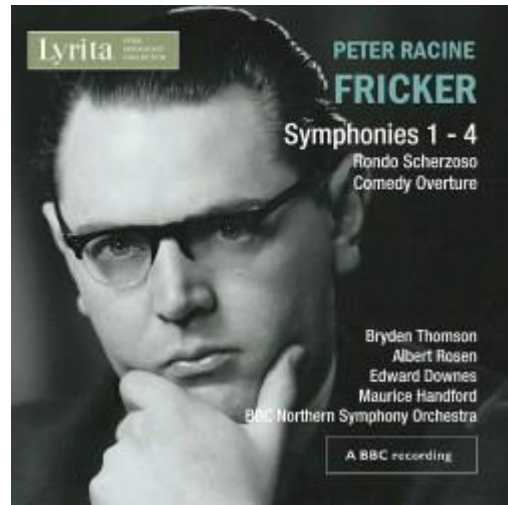


Celebrating Peter Racine Fricker's 100th Anniversary

by John France

Peter Racine Fricker (1920-90) is often regarded as an *enfant terrible* of British music, especially by people who do not know his music, yet, he was once deemed to be one of the most promising post-war composers (along with Humphrey Searle and Iain Hamilton). He has a reputation of having been a radical. Certainly, his prevailing aesthetic was far removed from the pastoralism of Vaughan Williams and the post-Elgarian bombast of William Walton. Instead, he turned towards Arnold Schoenberg, Béla Bartok, and Igor Stravinsky for musical inspiration. Looking back on his musical achievement from 2020, we see a composer who created 'an impressive body of work in his highly expressive, urbane and freely atonal language.' (Lyrita CD Advert). Critically, it has been suggested that the lack of interest in Fricker's music may be that its style falls between two stools: too traditional for the late twentieth century avant-garde enthusiasts and too 'modern' ('progressive' and 'aggressive') for more traditional listeners.



Brief Biography of Peter Racine Fricker

- Peter Racine Fricker was born in Ealing, London on 5 September 1920. As his name implies, he was a descendant of the French playwright Jean Racine.
- After attending St Paul's School, London, Fricker entered the Royal College of Music (RCM). His tutors were R.O. Morris for composition and Ernest Bullock for organ.
- Five years of war service were completed between 1941-1946. Fricker was a radio operator in the Royal Airforce.
- After the war, Fricker had further lessons with the Hungarian émigré composer Mátyás Seiber at Morley College.
- Fricker married Audrey Clench in 1943.
- In 1947 he secured the A.J. Clements Prize for his Wind Quintet, op.5.
- Two years later, Fricker gained the Koussevitzky prize with his Symphony No.1.
- In 1951 Fricker won the Arts Council Festival of Britain competition for young composers' prize with his Violin Concerto. He was aged 31 years.
- Fricker accepted the headship of Morley College (1952-64) succeeding Michael Tippett.
- Three years later he was appointed Professor of Music (1955-64) at the RCM.
- In 1964, Fricker moved to the United States as visiting professor of music at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and in 1970 he became Chair of the Music Department there.
- Fricker was appointed composer-in-residence of the Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra in 1989.
- Peter Racine Fricker died in Santa Barbara on 1 February 1990.

Fricker's compositions include five symphonies, several concertos, numerous chamber music pieces and various piano and organ works as well as the major choral work *The Vision of Judgement*, recently released on Lyrita. It is unfortunate that after Fricker moved to the United States, his music was largely forgotten, certainly until the recent revival by the recording industry.

Bibliography

At present (2020), there is no standard biography of Fricker. Details of his life and work must be pieced together from dictionary and encyclopaedia entries as well as obituaries and other published sources. Detailed analysis of his music is limited to a handful of dissertations and thesis as well as references in

the several studies of British post-war music. An important chapter in Francis Routh's *Contemporary British Music* was published in 1972 and available online at [MusicWeb International](#). Several essential articles about the composer are available in *Music and Musicians*, *The Listener*, and *Music Review*. There are plenty of historic concert and CD reviews in daily newspapers and music journals. The University of California, Santa Barbara maintains an 'online' catalogue as well as the Fricker Archive. There is no website devoted to the composer.

I have posted a dozen articles and reviews of Fricker's music on my blog, *The Land of Lost Content*. Essays here include a detailed study of the Wind Quintet, op.5 ([Part I](#) and [Part II](#)) and the [Rondo Scherzoso](#) (1947) as well as a comprehensive review of the Naxos recording of the [String Quartets](#).

Six Key Works

Any appreciation of Peter Racine Fricker's music is hampered by the lack of available recordings. At present, the *Archiv* website lists a dozen CDs which between them features about twenty works. Exploring file sharing groups and *YouTube* will reveal many more, yet, any assessment must be based on commercially recorded music. Certainly, Fricker seems to rarely feature in the concert hall or recital room. The listener is fortunate in having recordings of the five symphonies, the *Concerto for Violin and Small Orchestra op. 11* and *The Vision of Judgement* (all on Lyrita) as well as the Naxos disc of the complete string quartets and the complete organ works from *Toccata*.

So, the list of five key works is limited to what is available on CD, download or streaming. Check *YouTube* for uploads of these works. The first two pieces are immediately approachable:

- Rondo Scherzoso (1948) (Lyrita REAM.2136)
- Comedy Overture Op. 32 (1958) (Lyrita REAM.2136)
- Litany for double string orchestra, op.25 (1956)
- Symphony No.2 op.14 (1950-51) (Lyrita REAM.2136)
- Violin Concerto op.11 (1950, rev.1974) (Lyrita SRCD.276)

Finally, if you have time to hear only one work:

The *Litany* for double string orchestra, op.25 (1956) may appear to be a strange work to recommend. However, I think that this piece could be regarded as entry level to Peter Racine Fricker. It was completed in 1955 and was premiered at the following year's Cheltenham Festival. At the time, the work evoked superficial comparisons with Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia* and Michael Tippett's *Double Concerto* for string orchestra. In fact, Fricker's music is edgier and bleaker than the older composers. The powerful effect of this music is derived from the plainsong motive and various tonal and 12-tone techniques deployed. Despite the austere nature of *Litany*, Fricker handles his material with skill resulting in some excellent scoring. It has been uploaded to [YouTube](#).

Fricker's achievement in composition was summed up by Colin Mason, writing nearly 60 years ago: 'All his works are distinguished by their concentration of thought, harmonic density, subtlety and inventiveness of structure and originality of design.'

John France