

Lennox Berkeley
England

Interview

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Lance Bosman



Lance Bosman
meets the composer

Lennox Berkeley

In view of the extensive range of works by Lennox Berkeley, his contributions for guitar are comparatively few. Yet they reveal the versatility of a composer who, knowing little about the mechanics of the instrument, expresses remarkable sympathy with it. In a period spanning four decades his writing has yielded three symphonies and numerous ensemble and solo compositions. In many of these, the piano (which he plays) and the voice take a prominent part.

Born in Oxford in 1904, he later studied French there. Then, during his early twenties, his interest in composition led to an introduction to Ravel. Through Ravel's recommendation he began a course of studies under Nadia Boulanger — a mother-figure to many composers. During the five years he spent with her, he came into contact with other composers, Stravinsky, Copland, Roy Harris and Poulenc. With the last of these he formed a lasting friendship.

Although he describes his earlier music as in a similar idiom to Benjamin Britten's (they once collaborated on an orchestral suite), his later works developed along personal lines with his own brand of melody and harmonic clarity. These traits are noticeable in *Sonatina*, his first music for guitar. But what makes this composition shine is the skilful placing of rasgueados, harmonics, pizzicatos and a host of other guitar effects.

At his London home he discussed his approach to composition in general and the problems that arise particularly when writing for the guitar. His manner of conversation, not given to over-elaboration, conveyed to me that composition for Lennox Berkeley is a matter of notes rather than words.

'It's a difficult instrument to write for, to know what stretches are possible. When I wrote the *Sonatina* I gained experience. But in all the guitar things I've done I worked closely with Julian Bream. He's called here and we've gone through every facet together. I've listened to the guitar quite a lot, so I have in mind the sort of things that are effective on it

— pizzicatos, harmonics, etc. Natural harmonics I can tell, but artificial harmonics I don't know too well.'

The middle section of the Sonatina has two or three parts moving simultaneously; did this present any problems?

The slow movement, yes it did. There again, Julian Bream helped me. But even so, you have to start with ideas that are suitable for guitar. That's what it amounts to. Another thing I find very difficult is that on a guitar you can't sustain the sound for any length of time. A harp is the same and also other plucked instruments — particularly in the treble notes.

When you begin a composition, do you plan a series of sketches?

Yes, I do. I generally make many versions of each section, partly because I find I don't do things right the first time. I write down, say, the first fifteen bars, then I find that's not exactly what I want. I do it again three or four times until I get it in the end. I try to think out what is the order of events in a movement and what sort of things the opening will be followed by, but without at that stage having any definite beam . . . I think you want to make a general plan in your head, then wait until you find the suitable notes to express what you want. I think it's necessary to have a plan, otherwise the music has no sense of direction.

When you compose, do you use an instrument, for example the piano?

Yes, I use the piano a great deal in composing. Without it, I find it is difficult to hear harmony. Some composers need the contact of actual sound, others don't: they can hear the harmony they want in their head.

You don't think that to work with an instrument is inhibiting because you're somewhat involved in the technique of it?

I think it needn't make any difference. It sometimes does but it shouldn't. For instance, if you're writing orchestral music you play it as best you can on a piano, but you have to



imagine it in terms of the orchestra. It's always best to get first ideas away from the piano. I don't start at the piano because the hands are apt to go to chords that you already know, instead of letting the music grow independently. I think it was easier to compose away from the keyboard in the 18th century because the musical language was so firmly established, whereas now things are very different.

In your recent Theme and Variations for guitar, did you have any preconceived idea of what you wanted from each variation, even before you thought how each variation might go?

Yes, they've got to relate. That's the kind of thing I meant when I said if you're writing a piece of music you must know the atmosphere, the type of thing you want to do, and then look for the actual notes. That's the way I work and particularly with variations. They need to contrast and yet all relate to the same thing.

At this point, Lennox Berkeley outlined for me from the score where the theme, or at least its influences, could be detected in the variations. In some instances the variations snatch recognisable fragments from the theme, at other times they imply it more by fleeting reference. These fragments, or motifs as they could be called, are stated as two distinct, brief note-patterns in the opening section. The following extracts show these motifs as they recur in their original form and in different guises.

The principle motif of the theme, from which much of the variations is developed:



A second motif in the theme also plays an important part in that it constantly recurs in the variations:



Elsewhere in the theme, the first motif is repeated in the bass:



Here, from the 2nd Variation, is a repeat of the original motif at a different pitch:



... and the second motif at a different pitch:



In the 3rd Variation, 'I thought I'd like a variation of rapidly repeated notes, as this is a characteristic of the guitar. At this point, I've altered the original motif: instead of ending it on C sharp, it ends on C natural' ...



'Although he's recorded this, Julian Bream wasn't involved in the editing. The Italian guitarist Angelo Gilardino wrote asking if I would write it, and this I did, with Angelo as editor.'

And following this, you have recently written a Concertiste for guitar. What sort of orchestral density did you aim for?

As the guitar is so easily covered up, I reduced the orchestra to a minimum: single woodwind, bassoon, strings and two horns. Also I arranged it so that the guitar played one thing, followed by the orchestra answering with something else. Only a little touch of them both playing together.

It's not very often that a guitar concerto can be heard by all the audience ...

Yes, I know, a lot of it just gets covered. When the Concertiste was performed, Julian had the guitar amplified, but only very little because he doesn't like the sound. I think he's right to be careful because it spoils the quality of tone.

On reflection, can you detect any noticeable changes of style in your writing?

There are changes, but it would be difficult to tell you what they are. I think the idiom and harmony have been freed from influences and have become more personal, more individual possibly – at least I hope so. It's very difficult to judge progress. I think most composers tend to feel they've progressed as they've gone on. Of course, some composers have been successful very young, very early. That can be rather dangerous because they sometimes fizzle out. I think it's better to start a little more slowly and develop. But it doesn't necessarily follow – there are no rules.

Excerpts from Theme and Variations by Lennox Berkeley published by kind permission of Breitkopf & Hartel, London, on behalf of Edizioni Bèrben.

Theme and Variations has been recorded by Julian Bream ('Julian Bream 70s', RCA SB6876), and Lennox Berkeley's Sonatina is recorded on 'The art of Julian Bream', RCA RB16239.