

JAMES BROWN

by David C.F. Wright D.Mus

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James Clifford Brown was born on 18 August 1923 at 49 St. Matthew's Street, Ipswich to Henry John Brown, an electrical engineer and later professional cellist, and his wife Lois (nee Smith), who was a junior school teacher. Henry and Lois were married in Chesterton, Staffordshire in 1912 and had two other children, Tom, a chartered engineer and Dulcie, who has been a civil servant, missionary and music teacher of cello and classical guitar.

James was educated in Ipswich. When he left Northgate School in 1941, he went up to St. John's, Cambridge to read English and Music, but war service with the Army interrupted this between 1942-45. He studied music with Hubert Middleton, Philip Radcliffe and Henry Moule. He graduated with a BA in English and a Mus B in 1946. He received his MA in 1949.

Looking back, his first piano lessons had been with Elsie Copsey, a colleague of his father, and then in 1932, with Margaret Job, the daughter of Jonathan Job, who originally came from Lichfield, but settled in Ipswich, becoming the Borough Organist. He was the predominant musical figure in Suffolk and took young James under his wing as a chorister at St. Margaret's. Job was an excellent, if conservative choir trainer, a rigorous but very likeable teacher. James took organ, harmony and counterpoint lessons from him during 1936-41.

In 1940, he was appointed organist and choirmaster at All Hallows, Ipswich. He was sixteen.

During 1947-8, he was Research Assistant to Henry Moule, then engaged in statistical investigation into the musical language of Morley's madrigals. In 1948, James became the third member of staff at Leeds University teaching the syllabuses for B Mus and BA in Music. As time went on and the number of staff increased, James specialised in teaching composition. He was also university organist and gave annual recitals. He was at the university until his retirement in 1983.

He led a year's sabbatical in Rome during 1961-2 studying contemporary music with Boris Porena, a pupil of Goffredo Petrassi, the distinguished composer and elder statesman of Italian music.

James was a complete musician. He contributed music to the first revue staged by the Footlights Club in Cambridge after the war. He was a proficient organist and pianist. He was a very able composer who, while his music has yet to make an impact in this field, will ultimately be recognised.

In his teenage years, he was drawn to Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Sullivan, German and Elgar. In his early adult years he delighted in Bach, Stravinsky, Walton and Bliss. Despite his catholic taste, he admired the "wonderful clarity of purpose and the beautiful order, symmetry, colour and deep feeling of Webern". He also enjoyed all melodists from Berlioz to Jerome Kern. But his favourite composer of the 20th Century was probably Messiaen.

After reading my article on Elgar and seeing the evidence, James altered his opinion of Elgar and said, "I was often uncomfortable about his music".

He also said that some of Schubert's long works, such as the late piano sonatas, were far too long and tedious.

This may explain the French influence in his music, as well as the English tradition. In fact, to those who do not know his music, it could be described as 'subdued Messiaen'. Or, to be more precise, it has a quiet strength which, in itself, makes his music notable. His music is not extrovert or brash; it is not angry, noisy

or petulant. He is not interested in music being virtuosic or sensational, but in being music. It is thoughtful and reflective, but it certainly does not live in the world of grim psychological anachronism. Its gentleness and sincerity give his music a very tender and passionate feel. He once told me that he had not married, since composing was his life and demanded solitude. Whether you like his music or not, it has an individual and original voice.

Mention must be made of a few of his works. *Five Reflections* for piano (1950) is atmospheric and has, in the second, a Bachian feel. The third is an effective shifting pastoral which is touching; a fourth has a warm melodic attractiveness and the finale is a tripping *allegro con brio*. The title is apt. You can both hear and see with the mind's eye the moving of the water. It is nostalgic, but not of the wallowing variety. The massive *Piano Sonata* also dates from 1950. its opening *Moderato* has a 'call to arms'. It seems at first, to be uncertain, but this only heightens the interest. The music is developed with craftsmanship and melodic invention and harmonies sometimes unexpected. It is 'adult' music, strong but subdued, sometimes sad, sometimes sinister and mysterious. It has a memorable main theme that retains its identity in all its guises. The *adagio* is possibly too closely related to the opening movement. It contains some interesting explorations of sonorities and is perfectly laid out for the piano. The *Allegro* calls for sparkling finger work and again, possesses memorable material. In the relaxed moments there is a yearning. The *Recitative* section is akin to a soliloquy or self-examination. The music is fascinatingly enigmatic. It is sensual, but in an autumnal way. Perhaps the work as a whole is a little too introspective, but nonetheless, is a compelling document. The *Epilogue* is tuneful and choral-like. The frequent use of higher register of the piano may be wearisome and I cannot help feeling that this rather special movement would make a good orchestral piece, with the brass employed in the choral passages. The *Piano Concerto* (1993) has the same hallmarks and some exquisite pastel orchestration.

The Baptism of Christ (1978) for baritone, boy's choir, mixed chorus and orchestra is in the established line of the English choral tradition. It is cathedral music. It is a work of feeling and has a spirituality as opposed to being music out for material gain. It is not fireworks or music in the fast lane. It is not out to impress, but does provoke a spiritual response from a discerning listener.

The cantata *Ad Incestum Lucernae* for soprano, tenor, chorus and orchestra dates from 1974 and is setting of a text by Geoffrey Hill. It is a work of committed humanity and benevolence and this shines through this admirable score.

