

GEORGE WELDON AND THE MYTHS ABOUT COMPOSERS

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George Weldon was born in Chichester on 5 June 1908 and studied at the Royal College of Music and conducting with Sir Malcolm Sargent. He became an outstanding conductor far better than many with famous names and acclaim. He died in South Africa on 17 August 1963. He was 55.

There are a lot of myths and lies told about composers, musicians and conductors. As a result, many false ideas spring up and are consequently accepted as fact and become part of musical folklore.

One becomes irritated by such statements as, "There was no music in Birmingham until Simon Rattle came along in 1980." That is absolute nonsense and yet people believe it. It is a completely untrue statement and it is obviously made by those who worship Rattle and regard him as a god, a god of music.

But the same absurdities were said of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It was asserted that they were not a fine orchestra until Georg Solti came along and took over in 1969. That is also rubbish. But it is rubbish that is believed. The truth is that Solti built his success on the magnificent achievements of one of his predecessors at Chicago, the great Fritz Reiner who was their conductor between 1953 and 1963. One of the first things that Solti did was to champion the music of Bartók with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. But it was Reiner who initiated the championing of Bartók with this orchestra. Solti wanted and, indeed, received the praise and the glory for Reiner's achievement but Reiner was a far better conductor. His version of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra is still the best and his recording with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra of Shostakovich's Symphony No 6 is very fine. Reiner stuck to the score. Solti often deviated from a score. He always knew best.

And so it is with Rattle as it was with Karajan. Almost every piece that they conducted was edited, altered, 'improved' by them and so we never got pure Beethoven, for example. In Beethoven's Choral Symphony Karajan used eight horns and two sets of timpani, and this is on video for everyone to see! Not what Beethoven ordered! Rattle's recording of Walton's Symphony No 1 is quite shocking. He makes every sforzando a caricature as if to say, "Only I know what Walton wanted." I knew Walton and we often discussed this symphony. In public he would never condemn any performance of his work hoping it would always be played but, in private, he did. He did not like Haitink's 'long-winded' performance of the symphony, for example.

Not so, George Weldon. He would say to the orchestra at rehearsals, often with a lighted cigarette hanging out of his mouth, "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is what the composer wrote and this is what he is going to get."

One of the conductors of the CBSO, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, between Weldon and Rattle was Hugo Rignold who was in Birmingham between 1960 and 1968. He was an outstanding conductor and never afraid to tackle modern scores and difficult ones. He furthered the excellent work that Weldon began.

One will never forget Rignold's performance of Karl Amadeus Hartmann's superb Symphony No 6.

The Feeney Trust commissioned Humphrey Searle's Symphony No 4 for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It is a very difficult piece to perform and conduct. The orchestra, led by Felix Kok, was conducted by the composer and, at a rehearsal, Humphrey asked the orchestra to whom they owed their masterly skills as individuals and as a unit. The reply was, "George Weldon," (private letter from Searle to the author). This was also borne out by Norris Stanley who was with the CBSO all his life, coming up through the ranks until he became the leader. "Weldon was a fine conductor," he said, "and a really nice man and it was because of these qualities that he put others to shame and,

sadly, some did not like him.” Stanley remembered being conducted by Sibelius on one occasion and being shocked that he had a bottle of brandy on the rostrum that he kept swigging.

Chichester born Weldon was in his 37th year when he became the conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and he stayed there until 1951. He was very popular and, indeed, a very likeable man. His musicianship was excellent. He had a passion for English music at a time when this was still considered somewhat unfashionable and when the standard repertoire of Haydn to Brahms was preferred. But he had enemies and those of the most despicable type, those who were jealous of his success.

