

KENNETH LEIGHTON

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Unlike some British Composers, Kenneth Leighton was an exceptionally pleasant man. He did not have an arrogant and pompous personality or an inflated opinion of himself as some composers have.

Leighton was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire on 2 October 1929, to parents of modest means, who noted his musical ability early on, and enrolled him as a chorister at Wakefield Cathedral.

Encouraged by his mother and helped by school teachers, he had piano lessons and showed precocious ability. In 1940, he gained a place at the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, and was soon performing at school assemblies and concerts, while also composing settings of poetry for voice and piano and solo piano pieces including the Sonatina Op.1a, 1946, his first published work.

While still at school in 1946, he obtained the Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music (LRAM) in piano performance. As a university student at Queen's College, Oxford from 1947-1951, and on a Hastings Scholarship to study Classics, he continued to study music, tutored by the composer Bernard Rose.

Rose was born in 1916 and died in 1996, He was a chorister at Salisbury Cathedral, studied at RCM, 1933-1935, organist at Queens College Oxford and a volunteer in World War II and, as a soldier, saw action. He wrote a Symphony in A minor and some quality choral and vocal works.

At Oxford, Leighton came to the attention of Gerald Finzi, an early supporter and friend, who performed some of his works such as his Symphony for Strings, Op 3 of 1949 with the Newbury String players, and Vaughan Williams, who facilitated and attended some of his performances in London. He obtained a BA in Classics in 1950, and a BMus in 1951. In 1951, he was awarded a Mendelssohn Scholarship, which enabled him to study with Goffredo Petrassi in Rome, where he met his first wife, Lydia Angela Vignapiano, by whom he had two children, Angela and Robert.

Finzi was an excellent composer who was born in 1901 and, although an agnostic, wrote some unsurpassed inspirational music. He studied with Ernest Farrar and then at York Minister with Edward Baird. Finzi worked for the Ministry of War Transport in World War II and allowed German and Czech refugees to stay at his home. His work, Die Natalis, is a masterpiece of the highest order and when sung by the tenor Wilfred Brown, we realise that no other British composer has written a work of this type as great as this.

Chicken pox became severe inflammation of the brain and for ten years he had suffered from Hodgkin's disease and this contributed to his early death.

On his return from Italy in 1952, Leighton taught briefly at the Royal Marine School of Music in Deal, and held a Gregory Fellowship in music from 1953-56 at the University of Leeds, where he was a friend of Geoffrey Hill, the distinguished poet. In 1956, he was appointed lecturer in music at the University of Edinburgh. Following a period as Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford University from 1968 to 1970, Leighton returned to Edinburgh as Reid Professor of Music on the retirement of Sidney Newman. He held the chair at Edinburgh until his death in 1988. He married Josephine Anne Prescott in 1981.

Leighton was a rather private man, averse to self-promotion, who treasured peace and quiet, although he enjoyed family life and teaching, notably harmony and counterpoint. An outstanding pianist, he periodically gave public performances and broadcasts, and occasionally conducted the Edinburgh University orchestra.

His Symphony no 1 Op 42 is a 35 minute work of two massive slow movements separated by an impetuous middle movement. An interesting feature of his slow music is that it is never dull or static. It is deeply thought out and coherence, never pompous or a wallow with boring repetitions.

After a remarkably early rise to prominence and his spell in Italy, his life was dominated by composing, which continued uninterrupted, notwithstanding an unsettled period in the late 1970s and early 1980s associated with divorce and remarriage. For most of his career, he managed to reconcile university teaching commitments with his primary activity as a composer, although he found this more difficult in later years and was intending to retire early in order to have more time for composition. Amongst his distinguished pupils were Donald Runnicles and the composers Nigel Osborne, who succeeded him as Reid professor at Edinburgh, and James MacMillan. While he wrote a good deal of church music, and has occasionally been categorized as a church-music composer, he was not a church-goer or member of any congregation, nor even conventionally religious. His interests in literature and love of nature and countryside are to some extent reflected in the settings of English poetry in many of his works e.g. *Animal Heaven*, Op.83; *Symphony 3, 'Laudes Musicae'*, Op.90; *Earth Sweet Earth* Op.94. Fond of walking his dog on the hills, he loved the Scottish highlands and frequently visited the western isles in the 1960s often in an old camper van. Visits to Iona in the early 1970s foreshadowed the opera *Columba*, Op.77, 1978. He also had friends on the island of Arran, which he visited regularly. He died at home in Edinburgh in 1988, six months after being diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. His grave is in the Glen Sannox cemetery on Arran.

