

MICHAEL KENNEDY

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Michael Kennedy is a writer on music and a music critic. He was the music critic of the Daily Telegraph and then went to the Sunday Telegraph. He semi-retired in 2005.

He is said to be the authority on Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Mahler, Richard Strauss, Barbirolli and Britten. An authority is an expert, someone with extreme skill and the most information and knowledge on a subject.

He was awarded the OBE in 1981. An honorary Doctor of Music was bestowed on him in 2003 by the University of Manchester. He has been an admirable enthusiast and champion of the composers he admires.

His most well known book is The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Music of which he was editor which has been invaluable to thousands, if not millions, and is an indispensable book.

With any dictionary with over 14,000 entries, it cannot contain everything, but some important composers are omitted which is unfortunate. These include Andrew Downes, Frank Stiles, Klami, Merlatin, Boely and many others; as well as omissions of great performers such as Sybil Michelow, our finest contralto, and America's most famous contralto, Eula Beal, to name but two. And where is Alec Rowley? Dessoff, Gernsheim, Kabalais, Feld and many other important composers who are all missing! We have entries for The Rolling Stones and The Beatles!

In the list of composers' works, he misses out some very important works. Before the fifth edition, he omitted Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata which is probably the most original and virtuosic British piano sonata. Kennedy has omitted one of the very finest cello concerto of the 20th century which is by Joonas Kokkonen who, incidentally, wrote four symphonies not five, since the planned fifth was left unfinished and only survives as sketches.

The Fifth edition of the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Music dates from 2006 and yet, for example, it does not mention important works by Penderecki written before that time such as the Symphony no 7 of 1996 although he mentions it as The Seven Gates of Jerusalem under the category of voices and orchestra. He does not mention the massive Largo for cello and orchestra of 2003 which is, in effect, a Cello Concerto and it is very impressive.

Again, we have to re-emphasise that all composers works cannot be mentioned. If the closing date for entries was say 2000, it should have been stated and so some of these queries would not be necessary. We must also say that being a lexicographer is not an easy task.

While I supposed we can all be guilty of praising a favourite composer to the hilt, some of Kennedy's writings are sycophantic and fulsome particularly when it comes to Britten and Elgar. Is he both an authority and an expert on these composers? He speaks of Peter Pears as Britten's life long friend. No, his lifelong lover! Kennedy says that Britten's music was inventive whereas most of his music is loveless and dead, sterile and tedious. He refers to the War Requiem as a great work whereas it is not a requiem at all but includes another extended defence of homosexuality. Kennedy says that Britten's conducting of Mahler was superb. The Mahler experts deny this strongly. Kennedy talks about the drama in Britten's operas whereas the majority of people agree that they are tedious, uneventful musically, have no arias or melodies, and lack imagination and originality. Kennedy says that Britten won the admiration of all those for whom he composed works. This simply is not true. There were many musicians for whom he wrote who did not like his music or, for that matter, his rudeness. As for the comment that Britten was a genius, this is also false. Britten did not have the necessary assured

technical ability and skill. Conductors like Del Mar, Pritchard and Mackerras found elementary errors in his scores which, when told, the inflamed Britten libelled these musicians. If he were a genius, he would have had exceptional ability both in the composition of music and as a performer although he was an adequate pianist. He bragged that he played the viola in a piece that was on a gramophone record. What he did not say was that it was one note throughout and on an open string!

That he was a pervert, a paedophile and a pederast is not relevant to a dictionary of music but these perversions are in his music.

A major Channel Four documentary proved Kennedy's glowing appraisal to be wrong and had many famous musicians taking part who provided evidence of the many weaknesses in Britten's music.

(See article [*Britten: More Thoughts*](#))

Is he an expert on Walton? In his book about this composer, he does not tell us that Walton studied with Humphrey Searle immediately after World War II and until Walton went to live in Italy in 1948. Searle was his only teacher and so why has Kennedy left this out? It is an important fact. Is Kennedy the expert on Walton?

In the book, he confuses the conductor Leslie Heward with the actor Leslie Howard. Let us come to his defence. The proof readers should have picked this up.

