survived from the 1950 play, has been recorded by John Eliot Gardiner, and has become an unexpected “best-seller” for JG. This is the wonderful *Entry of the Three Kings*, a very simple but striking setting of text from the Gospel which takes us right to the other end of the scale to the mighty 1st Symphony and begins to give us a view of the depth and breadth of JG’s talents.

5 The Entry of the Three Kings (1950)

Performers: Montiverdi Choir, John Eliot Gardiner

Album: *As I Remember Christmas*

Catalogue No. Phillips 4620502

After the success of the Symphony at Cheltenham in 1951, JG’s career moved into top gear with a flurry of commissions for major works. He realised that he was now “a composer”. In 1952 he left the Opera House, and, for the next four years supported himself through composition.

One of his final jobs at Covent Garden was as the bar-room pianist in the Covent Garden production of *Wozzeck*. Described in the press as “a giant in a shrunken suit with arms akimbo”^{vii}, he clearly made a big impression. The performance was conducted by Erich Kleiber, and JG later told me that he had sight read the part at the dress rehearsal because “that would make it more interesting”. He reprised the role for Covent Garden in revivals of the production over the next decade or so.

The years 1952 to 1957 were peppered with major commissions. For the Philip Jones Brass Quartet there was the *Theme and Variations*, Op.7 in 1951. For the Three Choirs Festival in 1952 there was *Cantiones Sacrae*, Op.12. For the 1952 Cheltenham Festival, the *Variations on a Waltz of Carl Nielsen*, Op.13, which were also heard at the Proms that year, where they were conducted by Basil Cameron. For Cameron’s 70th birthday concert at the PROMS in 1954, JG re-wrote his *Scots Overture*, Op.25 which had originally been written for the Fighter Command Band in 1941. The ballet *Reflexion*, Op.14 was first performed at the 1952 Edinburgh Festival, conducted by John Lanchbery, with an orchestral suite from the Ballet being done by Anthony Bernard at the RFH the following year. The biggest commission of the period was the opera for Sadler’s Wells, *The Moon and Sixpence*, based on the short story by Somerset Maugham, which was first performed in May 1957.

He married in February 1955. Jane Abercrombie, my mother, was the daughter of Nigel and Elisabeth Abercrombie. Nigel was a senior civil servant (he became Secretary General of the Arts Council) and an academic of some distinction. He had been a very young Professor of French at Exeter University before the War, and wrote the book “The Origins of Jansenism”. And if you want to know what that was, you’ll have to look it up because *I* can’t possibly explain it! As Secretary General of the Arts Council, he usually had access to a box at Covent Garden, as a result of which we saw the performance of *Les Noces* in 1966 in which JG played one of the piano parts with Malcolm Williamson, Edmund Rubbra and Richard Rodney Bennett.

Elisabeth, my Grandmother, was an opera singer with both Glyndebourne and Sadler’s Wells, whose career was interrupted by the war, who never achieved her true

potential, and whom JG had known in his Oxford days in the 1930s when my mother was a young child.

JG had been living with his mother, who died in 1954, and my parents began their married life in their small cottage in South Close, Morden. But I was on the way by the middle of 1955 and they moved to a larger house in Motspur Park, where we lived until 1969, joined in 1958 by Lucy and 1962 by Emily, both of whom are in the audience tonight.

Needing a more secure income (he later said to me “I have no idea why your mother was prepared to take me on, because I had nothing”), he accepted an invitation from Thomas Armstrong to join the staff of the Royal Academy of Music (he stayed there for the next 30 years or so) as a Professor of Composition.

In an era when many successful composers moved into films, one may wonder why JG didn't make the transition. He did write the score for the British Council's film *The Coronation Ceremony* in 1952 which seems to have been well received, but his film writing career came to an abrupt end with the music for a film called *The Tower*, which had been commissioned by an oil company in 1953 for a documentary. As JG tells the story, he scored it for wind and brass alone, but the director hated it, and wanted a lush string sound. The score was rejected – JG was paid – and it was replaced by (in JG's words) “a more tuneful score by Doreen Carwithen”.

