

## WILLIAM MATHIAS

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William Mathias was an optimistic composer whose music often abounds with energy. And yet, he could also compose contemplative music. He was both exceptionally versatile and skilled in his ability to write for any medium. It is interesting that he often followed a 'serious' work with a 'lighter' one and it has been suggested that a thread runs through his complete oeuvre. Like Handel and Beethoven, he would revise material and reuse it not because he had run out of ideas but because he valued his material.

Mathias had a desire for originality in his music. Like all truly great composers he did not wish to suffer from 'musicologists' who often exclaim, "Oh, that passage sounds like so-and-so". No great composer wants to sound like someone else and comparisons of this sort can be odious. To quote one example, Mathias's Harp Concerto, Op 50, is not in any way the usual depiction of a pretty mermaid emerging from the sea or a depiction of heavenly angels. It is not nauseating, sentimental or stereotyped but music that is sturdy and impressive. It is marvellously written. The finale has a well-judged and effective use of percussion, and the solo part is neither effeminate nor weak.



This commendable quest for originality first showed itself in a compelling rhythmic drive. His early works especially never have a static quality; there is always movement and this enhances the continuity of his work. The other striking attribute is that his ceremonial works are never pompous, reminding me of that astute remark of Sir Roger Norrington when he said, "Music should never be pompous." Hear! Hear!

Most of his work has a clear texture even in heavily-scored passages; his enviable rhythmic vitality is shown best in such a work as his deservedly popular Piano Concerto No 3, Op 40 of 1968 which has exhilarating swagger, a robust energy and a canvass of kaleidoscopic colour. It has both a power and scintillation about it, as does Bartók and Prokofiev, and yet Mathias is not emulating any composer.

Here is a composer with his own personality and strength. Much of his work has the personal brand of infectious rhythmic vitality, spicy harmonies and melodic lines. He also had an extraordinary gift for what I can only describe as 'musical accentuation', a very personal type of multi-syncopation which occasionally recalls jazz. His music is often very colourful although never excessive. There is an enviable mastery in much that he does.

I suppose one could describe his music as 'controlled enthusiasm' but that does not in any way preclude his evident skill and technique. This is partly why he received commissions from major festivals.

Sadly, the majority of people do not realise that a composer's life is a lonely one in the musical sense. Nor do people realise or appreciate the complexity of music-making and how composers and performers need to be precise and accurate on every detail and how this affects their character. While some musicians are naturally difficult and sometimes unpleasant, others can be misunderstood and disliked because they sought perfection. The conductors Fritz Reiner and Bryden Thomson come into this latter category.

Mathias was often misunderstood. He developed an original idea of what some have termed 'recessional music' which, put simply, means that instead of music heading towards a climax or resolution it recedes from that expected point. It was part of his quest for originality to de-conventionalise tradition and, in that, one can but admire him. This 'recessional concept' is seen in his Symphony No 1, Op 31 of 1966 and other subsequent works.

William James Mathias was born in Whitland, Carmarthenshire on 1 November 1934, the only child of James Hughes Mathias, BA, who was deputy headmaster of Whitland Grammar School, and Marian Evans, ALCM, JP who was a piano teacher and organist. They were married at Whitland Tabernacle on 3 January 1934. Marian's father, Rhys Evans, was an amateur conductor and was also headmaster of Llanfallteg School. Rhys Evans' father, James Evans, was a chief engineer attached to Cyfarthfa Ironworks in Merthyr Tydfyl. William Hughes Mathias, brother of James, was a highly successful businessman and became High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire and was awarded the OBE.

At a very early age William began to write down music from the pianola. At five, he began piano lessons with a local teacher. He attended Whitland Primary School and at the age of eleven began attending Whitland Grammar School.

He was an exceptional student in everything except woodwork. He went up to University College of Wales in 1952 and achieved a first class BMus in 1956. Then he took up an open scholarship in Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London from 1956 - 58.

From the age of seven he had played the piano in public and knew from a very early age that he wanted to be a composer. But it was while at Aberystwyth, where he went to study English, French and Philosophy, that he was encouraged by Ian Parrott and changed his studies to music. At first, his parents were not in favour of a musical career since, at that time, a career as a composer in Wales was considered an amateur or leisure pursuit. And yet, Wales has produced some of the greatest singers and musicians and their choirs are as good as any others anywhere in the world. Two of his fellow students were the tenor Kenneth Bowen and the composer David Harries. Mathias won a number of compositional prizes at RAM. In fact, when he was a teenager, he wrote the school song for Whitland Grammar School.