The composer, John Veale, who knew Walton, wrote a gracious letter to Kennedy pointing out many mistakes in his book about Walton. The reply he received was thoroughly unpleasant and hostile! I saw both letters and it told us a lot about Michael Kennedy!

Throughout the dictionary, Kennedy makes it clear that he does not like serial music and the composers who write this dodecaphonic music. Kennedy classes this style of composition as a mere system. So was the fugue, the passacaglia and other formulae and systems.

He says that my relative, Sir Ivor Atkins, edited Bach's St Matthew Passion with Elgar. That is a myth, an idea widely held but untrue. All the technical editing was that of Atkins as shown in the letters that passed between the two musicians which letters I have. Atkins and Elgar discussed it together and Elgar pleaded that his name be included as an editor in accordance with his nauseating self-promotion and narcissism.

Kennedy writes that Elgar's greatness as a composer lies in his ability to combine nobility and spirituality with a popular style, his melodic charm and fine craftsmanship.

Greatness? Greatness means larger and better than others, extreme in stature and above others, very important, of exceptional skill and achievement.

Elgar and his music was often pompous and we should remind ourselves what pompous means... foolishly dignified and self important and foolishly grand in style. And foolish means very silly, unwise and absurd. Absurd means obviously senseless and/or illogical. So Elgar and his music is pompous, silly unwise, absurd and foolishly grand.

Research conducted a few years ago named the most hated symphonies which were Elgar's Second and Mahler's Fourth.

Again, in a dictionary of composers, one would not expect to read that Elgar was a dirty old man, sexually clandestine and wanted all women who performed his music to wear navy blue underwear and often inspected them with his thumbstick. I have letters from women and their daughters who

confirm this lewd voyeurism and Sir Ivor's letters telling Elgar to desist 'this disgusting and immoral practice'.

Another recent survey confirmed that the majority found *The Dream of Gerontius* painfully tedious and musically sterile, unproductive and lacking in energy and inspiration. Stanford and Parry discussed this work. One said, "it stinks of incense!". The other replied, "No, you are wrong. It just stinks!".

The Cello Concerto is hailed as a cornerstone of the cello repertoire, but leading cellists and other musicians find it nauseous in the extreme. Twelve of our finest cellists said that they have played it but it is not well written for the cello and that is true, although there will be those who will defend it. Both Holst and Malcolm Arnold, in serious mood, said this work was the most effective cure for constipation.

Now it is known that I do not like Elgar, Britten and Barbirolli, but that is not out of prejudice because my dislike for them is not unreasonable or unfair and I do not set out to be harmful or damaging but to uphold the truth, which, of course, is factual as opposed to opinion. What is true is real and genuine, accurate and precise.

Barbirolli was a very poor conductor. Although not a Mahler expert, these experts tell me that his Mahler was sadly lacking and 'all over the place'. I followed, or tried to follow his performance of [Mahler's Symphony no. 5 with the score, but it was wayward. Lewis Foreman writes that John Veale was ignored by William Glock and the BBC and that is why he was not promoted or heard. Absolute nonsense! John Veale's music was ignored because of Barbirolli's performance of his Symphony no. 1 which was atrocious and yet, a few years earlier, a better conductor, George Weldon had given an excellent performance of this work. As to another composer, whom I do not have his permission to name, had his Symphony no. 1 atrociously performed by Barbirolli. This conductor signed contracts to perform new works but when he saw the scores the music was beyond him and so he made Weldon conduct them. Does this not prove that Weldon was a better conductor than Barbirolli?

Barbirolli performed Arnell's hour-long Symphony no. 3, but cut 15 minutes because he could not cope with it. Neither could he conduct in five time. His attempts at conducting Stravinsky were laughable.

He was also a narcissist. He said that he discovered both Ginette Neveu and Jacqueline DuPre and I have him on tape saying this and that these two musicians became stars solely because of him. Neveu was already established as an international artiste and DuPre's success was due to William Pleeth!

Sir Arthur Bliss told a group of us that he welcomed first performances and other performances of his work from any conductor except Barbirolli! Vaughan Williams called Barbirolli 'Glorious John' and the conductor worked hard on some of Vaughan Williams' work which was a rare thing since he toadied up to this great composer. He ingratiated himself for his own selfish purposes.