Ruth Gipps became the choirmaster of the CBSO Choir in 1948 after the birth of her son, Lance in 1947. Nasty rumours circulated that Ruth was having an affair with Weldon and some said that Lance was Weldon’s son. Ruth was married to the clarinettist, Robert Baker, and, often, when she was on buses going to orchestral rehearsals or concerts she would be taunted by some people who would speak to her in such a way as to emphasise that she was Mrs Baker. In 1950, she was replaced by the obnoxious David Willcocks but the facts are that both she and Weldon were subject to the most unpleasant stories and life became intolerable for both of them. Weldon left shortly after ‘Widdy’ Gipps did and took up a post as Sir John Barbirolli’s assistant with the Hallé Orchestra. (Private letters from Weldon, Gipps and many others).

Widdy Gipps also wrote the programme notes for the CBSO concerts as, for example, is evidenced by a concert in Birmingham Town Hall on 30 September 1948. The programme was:

Dance of the Seven Veils (Salome) Richard Strauss

Piano Concerto No 2 in B flat, Brahms
Cyril Preedy (piano)

Eine Kleine Nachtmusick Mozart

Symphony No 2 John Veale

(Actually it was John Veale’s Symphony No 1).

Willcocks was a determined man and wanted to get ahead. He hated the idea of women conductors. Like Sir Thomas Beecham, Willcocks thought that there were no women composers and that women must not be allowed any important position in the music-making world since it was exclusively a male preserve. Willcocks’s views were not hidden and, as a result, animosity arose and was directed at Gipps and Weldon. Also at Birmingham at this time, albeit as a professor of music at the University, was Anthony Lewis who was also blatantly sexist and he too made life very difficult for Gipps and, therefore, for Weldon. These two ‘up-and-coming’ male musicians wanted Gipps out as choirmaster of the Symphony Chorus but they could not fault her musicianship. They wanted Weldon out as well because he allowed Gipps’s appointment and premièred some of her work with the orchestra. Again, his musicianship could not be faulted and so someone hatched the plot to implicate them as morally unsuitable. In a private letter from Lewis, he stated that he was one of a few who were determined to remove them both. The music critic on the Birmingham Post, John Waterhouse, did not like Weldon and the financial considerations of the orchestra were in the hands of an accountant named Russell, while funds and sponsorship came from Guest, Keen and Nettlefold, a director of which was Neville Chamberlain’s son-in-law, he having married Dorothy Chamberlain. Money ruled the day.

As to the scurrilous rumours about George and Ruth, the fact of the matter was that Weldon, Gipps and her husband, Robert Baker were close friends. They holidayed together. Weldon was a bachelor all his life and he was hopeless domestically.

Ruth would help him with cooking and housework and they met to discuss the musical works that they were rehearsing for later performance. George tended not to bother about himself and Ruth believed that he was in danger of self-neglect. How the tongues wagged and how this was monitored by the men who wanted to see the demise of both Gipps and Weldon. It is also true that, at the time when Gipps was choirmaster, Weldon was romantically interested in one of the members of the orchestra. There was a sort of on-off relationship with that party. Weldon was interested in her and not in Wid Gipps. When Weldon's enemies eventually made this discovery they invented a new story... that George was gay!

The British composer, John Veale is one of many who are grateful to Weldon for performances. Weldon premièred Veale's Symphony No 1 in Birmingham in 1948 as indicated in the programme details above. Incidentally, Barbirolli was to give a performance of Veale's Symphony No 1 in Cheltenham in 1952. Weldon gave a broadcast of John Veale's Panorama in 1951 in Dudley, which had a hall noted for its good acoustics, after Boult had premièred it at the Malvern Festival that year. By popular demand the work had to be repeated a few days later in Malvern and so Elgar's Wand of Youth Suite was, to quote Boult, "Gladly sacrificed for a better work." (Private letter of Boult to the author). In private conversation, John Veale told me that Weldon was a very likeable man, very personable, a good conductor and totally without conceit.

At the rehearsals of Veale's Symphony No 1, Weldon was very attentive and keen to perform it exactly as the composer intended it. "He was very conscientious and careful," said John, "there was not a hint of arrogance about him. He was a pleasure to work with. He was never autocratic."

