

## IAIN HAMILTON (1922-2000)

by Paul Conway

The death of Iain Hamilton last year deprived the contemporary British music scene of a distinguished composer whose style ranged widely from light music to avant-garde, but whose scrupulous attention to detail, fine ear for colour and keen understanding of musical structure informed all his works. His output encompasses most genres from operas and symphonies to chamber and solo works.

Iain Ellis Hamilton was born in Glasgow on June 6th, 1922. Seven years later, his family moved to London and he was educated at Mill Hill School. Having become an apprentice engineer, he remained in that profession for seven years until he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in 1947 and decided to devote himself to a life of composition. His years as an engineer left their mark on his compositions, however: such multi-sectional pieces as the *Sinfonia for Two Orchestras* (1958), the *First Cello Sonata* (1958), the *Third String Quartet* (1984) and *The Transit of Jupiter* (1995) are the result of a mind with a strong sense of design and structure.

At the Royal Academy, Iain Hamilton studied composition under William Alwyn and the piano under Harold Craxton, graduating in 1951 and winning the Dove Prize, the Academy's highest honour. He also studied at London University, gaining a BMus in 1950.

Amongst his first compositions to be heard were the *First String Quartet* (which won the Clements Memorial Prize in 1950) and the *Nocturnes for clarinet and piano* awarded the Edwin Evans Prize in 1951. His early works concentrate on the orchestra and convey a bracing virtuosity by means of an intensely chromatic but essentially tonal harmony. In this period fall the *Variations for string orchestra* of 1948 which has a late-Romantic style, the *First* (1949) and *Second* (1951) *Symphonies* and the *Clarinet Concerto*, which won the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Prize in 1951. With these works, the composer's technical skill is contained by the use of traditional forms but there is a powerful rhythmic drive reminiscent of Stravinsky and Bartók.

The *Variations for strings* is the composer's opus one. It has all the exuberance of youth yet is in no way immature. The theme itself is an original one and the variations which follow exhibit a wide range of character from Walton-esque *joie de vivre* to Mahlerian intensity and Puckish humour. There is a partly fugal *Finale*. It avoids empty rhetoric and, whilst not as ambitious or technically demanding as Britten's '*Frank Bridge Variations*', for example, it demonstrates the young Iain Hamilton's early mastery of the string orchestra. An intense expressiveness remained a characteristic of his orchestral string writing.

The *First Symphony* was first performed by Trevor Harvey and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in December 1952. Like the following three examples in the genre it is essentially a tonal work, though adventurous in its use of harmony and orchestral colour. It shares with the *Variations for Strings* a vitality and energy which is coupled in the first movement by a Walton-like jazziness. The slow movement has a hushed, otherworldly quality which is recalled in his last symphony of 1981. Rubbra-like alternating chords and a Baxian section for harp and cor anglais suggest Iain Hamilton was at least aware of his fellow British symphonists. The third movement is part *Finale*, part *scherzo* and has a mercurial wit, skittish at times, perhaps reflecting the *Symphony's* subtitle: '*Cyrano de Bergerac*'. It was played by Colin Davis in Switzerland in 1953 but the work has since been neglected, at least in comparison with the *Second Symphony*: it does not deserve this fate and a modern recording could win it new friends.

The *Second Symphony* was honoured with an award by the Koussevitzky foundation in 1951 and first performed two years later at Cheltenham Festival by the Hallé orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. It has received numerous performances since then and has become one of Iain Hamilton's most popular orchestral works. It was last broadcast on Radio 3 in 1996 in a performance by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Jerzy Maksymiuk. It is not hard to see why the symphony has

received so much attention: its powerful scoring and architectural ingenuity make a strong impression. The Lento introduction to the first movement is so extended that it almost becomes a separate movement in itself and its use in varied form in the main Allegro section and its return at the conclusion of the movement only serves to confirm its importance. The following Presto starts off as a conventional quicksilver scherzo but the contrasting Trio passage is marked 'alla marcia fantastica' and has a Berlioz-like hallucinatory quality. An Andante passage for lyrical woodwind lines over pulsating string chords breaks up the conventional ABA scheme of the scherzo and provides a central point of calm before the tempestuous conclusion. The Adagio third movement is distinguished by a beautiful, broad theme spanning large intervals in the manner of late Mahler. Its central climax is unerringly placed before the hushed ending. The relaxed con moto Finale unleashes rushing string semiquavers in its athletic first subject. They gather momentum throughout the movement and eventually initiate the bravura coda. Despite the wayward harmonies en route, the closing bars of the work are in a decisive E major. Deservedly popular though the Second Symphony is, it is hard to understand why the other three symphonies of Iain Hamilton have not enjoyed similar acclaim and exposure: they are in many ways less intellectually rigorous and more emotionally frank.

