

## Ronald Stevenson at 80



Even beyond the pages of the *DSCH Journal*, few, if any, would contend that the *Passacaglia on DSCH* is the best-known creation of the British composer, who turned 80 years of age this March (2008). Ronald Stevenson was in fact born in England, but moved north of the border to his ancestral land over fifty years ago. His career has been as notable for his pianistic prowess, and his study of the works of Busoni, Grainger and Paderewski as with his own output.

The *Passacaglia* is cast in a form whose roots lie tantalisingly in a Spanish dance, swinging to and forth amidst multitudinous variations built upon a relentless ground bass. As writer Malcolm MacDonald writes:

“This four-note figure fascinated Stevenson –with its introverted chromaticism, its rising and falling semitones mirroring each other and yet spanning the diatonic interval of the major third, it seemed to enshrine the harmonic and melodic character of his own music. Like the atomic nucleus whose splitting releases the power of the sun, it was to provide him with the basis for a staggering creative feat.”

And as Stevenson wrote in *The Listener* in 1969:

“James Joyce, writing the section ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’ in his *Finnegans Wake*, began by weaving a few names of rivers into his prose-poem and went on piling up river-names until the text was a torrent of over 500 of them. That is something like how I wrote my *Passacaglia*. I went on piling up variations over that ground bass until they grew into hundreds. I don’t know how many hundreds: I’ve never counted them. I felt the nature of the work was ‘aqueous’ – it should flow. And in the flow should be other forms, similar to what geologists call ‘aqueous rocks’.”



“[The] Composition of my *Passacaglia* was begun in West Linton, Scotland, on Christmas Eve 1960 and finished there on May 18th, 1962. I presented a bound copy of the work to its dedicatee, Shostakovich, in his suite in the George Hotel, Edinburgh, during the Edinburgh Festival of 1962. The chairman was the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid. The ceremony was televised by the B.B.C. The work was revised in Cape Town, in December 1963 and the composer was pianist in the premiere at the Hiddingh Hall, Cape Town on December 10th 1963.

This composition is a strict passacaglia because it is based on a constantly repeated theme, around which variations are woven. On the other hand, it is not a strict *Passacaglia* in that it does not keep to one key or one mood. It consists of hundreds of variations and is probably the longest single movement in piano literature (duration approximately 1 hour 20 minutes). The length has no virtue except that it allows the work to unfold in a kind of musical fresco. Though the work is sometimes motivated by extra-musical ideas; these are not essential to its appreciation.”

45 years on and a rare performance of the work in London, and in the context of a remarkable festival event –

‘Ronald Stevenson at 80’. Brain-child of pianist Murray McLachlan, the three-day exploration of both works by Stevenson and those that influenced him throughout his long career, the event included 30 musicians and over 70 works...

McLachlan was the intrepid soloist in the *Passacaglia* and it was he who received the most rapturous of ovations at the end of the 80’ of a performance that defied superlatives, such was the constancy of his reading. The work risks shapelessness in some of its more ‘drifting’ passages but McLachlan injected sufficient quantities of insightful passion and poetry to keep focused even the most wearied of listeners. His affinity with the multiple layers that underpin the work allowed the thematic and rhythmic progressions to unfold with ample dramatic acumen, so much so that the minutes raced by. The composer, who was seated towards the front of the hall, jerked nervously in a distant performance of his own, closely tied to McLachlan’s own, clearly reliving key passages and moments from his own pianistic past. After the performance he told me that he had ‘played the work for 20 years in 20 different countries’ but that he had grown to fear that the work would totally disappear from the concert hall. This performance, he said, marked the ‘renaissance’ of the piece and he was visibly shaken and moved by the audience’s reaction to it.

Amongst other works I would single out were Stevenson’s extraordinary String Quartet, *Voces Vagabundae*, beautifully played by the Martinu Quartet in a memorable coupling with the 2nd Janacek Quartet. The other Shostakovich-inspired work in the oeuvre, the *recitative and Air (DSCH)* received two thoughtful and accomplished performances, one in a version for string quartet (played by Chetham’s





String Quartet) and a version for violin and piano played by David Wyn Lloyd and Nancy Lee Harper.

The festival served perfectly to illustrate writer, lecturer and recording producer Ates Orga's assertion that: "Ronald, magician-like, deals in the spell [that is] no less than science of music. To some he will always remain the enigma, to others the elixir, of our times. He makes Herculean demands on himself and expects no less from his interpreters. The feelings he seeks to unfold kaleidoscopically knot the loving and the tender, the awesome and the fearful, the weighty and the playful, the domestic and the politic, laughter and tears. He is not, as Banowetz reminds us, 'an "easy" composer for either performer or listener, yet he is one of the few in whose music there can always be felt a personal integrity and a profound emotional message. This makes him very precious indeed."



*Stevenson and Shostakovich in 1962 with the score of the Passacaglia*

*Reviewed by Alan Mercer*