Leighton's earliest youthful works, characteristic of his Oxford years and well exemplified by *Veris Gratia*, Op.9, 1950, were influenced in part by the English tradition as represented by Vaughan Williams, Finzi, Herbert Howells, and Walton. His own more distinctive style, however, emerged and consolidated rapidly between 1950 and 1955, and probably owes as much to the period of study with Petrassi in Italy and familiarity with the work of a wide range of 20th-century European composers. He maintained a lifelong passion for the music of Bach as with his award-winning *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* op.24, 1956, first performed by Maurizio Pollini. A few pieces reflect experimentation or interest with serialism. Leighton's works are more generally typified by a strong sense of lyricism, diatonicism, contrapuntal mastery, chromaticism and rhythmic invention.

He composed a wide range of music for many different configurations of instruments, often for commissions, specific occasions and performers. His output includes church music, chamber, organ and solo piano music, as well as large-scale orchestral works and an opera, *Op.77, 1978*, based on the life of *Columba* with a libretto by the poet Edwin Morgan, first performed in Glasgow Theatre Royal in 1981 with Roderick Brydon conducting, and in Glasgow Cathedral in 1986 and 1990. The sacred and liturgical music is widely known and performed regularly across the UK and with recordings from Chandos, Hyperion, Naxos, ASV, Priory Records. Leighton did much to keep alive and transform the Victorian tradition of English choral music, and helped to bring English church music into the twentieth century. An enduringly popular early piece is "Lully, Lulla, Thou Little Tiny Child," Op. 25b, a setting of the Coventry Carol, and the later hymn "Drop, drop, slow tears" which concludes Op.38, 1961. The solo piano music, which ranges from charming miniatures for younger players to demandingly virtuosic works, has been recorded by various artists such as Eric Parkin, Peter Wallfisch, Margaret Fingerhut, Angela Brownridge, Stephen Hough, as also the fine works for organ, and those for cello championed by Raphael Wallfisch. In recent years, the chamber music and the larger-scale orchestral works have become better known thanks to new recordings, amongst which is the sparkling third piano concerto with Shelley/Brabbins/NOW and the second symphony, *Sinfonia mistica*, Op.69, 1974, a meditation on death in memory of his mother, a dramatic work of powerful intensity performed by Hickox and BBC Wales. The last piano pieces mark the culmination of a lifetime of writing for the instrument with the *Four Romantic Pieces*, Op.95, 1986.

As indicated, most of Leighton's works are recorded and commercially available on CD. Much of his output is published by Novello and Co.

