

ROBERT CRAWFORD

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It is with deep regret that we announce the death of Robert Crawford on January 26, 2012...

He was a scrupulously exact composer and individual. He agonised over every note in his small output of outstanding chamber music. It is his inherent fastidiousness which is the sure foundation of his music.

He came from a family in which his father was both an artist and exceptional craftsman, and his mother a poet. His two sisters continued in the line of practical skills – one is a weaver, the other a potter. Like his father, Robert was patient in his work, aware that being prolific can produce substandard work.



He was born Robert Caldwell Crawford in Edinburgh on 18 April 1925. After schooling at Craigend Park and Melville College, he was evacuated to Keswick where, at the grammar school, his music studies continued with Bertha Pell who later married the composer, Bernard Stevens. The Reid School of Music in Edinburgh did not suit his needs during 1943-44, and so he went to the Guildhall School of Music in London between 1945-1949.

However, earlier, and during the war, he had studied privately with Hans Gal at his Edinburgh home at a time when Robbie was working as a laboratory assistant having been rejected for Army service. He believed that his work in science laboratories may have led to his death.

He was taught species counterpoint and, perhaps, Crawford's expert contrapuntal 'technique' owes something to this period of study.

Gal had a responsible and mature attitude to both life and music, and this suited the serious-minded student whose love of music and a 'somewhat crazy wish to compose music' drove him on. His painfully self-critical personality made composition a struggle for him. Yet that conflict does not show itself in his fluent style. His admiration for Bach, Haydn and Schubert has given his work great lucidity, and his recognition of the worth of Sibelius and Bartok lies behind his impressive String Quartet no. 1, Op 4 of 1949.

It was first performed at the ISCM Festival in Frankfurt by the Berlin Quartet in 1951. The compositional skill is impeccable; the musical argument is easily followed; the music is strong and vibrant but not overwhelming. At the end of this piece, you are aware that you have undergone a satisfactory musical experience. A fellow composer, Thea Musgrave, said after hearing a performance, "This is real music".

The Piano Sonata no. 2, op 5 of 1951 is a large scale work, striking for its memorable material and splendid writing for the piano.

But to go back a couple of years. At GSM, Robert studied the viola with Ernest Yonge, conducting with Aylmer Buesst and played in his orchestra under Edric Cundell. But it was the study of composition with the distinguished composer Benjamin Frankel that was the great attraction. Frankel advised Robbie not to be so self-critical and obsessive and to write more rapidly. The result was the Six Bagatelles, Op 3, for piano of 1948 performed that same year by Ilona Kabos at the Wigmore Hall. The work was also taken up by Bernard Sumner and John Ogdon.

While at GSM, Crawford won the Wainwright Memorial Scholarship and the Prize of the Worshipful Company

of Musicians. His first commission came from the McEwan Commission of Glasgow University. This resulted in the String Quartet no 2, Op 8 of 1951. Christopher Grier wrote of its elegance, wit, attractive astringency and real beauty. The Glasgow Herald proclaimed its intellectual intensity and that it was a masterpiece.

A further commission from the same source led to the composition of Ricerare of 1986/87. The work is written for the same combination of instruments as Schubert's Octet of 1824. Crawford's work is in one movement, entirely based on the opening canonic pattern, which is then varied and developed. It was first performed in May 1987.

The year 1991 saw the completion of two piano pieces: A Saltire Sonata was written for Peter Seivewright and the Sonata Breve was written for the Scottish International Piano Competition in September 1992. It is subtitled Homage to Domenico Scarlatti. Crawford's piano music and the Piano Quintet of 2005 is available on Delphian Records DCD34055 in which the excellent pianist is Nicholas Ashton.

Hammered Brass for brass quintet and percussion was completed in August 1995. It was written to celebrate the ancient skills of craftsmen working with various metals. The peculiarity of each metal is captured in this notable score. It was commissioned by ECAT and is available on Linn Records CD.CKD 0162. It was the last recording of the splendid Wallace Collection, made in 2001.

His ability to write effectively for brass as well as strings stimulated his interest in writing an orchestral work. For some time he considered a Viola Concerto but eventually wrote a purely orchestral piece called Lunula premiered at Ayr Town Hall on 26 March 1988 and the final pages were revised in 2001. It is a very good piece and it is a pity he has not written more orchestral pieces. The work was a commission from BBC Radio 3.

The Variations on an original theme for two pianos was commissioned by Jean and Jack Keaney and completed in December 1995. It has a twelve note theme but it is not a serial work. The Clarinet Quintet was first performed by Douglas Mitchell and the Edinburgh Quartet and is now available on CD (Metier msv 28520) beautifully played by Linda Merrick and the Addenbury Ensemble, along with the Elegiac Quintet for recorder and string quartet and the mercurial Three two-part Inventions for recorder and clarinet.

On a personal note, Robert married Stephanie Frankel in Hampstead in July 1949. She is no relation to the composer Benjamin Frankel. They had two children, Elliot and Judith. Sadly, Stephanie died of cancer in 1974. Four years later, Robbie married Alison, daughter of the composer, Robin Orr.

Crawford was a freelance music critic from 1958 to 1970 and, for the next fifteen years, a music producer for the BBC. Among other things he was an external examiner for the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.

Robert was a quiet and determined person, a very courteous speaker and a composer of refined quality. While his string quartets should not be singled out, they, along with those of fellow Scot, David Dorward, have undoubtedly set a standard by which other works in this medium can be judged.

The String Quartet no 3 was completed in 2008 and written at the request of Paul Baxter of Delphian records to make up a CD of Quartets 1 to 3. This work is set in four movements which makes full use of the chromatic scale in a calculated pattern. Like all his works in sonata form since the Quartet no 1, the composer explores the possibilities of musical false relations.

The String Quartet no 4 was completed on 10 December 2010. It seems to follow convention patterns of the classical sonata form namely fast, slow, scherzo and the variation form for the finale. Like all his music, this quartet falls into a pattern of continuous development and variation material without any formal structure or repeats that would suggest a classical recapitulation.

In his quartets all the instruments are of equal importance.

We should listen to the music and not fret about details.

Robbie was working on a String Quintet, the fifth instrument being a double bass when health was in decline with a terminal illness.

Delphian records recorded the Quartets 1,2 and 3 played by the Edinburgh Quartet and the CD is available. Robbie was very pleased with the performances.

I spoke to Robbie a few days before his death. Actually it was Alison I spoke to, and Robbie was vey unwell but he insisted on speaking to me. He said that he was very frail, in considerable pain and his bones hurt. He remained the courteous knowledgeable and delightful friend he always was..

He was a truly lovable man, a role model of an excellent human being, something very rare in these days.

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