

Martin Dalby (1942-2018) - An Appreciation

By Kenneth Shenton

When Martin Dalby died, aged 76, in October last year, Britain lost a particularly outstanding and versatile musician who never perhaps received in his lifetime quite the recognition that was his due. A fine composer, who having taken his time to find a recognisable individual style, has left a sequence of major works that retain a unique place in twentieth century music. Likewise, as an innovative record and radio producer, he had a particular love of the medium and a readiness to experiment. As an administrator, he proved a highly principled Head of Music at BBC Scotland, perhaps never happier than when deploying his energies in the promotion of other people's music.

Born in April 1942, the son of the distinguished former Organist and Choirmaster of St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen, and Superintendent of the city's education system, John Martin Dalby spent his formative years being educated at the local grammar school. While there, for three years, from 1957 onwards, he played viola in the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, of which his father was also Associate Director. At the same time, teaching himself, Dalby junior became a highly proficient tuba player. In 1960, winning a Foundation Scholarship, he moved south to the Royal College of Music, studying the viola with Frederick Riddle and composition with Herbert Howells.



On leaving the Royal College of Music after three years, Dalby then undertook a detailed study of serial composition. Subsequently taking up the offer of a James Caird Travelling Scholarship, he joined a touring chamber orchestra, L'Orch dell' Accademia di Napoli, performing throughout both Europe and North Africa. Hoping to find a teacher who could help him make the transition to a more avant garde orientated language, he initially had lessons with Giovanni Petrassi, before discovering the music of Nikos Skalkottas. On returning to England in 1965, he joined the BBC in London, primarily working with Robert Simpson, Hans Keller and Deryck Cooke as a chamber music producer.

In 1971, Dalby returned north, appointed Cramb Research Fellow in Composition at the University of Glasgow. Twelve months later, he succeeded Watson Forbes as Head of Music at BBC Scotland. It provided him with a base not only to promote the works of Scottish composers, but also helped him support his own compositional career. Among his numerous innovations was the Kenneth Elliott and Frederick Rimmer series, *A History of Scottish Music*, together with John Purser's award winning, *Scotland's Music*. It was also during Dalby's stewardship that, in 1980, the Corporation proposed disbanding the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. That it survived owed much to Dalby's advocacy.

As a composer, Dalby's early output invariably reflects the numerous influences of his youth. Being a regular visitor to the organ loft hearing his father perform Hindemith's organ sonatas, clearly influenced such as the early *Music for Brass Band*, the children's cantata, *Job*, and *Concertino for Six Trumpets and Timpani*. The ghost of Sibelius appears in *Conflict: Three Episodes for Orchestra* as well as the delightful *Waltz Overture*, while serialism underpins *Three Songs of Ezra Pound*. The magic of Skalkottas shines through in yet another song cycle, *Wanderer for Mezzo Soprano and Piano*, while the input of Herbert Howells gave Dalby a deep and lasting appreciation of poetry.

Given Dalby's musical pedigree it is perhaps not surprising that much of his early output comprised sacred choral pieces. Works such as the *Two Liturgical Canticles* comprising settings of the Benedictus

and *Jubilate Deo* or the anthems, *God Be Merciful Unto Me* and *Laudate Dominum*, found favour in service lists worldwide. Particularly delightful is *My Song Is In Sighing*, a motet written in 1964 for boys' voices and organ. No less so the popular, *Mater Salutaris for choir and organ*, commissioned in 1981 by Glasgow High School. Three rather more straightforward examples of his art can be found in the Revised Church Hymnal of 1973, as well as the Faber Catholic Hymnal.

For the organ Dalby has essayed a number of contrasting works for the instrument. First came the ebullient *Flourish for a Wedding*. Far more cerebral is a *Little Suite*, somewhat Schoenbergian in outlook, while the titles of each of the five movements – *Prelude, Passacaglia, Choral, Toccata and Fugue* – reflect earlier influences. At its core lies its *Passacaglia*, the somewhat leisured manual writing offset by a relentless serial motif in the pedals. No less intense is the *Fantasia after Philip Rosseter*. Here the music of the 16th century lutenist opens, closes and appears on various occasions throughout the work. More recent keyboard works include three highly challenging piano sonatas.

One of his most elegiac and impassioned creations, classical and neo-romantic in structure, but with a harmonic and rhythmic astringency is *Nozze di Primavera*, created as a wedding gift to his wife, Hilary Belcher, a fellow string player and a former member of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, whom he married in 1984. Subtly shaded within its orchestration is the music for *Ex Te Lux Oritur*, the wedding hymn for Margaret of Scotland and Eric II of Norway. Here, as in the sadly neglected *Symphony* of 1970, the composer shows himself fully capable of mixing the cerebral with the sensitive. Lucid textures, skilful orchestration and thoughtful craftsmanship, all add to the mix.

In 1974, in one of four appearances at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, Frederick Riddle and the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Norman Del Mar, gave the first performance of *his Viola Concerto*. Sparked like many of Dalby's works by literary associations, in this case T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the work was a 60th birthday gift for his former teacher. Here, the composer pits the soloist against a large orchestra, its three major sections all contained within a single movement. Earlier that year, at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, in a first outing for the London Sinfonietta Chorus, *El Romanza del Pitido*, lamented in both Spanish and English, the loss of the steam train.

The *Dancer Eduardova*, an atmospheric sextet for The Fires of London, is evoked by a tram journey described by Kafka in his diaries while, likewise, *The Mary Bean*, also has a rich literary source, this time David Thomson's book, *The People of the Sea*, with its references to the Mary Bean, or Molucca Bean, carried by the Gulf Stream from the Caribbean to Orkney, Shetland and The Western Isles. Essentially a richly scored concert overture which, while depicting the relentless motion of the oceans, also incorporates not only an old Celtic plainchant but a poetry reference on the oboe, that refers to Jean Rhys's novel, *Wild Sargasso Sea*, inspired by the mad Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.

Retiring from the BBC in 1993, that year both he and John Purser won a Sony Gold Award for their series, *Scotland's Music*. Twelve months earlier, his recording of James MacMillan's, *The Confessions of Isobel Gowdie*, won a coveted Gramophone Award. Chairman of the Composers' Guild of Great Britain from 1995 until 1998, as a founding Director of the British Academy of Composers and Songwriters, he proved a worthy recipient of their Gold Badge Award. Among his many legacies, he leaves us an outstanding corpus of original music, an unmatched body of classical recordings, and an approach to his art and craft that will long continue to influence all who came into contact with him.