

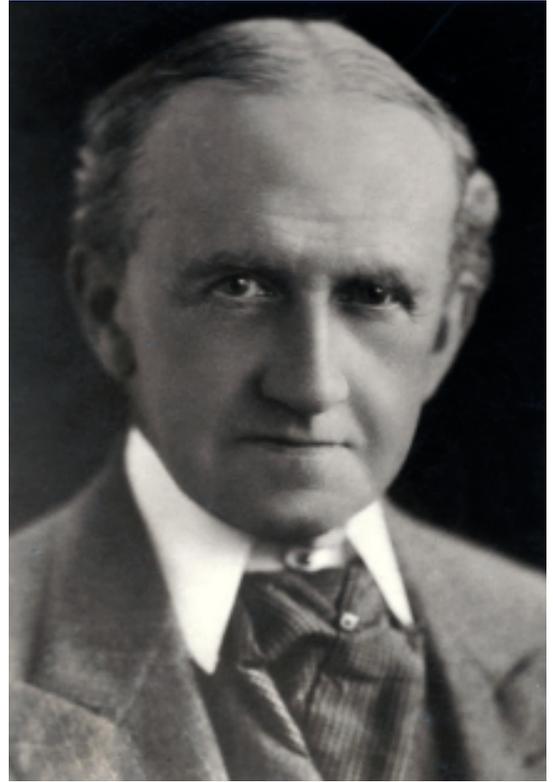
ALGERNON ASHTON

David C F Wright DMus

Algernon Ashton is an interesting British composer, now mostly forgotten.

One could ask why. His music is attractive but, perhaps, lacking in originality. He hated both originality and progress in music. He was highly critical of some compositional styles and his outspoken views on this and many other matters caused much offence and, consequently, people ignored him. He was also criticised severely by some including Havergal Brian whose own works leave a lot to be desired.

The other objection was that his music was said to be not British. He studied in Leipzig where one of his sisters was already studying. His mother and two other sisters moved to Leipzig with him and only when he was twenty two did he return to England. Had he followed in the footsteps of Elgar and wrote in his style he may have become popular. Thankfully, he did not do that.



Algernon Bennet Langton Ashton was born in Durham on 9 December 1859. His father died in 1863 which resulted in the family considering a major move.

In Leipzig he studied with Ivan Knorr from the age of seven and apparently Moscheles took an interest in him. When he was fifteen, he entered the Conservatory studying many aspects of music and had lessons with Carl Reinecke. Ashton moved to Frankfurt in 1880 and briefly studied with Raff. The German influence went further since he became immersed in the music of Beethoven and most of his works were published in Germany.

He settled in London in 1881 and in 1885 Grove gave him the position of a professorship at the Royal College of Music. Among his pupils were Coleridge-Taylor and Hurlstone. From 1913 to 1935 he taught at the London College of Music.

He kept a diary from the age of fifteen onwards and 58 volumes were written. He wrote many letters to newspapers and journals on a variety of subjects which letters were often vitriolic. Many letters concerned the upkeep of the graves of distinguished people. His letters were published in two volumes entitled Truth, Wit and Wisdom and More Truth, Wit and Wisdom, pretentious and pompous titles which tells us about his character.

In his diaries he recorded trivial matters in great detail. For fifty years he was a bachelor and then married a student at the London College of Music who was much younger than himself.

He had an Elgarian arrogance stating that if a list of the finest ten British composers were to drawn up he would be included. Yet he does not seem to have written about his work in his letters but he once wrote that his works were of absorbing interest.

He was a master of large scale works and not silly miniatures. His music is anachronistic and traditional.

Some misguided person says it owes much to Schumann. There are no basic themes as such but the music has a freshness and clarity.

There are eight surviving piano sonatas and although they are original they have never caught on. The Sonata no 1 of 1877 was not a success for its publishers since, for the British, it was Germanic and unfashionable. His persistence with detail may be meticulous but off putting. However, this should not deter from the appreciation of his works.

Apart from piano works there is a violin sonata, a viola sonata, three cello sonatas, two piano quintets, two piano quartets (the second has a slow movement based on a theme of Mozart), three piano trios and many songs. Four symphonies, a piano concerto and a violin concerto are lost.

He died on 10 April 1937.

[A PDF of his Piano Sonata no 4 is attached](#)

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Since writing this and four years later Dutton Digital has released a two CD set of Ashton's piano music magnificently played By Leslie De'Ath and this is highly commended. The CD number is CDLX7248

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