

## LENNOX BERKELEY

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I must state from the very beginning that Sir Lennox was a very kind and likable man as is his son Michael Berkeley. I have met some composers who are very unpleasant.

Berkeley may be another victim of the mendacious music public who possess the herd instinct. Each herd has a leader, or a group of self-appointed cabals and they exert a great influence. Sir John Barbirolli was one such man. He said that no one could be a musician or music over unless they adored Elgar and every note of his music. He also said that he discovered the violinists Eda Kersey and Ginette Neveu and made their respective careers for them. This is totally untrue and self-promoting. And he, and others, set precedents by which all music should be judge and the general public seem to have followed him like lemmings. You have got to love Elgar. Britten also took this egocentric stance, as, as far as he was concerned, performers and conductors who did not programme his work or adore him or his music could neither be a musician or a music lover.



In fact, this leads to considering the first possible reason was not, and is not promoted. A Radio 3 announcer once said that Berkeley's work was overshadowed by his contemporary, Britten. In other words, Britten was a better composer than Britten. Hugh Wood furthers these views when he venerates Elgar as 'an isolated genius' and says of Britten that 'he stands alone and is our best claim to be a composer of world rank'.

While studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris during 1927-1932, Berkeley met and formed friendships with two homosexual composers Ravel and Poulenc. In the end of the 1930s he lived for a short time in Spain with another homosexual, Britten until Peter Pears became Britten's lover. Berkeley also studied for a while with Ravel.

With Britten, Berkeley wrote two composite works the most well-known being Mont Juic.

As with other composers and musicians who did not venerate him, Britten jettisoned Berkeley and, thereafter, Britten was often curt and objectionable to Lennox who told me this himself. In fact, it is irrefutable that Britten was severely paranoid and thrived on starting arguments, rows and upsetting people. He loved to assassinate the characters of others and because of Berkeley's association with Britten, the gullible public believed that Berkeley was of the same disposition.

Absolutely untrue. Lennox was a most congenial person and, thankfully, nothing like Britten. Britten was notorious for hindering the progress and career of any rival. There were several attempts by Berkeley to reconcile with Britten not because Berkeley was in the wrong but because Berkeley had a fundamental good character. He arranged get-togethers with his family and Britten even into the 1960s. Berkeley invited Britten to be the god-father for his son Michael who was born in 1948, and dedicated his Stabat Mater to Britten. It is a work of simplicity but given a good performance is very effective.

Berkeley was becoming interested in Roman Catholicism and some of their moral tenets. This rightly led him to intensely dislike Britten's *Our Hunting Fathers* for voice and orchestra, not just because it is

very poor music, which it is, and calls for the soloist to make the sounds of sexual intercourse with animals, which because of its subjects of bestiality and buggery being so offensive which are the subjects of the poems by W H Auden and Britten himself, this repulsed Berkeley as it would any decent person. The poets pretended deceitfully that bestiality was not the subject matter. But I heard Britten say to Walton that it was and that bestiality is the next important step up from homosexuality and pederasty.

Britten was not a man to ever admit that he was wrong but in 1967 he agreed to stage Berkeley's *The Castaways* at the Aldeburgh Festival which festival Britten claimed was greater than the festivals at Bayreuth and Glyndebourne because Aldeburgh put on better music, mostly by Britten himself.

I have dwelt on this issue to reveal the quality of the character of Sir Lennox and to dispel the falsehoods that were said about him.

The second reason for the non-promotion of his music is the claim that it is not British. Sometimes he and his music were ridiculed to the effect that his music was really French. He is not alone in that unfair criticism. The American composer, Roger Sessions, was vilified for writing 'non-American' music, and Humphrey Searle was told his music was not British. Had Berkeley and Searle followed in the line of Parry and Elgar... thankfully, they did not... they would have fared better. But it has been said, and in truth, that Elgar's music was Teutonic. Berkeley and Searle were not into pomp, ostentation or grand empty gestures. Sir Roger Norrington said that music should never be pompous. He also said that vanity does not make a great composer.

Another reason is that some of Berkeley's music is poor.

