

Jeremy Dale Roberts (1934-2017)
An obituary by Kenneth Shenton

The death of Jeremy Dale Roberts on 11 July, 2017, has deprived the British music scene of one of its most colourful and individual personalities. Although he was perhaps better known as a highly successful composition teacher, he himself regarded this as an adjunct to, and a necessary extension of his own composing. As such, over the course of more than half a century, he amassed a small but intensely honed and crafted body of work that is worthy of more hearings than it is wont to receive.



The son of a local general practitioner, born on 16 May, 1934, in Minchinhampton in Gloucestershire, in the year Elgar, Holst and Delius died, Jeremy Dale Roberts was educated at Marlborough College. From there his prodigious musical talents took him to the Royal Academy of Music where he studied with William Alwyn and the South African born composer, Priaulx Rainier. It was she who broadened his outlook, insisting on the rigorous technical approach and economy of texture that so pervades his work.

A fellow student at the Royal Academy was Christopher Finzi, universally known as Kiffer, son of the composer, Gerald Finzi. Soon a regular visitor to the family home at Ashmansworth, set high on the Downs south of Newbury, on the Berkshire Wiltshire border, there he met and mixed with all the leading musicians of the day, not least his future wife, Paulette Zwahlen, who was then the Finzi's au pair. They married in 1966. Following Gerald Finzi's death, Dale Roberts would later edit a number of his compositions for publication.

After a period abroad, spent working as a tutor in the highlands of Cameroon, Dale Roberts began his professional career working with the harmonica player, Larry Adler and assisting the American composer Bernard Herrmann during the creation of his opera, *Wuthering Heights*. Joining the staff of Morley College in 1964, he also taught at the University of London. Appointed to the professorial staff of the Royal College of Music two years later, there he rose to become Head of Composition, his expertise proving pivotal in the development of many of Britain's most eminent practitioners.

Throughout his career, like Finzi before him, Dale Roberts remained acutely sensitive to the setting of the English language. This was never truer than in his early works such as the 1956 song cycle, *Nous n'irons plus au bois*, *Elegy-The Elm for Speaker*, *SATB Chorus and Semi-Chorus* or *Florilegium*, poems about flowers, fruits and grasses, scored for eight voices with instruments. Both the motet, *I Heard A Voice* and the eight *Canzonets*, dedicated to an early patron, Ursula Vaughan Williams, prove beautifully judged essays in choral sonorities.

Newer trends are reflected in such instrumental offerings as the *Suite for Flute and Strings* and *Sinfonia da Caccia*. This moving homage to his native county, commissioned by Morley College Concerts Society and first performed at the 1967 Thaxted Festival, is inscribed, *To the memory of Ivor Gurney, war poet and composer of Gloucestershire*. In the interim had come the incidental music for the 1960 Edinburgh Festival production at the Gateway Theatre of Elizabeth Sprigge's adaptation of Bjornstjerne Bjornson's play, *Mary Stuart in Scotland*, starring Patricia Kneale.

Much of his output is informed by a deep fascination with the visual arts. A noted example remains the piano work, *Ogetti-Omaggio a Morandi*, in which the restrained somewhat hermetic world of the Italian artist, Giorgio Morandi, becomes the musical equivalent of a still life. *Wieglied*, a gentle yet persuasive lullaby, celebrates the drawings of another artist of the twentieth century, the Argentinian,

Mauricio Lasansky. The more expansive *Tombeau*, created in the 1960s for the piano virtuoso, Stephen Bishop-Kovacevic, remains a veritable *tour de force*

Such drama and theatricality are also the recurring themes in the highly-charged *Cello Concerto Deathwatch*, composed for Rohan de Saram. Here the soloist is set against two complementary string orchestras as Dale Roberts reinforces the modes of transposition with an extra off-stage solo cello, whose interpolations are then echoed and extended by the soloist. *Croquis* or *Sketches for String Trio*, lightens the modernist mood with a rumbustious quodlibet, while the influence of Luciano Berio can be discerned within both powerful and bleak sextet *Winter Music*, and *Vers Libre*.

An increasing interest in timbre alongside a keener-edged melodic line inhabits the tripartite *String Quintet*. Intimately involved in the creative development of this work were members of the Kreutzer Quartet together with cellist, Bridget McCrea. Dedicated jointly to his pupil, Erica Fox and his teacher, Priaux Rainier, the work was conceived specifically to frame the interval of a concert. A deeply personal work, it demands a high degree of emotional and intellectual involvement, not only from the performers, but also from members of the audience.

As a composer, Dale Roberts invariably relished the limitations imposed by circumstance. Typical of this was *Layers*, a 1995 tercentenary tribute to Henry Purcell in which the composer brings Dido's Lament kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. Likewise, *Nightpiece* involves soprano voice and two bass viols, while *Hamadryad* requires a mezzo soprano singer, flautist plus bass flute with amplification, violin and piano. *Stelae*, commissioned by the Royal College of Music Gamelan, involves some twenty Javanese gongs and two drummers, all the performers arranged antiphonally,

Retiring from the Royal College of Music in 1999, since then Dale Roberts has returned to composition with renewed vigour. Commissioned and first performed by the New Opus Trio of Chicago in 2001 was *Hamadryad*, soon followed by a revised setting of the *Nunc Dimittis* for the Finzi Singers and Paul Spicer. For one of his last works in 2009, he returned to his former mentor, Ursula Vaughan Williams for a setting of her text, *Spoken To A Bronze Head*, for mezzo soprano and piano. Here again, there is much that both affection and judgement demand shall live.

Kenneth Shenton