

QUINCY PORTER

(1990)

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

Quincy Porter was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1897. He was a direct descendant of the theologian, Jonathon Edwards, who had been born in East Windsor, Connecticut in 1703, ordained in 1727, after studying at Yale, and became the minister of Northampton Congregational Church in Massachusetts. He preached the doctrines of Jean Calvin which created conflict, and he was consequentially sacked in 1750. He wrote *Freedom of Will* in which he proclaimed the Calvinistic dogma that man has no free will to find God and that, in eternity past, God choose who was going to have eternal life in heaven and who He was going to consign to hell.

Porter was a grandson of a Yale professor and went to Yale himself as did his Connecticut predecessor, Charles Ives. Quincy studied the violin and composition under Horatio Parker (1863–1919). It is interesting to note that Parker's oratorio, *Hora Novissima* of 1907 was the first work by an American composers to be played at the British Three Choirs Festival thanks to the efforts of my great uncle, Sir Ivor Atkins. Parker had studied with Josef Rheinberger (1839–1901) in Germany becoming an accomplished organist himself and writing a *Organ Concerto* and an accomplished *Symphony*.

For his graduation, Porter composed a violin concerto in the style of Brahms. His teacher admired the work and the other works of his gifted pupil. This caused Porter to have a deep respect for Parker and, in fact, Quincy played in the orchestra in a performance of Parker's last work AD 1919. The performance was not a success since the composer was conducting and overcome with emotion.

Porter was not just a versatile musician excelling in playing the viola, but was a studious academic. He spoke fluent German and considered studying music in Germany but the First World War ended that ambition. This affected many other musicians who also abandoned the prospect of studying in Germany and because of this, this is how Nadia Boulanger made a success of being a teacher in Paris. She became something of a legend and if you had but only an half hour with her you could say that you studied with Boulanger.

In 1920–1 Porter studied at the Schola Cantorium with Vincent D'Indy.

Porter's parents had wanted him to study law but Porter's mind was set on music.

Vincent D'Indy was born in Paris in 1851 and sent one of his compositions, a piano quintet, to the Belgian composer Cesar Franck, born 1822, who agreed to teach him. Neither Franck or D'Indy are be regarded as great composers. In fact, it is a general view, that much of their music is either dull or predictable. But D'Indy was one of the founders of the Schola Cantorium in 1894.

There is a clear influence of D'Indy in some of Porter's scores and some worrying features, the most obvious being marking a movement *allegro* when most of the movement is predominantly slow. But things changed when D'Indy discovered a great composer, Richard Wagner. The result was that D'Indy produced rich orchestration and drama in his music and jettisoned the pastel and dreary uneventful music of French and Belgian impressionists. This influence was to characterise some of Porter's music notably in the strong pages of the *Symphony no. 1*.

On his return from Paris, Porter lived in New York and, like Roger Sessions another highly intellectual composer, studied with Ernest Bloch both in Cleveland and in Manhattan. Bloch was a Jew born in Geneva in 1880. It has been said that his compositions were based on contrivances and formulae suffering from the annoying episodic quality of his music with its frequent stops and starts. His best work shows a spirituality and Jewishness, whereas Porter's music is tranquil and, perhaps, sometimes uneventful and, therefore, not altogether satisfactory.

Porter played the violin in the Capitol Theatre Orchestra and the viola in the de Ribaupierre String Quartet the leader being André de Ribaupierre in the Cleveland days while he was studying with Bloch. With the

quartets he played all the quartets of Beethoven and several first performances including the Piano Quintet of Bloch.

As a teacher, Bloch would give his pupils assignments including studying and analysing a composer's work and method of composition. For Porter, it had to be the motets of Roland de Lassus, a Flemish composer who lived from 1532 to 1594 dying in Munich. He was regarded as the first master of polyphony and continuity in music a feature which, sadly, does not always pervade Porter's scores.

For example, the first movement of Porter's String Quartet no 3 of 1930 is marked allegro but after about 55 seconds it becomes a slow andante. In fact there is only about 95 seconds which can be called allegro. The rest is not merry, quick and lively at all.

