

CONSTANT LAMBERT

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Leonard Constant Lambert was born on 23 August 1905 and died on 21 August 1951. He was a British composer and a gifted conductor.

Lambert was the son of Russian-born Australian painter George Lambert, and Constant was educated at Christ's Hospital and the Royal College of Music. His teachers there were Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris, Sir George Dyson for composition, Malcolm Sargent for conducting and Herbert Fryer for piano.

Lambert was a prodigy, writing orchestral works from the age of 13 and, at the age of 20, he received a commission to write a ballet for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, his ballet being *Romeo and Juliet*.

For a few years, he enjoyed being a meteoric celebrity, including participating in a recording of William Walton's *Façade* with Edith Sitwell.

Lambert's best-known composition is *The Rio Grande* (1927) for contralto, piano, chorus, and an orchestra of brass, strings and percussion. It achieved instant success, and Lambert made two recordings of the piece as conductor in 1930 and 1949 respectively. He had a great interest in African-American music, and once said that he would have ideally have liked *The Rio Grande* to feature a black choir.

During the 1930s, his career as a conductor took off with his appointment with the Vic-Wells ballet later known as *The Royal Ballet*, but his career as a composer stagnated. It cannot be said that he wrote any masterpieces but his major choral work *Summer's Last Will and Testament* after the play of the same name by Thomas Nashe, one of his most emotionally dark works, which proved unfashionable in the mood following the death of King George V. At the time Alan Frank hailed it as Lambert's finest work but Lambert himself considered he had failed as a composer, and completed only two major works in the remaining sixteen years of his life. Instead, he concentrated on conducting, and appeared at Covent Garden and in BBC radio broadcasts, and accompanied the ballet on European and American tours. He was a good pianist.

The war took its toll of his vitality and creativity, and his health declined with the development of diabetes which remained undiagnosed and untreated following to his fear of doctors, stemming from his childhood.

Lambert was renowned as a raconteur in his day and as an expert on many different arts and modern European culture. It has been asserted that he was also one of the first serious composers to understand fully the importance of jazz and popular culture in the music of his time. He responded positively to the music of Duke Ellington. His embrace of music outside the serious repertoire is illustrated by his book *Music Ho!* of 1934 subtitled a study of music in decline which remains one of the wittiest, if highly opinionated, volumes of music criticism in the English language. It is quite absurd that when a composer writes music with jazz or a blues so much is made of it as if it was a virtue. We are usually told that Ravel's *Violin Sonata* contains a blues. So what?

Constant was at the centre of a brilliant literary and intellectual circle including Humphrey Searle, Edith Sitwell, Michael Ayrton, Sacheverell Sitwell and Anthony Powell, and he is often said to be the prototype of the character Hugh Moreland in Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

His father, although born in Russia and of American heritage, was identified as an Australian, and Constant was always conscious of his Australian connections, although he never visited that country. He had his pick of British pianists but he chose the Australian pianist and composer Arthur Benjamin to premiere his Piano Concerto in 1931. He formed a strong bond with the dancer Robert Helpmann on his arrival in London. And he chose the brilliant young Australian pianist Gordon Watson to play the virtuoso piano part at the premiere of his last ballet, *Tiresias*.

As a conductor, he had an instinctive appreciation of Liszt, Chabrier, Waldteufel and romantic Russian composers, and made fine recordings of some of their works. However, it was only when his health was declining that his career had a chance to flourish with the development of the BBC Third Programme and the Philharmonia Orchestra, having struggled for many years to extract vital performances from second-rate ensembles.

Lambert's first marriage was to Florence Kaye and their son was Kit Lambert was one of the managers of the pop group The Who.

After divorcing Kaye in 1947, Lambert married the artist Isabel Delmer.

After his death, she married Alan Rawsthorne. Lambert's first wife Florence Kaye married Peter Hole and their daughter Anne later took the stage name Annie Lambert.

Lambert earlier had an on-and-off affair with the ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn. According to friends of Fonteyn, Lambert was the great love of her life and she despaired when she finally realised he would never marry her. Some aspects of this relationship were symbolised in his ballet *Horoscope of 1938*. Lambert had a very serious drink problem and often by mid-morning he was badly affected by this. He had also dabbled in the dangers of spiritualism although to a limited extent which Cyril Scott had advocated as an essential. At a pub at lunchtimes Lambert would say that he saw a dog walking on the ceiling and tell of other hallucinatory disturbances. Scott had ruthlessly tried to persuade Edmund Rubbra to embrace this nonsense and was furious when Rubbra became a Catholic (private correspondence with the author from friends of Lambert).

In all his difficulties, Constant was befriended by Humphrey Searle, Cecil Gray, Gordon Watson., Edith Sitwell and many others.

Lambert died on 21 August 1951, two days short of his forty-sixth birthday, of pneumonia and undiagnosed diabetes complicated by acute alcoholism, and was buried in Brompton Cemetery, London. His son Kit was buried in the same grave in 1983.

Major works

Ballets

Romeo and Juliet (1925)

Pomona (1927)

Horoscope (1938)

Tiresias (1950)

Les Patineurs (1937; arranged from music by Giacomo Meyerbeer)

Choral and vocal

Eight poems of Li Po (1928)

The Rio Grande (1927) (set to a poem by Sacheverell Sitwell)

Summer's Last Will and Testament (1936; to words by Thomas Nashe)

Dirge from Cymbeline (1947)

Orchestral

Piano Concerto (Concerto for piano, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings, 1924)

The Bird Actors Overture (1924)

Music for Orchestra (1927)

Aubade héroïque (1941)

Chamber

Concerto for Piano and 9 Instruments (1931)

Instrumental

Piano Sonata (1930)

Elegy, for piano (1938)

Trois Pièces Nègres pour les Touches Blanches, piano duet (4 hands) (1949)

Film music

Merchant Seamen (semi-documentary; 1940)

Anna Karenina (1948) which he left incomplete and Humphrey Searle finished it but was given no credit for it.

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