The first work of his maturity was the Divertimento for string orchestra, Op 7 first performed at the RAM in March 1958. It was later broadcast on the BBC Third Programme. While in London, Mathias had two terms of study of the piano with Peter Katin. He was not the best of students, particularly when it came to fingering, but Peter brought Mathias up to concert-pianist standard.

He married Margaret Yvonne Collins at Libanus Chapel, Aberaman on 17 September 1959. Yvonne was a professional singer. Their daughter, Rhiannon was born on 10 October 1968 and is a flautist and lecturer. Having achieved her respective bachelor and masters degree she is currently working on her PhD. With two LRAMs, William Mathias began his teaching career as a lecturer in the music department of University College of North Wales, Bangor in 1959. During 1968-9, he was senior lecturer in composition at Edinburgh University before returning to Bangor in 1970 to become Head of Music until he retired in 1988. He founded the North Wales International Music Festival at St Asaph in 1972.

He was elected a fellow of the RAM in 1965 and received a doctorate of music from the University of Wales in 1966 and elected a fellow in 1990. He was awarded an honorary doctorate of music by Westminster Choir College, Princeton in 1987, the Arnold Bax Society prize for composition in 1968 and the John Edwards Memorial Award from the Guild of the Promotion of Welsh Music in 1982. He had many positions: Member of the Welsh Arts Council 1974 - 81 and Chairman of its committee 1982-8; he was on the Music Advisory Committee of the British Council 1974-83; ISM 1976-80 and its president 1979-80; BBC Central Advisory Committee 1979-86; Welsh Advisory Committee of the British Council 1979-80; on the Council of the Composers Guild from 1982 onwards; Vice-President of the Royal College of Organists 1985-6 and the Chairman of ISM in 1990. He was created a CBE in the New Year's Honours List of 1985. This was partly due to his composing an anthem for HRH Prince Charles and Diana Spencer on the occasion of their wedding which 75 million people saw and heard.

What an audience for a four-minute work which television commentators ignorantly talked over! It is amazing that Elton John receives a knighthood following his 'performance' at Diana's funeral whereas Mathias, a true musician, only receives a CBE!

There is in Mathias's music a Celtic consciousness. This spiritual dimension is crucial to the understanding of his work. At the heart of his spiritual beliefs lie the concepts of praise and celebration but, in addition,

many of his works are meditative. In his early years he was a Baptist but later changed to the Church of Wales.

Mathias believed himself to be closer to 'classical' composers than the modern ones. He adored Mozart particularly *The Magic Flute*. He did not trust works of extreme self-expression or composers who were egotistical. He admired Debussy, Bartók, Gershwin, Stravinsky and Tippett. His great desire was to write music for now and not for an uncertain future. Had he not died so young on 29 July 1992 aged 57, what might he have accomplished? Death was an inspiration to him, however. Following the death of his mother in March 1980, he composed the large choral and orchestral work *Lux Aeterna* first performed at the Three Choirs Festival in 1982.

His other substantial choral and orchestral work is *This World's Joie*. It is set in four sections corresponding with the seasons. Spring represents Youth; Summer, Maturity, Autumn, Decline and Winter, Death. Many of the ingenious things that Mathias does in this piece may only be appreciated by professionals. The tritone G–C sharp infuses the melodic invention. There is a telling use of diminished fifths and successive minor thirds. He uses an eight-note scale that uses two diminished sevenths... G, A, B flat, C, D flat, E flat, F flat, and G flat, and this, and many other devices, give the work a splendid originality. He has the amazing ability to change tone and modulate over a held pedal-note. He also uses two modes in one scale and throughout the work, the music is generally non-demonstrative but the finale is truly magnificent.

One of the qualities I most admire about Mathias's music is his harmonies and his ability in modulation. Combined they make for gorgeous sounds.