Hugh Wood wrote that Berkeley was 'only a divertimento composer' and that his works are nothing more than 'salon music.' While some of Berkeley music is flawed, it is evident that his best music has an elegance lacking in these two other composers we are mentioning.

As with Searle, Berkeley was a modest and a thoroughly likable man and, therefore, the antithesis of these other two composers we have mentioned. Sir Lennox was a charming man. He was not insincere or fulsome. He had an effortless ability to make you feel at home. On my visits to him in Warwick Avenue, I found he and his wife, Freda, to be extremely congenial. In fact most of the material for this article comes from those visits.

Lennox Berkeley was born at Boars Hill, Oxford on 12 May 1903. He was educated at Dragon's School, Greshams School, Holt in Norfolk, where Britten was also a student, and at Merton College, Oxford. He went there in 1922 to read French, Old French and Philology. He studied the organ with W H Harris and Henry Ley. During his studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger he encountered Stravinsky, Millhaud, Honegger and Roussel as well as Poulenc and Ravel whom he first met in London. He also studied with Ravel.

In 1940, Berkeley spent the summer with Dylan and Caitlin Thomas, Willam Glock, Arnold Cooke and Humphrey Searle whom Lennox described as his most faithful and loyal friends.

While on the staff at the BBC during 1942-1945, he met his future wife, Freda Bernstein who had a secretarial post there. His son, Michael, was later to become one of the famous quartets of Third programme announcers... the others being Cormac Rigby, Patricia Hughes and the incomparable Tom Crowe who had an excellent speaking voice and also allowed gaps of silence before and after every performance of music. Today, we have irritating announcers who do not do that, such as Richard Baker who is still talking when the music has started.

One of Berkeley's first major compositions was the String Quartet no 1, Op 6 which dates from 1935. Along with the String Quartet no 2, Op 15 of 1942 and the String Quartet no 3 of 1970 there is little

Gallic charm or elegance in these works. The first quartet is sometimes strong and dark with fascinating interplay and the opening movement has a memorable theme. This is not ‘divertimento’ music. The second movement is moderately paced with some effective pizzicato work. There is some lovely viola work and a few unexpected growls. The finale is a serious piece of rich texture and there is an exciting moment when the music explodes and becomes somewhat frenetic, before it seems to flounder and sink into a confectionary-box style which, in turn, gives way to some beautiful melodic lines redolent of a lazy summer’s day in the country. But the music’s momentum is again lost. When the exuberance returns it is tempered with melodic nullity. The music subsides again with a prevalent three note motif. The penultimate section is splendid and a slow thoughtful section ends the work.

The problem of this piece is its weak and episodic structure. It has no unifying thread. It has an unsatisfying continuity and yet it contains moments of exceptional quality.

The String Quartet no 2 was written during the Second World War and is rough-edged and sometimes shrill. The opening movement possesses some energy. The slow movement is simple in utterance and the finale struts about trying to get going. There are some moments of vitality but its progression is not coherent. The String Quartet no. 3 appeared 28 years later. As with its predecessors there is little charm of elegance as set in some of his marvellous orchestral scores. The four movements are rather discursive and the work lacks a sense of direction.

The best passages of the quartets may owe something to Bartok but it lacks the Hungarian’s expertise.

Between the first two quartets came Berkeley’s first success, the Serenade for strings Op 12, of 1939. It is the exact opposite in style and taste to the work of the same title by Elgar composed almost fifty years earlier. Berkeley’s work is neither dull nor sentimental. Nor is it pompous. It does not whine or whinge. It is confident, sparkling, positive and hugely enjoyable... a first class piece.

Following on the heels of the String Quartet no 2 is another master work, the String Trio Op 19 of 1943. This is, in the main, a very fine piece, arguably his best chamber work. The opening moderato has an engaging melodic line over a swaggering ostinato and the contrasting second subject is in 5/8 time. The long slow movement has a great deal of parallel movement and is played muted throughout. It is often strangely beautiful. The joyful finale has a slow middle section and loses something as a consequence. There is a lively conclusion.

The music is in the neo-classical style that Stravinsky valued so much and, to my mind, seems to be indebted to the enviable clarity and joyful music that Albert Roussel wrote and, therefore, this may have established, or confirmed Berkeley’s French connection.