In 1956 came a commission for a Piano Concerto which was premiered in 1957 by Cyril Preedy and Barbirolli at the Cheltenham Festival. They gave a terrible performance which more or less put paid to the work. It was revived by Malcolm Binns and Adrian Boult in the 1960s, but the recording I am going to play, made last year by Peter Donohoe with the RSNO, and David Lloyd Jones finally demonstrates that this is a work to be reckoned with. To quote Colin Anderson on the Classical Source website, “The first movement opens with a burst of energy, the invention is sinewy and intense and is well-sustained through plenty of activity and incident, which can be heard as integral to the musical argument. The wind-down to some tense lyricism is quite absorbing.” The 2nd movement, is a set of variations with an accompanied cadenza which leads directly into the finale. I am going to play from the reprise of the main subject of the movement through the cadenza....

6 Piano Concerto No.1 in Bb, Op.34

Tema con variazioni (extract)

Performers: Peter Donohoe, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, David Lloyd-Jones

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No.: Naxos 8.570406

The finale follows without a break, and opens with an angular dance, melodically based on the theme of the slow movement. My second and final extract from the piece is the final 3 minutes or so, which finishes with what you will come to realise is a classic JG “throwaway” ending.

7 Piano Concerto No.1 in Bb, Op.34

Finale: *Rondo* (ending)

Performers: Peter Donohoe, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, David Lloyd-Jones

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No.: Naxos 8.570406

In the *Musical Times* in 1967, Louis Halsey wrote about JG, describing him as a “born choral composer”. Sadly, very little of his choral music has been recorded, but there are many major works. I am going to play two songs from a collection written during the Summer in 1955 and 1956. To quote JG’s own notes, “In both instances time spent on them was more like play than work, coming as it did between spells of concentration on longer and more complicated pieces, and I doubt if they would ever have progressed beyond the stage of incipience had not Professor Anthony Lewis suggested performing a composition of mine at the Barber Institute in 1957, which generous proposal spurred me on to complete them.” Like many of JG’s choral works, this cantata is made up of individual movements, which, whilst they go together well, stand equally well on their own. The first is a setting of Shakespeare’s *Crabbed Age and Youth*, the second of Henry Wotton’s *How happy is he born and taught*. I had to play the latter because it was dedicated to me, then recently born. The work exists in versions for small orchestra and piano duet, and this performance is of the piano duet version is by the London Oriana Choir conducted by David Drummond.

8 Seven Songs, Op.36

Crabbed Age and Youth (Shakespeare)

Performers: London Oriana Choir, David Drummond

Album: *Stuff and Nonsense!*

Catalogue No. London Oriana Choir Website www.londonoriana.com

9 Seven Songs, Op.36

How happy is he born and taught (Henry Wotton)

Performers: London Oriana Choir, David Drummond

Album: *Stuff and Nonsense!*

Catalogue No. London Oriana Choir Website www.londonoriana.com

My next example, the *Sinfonia Piccola*, Op. 47 for string orchestra was written in three weeks in the Summer of 1960. It is described in a review by Steve Schwartz on Classic Net as “...perfectly proportioned. A highly sophisticated essay, it brings to mind Tippett's *Little Music for Strings*, but without the latter's self-conscious Classical references. It plays masterful contrapuntal games. The second subject of the first movement gets brought back in inverted form during the recapitulation. The second-movement passacaglia uses a *modulating* bass line, the first time I've knowingly encountered such a beast. The big danger of the passacaglia normally lies in the fact that one modulates with difficulty, while keeping the same bass line, since most bass lines don't modulate. I can't think of a single instance in Bach, for example. Sometimes a composer will use a bass of ambiguous tonality – usually one that finds itself at home in a "home" minor and its relative major. But the fact that a passacaglia normally stays in the same key gives the opportunity for a piece that builds in power. However, a badly-written passacaglia can bore the scuppers out of you. The tonal sameness can become exasperating. Gardner's "solution" – which, by the way, doesn't make things any easier for himself – just blows my mind. The quick third movement,

a rondo with two themes, plays with stretto, canon, and fugato. Yet it sounds not academic, but high-spirited.”

I am just going to have to play the 2nd and 3rd movements in the recording by the Royal Ballet Sinfonia, conducted by Gavin Sutherland, so that you can see what Schwartz is talking about.

