Gordon Phillips

(1908-1991)

Introduction

In 1949, Milford composed the original version of his well-known *Fishing By Moonlight* but not in the version known today for piano and strings. The original was, unusually, for two harpsichords and show the composer’s imaginative use of instrumentation which often went beyond the norm. Having played part of the work to Finzi, Milford was asked by Finzi for a copy of the completed composition to perform with the Newbury Strings. On completion of the work in October, 1953, Milford wrote, “… do you still want that little harpsichord concerto of mine revised, or is too late to be of use? I’ve just finished revising ‘Fishing By M’ for Hinrichsen, and am now at a loose end, not up to ‘composing’ but glad to do something. But if you don’t want it I’ll find something else to do; perhaps you’d just send a card?”

Clearly, at this point Milford was in business communication with Max Hinrichsen. The present writer often wondered, however, how this arrangement came into being, considering the fact that Milford had published his works through other publishing houses and never with Hinrichsen. During the 1980s, this question was answered through Gordon Phillips.

It is not generally known that Milford was first and foremost an organist. He studied organ with Henry Ley at the Royal College of Music. It was through the organ loft that Milford and Philips first met round around 1950. By this stage, Gordon Phillips was a fine recitalist, a well-established composer, an editor with Hinrichsen and a personal friend of Max Hinrichsen.

Phillips related that he instantly recognised Milford’s style as being “quite different” from that of other contemporary organ composers in terms of inventive melody, unique phrasing (where one phrase would, surprisingly overlap with another), particulart use of harmony at unexpected melodic points and unique arrangements of well-known melodies (in terms of contrasting textures and rhythm). Realising this style, Phillips encouraged Max Hinrichsen to commence publishing Milford’s music (orchestral and organ). Gordon Phillips knew of the sadness of Milford’s life, his gentle temperament and distress at the deletion of many of his works with Novello and OUP but, conversely, recognsised his wit and overall cultural breadth. .

After the publication of *Fishing By Moonight*, Milford, Phillips and Hinrichsen worked together on the publication of Milford’s organ and choral music. Milford lived to see the publication of his cantata *Days and Moments* (a setting of poems by Walter de la Mare) but not the publication of his *Prelude in the Manner of a Passacaglia* for organ (1962).

On a personal level, the unravelling of this mystery has been a great joy to the present writer, in terms of his close frienship with the late Marion Milford, his profound interest in Milford’s music and having studied organ with Gordon Phillips at All Hallow-by-the Tower. Inspiration came during these organ lessons to commence writing on English music (following many lengthy discussions on the subject). When Gordon Phillips discovered that the present writer was writing on Milford, he encouraged this work implicitly. Thus, in every respect, it seems most appropriate to include Gordon in the Milford website.

Biography and Selected Organ Works

Biography

It is almost forgotten today that it was Gordon Phillips who drew many organists' attention to Early English Organ Music through the Tallis to Wesley series which he instigated and edited. He was the first to lead players back to what the composers had actually written, and away from the heavily edited and filled-in arrangements that had tried to give the early music a late nineteenth-century mantle. For giving so many an interest and better insight into the works of the Early English Organ Composers he should receive full recognition. His work in editing the various anthologies and collections went almost unnoticed although by his work some were encouraged to widen their musical horizons. As an organ composer he has been forgotten apart from the Six Carol Preludes and the Meditation from the Three Pastoral Pieces. In the recital world just before World War Two, he and a number of his friends played his pieces in and around London, and Herbert Ellingford gave performances of the Suite and the Sonata at St. George's Hall, Liverpool.

Gordon Phillips was born in Slough on the 13th October, 1908, son of a local Baptist minister, who was soon to move to West Bridgford, Nottingham. It was here that Gordon attended school. During his school years he went to a recital by Louis Vierne at the Town Hall, which so inspired him, so it is said, that he determined to become an organist much to the disapproval of his father. There appears to be no record of what Gordon did between leaving school and his enrolling at the Nottingham University College Training Department on a two-year Certificate Course (Teacher Training). In 1931 it is known that he was organist of the Parish Church of Widmerpool, a village south of Nottingham, and then at Woodborough Road Baptist Church in Nottingham from 1932-33. On completion of the course in 1932, his testimonial refers to his having considerable experience before embarking on the course, so we may assume that he did some teaching before leaving school and going to college.

In January 1933 Gordon Phillips passed the Associateship examinations of the Royal College of Organists and was listed by the RCO as living in Stevenage. The FRCO was passed in January 1935 and this entry puts him living in London. It was in 1934 that he became a student for two years at the Royal College of Music where he studied organ with Ernest Bullock and composition with John Ireland. Whilst a student he became assistant to Robert Ashfield at St. John's, Smith Square, before becoming organist at All Saints, Ennismore Gardens, Knightsbridge, in March 1936. During this period he was a frequent recitalist together with Robert Ashfield, Reginald Adams, Reginald Jevons, H. A. Roberts and Frank Wright. All included many of Gordon's newly published organ works in their programmes played at many of the London churches.