In 1940 Berkeley completed his Symphony no 1, Op 16 Hugh Wood writes, “Berkeley’s talent is circumscribed when he steps outside his limits as in the first two symphonies”.

The Symphony no. 1 begins with feeble melodic lines. When the music is robust, it is promising. But the propensity of Berkeley’s music is to dramatically sink as if dropped from some height. This is worrying. It lacks drama, coherence, passion and logical coherence. The second movement is also predominantly slow. The slow movement has an effective melody line but it is not developed and much of the music seems pointless. The finale does not work but it has a rare Berkeley climax.. Its thematic content is not that appealing.

His first concerto was the Piano Concerto, Op 29 of 1947 written for Colin Horsley who played it at a Promenade Concert in 1947. It owes something to both Ravel and Poulenc and the composer said it had an affinity of spirit with Mozart rather than the struggle of the piano and orchestra of the Romantic repertoire. The music is attractive and warm but it seems to be more of a dialogue than a concerto. Dialogue is a generic term which he used in his Dialogue for cello and chamber orchestra in 1970. The

Piano Concerto has three movements and ends with a coda which the composer said aims at shapeliness and precision rather than rhetoric.

Depending on your viewpoint, the opening movement may have banal moments. Perhaps this supports the widely-held view that Berkeley was primarily a miniaturist and that he could not sustain his material over a broad canvas. This attracts the suggestion that his music is trite, but the opposite view is equally troublesome, that over-blown, pompous and tedious music produces ennui.

This concerto has some good moments but it is not organised or arranged in order to produce the best effect and, in addition, if the passages of little or no merit were removed we could have a totally delightful piece. This highlights the problems that composers have.

This concerto has not caught on because it gives no opportunity for virtuoso display but this was the composer's intention. More likely is the fact that he did not have the requisite skill to write a piano concerto. Curiously in Grove 5, Wilfrid Mellers writes that Berkeley could write effectively for the piano. But then he wrote some rubbish including his saying that the Beatles were as great as Bach.

Michael Kennedy who also writes a load of rubbish and states that Berkeley's music is outstanding in quality and fastidious in workmanship. That only applies to a small part of his output.

People still say that the piano is a string instrument. It is not. It is a percussion instrument.

To complete the Berkeley family a second son, Julian Lennox, was born in 1950, and, in 1956, the third son Nicholas Eadnoth was born.

The next work was the Concerto for two pianos and orchestra, Op30 which does not differ in style or character from the Piano Concerto. It is a substantial work lasting thirty minutes. The most worrying feature is the finale which soon disintegrates into somewhat slow and lifeless music, It is true that the music is occasionally beautiful but the composer would have fared better if he had put all the slow music together and did the same with the quicker music. It is infuriating when a movement is designated as allegro when the majority of it is slow as we always find in Elgar.

The Flute Concerto, Op 36 has music which is attractive and melodic but not developed in the satisfying way that Beethoven would. This gives the work the unfortunate tag of being inconsequential. But where this work succeeds over the Piano Concerto is that this piece has a brilliant virtuosity at times. However, the problems remain.

Berkeley's music, despite its welcome melodic lines, is surface music; it has no depth... and, yet, it has its melodic quality. But melodic lines alone are not sufficient to justify any work.

The Divertimento in B flat for orchestra of 1943 is a joy, a sunny work and, like the Serenade, owes its success to the first movement with its engaging swagger. How good Berkeley is at bright music. Perhaps some will call it light music. Herein may lie another lack of appeal in that he could not write successful serious music or music of depth or drama. Nonetheless music of quality does not always have to be profound but it is reasonable to expect a composer to vary his style and avoid being predictable or typecast. However, the Divertimento is a really good piece possessing the elegance of Mendelssohn.

Berkeley's best work has been said to be his vocal and choral music. The Four Poems of St Teresa d'Avia, Op 27 is unusual in his output in that the music is strangely passionate. This is truly a magnificent song cycle, the text absolutely suits the music and the string accompaniment is incredibly effective. The vocal line is perfection. When one considers the praise given to Britten's orchestral song cycles none of them has the unsurpassed grace, quality and elegance of this veritable masterpiece. Kathleen

Ferrier sang them and the very few contraltos we have should take them up. The work reflects Berkeley's Catholic faith which was a tremendous solace to him particularly when he stricken with Alzheimer's disease from 1985.

