

JOSEPH HOLBROOKE

by David C F Wright, DMus

Joseph Charles Holbrooke was born in Croydon on 5 July 1878, one of five children. His sisters were Helen and Mary, and his brothers were Robert and James. His father, also called Joseph, was a music hall musician, said to be an uncouth and violent man. His wife died when Joseph junior was two years old.

The boy was a chorister at St Anne's, Soho, and went to the Royal Academy of Music studying piano with Frederick Corder, and composition with Frederick Westlake but, by then, he was already well-known among music hall performers including those who were crude, bawdy and of ill repute.

Joseph married Dorothy in 1903 and they had four children, Mildred (1905), Anton (1908), Barbara (1910) and Frederick James Gwydion (1912) who changed his surname to Brooke explaining that this was because his father was such a difficult and objectionable man, which he was.



Gwydion Brooke (1912-2005) was one of Britain's finest bassoonists and a supporter of new and inventive music. He said that Humphrey Searle was our greatest and most original composer, and yet his father was damning of anything new and, in any case, he did not have the skill and technique to compose challenging and 'modern' works such as serial works which call for the most exacting discipline.

Joseph sometimes used the forename Josef and some knew him as Joe. He was a dreadful man, a nuisance and very troublesome. He used to badger the BBC for performances. He used to insist that the BBC play his Poem: The Raven at least three times a week since it was 'the greatest orchestral work by a British composer ever written.'

Holbrooke was sometimes called the cockney Wagner.

He upset everyone. One of his operas is entitled The Snob which aptly describes him.

He did not live in the real world. He was obsessed with Greek, Roman and Welsh mythology and fascinated by the occult, spiritualism and those who taught and believed in witchcraft, its nudity and eroticism. He was also fascinated by the macabre and the works of Edgar Allan Poe. He admired Tchaikovsky and Schubert who was a regular frequenter of brothels and died of syphilis which rotted his brain. Another dissolute that interested him was Lord Byron.

He confessed his love for Wales and wrote many works with a Welsh connection but this was for self-promotion. Wales was, and is, the land of song and many of his works contains vocal and choral parts.

His Piano Concerto no. 1, which is not a concerto at all but, in the composer's own words, a Poem, is subtitled The Song of Gwyn ap Nudd who was a king in Welsh mythology.

In fact, several of his works are called Poems viz

1. The Raven Op 25
2. The Viking Op 32
3. Ulalume Op 35
4. Byron Op 39
5. Queen Mab Op 45
6. The Bells Op 50 a performance was conducted by Hans Richter

7. Poem for piano and orchestra
8. The Song of Gywn ap Nudd

Holbrooke was a competent pianist. He once played Tchaikovsky's B flat minor concerto.

He tried his hand at conducting his own works such as the Violin Concerto at Leeds in 1917. Beecham conducted some premieres including the Symphony no. 2 (Apollo). But, there were times, when Holbrooke was not taken seriously because of his connections with the music hall, his writing light music and that he wrote for dance bands and jazz ensembles. Dan Godfrey and the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra tried to encourage him but Holbrooke was so ungrateful and his difficulty increased in the 1920s with his hearing loss and the wearing of a cumbersome deaf aid.

He was never part of any revival in British music. He had a few early years of success and when a millionaire began to sponsor him he enjoyed a change of life style from his previous poverty. He travelled with De Walden on his honeymoon cruise ! Later, he travelled with him to South America and Africa. De Walden died in 1946.

Holbrooke attached himself to some strange and flawed contemporary musicians such as Cyril Scott and Sir Eugene Goossens. Both were into witchcraft, spiritualism and erotica.

Goossens (1893- 1962) was influenced by The Witch of King's Cross, Rosaleen Norton, who was a medium who specialised in erotica and pornography. Goossens took 'naughty' photographs of her occult activities and they had a lurid affair. The police acquired some of this disgusting material and, in March 1956, Goossens was arrested in Sydney, Australia, having in his possession a large amount of pornography and occult items including pictures of outrageous occult activities. He was fined and his career was ruined.

Cyril Scott (1879- 1970) was also involved in the occult and spiritualism including erotica. He believed that he received inspiration and messages from The Great White Brotherhood which doctrine is akin to Theosophy with its alleged supernatural beings who spread their beliefs to those whom they choose. As he was into the occult and nudity, this gave rise to Scott, Goossens and Holbrooke being called the three dirty old men of British music. Their careers collapsed or suffered because of their immorality.

Debussy liked Scott, and his own life was turbulent and full of erotica and sexual scandals.

Someone has said that Scott was the Father of Modern Music, a ridiculous claim. His music is anachronistic!

One might ask why was Holbrooke so fascinated by the 'bad boys' of music and literature ? What was his fascination with immoral people?

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) specialised in the macabre. With Holbrooke's distancing himself from the real world and majoring on mythology and now into the macabre, this tells us much about his character. He set The Masque of the Red Death, Ulalume and The Raven. In The Raven he quotes from Poe's text regularly over the score which suggests that the music is a faithful interpretation of the words. But this does not work.