The Serenade for Orchestra (1968) is attractive and has moments of tension in the *Andante*. The finale is one of subdued fun. Again, the music is not extrovert. Another *Serenade* (for clarinet in A and piano) dates from 1985 in its revised form. It is leisurely and pleasant. The *Sonatina* for clarinet and viola (1952) successfully marries these compatible instruments. What is intriguing about this work is that the music talks. It is that intimate. The *Sonata* for violin and piano (1956) is a substantial work in three movements *Allegretto e Variazioni*, *allegro con Fuoco* and *Moderato e piacevole*. It is a well integrated and exciting work and quite frankly, the best British work in this medium that I have enjoyed in almost forty years.

The Piano Trio (1981) is an accomplished work, albeit simple in design and construction following a traditional plan. The opening *Allegro risoluto* generates much interest while the central *Adagio sostenuto* has a strange beauty. The finale *Molto vivace* is very strong and powerful.

There are many beautiful and sensitive songs.

For years I have sought for a living British composer of exquisite songs in the tradition of Gurney, Quilter and Finzi. In James Brown, I have found that unique gift.

There is a 45 minute *Symphony* (1956) as well as a *Miniature Symphony* (1964) and a *Cello Concerto* (1979). There are two operettas *The Voice of Love* (1957) and *Men on the Moon* (1961), both having piano accompaniments.

All these works are of a gentle, quiet, sincere and genuine man and musician.

James Brown's Piano Concerto had its première on Sunday, 12 October 1997 in Leeds University's Great Hall. The distinguished soloist was Alan Cuckston. It was a success and warmly received.

James sold his house in Kirkstall, Leeds and moved into a warden-assisted residence in Bridlington where he was very happy. He entertained the fellow residents with his piano playing and arranged for all his manuscripts to be held at Leeds University under the supervision of Professor Richard Rastall.

I spoke to James on 21st December 2004 and we discussed musicians and composers we knew. Later that day he complained of discomfort and it was thought that he had appendicitis. He was taken to hospital where he died of a heart attack.

His funeral was held at the East Riding Crematorium on 30th December 2004.

While it is said of many people that they will be missed, it is true of James. He was a really lovely man.

A recording which includes two of his songs, is available on a CD sung by Judith Buckle.

I have many of his scores.

The works of James Brown

ORCHESTRAL

Miniature Symphony (1964)
Symphony (1956)
Divertimento (1967)
Serenade (1968)
Variations for organ and strings (1973)
Cello Concerto (1973)
Seascape for violin and strings (1984) arr from violin and piano
Piano Concerto

OPERETTA for principals, chorus and piano

The Voice of Love (1957)
Men on the Moon (1961)

CHORAL

The fear of the Lord (1954)
Blessed are they (1955)
Aubade (1959) all for SATB and organ
A Morning Pastoral SSA and piano (1965)
Two Motets SATB (1947/1967)
Ascension for double choir
Ad incensum lucernae for soprano, tenor, chorus and orchestra (1974)
The Baptism of Christ for baritone, boys' choir, chorus and orchestra (1978)
If ye turn to Him for boys' choir and organ
He that should come for double choir, three clarinets and bass clarinet (1981)
The World of Light for soprano, mezzo, male chorus and orchestra (1985)
Benedicte SATB and organ (1964/1985)
The lark now leaves his wat'ry nest (1949/1987) SA and piano
Give thanks unto the Lord (1957/ 1987) SATB and organ

CHAMBER MUSIC

Serenade for clarinet and piano (1950/1986) also for basset horn
Seascape for violin and piano (1952)
Sonatina for clarinet and viola (1952)

Pastorale for flute, clarinet and piano (1954)
Sonata for violin and piano (1956)
Two contrasted pieces for flute and piano (1958)
Partita for wind quintet and string quartet (1976)
Piano Trio (1981)
String Trio (1983)
Elegiac Fantasy for viola and piano (1983)
Trio for oboe, viola and piano (1983)
Suite for contrabassoon and piano (1985)

VOCAL

About thirty solo songs and
Four Poems of Frances Cornford (1950)
Bells and Flowers Four songs for children (1950)
Song Cycle The Shepherd in Love (1955)
Two Meditations from The Song of Solomon(1962)
Two Campion Poems (1966)
Four Devotional Songs (1970)
Song Cycle Earth is Our Home (1976)
Invocation for soprano, flute and piano (1988)

PIANO

Nocturne (1949)
Four Pieces (1949)
Sonata (1950)
Five Reflections (1950)
Suite (1951)
Two Piano Contrast (1957)
Three Sea Impressions (1957)
Three Little Studies (1963)
Seven Recreations (1970)

PIANO DUET

Scherzo in B flat (1948) also for two pianos
Promenade (1974)
Five Caprices (1978)
Suite : In the Open air (1943/ 1987)
Variations on a theme of Sullivan (1989)

TWO PIANOS

Concertino on a well known theme (1947)
Paso Doble (1949 / 1980)

ORGAN MUSIC

Two Chorale Preludes for Passiontide (1944)
Pastorale (1947)
Andante Sospirando (1951)
Sonata (1952)
Wedding March (1953)
Five Hymn Tune Preludes after Bach (1954)
Trio Sonata (1955)
Wedding Processional (1957)
Canzonet (1958)

Festal Toccata (1961)
Ricerca (1961)
Suite (1965)
Two Wedding Pieces (1966)
Concerto for organ solo(1969)
Scena The Burning Bush (1972)
Festive Song (1979)
Processional on the Old 44th (1983)
A Christmas Voluntary (1984)
Prelude and Postlude for Easter (1987)
Adagietto (1984/1989)
Summer Idyll (2000)

INCIDENTAL MUSIC

The York Mystery Plays (1951)
As You Like it (1952 rev 1988)
Salute for a centenary (1979)
Such is Life (1952)
The Pleasures of Respectability (1959)
Serjeant Musgrave's dance (1960)
The Mandrake (1963)

ARRANGEMENTS

Several
The completion of Edward German's Piano Sonata

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