George had a passion for cars. When he arranged to meet John Veale at Snow Hill Station, George was worried. The composer might be a frail eighty year old and unused to fast cars. Actually John was 26 and enjoyed the ride in the open-topped Austin Healey. Weldon raced cars as a hobby.

In fact, this genuine kindness was probably another cause of Weldon's downfall in Birmingham. He was too nice a man. If he had been vitriolic, unlikeable and threatening, as his enemies were towards him, perhaps he would have achieved a victory of sorts. But he was not like that.

It is a source of great annoyance to me that the people in this business who 'get on' are the emotional musical thugs, not the most gifted and honourable people.

There are some performances by Weldon that people particularly remember. He was not a show off like Rattle or Karajan but a humble, dedicated musician. He once said that he had no time for relationships or marriage as he was married to music and could not be a bigamist. In the pizzicato movement of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 4, he would conduct only the first two bars and then stop and would not conduct again until the woodwind entries. He explained that not all the score needed conducting and that the star of the performance was never to be the conductor but the composer first and the orchestra second. How things have changed! There was a memorable performance of Walton's Sinfonia Concertante with Phyllis Sellick as the piano obligato.

A few years ago I was with the conductor Bryden Thomson who was conducting, among other things, Dvorák's splendid Carnival Overture. It was a scintillating performance and I said so to 'Jack' Thothemson. He replied, "Have you heard George Weldon's recording?"

Foolishly, I replied, "Should I?"

Quick as a flash, Jack replied, "Everybody should." Then he added, "That man was a prince among conductors."

Bryden Thomson was a truly great conductor. He had all the gifts of Reiner and Weldon and believed that the conductor was the servant of the music and it was his duty to 'tell the truth' musically.

As a conductor, Weldon had an absolutely clear beat; he was concerned with orchestral balance and he got to the heart of every composer that he represented. The orchestras liked him. He was unpretentious.

But the management of the CBSO criticised him both unfairly and without mercy, as did Waterhouse. He was told that his programmes were not enterprising enough and so he went to the Committee with some innovative ideas. They rejected them all. George would not win! He implemented a New Works' Policy to appease the Committee but this was disastrous as the Town Hall was often less than half full. And the management, which included Willcocks, scolded him and made him take the blame!

George travelled the world conducting and was well received everywhere, except by the despots in Birmingham. He was involved in the Anglo-Turkish concerts and took part in the 50th anniversary celebrations of the London Symphony Orchestra in 1954 in the presence of royalty.

This vindictiveness probably led to George smoking too much. He always had a box of cigarettes on the rostrum and in boxes of fifty or a hundred Players. He kept a chamber pot by the rostrum which he used as an ashtray. While he was not an inebriate, he liked his drink and it may be true that, after Gipps left, his concentration was affected. But as soon as Gipps left, Willcocks took over. In 1957, Willcocks took over as Director of Music at Kings College, Cambridge where all the singers were male. In view of his opinion of women musicians, this must have suited him very well.

With Barbirolli in Manchester, George felt that he could put the past behind him, including his failed romance with a member of the Birmingham Orchestra. His enemies rejoiced at his departure and said of his liaison with Gipps that he was guilty as charged and that is why he had run away... although not far enough.

Another myth that exists about conductors lies in the veneration that some receive. Barbirolli is claimed to have been a great conductor. This he was not, in the sense that he was very restricted in what he could conduct, as, indeed, was Beecham, although Beecham did have taste. Beecham loved Delius and despised Elgar for the thick, turgid scores that he produced. Beecham championed Richard Arnell, a composer who really needs attention. The neglect of his exciting and melodious scores is incomprehensible. Conductors who are restricted often lie about music. Barbirolli, for example, would say that he would not conduct a work because he did not like it whereas the truth was that it was too difficult for him and beyond him. Even his friends admitted this. One wrote to me, "If you put it in literacy terms, Sir John could read Enid Blyton but not Tolstoy."