His vocal works are of high quality. The Greek Sons, Op 38 of 1951 are very fine and notable for their profound simplicity. The piano writing is strangely exceptional for once being exciting. This is rare, if not unique with this composer. His extraordinary gift for a vocal line is both compelling and refreshing as is also shown in the Fives Songs of W H Auden of 1958.

Shortly after the St Theresa poems came the Sinfonietta of 1950 which is generally regarded as a successful piece. The opening movement is energetic, airy and the hunting horn adds to its outdoors style. The slow movement is a little stale but the finale is a bustling movement closely related to the first movement. Surprisingly for this composer we have some tension and drama and a good musical argument.

The Symphony no 2, Op 51 dates from 1956 - 1958. It is an improvement on the Symphony no 1 but retains the features which many consider are structural and textural weaknesses. The music is too leisurely and lacks contrast. There is also a lack of drama and passion. It is also short of an 'original stamp' and, at times, is somewhat anaemic. It is pleasant enough but rather lightweight.

Yehudi Menuhin was associated with the Violin Concerto of 1961. It is, at times, a well-crafted work with an expressive solo line. It is a short work with a curious slow movement which has a twelve-note theme first stated by the violas. But it is not a serial piece. Berkeley was not competent enough to take up this strict discipline and those who object to this type of music do so because they are unequal to it. This concerto has the 'security' of tonality and is in C. The work is discursive and the slow movement, ending with a cadenza, is disappointing.

The 1960s has been said to be the time when Berkeley lost his Gallic charm. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, he composed music to dislodge the label of being a miniaturist and 'French' but now he attempted a serious utterance as, for example, in his Symphony no 3 of 1969, another passive work lacking in initiative or forceful qualities. Alan Rawsthorne's music is sometimes the same. Yet this symphony teems with melodic invention and colourful wind solos... but little drama or tension. It tends to ramble. If the brass are the main progenitors of drama in music then Berkeley, as with some French impressionists, fight shy of this group of instruments. The symphony is another cheerless work.

His continuing desire for acceptance as a serious composer is also shown in his Symphony no 4, Op 94 premiered by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Charles Groves.

It begins with the bass clarinet and the allegro has some facets to commend it but the liveliness is always short-lived and this is disappointing. The music is often feeble and has a simplicity that is banal. The composer is stepping outside his ability in order to write music that is more contemporary but the result is unnatural. Is this what Hugh Wood is saying?

The second movement begins with eight bars for string quartet and, overall, is an andante and five variations, the third of which, Lento, contains the best music of this symphony. The finale has a tonality of E and is marked allegro and is in 6/4 time but with its dotted minims and dotted semibreves all over the place makes it too spacious to be an allegro. It is a poor movement.

Berkeley was awarded the CBE in 1957 in the middle of his twenty two years as professor of composition at the Royal Academy in London. He retired in 1968, received an OBE in 1967 and was knighted in 1974. He received the Papal Knighthood of St Gregory in 1973. He was appointed honorary fellow of Merton College in 1974, honorary Professor of the University of Keele and an honorary

fellow of the Royal Northern College of Music in 1975. He was Professor Emeritus of the Cheltenham Festival from 1977 to 1983.

Sadly, I do not know his operas A Dinner Engagement of 1954, Nelson, also of 1954, The Castaways of 1967 and Faldon Park of 1982. One wonders if we will hear them on future occasions. Nelson is an heroic subject and I cannot see Berkeley writing heroic music.

Since his death in a London hospital on 26 December 1989, there has been no revival of his music although some is now recorded.

If his music is neglected, is it because of the mendacious public or the powers that be? Or is he sacrificed on the altars of Elgar and Britten? Is he dismissed because he was a Francophile? Or is he a composer who should had stuck to writing in the style of music he excelled at?

He was a congenial and lovely man and was deservedly respected. His best works such as the St Theresa Poems, the Serenade, the Divertimento, the Sinfonietta and the String Trio need revivals and substantial promotion.

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