

# contact

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LORD BERNERS  
( 1883 - 1950 )

"Lord Berners!" they said, "who the hell's he!?" Thirty years ago, such a question would not have needed asking; for anyone in the slightest way involved in the artistic world, would have been acquainted with his work, or, at the very least, been aware of his existence. The amused response to the idea that he ought to be 'resurrected' is rather unfortunate. Such a response would be labelled near sacrilege if the composed in question were an obscure Renaissance monkish figure, the producer of polyphonic masses by the scrolls, plainchant and "parody" in base. There seems to be a great unspoken maxim among many music scholars in this field that implies that, in some mystical way, there is respectability in antiquity; originality in contemporary context be damned! The boldest reactionary, who today grovels beneath the 'jackbooted avant-garde giants', if 400 years old (or hopefully more!) can 'react' to his own self-glorifying content, so long as the manuscript, wherein his hidden masterpieces lay, proves hard enough to 'translate' that a Ph.D. is deemed the only possible reward. Still, that is another hobbyhorse, and another article!

It is quite impossible to go into every facet of Berners' creative work here, for it stretched, not only across the many musical genres, but across the whole spectrum of artistic endeavour. Novels, (including a two-part autobiography), paintings, set & costume designs all, however fine, are overshadowed by his music, which he himself took most interest and pride in - and probably spent the greatest part of his recreation time engrossed in perfecting. I say 'recreation time', since Berners (his name, before succeeding to the barony in 1918, was Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt) was by profession, a diplomat. He was, and still is labelled an amateur and a dilettante; but there is little amateurishness in his music. Despite his groundings in musical technique acquired at Leipzig, he still had doubts about his own technical capabilities as a musician, and so went to Oxford for a month to master classical harmony and counterpoint; and 'master it' he did. His tutor reported that it took Berners a month to grasp what took many students six months or more.

He stands in a line of great English eccentrics, and amateurs - Beecham springs to mind most easily in the musical field. And 'English eccentrics' reminds one of Edith Sitwell. The whole Sitwell clan was passionately fond of publicity and kept a large bowl in the house full of press cuttings, featuring some member of the family or other. After noticing this at a dinner party, Berners, on repayment of the invitation, boldly displayed an even larger receptacle with a minute cutting, dwarfed against the bowl, to the effect that Lord Berners had now returned to 1, Chesham Place. More exciting events took place at the lord's country seat at weekend parties. When everyone (but Berners) had retired to their respective rooms, for the night, and he had gauged them to be in a state of sparse attire, the host would let off one of his many shot-guns into the garden, thus drawing everyone, immediately, out of their room. While quietly enjoying the resultant spectacle, he would calmly announce that he was not too sure whether the weapon in question was still in working order, and to avoid waking his guests in the morning, thought that he should test it now. Much emphasis

(probably too much for the narrow-minded musician's taste) has been put upon his talents as a showman and practical joker; yet, because much of it is so well reflected in his music, it becomes all the more inseparable from the man, and all the more part of his endearment - to me, at least. Any foreigner would have had his most distorted view of the English upper classes of the period quietly confirmed on entering Berner's London home, adorned as it was with portraits of generals and statesmen, suitably juxtaposed with pantomime masks of negroes and cats. Then again, he could as well be found sobbing over the state of the stock market (despite the fact that he had a cool half-million to his credit) as dyeing his pigeons in more exotic colours to the presumed dual pleasure of birds and 'artist'. His fascination with masks extended beyond those adorning the walls of his entrance hall; the wearing of certain 'examples' resulted in some frightening experiences for Italian peasants, ill-fated enough to catch sight of the peer 'en vacances'. He would be seen in his Rolls, playing a miniature piano (specially fitted in the back of the vehicle) and peering out of a window - all while donning a hideous mask of some idiot-boy or grinning child.