The composer, William Wordsworth, had a strange relationship with Barbirolli who gave 'demolition jobs' of some of his symphonies. But Wordsworth baited Barbirolli with other works setting problems which he and others knew Barbirolli was not up to. This composer's promising career was wrecked by Barbirolli's 'lousy conducting and lack of musicianship and skill'.

Solomon never forgave Barbirolli for telling him how to play a cadenza. Great performers like Arthur Schnitker and Jascha Heifetz complained that Barbirolli was useless and grossly incompetent. The great Mstislav Rostropovich said that working with Barbirolli on the Emperor Concerto was worse than having a tooth pulled without anaesthetic

This conductor was despicable. He stole Evelyn Rothwell from George Szell, a very fine conductor, and conducted a vicious hate campaign against him. Looking into the coffin of Rachmaninov, he

was both cruel and insensitive saying, among other snide things, that this was Rachmaninov's best performance!

Barbirolli was hated in America because he lacked the ability and skill one expects from a conductor. Renowned soloists refused to perform with him. He was an absolute sod, a really nasty person. He hated Sir Thomas Beecham.

Barbirolli always said that if you did not love Elgar and every note of his music you were neither a musician nor a music lover! Britten and Vaughan Williams hated Elgar. Vaughan Williams would say that listening to Elgar was like expecting an important letter but, when it came, you could not read it because the writing was so terrible!

The unanswered question is why does Kennedy call Barbirolli a great conductor? He was not. He was peddling his wares advocating persistently his likes, and dislikes. He was promoting himself and not the music.

The other serious weakness in some of Kennedy's writings, particularly in the Dictionary, is that his constant praise of his favourite composers is counterproductive since no one with any sense would accept that a composer is perfect and so great. Therefore, Kennedy is not achieving what he wants and is, in fact, causing people understandably to doubt him and what he says.

Kennedy states that when Barbirolli was with the Halle Orchestra he lifted it to new heights. Not so! Members of the orchestra and soloists have told me that he let the orchestra slip into serious decline and that he was often drunk on the podium. When Stanislaw Skrowaczewski took over the orchestra, the standards rose to enviable heights and the orchestra became great emerging triumphantly from decay.

I have written about these musicians many times before and I can hear people protesting that I am too persistent and I should 'give it a rest' and that this article is in the same vein and these furrows are already ploughed. But each article is separate in its own right and readers do not always like being referred to other articles but prefer the current article to contain all the relevant information itself.

I can not comment on Kennedy's alleged authority on Mahler or his book about Richard Strauss. These two composers were friends and Strauss's symphonic poems conducted by Fritz Reiner are essential recordings for all music lovers, as is his performances of Bartok. When it comes to Mahler, Rafael Kubelik's performances on CD are superlative.

Richard Strauss was a great composer of songs, opera and orchestral music. His Four Last songs are sublime. As for Mahler, I find that his music is often too long and sometimes contains too much angst and anxiety but, in this case, this is my opinion. There are moments in the symphonies from number six onwards that are superb.

Kennedy is a trenchant, keen and an incisive writer on music and has done much to promote composers and musicians that are his personal favourites. Where he fails, and where many of us may fail to some extent, he claims that the composers and musicians he likes are the greatest and he is selective as to what he writes about them. He ignores their failures and their lack of musical ability and skill, and passes over the obvious negative aspects of their music but praises them with untrue and sycophantic rhetoric.

He is entitled to admire the music of his choice, as we all are, but it is devious, insincere and dishonest to make untrue and misleading statements and give an incomplete and unbalanced account. Is he trying to convince us or himself?

In conclusion, I admit that there are some composers and their music which I do admire but it is not well written. But I do not claim that it is great music or the work of a genius.

Kennedy received the Elgar Society Medal in 2010 and he has worked hard for the cause of Elgar and, therefore certainly deserves it. I was surprised to read the names of previous recipients such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Leonard Slatkin, the underrated Jerzy Maksymiuk, Tadaaki Otaka, Andrew Litton, Sakaro Oramo and Northrop Moore.

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