

Lennox Berkeley's Piano Music – a personal view

For as long as I can remember, I have possessed a copy of the Opus 23 *Preludes*. It was given to me by my first piano teacher, who introduced me to composers such as Berkeley, Ireland, Bax, Bridge, Scott, Bowen and Ferguson as a matter of course, alongside Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. This instilled in me a lifelong devotion to this era of British piano music and an unquestioning acceptance of its importance to the pianist's repertoire.

As a child I loved playing the three slow Preludes from the Opus 23 set – who could resist the appeal of such gorgeous lyricism and bluesy harmonies? Later, as I became acquainted with the range of Berkeley's music, I came to appreciate the sophistication and craftsmanship that lay behind the notes. And it was only later, when my technique had developed sufficiently, that I could revel in the wonderfully ethereal quality of the first Prelude, and enjoy the urbane wit of the third Prelude - definitely the most technically challenging of the set to play.

I have mentioned Berkeley in a list of composers who are all fundamentally different to him. With composers such as Bax and Ireland I find that I often have to strive to achieve lucidity and clarity, whereas these qualities are already very much present in Berkeley's writing. This makes his music an unalloyed pleasure to study.

The joy that Berkeley's music affords me is similar to the delight I feel on reading Jane Austen. I like to consider Berkeley as the twentieth century musical equivalent. We could just as easily describe Berkeley as working on a "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, with so fine a brush", and indeed he himself spoke of his perceived limitations in a similarly humble and disarmingly modest manner. But, as with Austen, what a world is contained therein! They both wrote with consummate craftsmanship, refinement, elegance and wit. Both were masters of subtle characterisation as well as the art of parody and caricature.

Moreover, Berkeley's 'civilised' world does actually contain a surprising range of moods and emotions. He may have felt unable to be nasty or angry, but his early set of *Impromptus* concludes with a short piece that is nothing if not brittle and abrasive. And the octave study that opens the Opus 2 set conjures up an almost ghoulish atmosphere, (somewhat akin in mood to Howell's *Procession*). As with his other sets of short pieces, this Opus 2 set is made up of extraordinary contrasts - the Study is followed by an exquisitely tender *Berceuse*, whilst the *Capriccio* that ends the set is a thoroughly jolly romp that throws the odd sly wink at Stravinsky. It is hard to imagine that this is the same composer who, just a few years later, after the liberation of France, writes a piece such as *Paysage*. This is a personal favourite of mine, and is one of his most poignant and hauntingly beautiful works. Its wistful simplicity, even in the jubilant gestures of the middle section, makes the pathos all the more telling.

The prospect of recording a CD of the piano music for Chandos naturally encouraged me to explore all the works I had not previously encountered. Now that I can fairly safely say that I have played through everything that Berkeley wrote for the piano, including a number of unpublished early works, several qualities stand out for me. Firstly, how profoundly pianistic his writing is. That is not to say that all his piano pieces are easy to play! In addition to that tricky third prelude there are many taxing études. The Sonata also contains some demandingly bravura passages, and even a short piece such as the *Scherzo* Op. 32/2 can prove decidedly troublesome to play up to speed!

The other striking quality is the unity of style he brings to his entire oeuvre. Whether it's the sparkling take on Scarlatti in the *Scherzo*, the delicately Chopinesque inspiration in the *Mazurkas*, the uncompromisingly rigorous outer movements in the Sonata, or the charm and warmth of harmonies and melodies kindred with Poulenc, somehow his language and style remain distinctly his own.

Berkeley may be considered a miniaturist in terms of his overall pianistic output, but his Sonata is indisputably a masterpiece of form and dramatic intensity. I find a deeply satisfying sense of unity to the four movements. Even the second movement, which would seem at a first glance to be fleetingly self-contained, is derived from the first movement's opening motif of a rising sixth. Moreover, it is this second movement figure that reappears at a pivotal moment in the last movement, and is the means by which the music is propelled towards the coda. The subsequent re-statement of the last movement's introductory material, mixed in with the opening motif from the first movement makes for a supremely convincing ending to the whole work.

But I digress, as this article is not intended to be an analytical discussion of Berkeley's music – that has been done superbly elsewhere. Rather, it is simply the musings of a pianist grateful for a legacy that has so enriched our repertoire. In a world that is becoming increasingly brutal and irrational, Berkeley's music provides a welcome antidote.

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