But, despite these bizarre qualities, peculiar to that hearty breed of English eccentrics (of which he was a true member) he found just enough time to wear his three distinct artistic 'hats' - author, painter and composer. He took a keen interest in everything new in the Arts, - for example, on his piano at home might well be the latest work of Stravinsky with the dedication by the composer; Walton, also, was moved to dedicate his 'Belshazzar' to Berners in 1931. His complete works, including an opera, songs (to German and French as well as English texts) and piano music, are conveniently listed in Grove, so I need not catalogue them here. He is best remembered today as the composer of five important ballets for the Vic-Wells (now Royal) Ballet, among them "The Triumph of Neptune" and "A Wedding Bouquet," (to words of Gertrude Stein) for which he also wrote the scenario and designed costumes and sets. Stravinsky, a personal friend of the composer's, comes in for some parody in the ballet, with its obvious digs at "Les Noces" - although any attempt at thematic correlation between the two is doomed to failure. The ballet, not inappropriately in view of the title, is fully choral, as in "Les Noces". Stein's libretto comprises chattering inconsequential repetitions (e.g. punctuated outbursts of "Act One! Act One!" in the last act) in which sound counts for more than intelligibility. The following may act as a sample:-

Arthur Julia Arthur Julia Arthur  
this would make a dog uneasy dog uneasy  
Guy would it be possible to believe it of three  
Guy would it be possible  
Guy would it be possible  
All of them having come to the door  
this is now scene four  
this is now scene four

Berners sets these word patterns with masterly confidence. Some may agree with Jack Westrup that the "persistent brightness and sophisticated simplicity is as wearisome as smart conversation" - I, not surprisingly, do not; and that, after seventy or more hearings (of a tape, not separate public performances, alas!)

Among smaller instrumental pieces, the "Valse bourgeoise", for piano duet, first published in 1919, (and performed at the Salzburg Festival of 1923) are fine examples of the sharp wit coupled with a sound technique that is Lord Berners, the composer. The work is full of what the ordinary listener would call "wrong notes"; Berners had a habit in his earlier works of decorating his melodies and harmonies with great chromaticism. But there is not the slightest hint of atonality in the music. On a less purely musical note, at the entry of the Viennese subject in the third waltz, for example, Berners has written above the staff - "mais je connais ça" - showing himself, then a true francophile, even when tackling "le style viennois". But surely not simply a dilettante, the most frequent label attached to his name. It is easy to see why, as Constant Lambert, his life-long friend and champion, has recorded. But if every such labelled individual left to posterity what he produced, then "Vive les dilettantes" - for there are not so many such people that one can afford to let them be dismissed so lightly with a wave of the hand from some musical snob.

Berners has been called the English Satie, and as a label for quick characterisation it is misleading. However, in some ways, they can be regarded in the same light, if only because they shared a love for the eccentric in art, and for what seemed to all others trivial. But opinions are divided, as ever, Satie is regarded by many as a precursor of Debussy, by others as a trifling imitator. But while Satie studied music seriously at the Schola Cantorum in Paris, and is proceeded to live in comparative squalor, Berners wrote music initially as a pastime, with only the most basic of musical groundings, but lived a life of enviable affluence. The nature of his musical background is hinted at in much of his earlier work with its strong element of improvisation; but there is no suggestion of any 'bungling'. His musical gestures are made boldly and without pointless addition.

Throughout his varied artistic career he was true to the French he so admired (most of his titles are in French) and to the French themselves, who make a habit of never keeping their arts in watertight compartments. The fact that he did spread his net wide has probably accounted for his neglect in a country where such practice is unfashionable and shunned upon. But why is he not performed more often than he is, particularly in these days of revival upon revival? He certainly cannot be dismissed as just another post-Stanford wallower. The only British composer to whom he bears any resemblance is Constant Lambert - and that was more likely a reversal of influence. It is disappointing that in the amateur field - where such a

revival must, it seems, come before the professional box office try it - the "powers that be" are rooted in musical ignorance. And this also applies to youthful organisations, run by the young. Their repertoire is restricted to 'what they did for "A" level', 'what their teachers thought they ought to perform' and 'what they happened to hear by accident on Radio 3 the other week'. It is also a pity that those with some idea for innovation - and that does not mean 'new' music, or me as an individual - are always the ones least poised to act effectively.

I close with a sentence from Arnold Haskell's book "Balletomania" (an ailment I suffer from gladly) - "Thank God for Lord Berners ..... the great exception to everything written about the narrow views of English artists; ..... his role has already been a great one".

PHILIP LANE