On the outbreak of War he joined the Red Cross and the Civil Defence and by September 1942 he was a civil defence instructor. With the nightly air raids and fire watching the composition of organ music was in abeyance. Also during the war years he married although the couple separated after three years.

After the War the need to earn money was great and Gordon became a copyist for other composers and also at one time played the piano in one of London's larger stores. In 1950 some pieces for clarinet were published. He became associated with Sidney Campbell, a onetime warden of the Royal School of Church Music and organist of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, who encouraged him to get back on the recital circuit and resume organ teaching. Consequently he became lecturer in advanced piano playing and composition at the City Literary Institute and spent a day or two each week giving organ lessons at Cambridge. In 1954 he became tutor for organ and harmony at the Royal School of Church Music which had recently moved to Addington Palace from Canterbury. The year 1956 saw the end of his two years at the Royal School of Church Music and his appointment as organist at All Hallows by the Tower where he remained for the rest of his life. He arrived just in time to modify the specification for the new organ which had been drawn up in 1951 by William McKie, the organist of Westminster Abbey. The new organ was finished and opened in time for the first International Organ Congress held in London in 1957. Gordon Phillips was a contributor with a paper- "The Technique of Trio Playing based on Reger's compositions in trio-form" and one on "Purcell's Organs and Organ Music". Also for the Congress, Francis Jackson, organist of York Minster, included in the first recital at Westminster Abbey, Gordon's Toccata, which was published in 1953. Later, at a recital in Brompton Oratory, Ralph Downes played some of the pieces from the Tallis to Wesley Series. The first seven volumes of Tallis to Wesley and the first two volumes of Preludes - Interludes - Postludes had been published by 1957.

Once settled at All Hallows with his double weekly recitals and teaching at the London College of Music, he spent many hours preparing more of the Tallis to Wesley series up to volume 38 (volumes 16, 25, 30 and 31 were never printed), the 9 volumes of Preludes - Interludes - Postludes, the 12 volumes of Anthology of Organ Music and the 3 volumes of Sunday by Sunday. All this publishing came to an end in 1976. The Hinrichsen Edition, founded in 1938, was editorially independent of the Peters Edition and was run by Max Hinrichsen until his death in 1965, and then by his second wife Carla until 1975. It was then absorbed into the Peters Edition and re-named Peters Edition Ltd., London. This meant that Gordon had to deal with a new editorial overseer who did not approve of the practical clear text and layout of Gordon's work. That which had been the agreed format by him and Max Hinrichsen must now conform with the latest ideas of what a scholarly score should look like. Gordon did not want his edition to be for scholars to talk about, it should be for organists to play. This disagreement led to the withdrawal of the Roseingrave Fugues which were to have been volume 40 of the Tallis to Wesley series and his determination not to publish any more music. He continued to compose but only for his own use in recitals, and for friends. His wish, that on his death all manuscripts and music be taken into the back garden and burnt, was not followed and some of the later works have now been published. I wonder what, in the great hereafter, will be his response to what has been done!

Selected Organ Works

**TOCCATA IN C** (to H. A. Roberts, 1953

The opening idea is that of an arpeggio that overshoots and falls back, this is followed by some chromatic distractions all over a tonic pedal. The counterpoint to the running part is made up of a dotted figure and a few interjections of the opening melodic idea. Crotchet chords are introduced just as the left hand part takes over the arpeggio figure and this soon disintegrates into a disguised downward scale. The pedal part now moves up from bottom C to B only to fall back to E where the whole idea is repeated in a shortened form. After a short link to the tonal centre of F, the theme is back again over a tonic pedal. Crotchet chords are now accompanied by a more active pedal part which leads to a transition back to the home key for a recapitulation of the opening that is followed by an extended section of repeated chords. The more active part is now given to the left hand rather than the pedals. This gives way to the final section where all the devices used are brought together for climax and ending of the piece.

**PARTITA ON A PLAINSONG HYMN -** **URBS BEATA JERUSALEM**

This was written for the dedication of the church of All Hallows by the Tower and the newly installed organ, which took place on 23rd July 1957. It starts with the statement of the theme with each line of the Hymn repeated up an octave as if it were a quiet echo. The first variation sees the melody given to a reed stop and accompanied by one of the composer's favourite rhythmic devices - two semiquavers followed by two quavers. In the second variation the melody is hidden by a running part which pauses to allow the listener to follow the melody. It is a kind of free fantasia. With the third Variation strict time is restored with a flowing semiquaver top part and a continuous quaver bass. The melody is played on a reed stop, not the same one as in variation one, in crotchets in the tenor register. The fourth variation is a slow movement which has the theme on the pedals at 4-foot pitch exploiting yet another reed stop. The last variation is a grand finale with the theme displayed against a constantly moving pedal part which only stops for the fanfare interjections between the lines of the plainsong.

