

British Composer Series

NEVILLE BOWER



Dr David C F Wright

Neville Courtenay Bower is the second of three sons born to Denzil Mowbray Bower and his wife Emily Adeline, nee Cleveland, a schoolteacher, who was usually known as Mary. Denzil was a cadet in the Seventh Hussars, serving overseas in World War I in Mesopotamia against the Turks when he was only 16-18 years of age. He was the boy in the trenches handing out ammunition. Later he entered the Indian Provincial Civil Service becoming Deputy Registrar of Allahabad High Court. He also worked at GHQ, Red Fort, Delhi and at the Ordnance Depot in Aligarh. With his wife and three sons he returned to England in 1949 and worked in the hotel business, as did his father, finishing his career as staffing manager at the White House Hotel, Portland Square, London. He died in 1979.

Denzil Bower was an amateur pianist, self-taught but with an amusing way of playing, sometimes approaching imitating famous pianists of the day such as Fats Waller and Charlie Kunz. As it will be realised, his major interest was in military matters and he was a very keen shakari organising many shoots for friends and colleagues for both big game and bird-shooting. He was an excellent horseman and, being something of an expert on the subjects just mentioned, he gave a radio talk about it on All India Radio in Lucknow around 1939. Mary Bower was interested in reading and writing and was a prolific and reliable correspondent and encouraged her three sons to learn the piano. She died in 2000 at the age of 97.

Neville's parents married at Allahabad Cathedral in 1931. Their first son was Patrick Mowbray, born January 1932, who

became a fine pianist particularly enjoying the works of Chopin and Beethoven. He qualified as a chemical engineer. The third son, David Michael Bower, was born in July 1938 and he also played the piano well, but his preference was jazz. He became a businessman with an interest in the Stock market. Now he enjoys the classics and favours Bach.

It was between these two boys that Neville was born on 3 October 1934. His first schools were in India with a kindergarten in Allahabad (1938-1942) followed in 1948-9 by Sherwood College, Naini Tal. The return to London meant that he attended Battersea Polytechnic achieving London matriculation in 1951 when he went up to the Royal College of Music where he was until 1956.

As a child he was interested and highly competent at sports accumulating prizes, but music took over and he pursued his piano playing winning three local exhibitions from Trinity College, London and achieving then highest mark in India for his piano playing in 1947. His first piano teacher was Mrs A B Nickels from 1938, and Neville still has a Bible she gave him as a Christmas present in 1948. When he attended Sherwood School he was taught by George Thompson. At RCM he studied piano with Kendall Taylor, organ with Dr Osborne Peasgood, clarinet with Ralph Clark and, later, piano accompaniment with Hilda Klein. Theory studies began with Harry Stubbs and, later, he was with Patrick Hadley for theory and composition, well-known for his constant consumption of sherry before lessons and sometimes during them, as was also testified by Denis ApIvor.

Kendall Taylor was a wonderful teacher,

far too kind and generous and too nice a man to be a disciplinarian.

In 1954, Neville achieved ARCM for performance, LRAM in 1956 for teaching, BA in social sciences and humanities with the Open University in 1985, FTCL for composition in 1987, the chief examiner for which was the composer, Geoffrey Bush. Between 1987-1995 Neville worked as a music examiner for London University. Before that he had six years as a concert pianist until a car accident in 1965 ended that prospect, after which he taught at Grayscourt School in Richmond (1965-67), Ealing Grammar School (1967-1980) and Upton Grammar School, Slough, until he retired in 1986.

As a child, Neville responded to the gramophone and 78 records. He enjoyed The Blue Danube Waltz and The Sleeping Beauty Waltz by Tchaikovsky and would dance to these pieces when his parents were out and left in charge of their ayah. She used to sit and rock back and forth with delight to the dancing. The music that decided Neville to embark on a musical career was Wagner's Siegfried Idyll which he first heard when he was thirteen.

He did not like popular American music considering it poorly written and badly performed. He did not like to hear the piano played badly and mentions, in particular, tea shop pianists.

He was also interested in good literature having read avidly as a boy. This included most of the novels by Dickens and Alexander Dumas. He also read Sir Walter Scott, Conan Doyle, Captain W E Johns of Biggles fame, Charles Kingsley, Oscar Wilde and the Hornblower novels of C S Forrester.

His parents wanted him to join the Civil Service as that was a 'safe' career, but, from the age of ten, Neville had become interested in composition. He wrote a piece called Agincourt inspired by Walton's music to Henry V, having just seen the film. He also composed a Waltz in D flat and a "tragic" piece called Air Disaster. Playing it to friends they thought this was a joke.

