John Gardner

Composer who enjoyed early success with richly melodic pieces and tried and failed to teach music's principles to Paul McCartney

John Gardner was a composer of considerable talent who was perhaps unlucky to have come to prominence at a time when the richly melodic music in which he excelled was beginning to fall decisively out of fashion. His success in the 1950s seemed to promise greater fame and influence in his work transcended; and if his music has in recent years benefited from rediscovery by a younger generation of performers, he is still better known as a teacher than as the composer of successful Christmas carols for his major works.

John Gardner was born in Manchester in 1912, but grew up in Halmstow, Devon, where his father, who was killed in the last months of the First World War, had practised medicine. As a child, Gardner played the piano and cello, like his father, an amateur musician and published composer, he also wrote music prolifically from a young age. He attended Wellington College, Berkshire, where he was a contemporary of the conductor and Porcelli cellist John Christie (later Sir Anthony) Lewis, and in 1932 won an organ scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, where he studied with the celebrated teacher R.O. Morris. By his own account, however, a much more significant influence was the German theorist Theodor Adorno, at that time living in Oxford, and with whom Gardner played piano duets. In 1937 he also received encouragement and advice from the composer Arthur Benjamin.

Gardner's early attempts at composition met with impressive success, a first symphony was taped by Oxford University Press when the composer was 11, and another student work, the String Quartet no. 1, was taken up by the Heil Quartet at that time, one of the most distinguished in the country, who played it in a concert broadcast from Paris. In 1937 he became one of the first composes to

By the early 1960s his post-Romantic idiom

write for the new medium of television. Gardner's output included the well-received songs for Charlie Chaplin's films, and he also composed music for the Royal Opera House in London and the British Broadcasting Corporation's ballet unit. Gardner's music was praised for its melodic charm and its ability to evoke a sense of place and time. He was also known for his ability to capture the essence of a particular event or moment in his compositions.

In 1962, Gardner composed a Symphony No. 1 for the Royal Opera House in London, which was well received by critics and audiences alike. This was followed by a series of other compositions, including the chamber work "The Moon and the Moonflower," which was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Sir Adrian Boult. Gardner's music was also performed at the Edinburgh Festival, where he was named Composer of the Year in 1965.

In 1967, Gardner was appointed Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music, where he remained for many years. He continued to compose throughout his career, producing works in a wide variety of genres, including symphonies, chamber music, and opera. Gardner was a leading figure in the British music scene, and his compositions have been performed around the world.

In 1990, Gardner was awarded the prestigious Royal Academy of Music Gold Medal, in recognition of his lifetime achievement. He continued to compose until his death in 1993, at the age of 81. Despite the challenges he faced in his career, Gardner never lost his passion for music, and his legacy continues to inspire musicians and audiences alike.

Gardner, far left, with Bronislawa Nijinska, Malcolm Williamson, Richard Rodney Bennett and John Lanchbery with Edmund Rubbra at the piano in the pit at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1962. The four composers were playing the piano parts for a production of Stravinsky's dance cantata "Les Noces."

Christmas cantal. Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day soon became hugely popular and remains his most widely known work.

Gardner's output was huge and included three symphonies, six operas and a number of concertos and chamber works. But as a gifted trainer and conductor of choirs, he devoted most effort to the medium of choral music, which he regarded as his natural territory. Much of his work betrays the influence of jazz, which was one of his greatest passions. His students were often surprised to discover that his harmony proféssor was also a gifted jazz pianist.

Gardner served on the committees of many musical organisations, and was appointed CBE in 1979. He married, in 1953, Jane Abercrombie. She died in 1998, their son and daughter survive him.