

COLIN McPHEE

David C F Wright PhD

Colin McPhee was born in Montreal on 15 March 1900. He enrolled in the Peabody Institute in 1918, studying composition with Gustav Strube and piano with Harold Randolph; subsequently he studied with the brilliant Edgar Varèse before marrying Jane Bel in 1931, a disciple of Margaret Mead.. He was involved in the circle of experimental composers known as the "ultra-modernists" and was among those, along with the group's leader, Henry Cowell, John Becker, and Cowell protégé, Lou Harrison, particularly interested in what would later become known as "world music."

McPhee is said to have first encountered Balinese music while listening to a record in New York City.. He and his wife moved to Bali together for Belo's anthropological work. Once there, McPhee became so interested in the music that he studied, built, and wrote extensively about the gamelans. McPhee, who was gay, divorced Belo in 1939. In the early 1940s, he lived in a large brownstone house in Brooklyn, which he shared with W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, both homosexuals

As I have been unfairly criticised as homophobic, which I am not, all the medical evidence supports the statement that no one is born gay. It is learned or chosen behaviour. I cannot understand how a man said to be born gay would marry a wife!

In 1942, McPhee arranged Britten's Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, originally written for string orchestra, for two pianos, to be used for Lew Christensen's ballet Jinx.

McPhee was responsible for introducing Britten to the Balinese music that influenced such works by the British composer as *The Prince of the Pagodas*, *Curlew River*, and *Death in Venice*. Later in the decade, McPhee fell into an alcohol-fuelled depression and became a drunk, but began to write music again during the 1950s. He became professor of ethnomusicology at UCLA in 1958 and was also a respected jazz critic. He died in Los Angeles on 7 January 1964. His music is somewhat lightweight but attractive but it is not durable. His writing for wind instruments is accomplished. But he is not a great composer.

On June 26 and 27, 2009, an opera about McPhee's life by the American composer Evan Ziporyn, entitled *A House in Bali*, premiered at Puri Saraswati in Ubud, Bali.

McPhee's *A House in Bali*, the chronicle of his life there, is still considered a valuable introduction to Balinese culture. His posthumously published *Music in Bali* was the first comprehensive analysis of Balinese music published in English.

His best-known musical work is *Tabuh-Tabuhan: Toccata for Orchestra*, composed and premiered in Mexico in 1936. Its title translates as "collection of percussion instruments", and it combines Balinese and traditional Western musical elements. It is scored for Western orchestra but, in McPhee's description, the core of the ensemble is a "'nuclear gamelan' composed of two pianos, celesta, xylophone, marimba, and glockenspiel," giving it a highly percussive balance of sound. The orchestra is augmented by two Balinese gongs and cymbals. The work is in three movements: "Ostinatos", a flute-inspired "Nocturne," and a syncopated "Finale." Some of the themes in it derive from Balinese folk sources.

Literary works

Angkloeng gamelans in Bali. (1937?)

Balinese wajang koelit and its music. (1936?, 1981) ISBN 0-404-16765-9

Children and music in Bali. (1938) Publisher: Overdruk Uit Djawa

A House in Bali. (1944) Publisher: The Asia Press with The John Day Company, New York

Music in Bali: a study in form and instrumental organization in Balinese orchestral music. (1966, 1976) ISBN 0-306-70778-0

House in Bali. (1980) ISBN 0-404-16766-7

Club of small men: a children's tale from Bali. (2002) ISBN 0-7946-0074-3

Music

Balinese Ceremonial Music for two pianos (1934)

Tabuh Tubahan Toccata for orchestra (1936)

Tabuh Tubahan for two pianos and orchestra (1936)

Concerto for piano and wind octet (1938)

Transitions for orchestra (1954)

Suite in six movements (1957) various combinations

Symphony no 2 Pastorale (1957)

Concerto for wind orchestra (1960)

Kabing Siem flute and piano (1960)

Lagoe Soseloelingan Ardja flute and piano 9 1960)

Lagu dele, for piano (1960)

NOTE This essay is based on the Wikipedia entry but with additional information.

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