The *Symphony No 1* of 1966 is dedicated to his wife, Yvonne. It is in four movements and retains the features of classical design. The opening *allegro moderato* is in sonata form. Whereas its clear structure and form is one of its strengths, the constant use of the piano, usually to double the higher strings, may become a little wearisome. It is a movement of subdued brilliance and may suffer because of its leisurely tempo which slackens at least twice. In non-academic terms, the movement is 'recessional' in that it does not reach any usual climaxes and there is therefore a lack of tension and development. The second movement, *vivace*, is a type of scherzo. Although it ends bravely it still remains low-key and yet the content and structure is exemplary. The slow movement, *molto adagio*, is by far the best. It has an independent piano part, woodwind solos, a sparkling quartet for glockenspiel, celesta, harp and piano, some intense dark string writing, clever counterpoint and a concluding flute solo. The finale begins *largamente* proceeding to *allegro con brio*, a rondo which expects much and delivers less. Again, it is well written but it lacks tension and dramatic content save for the last forty bars. I once advocated to the composer that the symphony was an understatement in a noble attempt not to make an overstatement. Gracious as ever, he replied, "I think you may be right." Mathias was kind, gregarious but remained a rather private man.

The *Symphony No 2* (*Summer Music*) is wonderful, unusual music. If the first symphony may hint at Shostakovich's First then this one hints at Shostakovich's Eighth.

It has a warm, glowing mysterious opening. It is peaceful but when 'the countryside bursts into life' there is a great sense of both activity and atmosphere. But the music never really gets going... and yet, what colour, what vistas and what a sound world which some have expressed as a cross between the English pastoral and French impressionists. The second movement promises much. It is stronger and well-judged. There is both an energy and a logic; the orchestration is vivid and, at times, striking. The music is often very impressive and its strength is sometimes staggering. The third movement is warm 'rural' music with a strange beauty. The shifting harmonies suggest gentle clouds floating in a summer's sky. Despite its warmth it is not sickly music and we do have a stunning climax. The finale begins as if it were a medieval hunt as Ruth Gipps depicts in her *Fourth Symphony*. Here is another example of Mathias's controlled enthusiasm but it sinks in the middle before a heady conclusion.

There is no doubt that Mathias's finest symphony is his *Symphony No 3*, his last. The opening movement is of controlled brilliance and a semi-rugged grandeur. It has something of Roussel's orientalism and the pounding bass as Tippett used in the opening of his *Symphony No 2*. The slow section rather deflates the piece but the 'Celtic twilight' is here in all its glory. The slow movement combines dark strings and excellent woodwind

solos; the writing for the oboe is exquisite. There is a powerful climax and so, if a pun is permitted, the 'recessional' music has receded.

Strength is the key to the majority of the music that follows in this fine symphony. While we cannot have white heat all the time the loss of momentum and suspense does rather disappoint but the swagger of such works as the Piano Concerto No 3 returns. Often the music borders on being angry.

Central to his output are his eleven concertos. The Piano Concerto No 1 seems to languish in the past; the Piano Concerto No 2 follows traditional lines and stands between Shostakovich's Second and Bartók's Third. The Piano Concerto No 3 is a work of exhilaration, a real piano concerto in every sense, and they are rare today. The recording with Peter Katin should be acquired by all genuine music-lovers.

It is certain that the piano concertos are among Mathias's finest works. The Concerto for harpsichord, percussion and strings, Op 56 was premièred at the Fishguard Festival on 26 June 1971. Gillian Weir later took it up. This is a very difficult medium to write for and I am not convinced that the composer succeeds. The limitation of the harpsichord can limit what the composer wants to say. However, the concerto has a vigorous finale.

The Organ Concerto, Op 92 is a rewarding work but may take some getting to know. It stands alone among the concertos since it is one movement lasting half-an-hour. The composer's original idea was to set the fourteen stations of the Cross as variations and conclude with a movement or variation entitled *Et resurrexit*. Mathias considered calling the work *Via Crucis*. The starting point is a quotation from a canon by Bach *Christus corobanit crucigeros*. There are references in this mighty concerto to some of his earlier works, the Litanies for orchestra of 1967, part of the *Dies Irae* from *Lux Aeterna* and the climax of the first movement of the Symphony No 2 completed a year earlier. There is a short passage from the Harp Concerto and the *Elegy for a Prince*, Op 59. The concerto uses six trumpets and the composer has brilliantly solved all the problems of balance. It is a profound work and genuinely invokes the idea of a pilgrimage. But we are not left with despair as the original subject matter may suggest but with the glorious affirmation of ageless truth: "Christ is not here. He is risen. Why seek ye the living among the dead? Death is swallowed up in victory!"