The earliest compositions were for pupils and friends but, latterly, he received deserved praise for some of his works including Evocation for clarinet and piano, which was played by the legendary Jack Brymer, and the splendid organ piece Eternal premiered by Jonathan Rees-Williams at the superb organ of Lichfield cathedral.

In his music Neville strives to be original but admits that some of his early pieces may show the influence of Vaughan Williams and perhaps Debussy and Messaien. But, by the 1980s, he had adopted his own style of composition which he calls the tonal-chromatic system. He ventured into serialism briefly but found that it did not correspond with his aesthetic. He does not care for minimalism or jargonistic creations, or music that claims to be serious but is obviously influenced by jazz. He finds the definitions of some types of music to be ridiculous, which they are, of course. I asked him, "Do you believe that aleatory, electronic, acoustic and sonic music is real music and can be honestly ascribed to a composer and that it is composed?" to which he replied, "Perhaps such people should change their professions and become architects, engineers and naturalists respectively!"

It is this unnecessary jargonese that ridicules music and its purpose.

In his catalogue of works, his opus 1 is Three Songs for School Choirs published separately by Boosey and Hawkes in 1961, 1962 and 1965 respectively. When it comes to composing, he can experience the creative impulse at any time of the day or night and can compose up to ten pages at one sitting or nothing at all. He can also destroy the ten pages written. He has written two symphonies but discarded them and prefers to compose pictures in music.

He was a heavy smoker until the age of 35 but gave it up overnight. He believes in moderation in all things. He was brought up in a Conservative-orientated family but finds politics more and more irritating. He believes strongly in a Divine Creator but is a free-thinker and eschews all religious dogma and sectarianism. He is a keen animal lover and enjoys watching sports for its skill. He deplores bad-sportsmanship. He enjoys reading, he sometimes paints, has written some poetry and an incomplete novel and two unpublished books on music.

Unlike the Elgars and Brittens of this world, he is not an arrogant or self-promoting person and yet his best music is, in fact, much much better than much music available commercially. The problem is that not many have heard it, and so he does not have a public. He conducted the Apollo Singers (1967-69) in such works as Dvorak's Requiem and he also conducted the Ealing Boys' Choir (1968-1980) and worked with his choir and with Antal Dorati on the Kodaly Memorial Concert at the Royal Festival Hall which concert included a new

realisation of Hary Janos. He appeared as a conductor in MGM's film Goodbye Mr Chips with his school band playing a number called School Days with such actors as Petula Clarke, Peter O'Toole, George Baker and Michael Redgrave. This was the 1970s version, not the classic earlier version with the inimitable Robert Donat.

Neville married June Powell in 1959, a keen amateur dancer who attended the Ballet Rambert school on Saturday mornings where Neville worked as a pianist. She died in 2005. There are no children.

His taste in music may be conservative. He has told me that had Mozart and Schubert lived longer they would have added greatly to the development of music. He explains that Beethoven was a far more original composer, as was Brahms, whose startling innovations still exert an influence today. Liszt, as explained by Humphrey Searle, was far-reaching in his later music and, in Neville's six years as a concert pianist, he enjoyed playing Liszt particularly the Mephisto Waltz, the incredible Sonata and the stunning Piano Concerto no. 1. I have heard his excellent 1962 performance of this incredible concerto which he played with the Modern Symphony Orchestra under Arthur Dinnington. Among his repertoire was the Greig concerto and Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto no. 2. Like many people he was initially impressed with Mahler but sometimes feels the angst is overdone. Britten is a very uneven composer, Tippett is sometimes surprising and sometimes painfully dull, and Ligeti is a great innovator but not successful in everything

he does.

At the opening of the refurbishment of the Holywell Music Room in Oxford in 1960, Neville gave a recital with a second pianist, Jessie Munro, and met Edmund Rubbra, who later saw some of Neville's scores and suggested that Neville study with him at Oxford for a music degree. Rubbra was one of the sponsors for the first Leeds piano competition in 1963.

When Neville's music has been played it has received positive reviews. Like Humphrey Searle, Neville is not a self-promoter or a pompous individual, but someone has to take up his cause as his music certainly merits it. When asked what he would wish to be remembered for, he replied, "First as a human being; second, as a musician; and third, as a composer."

That tells us a lot about Neville Bower.

