

EDWARD HARPER

David C.F. Wright, DMus

The English composer, pianist and conductor Edward Harper was born Edward John Harper on 17 March 1941 in Taunton. He studied music at Christ Church Oxford, the Royal College of Music in London, where his teachers included Gordon Jacob, and in Milan with Franco Donatoni.

In 1964, Harper was appointed a Lecturer in Music at Edinburgh University where he worked for forty years. Admiring the discipline and challenge of twelve note music, he wrote many successful pieces in this style but, to demonstrate his versatility and abilities he later wrote in a tonal style as in his orchestral masterpiece Bartók Games of 1972. Before this, his major work was the Piano Concerto of 1969.

He composed five operas, the first being Fanny Robin set in one act and dating from 1974. Harper wrote his own libretto derived from Thomas Hardy's Wessex Poems of 1874 and from Far From the Madding Crowd. The Spire dates from 1993 and Hedda Gabler was composed between 1984 and 1985, The Mellstock Quire was completed in 1987 and the children's opera Lochinvar dates from 2000.

His Symphony no. 1 dates from 1979 and was premiered by the Scottish National Orchestra under Alexander Gibson. His Symphony no. 2, subtitled Miracles, was completed in 2007. It consists of an overture and setting of four texts from William Barnes, Ron Butlin, Walt Whitman and Isaiah 11 verses 6 to 9. This powerful work is diverse in content with a dance of death, a scherzo and a propulsive joy. The work is scored for baritone, chorus an orchestra and is available on CD on the Delphian label.

The Clarinet Concerto was commissioned by the Llandaff Festival in 1981 and there are two orchestral song cycles. Seven Poems by E E Cummings was commissioned by the BBC for the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 and Homage to Thomas Hardy was a Cheltenham Festival commission of 1990. It is scored for baritone and chamber orchestra.

There are two masses, the Chester Mass for chorus and orchestra of 1979 and the Mass: Qui creavit coelum for unaccompanied choir of 1987.

He had an amazing ear for sound and some of his works both for string orchestra and chamber orchestra reflect this extraordinary gift. There are five separate Fantasias written between 1975 and 1985 as well as the Double Variations for oboe, bassoon and wind ensemble of 1989.

A gifted pianist he was the director of the New Music Group of Scotland from 1975.

He had an admiration for fellow musicians as shown in his Ricerare in memory of Dallapiccola, his Intrada after Monteverdi, In Memorium Kenneth Leighton and his Three Motets after William Byrd. There are two string quartets (1967 and 1986) a Piano Trio (1991), a Trio for clarinet, cello and piano and two Quintets, one combining wind and strings (1969) and another being a Flute Quintet scored for flute and string quartet.

As indicated, Harper had a love of literature and valued such writers including Walter Scott. Thomas Hardy. Walt Whitman, Ibsen and the prize-winning novelist, Ron Butlin.

He was a modest, shy, quiet and taciturn man. He was not self-indulgent or self-promoting but immensely likeable. He was an enthusiastic devotee of real ale, a passionate cricketer in his youth and enjoyed hill walking. He was genuinely a lovely man.

He was married three times. His first marriage failed, his second wife died and he married for the third time to the cellist Louise Paterson who survives him as do his two children, Edward and Alice, from his second marriage to Dorothy.

For some time he suffered from cancer, and because the NHS could not provide the requisite treatment he travelled many times to Vienna for chemotherapy. He died on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009.

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