

YORK BOWEN

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There has much been written about York Bowen and there is a York Bowen Society who, incidentally, were unable to assist me with some enquiries. There is nothing new that I can say about this composer, apart from expressing my value judgements.

His music is what is generally called Romantic and belongs to the nineteenth century more than the twentieth century. It is not progressive and certainly not experimental. Sadly, it is not very original. Is this a possible reason why his music may be somewhat neglected? Clearly his music went out of fashion by the 1920s.

And yet for all that, it is attractive and well-written music but after hearing any of his works there seems to be no over-riding desire to hear it again soon. The Piano Concerto no 1 Op 11 of 1903 is a fine piece and the Piano Sonata no 1 in B minor Op 6 has some gorgeous music of the highest quality whereas the Piano Concerto no 4 in A minor Op 88 at about 42 minutes tends to meander despite having some magical moments. It was premiered at a Prom under Boult.



It is interesting to note that Romantic composers seem to have a passion for minor keys. All of Bowen's piano sonatas are set in minor keys.

The points that I have made are evident in his Violin Concerto in E minor Op 33 of 1913. The first two movements are leisurely and often very beautiful and yet it meanders and wanders. It lacks a sense of direction and, therefore, perhaps, purpose. It is cleverly conceived for the soloist but another reason why his music may not be found in the concert hall is that soloists may not be prepared to learn a big score for one public performance only. However, in a recording studio, they can play the work with the music before them.

Edwin York Bowen was born in Crouch End, London on 22 February 1888. His father was the owner of a whisky distillers Bowen and McKechnie.

York's first lessons at the piano were with his mother. He was one of three sons and little is known about his two brothers.

His next musical education was at the Northern Metropolitan College of Music and then at the Blackheath Conservatory of Music with Alfred Izard. But the most significant event in his early days was his playing a Dussek concerto when he was eight years old.

At the age of fourteen, he received an Erard scholarship to RAM to study composition with Frederick Corder and the piano with Tobias Matthay. Bowen won the Sterndale Bennett award and the Worshipful Company of Musicians Medal and, in 1907, was awarded a full fellowship with RAM and, in 1909, became a professor of piano there. He was 25 years old. He was an excellent pianist, a competent organist and worked with such performers as Kreisler and Lionel Tertis. He played his own concertos with Henry Wood and Hans Richter. Bowen also played the viola and the horn.

It was Landon Ronald who premiered Bowen's Symphony no 2 in E minor in 1912, the year Bowen married Sylvia Dalton who was a singer and the daughter of a vicar in Somerset. Their son, Philip, was born in 1913.

In World War I, York Bowen played in the Band of the Scots Guards. During service in France, he developed pneumonia and returned to the UK. In 1919, his RAF March won the Sunday Express prize.

But his music fell in popularity after World War I. It is true that far more fascinating music was being written and performed with composers like Stravinsky and Bartok as well as Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Bowen's music did not have this interest or appeal.

And yet his music was, and is, far better than Debussy, Scriabin and Medtner whose music is weak, atmospheric and often pointless. Bowen's music is more 'grounded' since it consists of more matter and is not hollow like these three aforementioned composers.

He was the first pianist to record Beethoven's Piano Concerto no 4 in G and he premiered Walton's Sinfonia Concertante in 1928. In 1931-1932 he edited many of Mozart's piano works and in 1949 and 1950 edited the piano works of Chopin.

I find it somewhat surprising that one of his most supportive advocates was Kaikhosru Sorabji who was the most difficult and eccentric musician I have ever met. I have no doubt that he was completely mad. I met him several times in Dorset. However, Bowen's 24 Preludes Op 102 were dedicated to Sorabji.

In recent years there have been some fine recordings of Bowen's work and these are very welcome. Some of his piano writings are virtuosic and very difficult as in the Piano Sonata no 5.

His Toccata for piano Op 155 of 1957 is a stunning piece and earned him the nickname of the British Rachmaninov!

York Bowen died suddenly on 23 November 1961. He was 76.

He is one of the three best British composers of tonal piano music, the others being Stanley Bate and Richard Arnell and essays about them appear on this site.

Main and selective works

- Symphony no. 1 in G minor Op 4 1902
- Piano Sonata no 1 in B minor Op 6
- Piano Sonata no 2 in C sharp minor Op 9 1901
- Piano Concerto no 1 in E flat Op 11 1903
- Fantasia in F minor for viola and organ 1903
- Piano Sonata no 3 in D minor Op 12
- Concert Overture Op 15
- Symphonic Fantasia Op 16
- Piano Concerto no 2 in C sharp minor (Concertstuck) Op 17 1905
- Viola Sonata no 1 in C minor Op 18 1905
- Viola Sonata no 2 in F Op 22 1966
- Piano Concerto no 3 (Fantasia) in G minor 1907
- Viola Concerto in C minor Op 25 1906-7
- Phantasia Trio for piano trio Op 24
- Ballade no 1 in D minor Op 29
- Symphony no 2 in E minor Op 31 1909
- Violin Concerto in E minor Op 33 1913
- Piano Sonata no 4 (Short Sonata) in C sharp minor Op 35 no 1
- String Quartet no 2 in D minor Op 41
- Fanatsie Quartet in E minor for four violas op 41 no 1
- String Quartet no 3 in G Op 46 1919

Cello Sonata in A Op 64 1921
Piano Sonata no 5 in F minor Op 72 1925
Rhapsody Trio 1926
Rhapsody for cello and Orchestra Op 74
Oboe Sonata op 83
Horn Quintet Op 85
Piano Concerto no 4 in A minor op 88 1929
Festal Overture Op 89
Horn Sonata 101
24 preludes for piano Op 102
Sonata for two pianos op 107
Clarinet Sonata Op 109
Piano Trio Op 118
Flute Sonata Op 120
Treble recorder Sonata Op 121
Symphony no 3 op 137 (lost)
Fantasie in G minor for organ Op 136
Sonatina for piano Op 144
Concerto for horn, strings and timpani Op150
Piano Sonata no 6 in B flat minor Op 160 1961
Symphony no. 4 (1961 incomplete)
There are a few songs and the Four Chinese Lyrics Op 48

His music should be investigated. There is a lot that will give pleasure.

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