10 10-11 Sinfonia Piccola, Op.47

2nd movement

Performers: Royal Ballet Sinfonia, Gavin Sutherland

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line CD WHL 2125

11 10-11 Sinfonia Piccola, Op.47

3rd movement

Performers: Royal Ballet Sinfonia, Gavin Sutherland

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line CD WHL 2125

Two major choral works followed in close succession at the end of the 1950s. *The Ballad of the White Horse*, a 44' minute setting of Chesterton's epic poem was premiered by Charles Groves in Bournemouth in 1959. This was followed by the *Herrick Cantata* of 1961, which was first performed in Birmingham by Meredith Davies and the CBSO and Chorus. I am going to play one of the movements from the *Herrick Cantata* from a live performance conducted by Philip Brunelle in Minneapolis many years later. It is a setting of Herrick's poem *Music to becalm his fever* and I believe it is one of JG's personal favourite works.

12 Herrick Cantata, Op.49

Music to becalm his fever

Performers: Choir and Orchestra conducted by Phillip Brunelle

Album: Private recording

Returning to Louis Halsey's 1967 article, he goes on to say "Something like half of Gardner's choral music is to sacred words, and the quality of this entitles him to be considered one of the most important contemporary English composers of church music. This is of course not the same thing as describing him as a 'church composer', any more than one would so describe, for instance, Bernard Naylor, John Joubert or Anthony Milner. Gardner's music certainly possesses a real sense of contact with music of the past, but it is not in the least 'traditional' in the way that so much church music is." He goes on to quote JG talking on the radio about his own music in the mid 60s "I myself would certainly hate to be thought of as a 'heavy' composer, and frequently I am not even serious. As I get older, my music gets lighter (second childhood, perhaps?). Most of what I write is meant, in the best sense, to have 'entertainment value'; in other words it is not intended to be interesting or instructive, nor is it offered, except indirectly, as a demonstration of this or that technique. It is meant, most of it, to divert, to delight. In so trying I am following in the footsteps of the greatest composers. Possibly ineptly, but certainly with sincerity."

Halsey also states his admiration for JG's "completely uninhibited approach to composition", which is well illustrated by my next example, a Farnham Festival Commission from 1963. I am going to play *Fight the good Fight* from the *Five Hymns in Popular Style* which were dedicated to Malcolm Williamson. Williamson's career seemed to go rapidly downhill through illness and alcoholism once he became Master of the Queen's Music in 1976 and he is thought to have greatly displeased the Queen in a variety of ways. A Malcolm Williamson story told me by JG is typical of the sort of thing that got him into trouble. Williamson was asked what he thought of Elizabeth Lutyens, who had been his teacher, and for whom he had a great deal of respect. His waspish response was to the effect that "The trouble with her is that she doesn't know how to write a middle eight!". A perceptive comment perhaps but delivered in the wrong way.

JG's own comments on the *Five Hymns in Popular Style* are worth hearing,

"Lowering the brow of the Church is all the rage these days, and it is probable that many of the attempts to bring the atmosphere of the Espresso bar to the chancel are as hypocritical as they are misguided. The fact remains, however, that until the nineteenth century, the styles of secular and sacred music tended to go hand in hand. Thus we find composers using the same turns of phrase to express both erotic love and pious adoration, a practice condemned by some, but one which undoubtedly arose from an attitude towards life which saw it whole, and which allowed God to be praised for having endowed us with the pleasures of the senses as well as with the delights of the spirit.

In these five hymns I have been inspired particularly by the example of Malcolm Williamson, to whom they are dedicated, and by the wonderful poetry of Bishop Heber, Henry Lyte and Mrs. Adams, so full of simple profound thoughts, expressed in language which is both noble, evocative and memorable. Popular art in the best sense, in fact!"

Gardner's *Five Hymns in Popular Style* are fresh settings of extremely well known Church of England war-horses. *Abide With Me* is set as a delightfully bluesy number in the style of Mahalia Jackson. *Nearer, my God to thee* is a rumba, and so on. Described by Francis Routh as JG's *Land of Hope and Glory*^{viii}, these hymns have mysteriously never been recorded in their entirety. *Fight the Good Fight* which I am going to play now is pure Gardner, exhibiting the delightful interplay between compound and duple time which you have already heard in *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day*, the finale from *Sinfonia da Piccola*, and I am sure you are beginning to realise is a Gardner trademark. This hymn is very popular in the USA, but this recording comes from Wells Cathedral with the Cathedral choir conducted by Malcolm Archer.

