

HALL OVERTON

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My introduction to this American composer was through his two symphonies and a string quartet, works which deeply impressed me. I knew nothing about him and thought he was a serious composer. I did not know that he was a jazz pianist performing in clubs and 'dives', some of which were decidedly decadent.

I realise that this is a personal point of view, but I often feel disappointed that a composer who could write two fine symphonies could lower himself to serve music of a lesser type. I do not say this to be judgemental or to be a snob since I have to accept that there are a few composers who were excellent in serious music and in other types of music, the most obvious case being the versatile and brilliant Leonard Bernstein.

Hall Franklin Overton was born in Bangor, Michigan on 23 February 1920, the eldest of three sons born to Stanford and Ruth (Barnes) Overton. The other sons are Harvey and Richard.

He was brought up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A teacher at his school recognised his musical talent and encouraged him to enrol in The Chicago Music College which he did from 1940. In 1942, he entered the armed services where he remained until 1945. He served overseas with the U S Third Armoured Division on combat duty. It was here that he learnt jazz to entertain his comrades who were not in sympathy with serious music. The horrors of war affected his personality since any refinement he had, was eventually lost.

However, he did attempt to follow the serious path by studying at the Julliard School of Music with Vincent Persichetti, an exceptional teacher, and upon graduation in 1951, he became a member of the faculty there.

Later, he also taught at The Yale School of Music and the conflicts within his thinking lead him to study at the New School of Social Research. It is probably here that he imbibed the notion that jazz and improvisation was on a par with serious music and that it probably had far greater financial rewards. Nonetheless, he received awards for his serious music such as those from the Koussevitzky Foundation and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

For some years he had been drawn to jazz. It needed no discipline or study and, therefore, no effort.

By 1954, he had the Jazz Loft Project at 821 Sixth Avenue, New York City. With musicians Dick Cary and Jimmy Stevenson, the photographer Eugene Smith and painter David x Smith.

Overton was in two minds which way to go but it was jazz that engulfed him. He made recordings with Stan Getz, Duke Jordan, Jimmy Raney and Teddy Charles. Thelonious Monk employed Overton to orchestrate some of his own piano works, although this was really for big band, and a live recording of these was made on 28 February 1959 and released as an album The Thelonious Monk Album at the Town Hall. A second album appeared in 1963 which was recorded at the New York Philharmonic Hall.

The mixing with such people and at clubs and 'dives' encouraged Overton as a heavy smoker and drinker. In fact, he was a chain-smoker.

In 1949, he married Nancy Swain (1926-2009). They had two sons, Richard, known as Rick, who became a comedian, actor and writer in California. Steven went to live in New Mexico.

In his last years, Overton seemed to have some regrets as to the musical course he had chosen and embarked on his opera Huckleberry Finn which the Julliard Opera Company performed a few

months before he died. It is not an opera for children. It sought to recreate the America of Mark Twain's time.

There are many who testify to Overton as a genius in the field of jazz and in music of the 20th century whether it be by Debussy, Ravel, Gunther Schiller or Milton Babbitt.

Hall Overton was an intense man with a complex mind and outlook. He was generous, particularly with his time, and was kind in passing on his knowledge and experience to others.

He died on 24 November 1972 of cirrhosis of the liver.

It is a pity that he did not write more music in a serious fashion; the symphonies are highly recommended.

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