Main Works

- Op 1a Sonatina No 1 (piano);
- 2 Piano Sonata No 1;
- 2a Sonatina No 2 (piano);
- 3 Symphony for Strings;
- 4 Violin Sonata No 1 (& flute/piano version);
- 5 Elegy (cello and piano & orchestral version);
- 6 Veris Gratia Cantata;
- 7 Scherzo for two Pianos;
- 8 Hippolytus (Cantata);
- 9 Veris Gratia;
- 10 Just Now the Lilac is in Bloom (Cantata Baritone/String Orchestra);
- 11a Napoli, Rhapsody on Neapolitan themes (piano/orchestra);
- 11 Piano Concerto No 1;
- 12 Violin Concerto;
- 14 Primavera Romana (orchestra);
- 15 Concerto for Viola, Harp, Timpani & String Orchestra
- 16 The Light Invisible (choir/orchestra);
- 17 Piano Sonata No 2;
- 18 Passacaglia, Chorale and Fugue (organ);
- 19 Burlesque (orchestra);
- 19a Serenade for Flute & Piano;
- 20 Violin Sonata No 2;
- 21 A Christmas Carol (orchestra & organ version);
- 22 Five Studies (piano);
- 23 Concerto for Oboe & String Orchestra;
- 24 Fantasia Contrappuntistica (piano);
- 25 Three Carols;
- 26 Concerto for Two Pianos, Timpani, Orchestra;
- 27 Piano Sonata No 3;
- 28 The Birds (choir);
- 29 Fantasia on the name Bach (viola/piano);
- 30 Variations (piano);
- 31 Cello Concerto
- 32 String Quartet No 1;
- 33 String Quartet No 2;
- 34 Piano Quintet;
- 35 Partita for cello/piano;
- 41 Prelude, Scherzo and Passacaglia (organ);
- 42 Symphony No 1;
- 43 Seven Variations for String Quartet;
- 44 Mass (Double Choir);
- 45 Communion Service in D;
- 46 Piano Trio;
- 47 Pieces for Angela (piano);
- 48 Metamorphoses (piano);
- 49 Et Resurrexit (organ);
- 50 Missa Brevis;
- 51 Conflicts: Fantasy on Two Themes (piano);
- 52 Sonata for Solo Cello;
- 53 Dance Suite No 1;
- 54 Three Psalms;

- 55 Easter Sequence (choir/organ);
- 56 Six Studies, Variations (piano);
- 57 Piano Concerto No 3;
- 58 Organ Concerto;
- 59 Dance Suite No 2;
- 60 Dance Overture;
- 61 Laudes Animantium (choir);
- 62 Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Second Service);
- 63 Piano Quartet (Contrasts and Variants);
- 64 Piano Sonata;
- 65 Six Elizabethan Lyrics;
- 66 Sarum Mass;
- 67 Mass for Ampleforth;
- 68 Laudate Pueri (choir);
- 69 Symphony No 2;
- 70 Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune (clarinet/cello/piano);
- 71 Laudes Montium (choir);
- 72 Six Fantasies on Hymn Tunes (organ);
- 73 Martyrs, Dialogues on a Scottish Psalm Tune (org);
- 74 Hymn to Matter (choir/orchestra);
- 75 Sequence for All Saints (chor);
- 76 Improvisations, De profundis (harpsichord);
- 77 Columba (opera);
- 78 Columba mea, Song of Songs (voice and orchestra);
- 79 Awake my Glory (voice/choir/organ);
- 80 Fantasy on a Chorale (Es ist genug)(violin/org);
- 81 Missa Cornelia (choir/organ);
- 82 Missa de Gloria (organ);
- 83 Animal Heaven (choir/orchestra);
- 84 These are thy wonders (voice organ);
- 85 Alleluia Pascha Nostrum (cello/piano);
- 86 Household Pets (piano);
- 87 Fantasy-Octet (Strings);
- 88 Concerto for Harpsichord, Recorder (or flute) and String Orchestra;
- 89 Dance Suite No 3;
- 90 Symphony No 3;
- 91 The World's Desire (chor);
- 92 Sonata for piano, four hands ;
- 93 Veni Redemptor (organ);
- 94 Earth, Sweet Earth (voice/piano);
- 95 Four Romantic Pieces (piano);
- 96 Prelude, Hymn and Toccata (piano).

Among his awards are

- 1951 - Mendelssohn Scholarship
- 1951 - Royal Philharmonic Society Prize
- 1956 - Busoni Prize for composition (Fantasia Contrappuntistica Op.24)
- 1960 - National Federation of Music Societies Prize for the best choral work of the year
- 1960 - Doctorate of Music, University of Oxford
- 1965 - City of Trieste First Prize for a new symphonic work
- 1966 - Bernhard Sprengel Prize for chamber music
- 1967 - Cobbett Medal for distinguished services to chamber music

1977 - Honorary doctorate, University of St Andrews
1982 - Fellow of the Royal College of Music

(1898)

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