But this shows up what a better conductor Weldon was than Barbirolli.

Barbirolli was engaged to conduct some Promenade Concerts at the Albert Hall during one season in the mid 1950s. He was told by the BBC all the items that he was to conduct and contractually agreed to them all. During rehearsals, at which George was present, Barbirolli was absolutely hopeless at a modern score he was working on. He had no idea how to beat irregular time signatures or how to balance the orchestral texture particularly in big chords. There were difficult entries and very complicated passages where the conductor has to guide the orchestra expertly. But his cues were non-existent. He simply did not have a clue. "This is an awful piece," he complained. But the truth was that he was unequal to it. It was his fault.

Barbirolli was a pompous, self-important man and, in this respect, was very much like Elgar. He had little idea about the mechanics of the orchestra. He was not very efficient, whereas Weldon was the last word in the mastery of orchestral mechanics. What Barbirolli had going for him was that he was an expert on strings and not just his own instrument, the cello. He had a wonderful ear for string sonorities and was very competent on fingering for string instruments.

If we compare Barbirolli with another conductor, Sir Adrian Boult, another interesting fact emerges.

Boult was, by far, the better conductor. Even if he did not like the music Boult would still conduct it simply because he was capable of doing so. Barbirolli was not. Boult conducted the first British performance of Berg's *Wozzeck* in 1935; he recorded for Lyrita the stunning *Symphony No 1* by Humphrey Searle. Boult told me, "I am not in sympathy with this music but have to admit its genius." Boult often performed Elgar and recorded his music but his famous remark about Elgar, which I have on video, comes to mind. "If Elgar's music is played badly, you blame the orchestra; if it is played well, you blame Elgar."

But to return to Barbirolli's incompetence with this modern score. He asked Weldon to rehearse it with the orchestra and within a very short space of time Weldon and the orchestra had mastered it. Barbirolli was not pleased and said that he would not conduct it. At the Promenade Concert, not only did Weldon conduct it, but it was a great success and the composer, when called to the platform, shook Weldon's hand for an extraordinary length of time not only in gratitude but in genuine admiration for George's ability.

Putting aside the merits of that particular piece, the important fact is that Weldon was a better conductor than Barbirolli. Weldon could do what Barbirolli could not. And there were other examples of this. To be fair to Barbirolli, he forgave Weldon. (Copy letter of Barbirolli to Weldon).

For most of his life Weldon was slim and had great physical energy. He had an impressive look about him although one wonders whether he could be called handsome. He had a slight stoop... a hazard of being a conductor. Some, without wishing to be offensive, said that he gave the appearance of being *louche*, slightly decadent.

When he died on a tour with the Hallé in South Africa in 1963 more nasty rumours began. Suicide was even mentioned. But it was through natural causes. The heavy smoking coupled with his asthma weakened him. His doctor had advised him not to go on this tour which included trips to Greece and Turkey. It was said that a South African winter would help George's asthma. On the Thursday he complained of a terrible pain in his leg and, after the concert in Cape Town on Saturday, he died. And yet George was not normally one to complain of any pain or discomfort.

There was music in Birmingham before Simon Rattle. This city had a very fine conductor in George Weldon who suffered because he was sincere and genuine and because lesser musicians were jealous of him.

It simply is not fair when lesser musicians and conductors, and, indeed, performers as well, are venerated and given the movie-star treatment and yet the greatest musicians are maligned, neglected or forgotten.

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(In memory of Ruth Gipps)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is written to fulfil a promise to the late Ruth Gipps and to set the record straight. I realise that I have written some things which may upset some people but it is not my intention to do so. What

I have written is the truth which other people should have made known long ago. I have no desire to be troublesome or offensive to anyone whether living or dead, or to any family or relatives of those who have died, and I am not making any accusations against anyone in particular so as to avoid any suggestion of libel. What I have written is also true to life, particularly the sexist attitude towards women after the Second World War in which many served courageously.