13 Five Hymns in Popular Style, Op.54

Fight the Good Fight

Performers: Wells Cathedral Choir, Malcolm Archer

Album: *More than Hymns*

Catalogue No. Lammas 149

The pieces I am now playing you, from the early 1960s through to the late 1970s are firmly ingrained on my consciousness because I literally grew up with them. In 1969 we moved from Motspur Park to a large house in New Malden where Dad had a study on the ground floor. He composed with a piano next to him, using it to check what he was writing and when it was all finished, to play it through to my Mother. He approached composition as a routine, but sometimes found it difficult to get stuck into writing. As most work was commissioned he would nearly always have deadlines, and sometimes they would approach more quickly than progress was being made on the compositions. Many times I remember my Mother fending off phone calls from anxious commissioners, and frantic trips to London at the last possible minute with bundles of transparencies for copying. During the composition of his opera *The Visitors* for Sadlers Wells in 1972 he would be at the desk in his study by 4:30 in the morning, before travelling to the Academy or St Paul's to teach.

As children we weren't forced to play music, but we were certainly encouraged if we showed an interest, which we all did. Eventually we had three pianos in the house. Sunday afternoon entertainment for my sister Lucy and me involved playing through the classical repertoire in piano duets. We all joined the local youth orchestras, and for my debut on timpani with the Stoneleigh Youth Orchestra, JG read through the score of Beethoven's 3rd Piano Concerto, playing both the piano and orchestral parts so that I could learn the timpani part. He probably did similar things for Emily and Lucy.

In the late 1960s we took part in the European Summer School for Young Musicians, run by John Davies who taught clarinet at the RAM. JG conducted the choir, whilst in turns, Philip Cannon, Malcolm Arnold and Maurice Miles took the orchestra in successive years. These courses took place in Austria and Switzerland and involved exciting train journeys across Europe, usually in carriages specially chartered for the Orchestra. Much of the night would be spent with Dad, leaning out of the window, once again observing the junctions and locomotive changes, which was all too exciting to allow much sleep.

The Malcolm Arnold year was especially memorable. In those days tourists were limited to taking £50 out of the country – but judging by the regularity with which Malcolm entertained the entire course in the bar, he had flouted that particular regulation. Sadly, the course culminated with an outside TV broadcast where, just as he was giving the upbeat, a very drunk Malcolm was distracted by a butterfly - which he tried to catch. He lost his balance and collapsed on the ground and had to be taken to his room. At the concert at the Teater an der Wien, Malcolm conducted his 2nd *Symphony* whilst JG did his *5 Hymns in Popular Style*. In hindsight, reading about this course in the Anthony Meredith/Paul Harris biography of Arnold, it was a pathetic and sad episode in Arnold's life, but I was too young to realise this and it just seemed like enormous fun. Many of the musicians on the course, who included Julian Lloyd Webber and Simon Rattle remember the encouragement they were given by Arnold, and he helped me enormously, on my first time in an orchestral percussion section by organising a special sectional rehearsal so that I could learn to count bars rest (with help from Simon Rattle) and cope with playing the triangle in Arnold's 2nd *Symphony*.

Our last encounter with Malcolm was his last Christmas before moving to Ireland, which would have been 1970. He had written his last film score and his accountants were saying he had to move, something which he put off for a long time. His last

hurrah in Cornwall was an impromptu invitation to the whole Gardner family to spend Christmas with him and family, where it hardly needs to be said we were royally fed, entertained and watered for several days, which have stayed in the memory ever since.

Many Summer holidays were spent at Bernard Robinson's Music Camp where JG's choice of repertoire for the choir and orchestra was both intriguing and challenging. Apart from his own works, he introduced many people for the first time to Rubbra's *Inscape*, Carlo Martelli's 2nd *Symphony*, Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, John Joubert's *Symphony No.1*, and he would also take the choir through a lot of Bruckner or Josquin de Pres, two composers whom he specially admired. As he told Martin Anderson, "I am a choir man: I always ran amateur choirs. I just knew what singers could sing. I think I am probably a choral composer more than anything, really. I ran my own choir and I've done a lot of summer schools and things, running choirs. I don't do it anymore now, but I think I was rather good at making people sing, and I rather like the act of singing myself."

Through these events he spent a lot of time with amateur and aspiring musicians. Those who have been conducted by him will remember with the extraordinary musicianship, the unerring sense of pitch and intolerance of wrong notes, and his ability to generate excitement and help the performers surpass themselves. Perhaps nowhere did he make such a big impression as at St Paul's Girls' School, and this was not just because he was the only man on the staff!