The First Violin Concerto (1952) has an Expressionist glow and its wide-arching melodies recalling Alban Berg. Cast in three movements, with a lyrical Adagio bordered by two Allegros, it was written in memory of the composer's father who died the previous year. The material in all three movements undergoes perpetual variation and growth. The Expressionism of the Violin Concerto no 1 is also apparent in Iain Hamilton's Viola Sonata, also written in 1952. The Symphonic Variations for orchestra of 1953 is a three-movement symphony comprised of twelve variations. It was premièred at the Cheltenham Festival in 1956 by Sir John Barbirolli.

From 1951 to 1961, Iain Hamilton contributed much to the musical life of London as a composer and teacher, lecturing at Morley College (1952-1958) and at London University. He was chairman of the Composer's Guild of Great Britain in 1958 chairman and secretary of the Institute of Contemporary Arts from 1958 to 1960 as well as a member of the BBC's Music Advisory Panel.

From 1955 serialism begins to play a part in Hamilton's compositions, beginning with the Serenata for clarinet and piano and the Three Piano Pieces which were written for an album of piano music by various composers intended for the moderately accomplished pianist. The pieces constitute a serenade or divertimento and are marked Allegro, Lento and Vivo. His cantata 'The Bermudas', a partly serial work, was commissioned by the BBC and performed during its 1957-1958 Festival Hall series. This was followed by a series of lighter orchestral works including a concerto for jazz trumpet (1957), a light overture '1912' (based on music hall songs and dedicated to the memory of the Victorian comedian Dan Leno) and the Scottish Dances.

The Scottish Dances were commissioned for the BBC Light Music Festival and received their first performance on St Andrew's Day 1956. Based on well-known tunes to which Robert Burns set some of his poetry, the first dance is entitled 'Caller Herring'. Its main theme is a brisk Allegro molto in 5/8 time but the contrasting central section is in 15/8 and contains swooning semitonal clashes on the violins. This is followed by 'Duncan Grey', an Andante comodo which has the added instruction 'slow bounce', an indication of its jazzy, smoky atmosphere. The third dance employs two tunes: 'Whistle and I'll come tae ye' and 'My love she's but a lassie yet'. The orchestral colour is especially vibrant in this dance, which dashes through a variety of keys and includes snare drum and bas drum rolls and trumpet flutter tonguing. This is followed by 'The Lea Rig' (or The Grass Ridge), an evocatively scored movement for strings and horn solo only. The set finishes with 'Gin I were where Gaddie rins' (Would I were where the River Gaddie runs). The jazziness of the second dance returns with the marking 'Bright swing tempo' and there is more than a touch of Malcolm Arnold in the subsequent passage for impudent piccolo pitted against burbling bassoon. The Dances are dedicated to the composer's mother and five aunts. It was recently recorded in a spirited and affectionate performance for ASV by the Royal Ballet Sinfonia under John Wilson (CD WHL 2123).

After this, the composer began a period in which his music was serial and atonal which lasted from 1958 to 1966. This period showed the influence of much study of the music of Anton Webern. The first important work to emerge from this stage in his career was the *Sinfonia for Two Orchestras* which was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1959 in celebration of the Burns bicentenary. Despite the composer's warnings that the work was more an expression of the composer's admiration of Burns' achievements than a piece directly inspired by the poems themselves, its tough, acerbic nature shocked the audience, who were probably expecting something less uncompromising along the lines of the *Scottish Dances*. The President of the Burns Federation was equally uncompromising in his response, describing it as "rotten and ghastly". Alexander Gibson, who had premiered the *Sinfonia*, clearly believed in it and performed it again in the Scottish National Orchestra's 1959-60 season and later recorded it for EMI on a long-deleted LP (ALP 2279).

Other works of this period include the *First Piano Concerto* (1960), 'Threnos' for organ and the *First Cello Sonata* of 1958 which was written for cellist Joan Dickson and commissioned by the University Court of the University of Glasgow. The *Sonata* was premiered by Joan Dickson accompanied by Iain Hamilton at the piano. It contains certain echoes of the contemporaneous *Sinfonia for Two Orchestras*: both works are made up of many short sections played continuously. The *Cello Sonata* has seven sections, of which the first, third and seventh are cadenzas and the other movements have an improvisatory quality. The first and last cadenzas are for both instruments, whilst the second is for solo cello and the third for piano alone. All sections are bound together by the use of common intervals, rather than shared material.

In 1961 Iain Hamilton moved to America to teach at Duke University, North Carolina where he was made Professor of Music for the year of 1966 to 1967. He settled in New York City, taught as resident composer of Tanglewood in 1962 and was visiting composer at the University of Albania. His wide knowledge of the Arts in the 19th and 20th Centuries made him popular as a lecturer on radio and television and he held the Cramb lectureship at Glasgow University in 1971, sharing the Duke University post with his Glasgow University commitments. In 1974 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy and the Composers' Guild gave him the Ralph Vaughan Williams Award as Composer of the Year.