This work was premièred at the BBC Proms in 1984. Another substantial work is the Violin Concerto the first performance of which was entrusted to György Pauk and the Hallé Orchestra under the reliable Sir Charles Groves. It owes something to the great nineteenth century concertos and the masterpiece of Sibelius is hinted at. I find this work problematical. It lacks form and by this I mean a clearly defined shape. It is aurally difficult for the average listener to pick out defined themes and where there are no obvious landmarks there are no obvious valleys. The energetic music fills us with great expectancy but it is short-lived. There is much to admire here but, for some of us, it does not gel into a convincing whole.

The same year saw the première of the Horn Concerto, Op 93 at the Llandaff Festival on 9 June with Hugh Potts as the soloist with the Northern Sinfonia under Richard Hickox. Its reduced scoring is for strings and timpani and a four-note phrase recalling Shostakovich again, this time the Symphony No 10, which dominates this work. It is a typical Mathias concerto alternating 'perky' music with that individual contemplative style. The scherzo succeeds because it maintains its pulse and the long slow movement is very beautiful. The finale is rhythmically vibrant and both memorable and hugely enjoyable... and Shostakovich reappears! The superlative performance that I have is of Frank Lloyd and the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra under Bryden Thomson.

The other concertos are for flute, oboe and clarinet respectively. Of these, the Clarinet Concerto is the finest and deserves to be better known. Parts of the slow movement are exquisite and the finale has exuberant high spirits. Great fun!

The chamber music may be worth exploring. There are three string quartets. The Quartet No 1 is in one movement and is very well written although it does not have the mercurial flow and continuity of a Mendelssohn. It seems to be an experimental work, a testing of the waters and it is introspective. It never gets going; it is like a fledgling bird perpetually trying to fly. The Quartet No 2 is arguably the best of the three having clear lines, rhythmic drive and varied colours. The Quartet No 3 has much to commend it,

particularly the central movement but, overall, the work does not seem to easily communicate aurally. Quartets need to have character and vigour as well as lyricism. Slow music, in this medium, however well written it is, can sound both dreadful and feeble. But the Quartet No 2 is a really good piece.

The music speaks far better than any words. If you compare the quartets with the Divertimento, Op 7 you will easily prove that the continuity in the earlier work is vastly more satisfying.

In fact, William Mathias' early works are somewhat more rewarding than some of his later ones when he employed his 'recessional music' where his music no longer developed or worked towards expected climaxes. He was an excellent pianist having studied with Peter Katin and his understanding of the piano is assured. The Piano Sonata No 1, Op 23 is individual, strong and expertly laid out for the piano. It has a brilliance that is not that uncomfortable dazzling white light that blinds because it is always at the top of the piano, but a rugged brilliance. It teems with energy. It may not have the swaggering gait of the Piano Concerto No 3 but it is impressive. The slow movement is worth getting to know. It has a beauty and simplicity that defies its depth. The final toccata is full of vitality and athletic leaps.

The Sonata No 2, Op 46 dates from 1969 and is one of many piano sonatas that have employed the terrific Liszt Sonata as their model. Humphrey Searle did this first in 1951 in accordance with the precise instruction of the body commissioning this sonata for the 140th anniversary of Liszt's birth. The Mathias is in the slow-fast-slow format. The opening is uneasy and then the music suddenly releases a tremendous blast and internal energy. This is good, old-fashioned, exciting piano music full of suspense, tension and exhilaration. The final section explores wonderful harmonies and arabesque figures and eventually leads to a quiet ending.

I do not know Mathias's opera, *The Servants*, but Malcolm Boyd wrote enthusiastically about it and, consequently, a revival would be welcome.

There is much excellent organ music including short pieces, and choral works of distinction but there are too many to mention here.

He died on 29 July 1992 and is buried outside St Asaph Cathedral. In his last years he told me that he had suspected heart trouble and this affected his personality and the quality of his music.

As with all composers, the quality of Mathias's music varies. One wishes that some works had not been written but his finest works should become regularly programmed in concerts and recitals.

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