Rosemary Kerslake, the actress,

"For me John Gardner's greatest achievement was the performance of the Verdi Requiem, involving the joint choirs and orchestras of the Girls' and Boys' schools with professional soloists. It was a painstaking and laborious task to learn the music, since few of us were accomplished sight-readers. However, the eventual performance was quite extraordinarily inspiring and uplifting, and has left me with an abiding love of the Requiem, and indeed Verdi's music in general. Some of the soloists remarked afterwards that, although they had performed the work several times before with diverse choral societies, they had never experienced that level of excitement and intensity. I am enormously grateful to have been a part of it."

The singer Sally Bradshaw,

"My year was the first to sing John Gardner's carol settings which were premiered at the Christmas Carol Concert. I remember the excitement and also the matter-of-factness: John Gardner was modest and unpretentious and so we may not have realised fully at the time what classics those settings are. We sang *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day* obsessively in the locker rooms. To this day several members of my form are moved to tears when they hear those carols.

As a music master he was a delight. I remember nuggets of advice he would give during our singing class: "If you're a student and really want to hear a concert and haven't the money, just go and mill around at the interval and shuffle in with the crowd." That was as outrageous as he ever became. He handled the barrage of schoolgirl crushes with impeccable restraint and goodwill, clumping somewhat heavy-footedly home to his wife and numerous family in New Malden. He also

introduced us to the best of choral music, outstandingly Victoria anthems, whose spirituality and complexity took my breath away."

Not everyone thrived under his tutelage. At the RAM, Joe Jackson was one of a number of famous pop musicians who have the "classically trained" epithet in their CVs, and he remembers JG as a bully, making him play through Bach fugues in open score. To do well as an individual pupil of JG's you had to demonstrate a certain amount of musical ability, and without it I suspect you were in for an unhappy time. The composer David Bedford whom I see from time to time often reminds me of one of his exam pieces which JG had marked and was passed back to him with one word "Fail" written on the front. He laughs about it now...

My occasional visits to the Academy Staff Restaurant were always memorable. Sharing the table would be characters like Alan Bush, Lennox Berkeley, Michael Head, Eric Fenby, Gareth Morris and so on. JG was much enjoyed by the students for whom he was a breath of fresh air in what was at that time a rather stuffy establishment.

Sirion Leggate was a pupil in the late 1960s. "There were often quite a few students packed into his top floor teaching room - if it were in the basement it would have been called a bunker. I remember his telling us about an occasion that he took his children to see the Severn Bore. I had no idea what that was but he gave us a verbal description interspersed with musical quotations from "Tosca". He introduced me to the "Seven Star Diary", Faber-Castell clutch pencil, Stephens Record Ink, the Osmiroid manuscript nib, and "queen of puddings". He would sight-read through full scores of symphonies as if they were "100 tunes a Day" for piano." And another (Carol Clayton) told me that the "students all had a sort of secret respect for his obvious rebellious, non-conformist nature" highlighting an article he had written in the RAM Magazine about a trip to New Orleans describing a singer who was singing a song called "I'm gonna bang you baby", when it was obvious to everyone in the audience that his "banging days were over".

I'd also like to relate a story from his days on the PRS Board when some particularly mis-informed argument was going on. The Public Relations Director caught him doodling and enquired what it was, to which he replied "variations on *Three Blind Mice*".

I'm going to move on to 1976 and the *Sonata da Chiesa* for two trumpets and organ. This work was written in its original version for John Wilbraham, Michael Laird and John Birch and given its first performance in Rotterdam in 1976. It was subsequently revised, and performed by them in a new version in Chichester Cathedral in 1977. It uses the simple five-note ascending and descending motif from Monteverdi's "l'Orfeo", which had struck JG when he heard Thurston Dart playing it on some antique brass instrument during a TV programme. The four movement work which resulted is full of vitality and pays homage to Baroque forms and techniques. The writing for both trumpet and organ is highly idiomatic and the thematic material ingeniously developed, manipulated and elaborately entwined. I am going to play the 2nd movement which is particularly rousing. Here it is played by the trumpeters Mark David and Alistair Mackie, with Andrew Millington on the organ.