All intelligent composer want to seek and evolve a personal style. For years Neville struggled with tonal music in his search to give it something of his own sense and personality. This is a problem that all composers have, or have had in the past, from Debussy onwards. However, most of them related music to tonality even Stravinsky and, to some extent, Schoenberg. Neville began to consider intervals as colouristic entities in their own right. Most people think of the diatonic system as from C to C. Every pianist learns the scale of C first. Neville began to think of a new starting point as B to B which would work out as half tone, tone, tone, half tone, tone, tone, tone instead of tone, tone, half tone, tone, tone, tone, half tone as it would be in C. The B to B system translated into C would be

C, D flat, E flat, F, G flat, A flat, B flat, C. This sequence of intervals could begin on any note of the scale to build up the system. He also used the diminished fifth, C to G flat, to start the hypo and hyper modes of each scale. In this context hypo means lower and hyper means higher. Then research was undertaken into how intervals could be "filled in". For example the major third, C to E is filled in by the major second, the D. Neville's system would use the filled in notes namely D flat and E flat but not D making more colouristic possibilities. Thus the music is chromatic while remaining within a tonal element but, as in the example above, the intervals are not concerned with C major or C minor.

These new scales are shown, for example, in the piano work Greenpeace and uses what the composer calls the "green" scale. The hypo form of the scale in C sharp, D, E, F, G, B, C sharp; the hyper version would be G, A, B, C sharp, D, E, F, G.

In his work Prism the darkest colours, colours nearest to black, are expresses as the scale B flat, C flat, D flat, E flat, F flat, G flat, A flat and B flat. In contrast to the black colours, the scale for the red colours would be B to B where every note is sharp.

Neville's system of colours is, of course, personal. He might consider the tonality of E to represent yellow, for example. But orchestration suggests colours. Brilliant white suggest piccolos and high flutes, for example.

This system may not appeal to everyone and some may think it somewhat contrived but Scriabin also believed in the colour of intervals and scales and , lest

we be charged with a modern idea or gimmick, Haydn and Mozart, among others, used scales and keys for music. For example, D major was usually used for military or ceremonial music and C minor for tragic or funereal music.

Music has to have colour and, with that concept, is contrast. Colour can reveal characterisation. One can think of a lot of music that is colourless or deadly dull which one could call dismal grey or a dull brown. On the hand one can listen to the end of Respighi's Pines of Rome and the blazing glory of the orchestration suggests red. Of course, there are exceptions such as Berlioz's March to the Scaffold from his *Symphonie Fantastique* which one might expect to have the orchestral colour of black, but it does not.

Intervals have characteristics as well. A rising perfect fifth suggest optimism or courage while a falling perfect fourth can often have a nostalgic feel about it.

And so to the music. I can only deal with the music I have seen or heard.

Greenscape, Op 33 no. 2, for piano was dedicated to his wife. The piece is concerned with the natural world and the green scale is G to G with C as a sharp. The revision of this piece was completed in Lichfield in 2005. It is of moderate pace throughout and begins with a striking theme of seven notes. The music is often agitated but it clearly reveals various emotions, but is never mawkish, but strong and eminently pianistic. It is meticulously written with precise instructions as to how it is to be played. Having played it, I have to admit that this work is a profoundly moving experience. It demands constant listening and study to unravel its many secrets.

Prism for piano is another memorial piece dedicated to the memory of Kendall Taylor originally composed in 1987. It is a large scale work of much virtuosity, very difficult to perform and necessitating a pianist of maximum skill, technique and execution. It teems with excitement but I fear few will be able to rise to its challenge and Lisztian demands.

Another notable piano work is *Escapements*, Op 13, set in four movements. The opening movement is technically very difficult and builds up to a frantic Hindustani Dance of velocity and power. After a tremendous *pium allegro* the final is a *pianissimo presto*. The second movement is deceptively straight forward and is to be played freely with a sensitivity to tonal balance. The third movement is in ABA form and calls for great interpretation skills. *Escapement IV* was inspired by Ravi Shankar's Raga Multani and develops into a fascinating imitation of Indian drums, the tabla and dhol. The excitement is short-lived and the music is allowed to fade away.

Music for a while, Op 39, is a collection of seven piano pieces dedicated to Neville's wife. Their titles are *Musing*, *Parade*, *Chorale I*, *Daydream*, *Spree*, *Lament* and *Chorale II*. They are not as demanding as his other piano pieces but they have a rich chromaticism. The movement, *Spree*, is quite outstanding while the finale chorale ends with three chords which depict the three spires of Lichfield cathedral.

