

RUDOLPH ESCHER

David Wright DMus

This Dutch composer, Rudolf George Escher, was born in Amsterdam on 5 January 1912. His father, Bernard George, was a geologist and mineralogist and Rudolf's half brother, Maurits Cornelius, was a graphic artist. When Rudolf was four, the family moved to Batavia in the Dutch East Indies where the father worked as an engineer with the Batavia Petroleum Company.

In 1922, back in the Netherlands, Rudolph studied at Leiden gymnasium, then at the Toonkunst Conservatory in Rotterdam from 1931 taking composition lessons with Willem Pijper. Escher's piano sonata dates from 1935. He played the piano and, to some extent, learned the violin and cello.

He also wrote a distinguished essay, *Toscani and Debussy*.

On 14 May 1940, Rotterdam was bombed and many of Escher's scores were destroyed. He complained, 'I experienced the inner value of my work more than I did last year. It is truly an antidote against the morally destructive effect of such infernal violence.'

This quote is from a letter to his sister, Lot, and his brother-in-law, Jan Schouten on 11 February 1941.

During the war, Escher composed *Musique pour l'esprit en deuil*, 1941-43, which elevated him as an important composer in the Netherlands. It is an incredible orchestral score of originality and fascination. Also in 1947-8 is the *Concerto voor Strijkorkest* (string orchestra). Other works of the 1930s and 1940s are *Passacaglia* for organ 1937, *Sonata concertante* for cello and piano 1943, *sonata* for two flutes 1944, *Arxana suite* for piano 1944 and a trio for oboe, clarinet and bassoon of 1947. His orchestral work, *Hymne du Grand Meaulnes* appeared in 1951 and the title was changed to *Chant de Grand Meaulnes*.

After the war, he was a contributor both to the visual arts and music for the *Groene Amsterdammer*. He was a talented poet publishing in poetry magazines in the 1950s and he was successful as a composer. He befriended the Dutch composer Matthijs Vermeulen (1888- 1967) who objected to the German influence on Dutch music and he showed his dissatisfaction at the lack of artistic integrity in the Netherlands.

He lost his wife and beloved son in 1944 and remarried in 1946 to Thea Diepenbrock, daughter of his mentor.

His own music was subject to hostility but decidedly atonal and contrapuntal. There are seven symphonies. He was also an admirer of Debussy.

But to return to Escher who won many prizes :

Music prize of City of Amsterdam 1946 for *Musique pour l'esprit en deuil*

Dutch Government Grant 1947 for *Arcana*

First prize City of Amsterdam for *Le vrai visage de la paix*

Visser Netherlands prize for *Nostalgia* of 1961

ditto for *Wind Quintet* 1968

Professor Van der Leeuw prize for *Le Tombeau de Ravel* 1959

Willem Pijper prize 1966 for *Sonata concertante* for cello and piano

Johan Wagenaar prize 1977 for all his works

Another impressive work of Escher is the Symphony no 1 of 1953-54. It is everything a symphony should be, full of contrast, drama, lyricism and purpose. It could be called a towering masterpiece.

Chamber music preoccupied most of his output from the late 1940s such as

- Due Voci for piano 1949
- Non troppo, ten easy pieces for piano 1949
- Sonata for solo flute 1949
- Sonata for violin and piano 1950
- Sonatina for piano 1951
- Le Tombeau de Ravel 1952
- Air pour charmer un lézard for flute 1953
- String Trio 1959
- Wind Quintet 1967
- Monologue for solo flute 1969
- Sonata for solo clarinet 1973
- Sinfonia per dieci instruments 1976
- Sonata for flute and piano 1976
- Trio for clarinet, viola and piano 1978

On the orchestral scene, there appears the Symphony no 2 of 1955, Summer Rites at Noon of 1969 and an orchestration of Debussy's Six Epigrams Antiques of 1977.

His vocal and choral works are

- Chants du desirs (Louise Labe) mezzo, piano 1951
- Nostalgies (Levet) tenor and orchestra 1951
- Strange Meeting (Wilfred Owen) baritone,piano 1952
- Le vrai visage de la paix (Eluard) a cappella 1953
- Songs of love and eternity (Emily Dickinson) a cappella 1965
- Ciel air et vents (Ronsard) a cappella 1957
- Univers (Rimbaud) tenor and orchestra 1970
- Three Auden poems 1975 a cappella.

Escher was a very fussy composer often revising his work such as the two symphonies, for example. He was not happy with the Violin Sonata but the conductor Reinbert finally encouraged the composer. The slow movement shows some influence of the French masters.

Escher died on 17 March 1980 at De Kong on the Frisian island of Texel. He was 68. His friends and widow formed an Escher committee and, in 1992, the committee published correspondence between Escher and fellow composer, Peter Schat.(1935-2003). A foundation was set up to benefit young composers and perform Escher's works.

(796)

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright DMus 2017 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.

WM 17.11