14 Sonata da Chiesa sopra una thema di Claudio Montiverdi, Op.136

2nd movement

Performers: Mark David & Alistair Mackie (trumpets) and Andrew Millington (organ)

Album: *The trumpet shall be heard on high*

Catalogue No. Herald 243

One of JG's star pupils at the Academy was the oboist Nick Daniel. Anyone who went to the Academy as an instrumentalist would, as a matter of routine, have to study harmony, counterpoint, keyboard studies, and so on, whether they wanted to or not. All part of being a rounded musician, I suppose. If JG warmed to the student (and he by no means warmed to them all) they could be guaranteed a good time. Nick desperately wanted to play jazz, so his sessions with JG turned into Nick playing jazz standards with JG improvising the accompaniment. Many of these were written down and have been performed and broadcast by Nick. The Oboe Concerto was the biggest work JG wrote for him, and he gave its first performance in a broadcast on Radio 3. Nick has never recorded it however, and I am going to play the slow movement in the recording by Jill Crowther with the English Northern Philharmonia conducted by Alan Cuckston. The work was written in 1990. This is the delightfully elegant second movement, and beautifully played.

15 Concerto for Oboe and Strings, Op.193

2nd movement

Performers: Jill Crowther, English Northern Philharmonia, conducted by Alan Cuckston

Album: *English oboe concertos*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line WHL 2130

This piece forms an excellent contrast to the Piano Concerto which I played in the first half of this talk. What are the differences? Well firstly this piece is far less ambitious. It is shorter and scored for strings only. Secondly, the writing is cleaner and simpler, but it is no less expressive for that. JG is still faithful to tonality and to traditional structures but he is expressing himself much more directly. I can quote JG to explain this and also to provide a neat link to the next musical example. Talking to Martin Anderson around the time of his 80th birthday he said,

“My music suffered quite a time by being very difficult. I think it's easier now - I've learned that lesson. It's no good writing difficult music unless you are going to have marvellous conductors and lots of rehearsal. My *Burns Sequence*, my last work for choir and orchestra, which has been very successful, I really wrote very practical music there for the choir.^{ix}”

The choral cantatas are central to JG's output, punctuating it at regular intervals. Ones that I haven't mentioned or played so far include the *The Noble Heart* Op.59, *A Shakespeare Sequence* Op.66, (both 1964), the *Cantata for Christmas* Op. 82 (1966), the *Cantata for Easter* Op.105 (1970), the *Cantata for St. Cecilia* Op.195 (1991).

In 1993 The National Youth Choir of Scotland commissioned a choral work from JG and he wrote for them one of his most wonderful works, the *A Burns Sequence*, Op.213. The work makes some musical nods towards the “Scottishness” of the

Robbie Burns words, but the two movements I'm going to play are simply classic JG song settings. They are *Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary* and *I'll whistle and I'll come to ye*", performed by the National Youth Choir of Scotland with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Christopher Bell.

16 A Burns Sequence, Op.213

Will ye go to the Indies my Mary?

Performers: National Youth Choir of Scotland, Scottish Chamber Orchestra,
conducted by Christopher Bell

Album: *A Burns Sequence*

Catalogue No. Available from NYCOS website www.nycos.co.uk

17 A Burns Sequence, Op.213

Oh whistle and I'll come to ye

Performers: National Youth Choir of Scotland, Scottish Chamber Orchestra,
conducted by Christopher Bell

Album: *A Burns Sequence*

Catalogue No. Available from NYCOS website www.nycos.co.uk

In 1998 my mother died of motor neurone disease. Although she had been a nurse, and then a dental nurse for most of her working life, in her later years she formed a working partnership with JG and purchased a computer and a copy of the Sibelius software in 1994. From then on she typeset all his new music, some of his old music, and allowed him to self publish. Following her death, and until very recently, JG has continued to compose, completing a Bassoon Concerto in 2004 which was premièred earlier this year. This has the tantalising opus number 249. Since 1997 when the BBC made a small fuss about his 80th birthday there has been a steady decline in interest in his music, but one of the notable exceptions has been Philip Brunelle, who is based in Minneapolis, and has been an unfailing champion of JG's works. He has performed many of the major works and commissioned a number of new ones, such as the *Stabat Mater* of 1993 and the *Sextet for Piano and wind* of 1995. When my mother died, Brunelle suggested that JG should write some songs in her memory, and the commissioning fee was donated to the Motor Neurone Disease Association. Their composition was clearly a labour of love, and I am going to play the last two songs from the set, *has not, since then, Love's prompture deep* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and *A Slumber did my spirit seal* by Wordsworth. Here they are sung by Maria Jette accompanied by Philip Brunelle, at what I think must have been the first performance. This is some of the most moving music he has written, and I would ask you to pay particular attention to the simple lyrical beauty of the second example.