An exceptionally fine work is *Evocation for clarinet and piano*, Op 14, which dates from 1985. It was admired and played by no less a performer than Jack Brymer. It is a work of mixed emotions and none

the worse for that. At times there is a gentle calm and, at other times, an angry, almost brutal excitement. It is, without doubt, an outstanding piece and competent and ambitious clarinetists should take it up. That it is not known is a scandal.

Dance of Life , Op 28, is scored for viola and piano and dates from 1986 and is dedicated to Neville's father whom the composer says taught him the dance of life and many other truths besides. It is another concert work full of contrast and is challenging for both players. Again, the composer's instructions in the score are precise and comprehensible. I feel the piece has a lot of retrospection which is very personal to the composer.

I have no hesitation in saying that Eternal, Op 32, for organ, which comprises a chorale and a fugue, is the finest British organ work I have discovered. It is a concert work with a fine contrast between the two movements which would show off any good organ, and organist, to their best advantage. The king of instruments has never been better served. There is a sublime serenity in the chorale and the excitement is the brilliant fugue which is exhilarating and therapeutically exhausting. It is truly magnificent.

Neville's songs are difficult concert works. The singer and the pianist have individual parts and, while the parts are integral, both performers have to execute their respective parts which are such that they cannot make allowances for each other as you can in classical songs, for example. Songs of Innocence, Op 46 sets texts by Blake. The Wild Valleys is brilliantly caught in the piano part. The

Lamb is somewhat static and sparse and I do not think the naivety of Blake's words are caught. Nurse's Song has a finely realised vocal line and is probably the best song. Infant Joy is like a recitative and calls for the singer to 'sell' the song. The Cradle Song is a little too active for the subject matter. Spring is a successful song and The Divine Image is either bleak or potentially reverential.

Songs of Experience, Op 47 are ten more songs set to texts by Blake whose poetry is often mystical and confusing. Some of his words are banal and do not lend themselves to a serious musical setting but seem more suited to a humorous, carefree style, perhaps in the Lewis Carroll mould.

The two sets of songs to texts by Thomas Hardy are very difficult to bring off for the reasons stated earlier. They are sometimes angular and may have benefited from a more romantic clothing. The set, The Dream Follower, sets nine texts. Probably the finest songs in this set are Two Lips, the fifth song, and I Look into my Glass which captures the requisite atmosphere.

The second set, Ghosts and Dreams, Op 53, was written in memory of the composer's mother and there are seven songs. The songs are again very challenging but there is much to commend them. The fourth song, An Upbraiding, is especially fine. I rate this song cycle the best to come from Neville's pen but that does not mean that the other song cycles are to be ignored.

The Sonata for oboe and piano won a prestigious first prize in 1966. As with the clarinet and viola pieces this sonata shows an exemplary understanding of the

instrument and, again, how meticulous the composer is. Leon Goossens once told me that the oboe is lady and, in this splendid sonata, there is a sensual content, intentional or not, and the music often gives the impression of an intimate dialogue. The musical world is short of oboe sonatas and this is a work which oboists should take into their repertoire.

The Duo Concertante for oboe and orchestra is probably Neville's most classical work in the sense of structure. It is in three movements, the first, *Molto Andante*, is in sonata form with its two themes, development, recapitulation and cadenza with a headlong conclusion. The second movement is in ternary form and is marked *Adagio tranquillo* and is subtitled *Romanza*. The third movement is a rondo with an important second theme in 5/8 time and its central section is a fugue. The orchestra is a chamber orchestra but includes harp, guitar, xylophone and glockenspiel. The music reaches an exciting ending. It is an engaging work.

It will be said that there are many

composers like Neville Bower who are not known or little known and deserving of attention. What makes this dilemma even more unjust is the amount of music regularly played and recorded which does not have the quality and integrity as in the music of Neville Bower and others like him. We live in a society that foolishly believes that if there are 40 commercial recordings available of a work then it must be a very fine work and if there is nothing recorded by another composer then that composer has no worth.

This is simply not true. Sir Adrian Boult is on record saying, "If Elgar's music is played badly, you blame the orchestra: if it played well, you blame Elgar!" That remark is not quoted here to eviscerate Elgar but to show that supply and demand is not based on quality and worth. The BBC did sterling work and were alone for many years in promoting Elgar. But it cannot promote everyone. However, if one composer is so promoted it demeans and ignores others who may be even more worthy, of which Neville Bower is an obvious example.

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