

Ronald Center and Deveron Arts By James Naughtie

I wonder what Ronald Center would have made of the weekend celebrations of his music in Huntly? There would have been a mixture of satisfaction, pride and slight embarrassment. These, after all, were qualities of the man which all of his pupils sensed: an unshakeable belief in the business of composing, an awareness that he had the capacity to write with power and originality, but underneath a shyness that sometimes suggested a darkness that troubled him greatly.

There was nothing melancholy about the weekend activities in his honour, however. It was not just that Euan Shand had bottled a commemorative whisky, and that several toasts were made - most movingly on the steps of the Old Manse in Princes Street, where so many of us traipsed for our lessons all those years ago - nor that Paul Anderson, one of our best traditional fiddlers, was on fine form throughout, but that everyone who participated in any of the events had a feeling that we were doing the right thing : that, thanks to the perseverance of Deveron Arts, we were involved something that might restore to its proper place (perhaps for the centenary of his birth in 1913) music which sprang from the north-east and had an original voice.

From the moment Joseph Long set to work on the Piano Sonata on Friday night (grappling heroically with a piano which the composer might have sent for remedial surgery) we knew it was going to be fun. James Reid-Baxter, for whom music is a relief when his translation work for the European Parliament becomes too much, was a sparkling raconteur in his account of Center's life, plucking newspaper cuttings, memories and anecdotes, and musical examples from his rich store of research. His enthusiasm, which bubbled through the weekend like the Deveron in spate, is a wonder to behold - it was he who mounted a festival of Center's music in Bogota of all places (he was doing a PhD there at the time) which caused Colombian concert goers to be exposed to more of the music and songs than the folk of Huntly ever had. So by the time Friday night drew to a close, we were well on the way.

By this stage, I was deep in recollection - of Thursday evenings in the Old Manse, where I'd wait for my turn on the piano and hear voices from the next room, where Evelyn Center (Morrison) would be taking a singing pupil through his scales. I'd have my half hour which involved everything from a rap on the knuckles (literally) for lack of practice, to a magical introduction to some Bach or a conversation about why it was worth going to see an opera, or about a guy called Proust of whom I'd never heard. As we all remember, he was gentle and tough in equal measure: singers in the various church choirs remembered in the course of the weekend how he'd be a hard task-master in Brahms's German Requiem or Bach's B Minor Mass, a work which caused one local minister - I love this story - to complain of too much popery. For Ronald Center, whose devotion to Bach and knowledge of his (Lutheran) history was so precious, this was a last straw. He changed churches.

And it was in church that we heard, on the Saturday night, the first performance of his second string quartet, the players led by Emily White, whose artist's residence in Huntly was the spur for the whole weekend's events. Just as when Donald Hawksworth played on the organ in the Old Church up the road, we all had a sense of the composer's presence: listening to the Lachrimosa for strings for the first time brought him back to me.

Throughout proceedings - from the walk to the Gordon Schools (where a blue plaque in his memory has been placed) to the hall where we used to play in the dreaded parents' concerts - stories were told. When he and Evelyn were looking for a house to rent in Huntly during the Second World War (he'd stayed in the army for only a very short time - no is quite sure how that story ended) they visited one property where, from the back premises, they heard the unexpected and unmistakable sound of a Bach cello suite. They found two Polish refugees living there. They were musicians from Warsaw and Cracow and had brought their instruments with them. The Centers then organised concerts with them to raise funds for the Free Polish Army, in which he was later given an honorary commission. Over the two days we all recalled our own experiences and asked new questions: why did he burn some of his music? Is there any more of his symphonic score still lying somewhere? Are there letters in the collections of other composers and conductors?

This is a rich store. Dr Sally Garden gave a beautiful performance of the art songs on Saturday afternoon, with Donald Hawksworth at the piano, and it was a reminder to us all how this composer had a temperament and a taste that encompassed the traditional musical cadences of Scotland (he wrote many settings of Scots songs for Evelyn) and the German romantic tradition, whose passions he understood. In particular - listening to the Garmouth Singers and the Easdale choir in church - we were able to enjoy his ability to write with great simplicity but deep emotion for the voice. As Emily pointed out, that was a natural component of his long partnership with Evelyn; more remarkable was his ability to write for strings - especially, perhaps, the cello - when he wasn't a string player himself, having been trained on the organ and piano.

The weekend's music and conversation brought him back to us and filled out the simple story of a man who lived in Huntly from 1943 until his death 30 years later, teaching throughout that time - for a few years at school and then privately - and spending his quiet hours in the business of composition. As we wandered around the town, enjoyed a concert, had a dram and a gossip, the bare biography was transformed again into a man many of us had known - some well, some more distantly - and treasured. He no longer counts as a forgotten composer. That is an achievement; I know that there's much more to come in this story.

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