This raises another problem with his music. Most of his works have titles which distract from the music and generate an interest in just the titles, and why, rather than just enjoying the music. There is a Nonet called Irene and a Bassoon Quintet called Elenora. There are titles and subtitles for his three string quartets viz

1 in D minor (1908) is called a fantasie and the movements are called Absence, Departure and Return

2 is called Song and Dance, Belgium - Russia

3 is called The Pickwick Club, a humoresque in two parts (after Charles Dickens)

Some have called his folksong suites for string quartet his quartets numbers 3 to 6

The symphonies suffer from the same titling

The Symphony no. 1 op. 40 is dedicated to Henry Wood and the Queens Hall Orchestra. It is entitled Homages

and the four movements are:

1. Festiva, an heroic march, is homage to Wagner
2. Serenata is homage to Grieg
3. Elegiac Poem is homage to Dvorak.
4. Introduction and Russian dance, homage to Tschaikovsky.

The Symphony no. 2, Op 51 is subtitled Apollo and the Seamen and lasts for about 70 minutes and is in four parts and dates from 1908. Apollo was an Olympian deity and statues of him full frontal nude inspired many a homosexual like Benjamin Britten but also inspired others. It must be remembered that Greek and Roman men, even if they were married, had a boy to have sex with, and this perversion is behind Holbrooke's symphony as the composer explained to friends in York.

The Symphony no 3, Op 90 is called Ships and the three movements are titled Warships, Hospitalships and Merchantships.

The Symphony no. 4 is entitled The Little One and is dedicated to the memory of Schubert.

The Symphony no. 5 is called Wild Wales.

The Symphony no. 6 is subtitled Old England and is for military band.

The Symphony no. 7 is for string orchestra, and, thankfully, does not appear to have a title.

The Symphony no 8 is called Dance Symphony and is for piano and orchestra.

There is also a Symphony Drammatica Op 48 for chorus and orchestra which is entitled Homage to Poe

And a Symphonietta for 14 wind instruments.

It could be successfully argued that the symphonies and the string quartets are not symphonies or quartets at all in the correct or accepted meaning of the terms. In fact, the first symphony, Op 40, was originally called a Grand Suite.

The Welsh connection is shown in such works as Bronwen, a drama Op 75, and the Bronwen Overture Op 75, boring because of the persistent tritone, The Birds of Rhiannon Op 87, and Dylan, a drama in three acts Op 53 as well as the Piano Concerto no. 1, the Cello Concerto and the Welsh Symphony, the Symphony no. 5.

There are three sets of variations for orchestra: Three Blind Mice of 1900, The Girl I left behind me of 1905 and Auld Lang Syne of 1906

Although the first piano concerto is not a concerto, there is a second 'piano concerto' subtitled L'Orient, a Violin Concerto named The Grasshopper, a Saxophone Concerto, a Cello Concerto (The Cambrian), a Concerto for clarinet, saxophone, bassoon, violin, viola, cello and small orchestra called Tamerlane, and a Concerto for flute, clarinet, cor anglais, bassoon and orchestra.

There is much piano music including two fantasy sonatas called The Haunted Place and Destiny. Again such works have picturesque titles such as the Three Pieces called An Enchanted Garden with three movements entitled A ray of sunshine, Chasing butterflies and Brownies ! There are three violin sonatas and four folksong suites for string quartets and much more. There are many songs which do need reviving and the composer's politics are indicated in his Socialist Songs Op 77.

It is said that the first of his two Piano quartets in G minor Op 21 is a worthy piece. The second in D minor is subtitled Byron

All these titles indicate programme music, as opposed to absolute music, and programme music does not appeal to everyone since ones tries to find in the music the corresponding theme. The other problem is that

programme music is episodic. It stops and starts and the continuity is non-existent. This is a very worrying feature in Holbrooke's music

Like his hero Schubert, all of Holbrooke's stage works failed. They are

The Stranger, opera c 1908

The Cauldron of Annwn, a music drama 1908 -1920

Pierrot and Pierette Op 36, 1909

The Snob Op 49 unfinished opera

Dylan, a music drama Op 53

The Children of Don, Op 56

Coromanthe, a ballet, Op 61

The moth, a ballet. Op 62 Sometimes called The Moth and the Flame

The wizard, a ballet Op 66

The Red Masque, a ballet Op 67.. some catalogues call this Op 66

Bronwen, a music drama. Sometimes designated Op 67 as well 1920

The Enchanter, an opera-ballet 1914

Chicago c 1915

Pandora, a ballet 1919

The Sailor's Arms, an operetta 1930

Aucassin and Nicolette, a ballet 1935

Newcastle, 1935

Tamlane, an opera ballet 1943

There seems to be much to do to produce a full and accurate list of his works and there still exists discrepancies between existing lists.

An example of the episodic music is the so-called Piano Concerto no. 1. It is bitty, tedious, sprawling, constantly changing and therefore somewhat incoherent. It does not have a satisfying or unifying structure and most pianists I know dismiss it and I can understand why. It is a dreadful piece.

However, to add a positive note, Holbrooke's orchestration is often very fine but, sometimes, there is too much doubling.

He died in London on 5 August 1958, the same year as a truly great English composer whose name was Ralph Vaughan Williams.

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