In 1928 Porter was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and he chose to return to Paris and he stayed there for three years studying with Nadia Boulanger. Lennox Berkeley was a student of hers from 1927 to 1932 and knew Porter. In Paris the American composer, now in his early thirties, conceived and wrote his Ukrainian Suite for string orchestra, his Violin Sonata no. 2, his Piano Sonata and the Suite for viola alone.

He returned to the USA and went to Vassar, Massachusetts in 1932 and in his six years sojourn there he composed his Symphony no. 1 and the Dance in Three Time. He also wrote Dance in Four Time and Dance in Five Time. In these years Boston did not take up his work with their own conductors. Porter conducted his own work. He was a more than average conductor since his days as an undergraduate at Yale where he revived the University Orchestra. He conducted many student orchestras and was a welcome guest conductor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the New York Symphony Orchestra. With Aaron Copland and others he set up the American Music Centre in Manhattan.

The symphony won a honourable mention for new American works in 1936–7 in the New York Philharmonic season the winner being Gardner Read. One of the losers was Aaron Copland using a pseudonym and the piece was El Salon Mexico.

Porter's symphony is in three movements which originally had titles Strophe, Antistrophe and Epode as if a Greek tragedy but Porter later withdrew these titles. He said that the symphony expressed his feelings which could only be written down as music. The music has a pastoral flavour depicting the American countryside complete with the sound of a busy woodpecker. Sometimes summer with its hypnotic heat haze is clear and the tranquil, rural scene is beautifully captured. It may not have the immediacy of Samuel Barber's exquisite Knoxville and Porter does not go in for massive sound and sensationalism.

In 1938 he accepted the position of Dean at the New England Conservatory and became director in 1942. This meant executive and administration duties whereas he would have preferred to continue to compose. The year 1938 saw the premiere of his Symphony no. 1 by the New York Philharmonic at the Carnegie Hall on 2 April with the composer conducting. It received a measure of success. Koussevitsky apparently rejected it, but then approached Porter for a new work but the composer doubted the conductor's sincerity and nothing came of it.

In 1943 Porter was awarded the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Medal for his contribution to chamber music. Many believe that his ten string quartets are the finest produced by an American composer.

For all the comments about the New England style of music being austere, Porter had a boyish fascination with gadgets of all kinds. He would spend hours tinkering with some mechanical or other device and displaying unlimited patience.

When his father died in New Haven in 1946, Porter was called to a professorship at Yale. He was there for ten years and were the most fruitful time in his career. In this time he composed his Viola Concerto which enjoyed many performances by William Primrose and Harry Danks. Porter completed his String Quartet no. 8 in 1950 and, in 1954, won the Pulitzer Prize for his Concertante for two pianos and orchestra.

At Yale he was Battell Professor of Theory at the Music School but he could not get on with another Yale professor the distinguished German composer, Paul Hindemith until he went to Zurich in 1950. Porter tended to live in the past whereas Hindemith was labelled a modernist.

In the last years of his life he pursued composition in New Haven where he lived with his wife, the violinist Lois Brown whom he had married in his Cleveland days. They had two children. In the summers they lived in a house on Squam Lake, New Hampshire which Porter's father had built. On a hill in the grounds was the "hut" where Porter composed. He was a great thinker, as was Roger Sessions, but he would not talk about his music although he would say that he wanted to write something different. Like all great men, he was a modest, self-effacing man.

Here in New Hampshire he wrote most of his New England Episodes (1958), the Harpsichord Concerto (1960), the Symphony no. 2 (1961–2) and his final chamber work, the haunting Oboe Quintet (1962).

The Symphony no. 2 was completed in October 1962 a few days before the Cuban Missile Crisis and its premiere took place on 14 January 1964 shortly after President Kennedy's assassination. While these events are not in the music there is some angst and a reflection of the Cold War situation. The music is sarcastic as in the quaint finale of the String Quartet no. 2 the music is largely introspective.

Quincy Porter died in 1966 in Bethany, Connecticut of a stroke while sitting in his television room watching the Yale–Princeton football match.

List of works

- 9 string quartets
- 2 symphonies
- Viola concerto
- Harpsichord concerto
- Concerto Concertante for two pianos and orchestra

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