18 Recollections of Love, Op.242

has not, since then, love's prompture deep?

Performers: Maria Jette (soprano), Philip Brunelle (piano)

Album: Private Recording

19 Recollections of Love, Op.242

A slumber did my spirit seal

Performers: Maria Jette (soprano), Philip Brunelle (piano)

Album: Private Recording

The most recent piece I am going to play is the *Petite Suite* Op.245, written for another Gardner champion, the recorder player John Turner. The two movements I've chosen are the *Idée Fixe* and the *Marche Funèbre*. The whimsical use of French for the titles is simply because JG wanted to avoid confusion with another Little Suite he had written for recorder. In JG's own notes he explains that the "*Idée Fixe* pays homage to an earlier style with umpteen statements of a five note Landini cadence with a trill on its third note." The haunting funeral march uses a theme from the 1st Symphony and finishes with a repeating rhythmic pattern on a high F. JG notes that this piece could easily have been made into something bigger, but would not have fitted the frame of the piece.

20 Petite Suite for Recorder and Strings, Op.245

Idée Fixe

Performers: John Turner (recorder), Royal Ballet Sinfonia, conducted Gavin Sutherland

Album: *English Recorder Concertos*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line WHL2143

21 Petite Suite for Recorder and Strings, Op.245

Marche Funèbre

Performers: John Turner (recorder), Royal Ballet Sinfonia, conducted Gavin Sutherland

Album: *English Recorder Concertos*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line WHL2143

With this last piece I have brought this talk full circle. Through most of the *Marche Funèbre* the basses were playing the 2nd subject from the first movement of the 1st Symphony. We have seen in this talk how JG's music has evolved from the massive and expansive symphony and piano concerto in the 1950s to the distilled and more simple Oboe Concerto, *A Burns Sequence* and *Petite Suite* in the 1980s and 1990s.

I said earlier that there has been a decline in interest in his work. Last year we decided we would do something about it. The first thing we did was to create the website, and I was encouraged by an e-mail I received from America within hours of putting the website up. It was from a singer who was going to perform *Abide with me* that evening and she just wanted us to know that she loved the piece. From the website we have generated a steady flow of interest, and there have been about 30 performances this year which I can attribute to the fact that we simply made a bit of effort to make people realise it was John Gardner's 90th birthday and that *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day* was *not* the only thing he has written. The Naxos CD came out last month, and for a brief moment looked as though it might just get into the Classical Charts. Naxos reported it as their 6th best selling CD in September. It has been played twice on ClassicFM as a result of being in their New Releases chart, once on Radio 3, and it seems to have missed the main classical chart by not much more than a hairsbreadth.

More recordings are in the planning stages, of choral music, and then brass and organ, and we received a very interesting proposal this evening which I can't say anything about just yet. If you want to buy any of the recordings I have played tonight, most of

them are commercially available, there is a complete discography on the website which will give you the catalogue numbers.

To bring this talk to a conclusion, I am going to return to an orchestral work from the 1960s which is definitely classic Gardner. This is the little overture *Half Holiday* which was written in 1962 for a series of orchestral music for amateurs published by Novello. When I conducted it myself many years ago I took a good look at it and found that all the melodic material derives from the opening bars, and the more I looked at it the more I found. I was later pleased to find that JG corroborates this in his own note on the work, saying “its themes and episodes are elaborately interrelated: a process I found both spontaneous and enjoyable.”

I hope you will also find it to be spontaneous and enjoyable.

Goodnight and thank you.

22 Half Holiday Overture, Op.51

Performers: Royal Ballet Sinfonia, Gavin Sutherland

Album: *John Gardner*

Catalogue No. ASV White Line WHL2125

ⁱ Martin Anderson interview, Fanfare Magazine c.2000

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} Patric Stanford, Choir and Organ Magazine, March/April 2007

^v Malcolm Arnold, *Rogue Genius*, Anthony Meredith/Paul Harris Thames/Elkin, ISBN 0 903413 54 X

^{vi} <http://www.musicweb-international.com/gardner/symphonies.html>

^{vii} Source unknown

^{viii} Contemporary British Music - The Twenty-Five Years from 1945 to 1970

^{ix} Martin Anderson interview, Fanfare Magazine, c2000.