A new exotic flavour permeated his music after 1966, perhaps the result of several trips to the West Indies in the mid-1960s. This first manifests itself in the *String Quartet no 2* of 1965 and the *Dialogues for soprano and ensemble*, settings of Chateaubriand (1965). His first Proms commission, 'Cantos' for orchestra, came in 1965. A more dramatic style developed throughout the 1960s led to two operas written in the late 1960s to his own libretti (the dramatic narrative 'Agamemnon' and 'The Royal Hunt of the Sun', based on Peter Shaffer's play and premiered at the London Colliseum in 1977). These works sowed the seeds of the gradual abandonment of serialism as a governing principle in his works.

The following period saw a series of pieces heavily influenced by their literary inspirations. 'Voyage' for horn and orchestra (which utilises microtones and aleatoricism) quotes lines from Baudelaire and Rimbaud in its score. It is dedicated "to Mahler and those who died young". Both 'Circus', for two trumpets and orchestra and 'Commedia' are associated with 'The Divine Comedy' and 'Alastor' uses a title from Shelley. These works also employ quotations from 19th Century music.

'Circus' is a virtuoso concerto for two trumpets and orchestra. It was premiered in January 1970 by soloists Philip Jones and Elgar Howarth with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir John Pritchard. In two sections, the first is the more substantial of the two with two cadenzas and much virtuosic writing for the soloists presaging the brilliance of the trumpet parts in the Maxwell Davies Symphonies. The short second section contains quotes from Liszt, Mahler, Paganini and Berlioz, though these are subtly subsumed into the glittering textures of a highly original and powerful twenty-minute work. 'Commedia' (1973), a commission from the London Philharmonic for the orchestra's 40th anniversary, was premiered by the LPO under Bernard Haitink.

The two-act opera 'The Catiline Conspiracy', based on the Ben Jones tragedy, which was premiered by Scottish Opera in 1974 and the Te Deum both show a re-embracing of tonality further explored in his opera 'Anna Karenina' (1978). This opera, Iain Hamilton's first tonal work since the early 1950s, was produced in London in 1981.

His intensely dramatic scena, 'Cleopatra' (1977) was sung by Lois McDonall with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under David Atherton at the 1978 Proms and marked a further exploration of more conventional tonality. Exotically scored with sensuous writing for the soloist, this work, with text by the composer, is reminiscent of Strauss' s operas Elektra and Salomé in its late-Romantic opulence. The soaring, Expressionistic 'stream of consciousness' solo part also suggests links with another archetypal Expressionist work, Schoenberg's 'Pierrot Lunaire' but 'Cleopatra' sounds less harmonically radical. The piece is divided into a series of arias and orchestral interludes, all ravishingly scored.

In the late 1970s, Iain Hamilton received commissions for two orchestral works which he decided should both be symphonies. The Third Symphony was completed in New York in late 1980 and continues the composer's more diatonic style, being written in the key of G with both structure and material based on tonal relationships. The Symphony is scored for just double woodwind, 2 horns and strings, creating an intimacy complemented by its predominantly lyrical nature. There are four movements, an Allegretto which establishes a Nordic sound to the woodwind writing frequently reminiscent of Sibelius, a scurrying Scherzo in C with a central Trio in the form of an ironically nostalgic waltz. The Andante third movement is marked 'tenderly and sadly' and is characterised an intensity in the string writing recognisable from his opus one and the First Symphony. The Andante's main theme sounds like a Victorian ballad distorted by time and painful memory. The Finale is very fast and ends with powerful tutti chords like those at the conclusion of the first movement.

The Fourth Symphony (1981) was commissioned by the Scottish National Orchestra and Sir Alexander Gibson who gave the first performance of the work in 1983. It was started whilst the composer was still living in New York and finished after he had returned to reside permanently in London in 1981. The Symphony no 4 is one of his most personal works and he uses his most accessible tonal idiom to express himself. It is dedicated to the memory of a close personal friend, to whom the 'Requiem' of 1979 is also dedicated and there are quotations from the Requiem in the Symphony. The first movement is subdued and grieving, lacking the dynamism of Iain Hamilton's other orchestral works but making up for this by its emotional honesty. Here, for once, the composer's considerable structural and rhythmic achievements are subsumed beneath the melodic element of the work, communicating a raw sense of loss. The second movement is a Mahlerian threnody characterised by weaving strings and harp over timpani taps. The gently rocking accompanying figure takes over at the climax, but the work gradually subsides back to the opening material. The following Scherzo is melancholic, more a Valse Triste than a musical joke. A lonely solo trumpet adds to the feeling of inconsolable desolation. The Finale binds many disparate elements together. It begins with a funeral march with tolling timpani and muted brass which is then parodied by the following Allegro passage with the same material played at a faster speed. This is much more a 'scherzo' than the previous movement, albeit a malicious and bitter one. This leads to an Adagio section which relates to the 'Lux Aeteram' from the Requiem and material from the earlier movements of the symphony returns but refracted and disturbed through grief. A very moving work, this is all half-lights (in contradistinction to the usual brilliance of Iain Hamilton's scoring) and it makes an appropriately valedictory last symphony, though the quality of all four of Iain Hamilton's examples in the genre makes one wish he had contributed more.

