

RIC GRAEBNER

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Eric Hans Graebner was born on the eighth of January 1943. He was actually named Hans Eric since his parents wished to return to Austria once the Second World War was over. But he is known today as Ric.

He was born at Berrington near Shrewsbury and is a British national. His father, Hans, was an administrator for British Rail. His mother had a similar position also with British Rail and her name was Lilly Kornmehl. She played the piano and enjoyed listening to serious music. Ric has a brother, Ronald, who was born in 1946, and was a semi-professional footballer.

Ric's paternal grandfather and great uncle had some musical interests and his maternal uncle was Walter Loessor, a concert pianist and sometime assistant to Bruno Walter. Ric believes that he is distantly related to Joseph Joachim and Paul Wittgenstein.

As a child, Graebner was apparently obsessed with the family's wind up gramophone. He began piano lessons with a Miss Dodd when he was only four years of age. Later he had piano lessons with Rev. Daniels and then Barnham Johnson, Head of Music at Shrewsbury Public School, took up the oboe with Thea Stainer, whose husband is a descendant of Sir John Stainer, and the organ with David Willcocks. His schools were St Giles, Shrewsbury (1947–1951), Lancastarian (1951–54) and Priory School (1954–1961) all in Shrewsbury. He won awards at school and achieved O and A levels in GCSE. For A levels there was the strong influence of his classics obsessed teacher persuading him to take Latin and Greek whereas he wanted to take science and mathematics. He was offered a concession that he could do music!

From 1961 to 1964 he was a student at Kings College, Cambridge receiving a BA in Music with a double first! Among his tutors were John Exton, Nicholas Temperley and Philip Radcliffe. He then proceeded to York University studying under Wilfrid Mellers and David Blake and playing the Beethoven Cello Sonatas with fellow student Moray Welsh and, achieving a Doctor of Philosophy degree specialising in Berlioz's opera. He enjoyed the music of Wagner, Mahler, Schoenberg and Stravinsky and, understandably, did not care for Viennese waltzes. Literary works that appealed to him, and still do, are the works of Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Kafka and Thomas Hardy.

When he was four he tried composing and produced a waltz. But he made his first impact as a pianist in 1952 with Bach's Partita in E in his home town of Shrewsbury. His teacher insisted that he play it from memory but half way through he forgot what was to come next and improvised the rest. Everyone was too polite to comment.

His first professional performance of one of his own works was of his Piano Trio of 1963 given by the Orion Trio and his first broadcast was in 1979 of his String Quartet no. 1 played by the Guadagnini Quartet.

His interests were always expanding. He read up on the works of Milton Babbitt and others and two of his own works Aspects of Three Tetrachords, a work for tape, and Thalia for two pianos. Thalia established him as a composer which, along with the Capriccio for violin and piano, are two of his most important and impressive works.

Some music lovers sometimes become almost paranoid about influences in music. Graebner may show influences of all great composers from Haydn to Stravinsky. He used to compose at the piano but now with a computer and he can compose from five minutes a day to four hours a day perhaps up to 90 bars or just one note. As with most composers the mornings are the best time to compose and, also in common with many composers, he finds writing for the guitar not easy.

His son, Alasdair, who was born in 1968 is following an artistic career being the chief technician at the Peacock theatre in London.

Like every good musician, Graebner has scrapped some of his pieces and may disown some pieces but not necessarily for musical reasons. He approves of serial music provided the composer is in control of this highly disciplined way of composition and considers aleatoric music in certain situations might be appropriate. Electronic music he not see as a genre or mere technique but an effective and economic means of production. I am not qualified to discuss his electronic scores although I should record that Venus in Landscape is one of the works that gives the composer the most pleasure.

His opinions of musicians are precise and very rewarding. He speaks about the conductors Christoph Dohnanyi and Pierre Boulez who bring out the unobvious in the score so that "you can hear what the violas and the second trumpet are doing." As for composers he believes that Mendelssohn and Dvořák are underrated and that this is also the case for Parry and Lili Boulanger. He believes Parry is technically good and has fine ideas and is as competent as Brahms. He admires Thomas Adès and finds Robin Holloway to be interesting.

All composers should be honest but some are afraid to speak about music they do not like for fear that their own popularity will suffer. Graebner does not respond to Handel opera, early Verdi, Chopin and some Schumann. As a composer himself he likes to feel that his work can be understood by a wide-ranging public but, obviously, on different levels. A warm response is encouraging but could be due to other considerations and not necessarily the quality of the piece. This is true of many of us. We may endure a piece and then rejoice at its loud and impressive ending but not necessarily enjoying what has gone before. We can be misled into liking a piece because of association or because the harpist was so sexually attractive.

As a person, Ric is more outgoing at a personal level than at a professional level. He is a perfectionist and easily annoyed with irrelevant social conventions such as annual Christmas cards to people you have not seen or spoke to for years or the convention of stuffy dress codes. He does not care for competitiveness in music and enjoys collaboration such as the mixed media approach as, for example, music with mine or music with dance where the visual aspects are often vital. But he accepts that a composer's lot can be isolated.

His Wind Quintet was premiered by the Vega Quintet in the spring of 2003.

It will be interesting to follow this composer and his output.

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