A series of major operas occupied much of the last twenty five years of his life: 'Tamburlaine' (1976), a lyric drama, was commissioned and premiered by the BBC, 'Anna Karenina' of 1978 was commissioned by the English National Opera and received its first American performance in Los Angeles. 'Raleigh's Dream' (1983) was commissioned by the North Carolina British-American Festival at Duke University and 'Lancelot' was commissioned and premiered by the Arundel Festival in 1985. He wrote a one act opera 'The Tragedy of Macbeth' in 1990 and 'London's Fair' in 1992.

Late a cappella works include the Requiem of 1979 and Mass in A (1980) and prepared the way for a string of choral works, including the St Mark Passion (1982), commissioned by the London Chorale and 'The Bright Heavens Sounding' (1985), a setting of a text by Spenser.

The Octet for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone and double bass (1983) was commissioned by the Paragon Ensemble. Cast in three movements, it shares with the examples by Franz Schubert and Egon Wellesz a good-humoured nature. The first movement treats each player as a soloist, whilst the central slow movement weaves an intricate harmonic tapestry of sound over which different solo instruments float their melodic lines. The Finale restores the bluff banter of the opening movement with its garrulous florid woodwind arabesques.

The Third String Quartet, written in 1984, was commissioned and premièred by the Delmé Quartet. Its three movements are divided up into several sections of varying tempi. This patchwork effect is a familiar device of the composer who frequently thinks in terms of a sequence of varied passages within his large-scale structures. The quartet is a fine example of Iain Hamilton's achievements in the field of chamber music: lyrically intense but emotionally tough, there is little of the "heart on sleeve" openness of the Fourth Symphony to be found in this cleverly constructed and cogently argued piece.

The Second Piano Concerto (1987) is a tough, Bartókian work, emphasising the percussive nature of the solo instrument rather than its lyrical side. The first and third movements are both virtuosic examples of motoric rhythmically driven constructions in which the soloist is rarely silent. The central slow movement provides welcome relief: mist-wreathed trance-like opening and closing passages frame a spectral scherzando central section led by the piano. The overall tone of the work, however, is one of dynamic power, underlined by its bravura ending.

In 1995 his dramatic orchestral work 'The Transit of Jupiter' was given its first performance by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins at their 60th birthday celebrations in 1995. This brilliant and vibrantly scored piece begins with an initial explosive signal and then consists of a succession of massive chords which form the basis of the rest of the sixteen-minute work, creating a satisfying passacaglia feel to the piece. The one-movement work is divided into eighteen sections, each combining with one another and self-generating organically. There is a satisfying inevitability about the composition's progression born of a mind which thrives on structural balance and craftsmanship. 'The Transit of Jupiter' was designed to show off the skill and accuracy of the BBC Scottish Orchestra and, though not based on astronomy or astrology, creates a vivid impression of both the massiveness and the enigmatic quality of Jupiter, the biggest planet, in motion as it hurtles through space.

Among his very last compositions are 'Bulgaria Invocation', an evocation for orchestra and five pieces for clarinet and piano entitled 'The Wild Garden'. In 2000 he wrote another orchestral work: 'London' for piano and orchestra. Iain Hamilton died in London on July 28th 2000.

Despite the bewilderingly wide range of styles Iain Hamilton employed in his many compositions, his works are all bound by a sensitive ear for timbre and texture. His orchestral pieces are particularly colourful and full of interesting effects without resorting to gimmickry or empty virtuosity. All his compositions, no matter in what idiom he chose to express them, share a strong sense of the dramatic from the chamber pieces to the large stage works.

He was also a most erudite writer on musical matters and contributed articles to 'Tempo', amongst other journals, and a chapter in Howard Hartog's Penguin classic 'European Music in the 20th Century'.

I hope some of his compositions will now receive further performances in the form of a major retrospective so that the full extent of his achievement may be easier to quantify. His current under-

representation on disc and in concert programmes is a glaring example of unwarranted neglect of an important figure in British music.

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