**TRUMPET TUNE (FOR JOHN TURNER)**

The most often played of the composer's light music whose structure is conventional and the chord progressions on the whole are predictable. As with a number of his works, the middle section is in the relative minor key which makes a good contrast before returning to a repeat of the opening. It is the dotted rhythm in the first and final sections that many find so engaging.

**THE TOWER HILL SUITE**

Originally a set of six pieces - Procession, Trumpet Tune, Minuet, Hornpipe, Air, and Gavotte - but later the composer decided to leave out the Minuet as he felt that it was not in keeping with the other movements. The Suite was never published in his lifetime and was only available in manuscript to some of his pupils and friends. Recently the Suite has been published with the Minuet reinstated. With most of the later unpublished works Gordon Phillips was setting out to write popular music for use in recitals or for his pupils to play, and they were intended to be tuneful and for the most part easy to play. They were never intended to be published.

**Air**

A lyrical melody, simply harmonised, so as not to distract from the melodic line, is followed by a restless middle section in the dominant key. The piece ends with the calm opening repeated. There are two versions of the Air, the one contained in the manuscript of the whole suite and a variant that was given to one of his pupils. The version from the whole suite is the one played.

**Gavotte**

The first part follows a normal four times four bar structure with a brief modulation through the dominant in the third phrase. The middle section starting in the minor key then passes through many keys only to be pulled back momentarily before setting off again. The last section, as might be expected, is a repeat of the opening and this eventually goes a little haywire before the final fling.

**SONATA IN C MINOR**

In 1939 the Sonata was published and it did not get a good review in the Musical Times of July that year. Harvey Grace wrote, "Gordon Phillips' Sonata suggests that the composer has gone Hindemithian . . . I maintain that eighteen pages of unrelieved dissonance is as monotonous as the same amount of unrelieved consonance". The difficulty with this piece is that the form of the various movements is apparent to the eye, but due to the dissonance and economy of rhythmic patterns, it is very hard to follow by just listening. Together with the actual physical difficulty of playing the piece, it is not surprising that it has very seldom been played. Herbert Elllingford, to whom the sonata is dedicated, is known to have played it twice at St. George's Hall, Liverpool, first in October 1939 and then again in January 1940.

**Allegro moderato**

After the shock of the first 14 bars the texture thins and the opening melodic and rhythmic phrase is able to be discerned more clearly before we have what we might call the second subject. The key signature has changed to that of C major and it is marked "tranquillo", "mp", and there is almost an absence of semiquavers. However the continued dissonance obscures the change of key. The development starts with a change of manual back to the Great organ for the development of the first idea and then for the second idea another change of manual. Then the two ideas are combined and with crescendo and accelerando the climax of the music is reached. A short after thought is followed by the recapitulation.

**Minuet**

After the first movement this is much more comprehensible as the first phrase is capable of recognition when it is repeated. The middle section using the material from the opening, strives to crescendo but falls back until a unison passage, with a rest that conveys a feeling of hesitation, ends with a cadence. After a longer rest a repeat of the opening follows now a fourth higher and this concludes the Minuet.

**Rondo**

This is an extremely clever development of a single idea - four ascending or descending quavers, sometimes disguised in an eight note semiquaver pattern. The return of the rondo theme is also of interest as it comes back the first time a third higher than the original, and then a third lower, and finally at the original pitch in octaves. This subtlety is somewhat lost by the obscure tonality and perhaps the following of the score is the best way to hear what is going on.

**SIX CAROL PRELUDES**

*O Little Town of Bethlehem (OBC 138), The Holly and the Ivy, (OBC38),*

*Coventry Carol (OBC22), This Endris Night (OBC 39),*

*The Angel Gabriel (OBC 37), The First Nowell (OBC 27)*

Unlike the Five Meditations on Evening Hymns, this collection of Carol Preludes is treated in a more varied way. The only one that is not wholly satisfactory is *The Holly and the Ivy* which is over before one has grasped what the composer was trying to do. When they were first published, they were hailed as most suitable for Christmas and well within the capabilities of most organists as well as being comprehensible to most congregations. The tunes are all found in the Oxford Book of Carols of 1928 (OBC) and all the melodies are still popular today with the exception of *The Angel Gabriel* which is now sung to a different tune.

**THREE PASTORAL PIECES**

The Three Pastoral Pieces were composed separately in October 1936, November and February 1937, and were then published as a set by Oxford University Press later in 1937. They go well played as a set of pieces as the cumulative effect is that of progress from the known towards the modern. Each piece has a dedication to a contemporary organist - Reginald Jevons, W. S. Lloyd Webber and Harold Fairburn - all of whom were recitalists at that time.

**Meditation**

After toying with the ideas arising from the first four notes, first upwards then downwards, the possibilities for modulation are explored and in the process the melodic fragment gets modified. When we return to recapitulate the opening it is as if after much thought - first ideas are best.

**Scherzo**

A lively piece whose chromatic decoration conveys a feeling of restlessness until we reach the middle section which is in the major key. The tonal stability is short lived and after more chromaticism and an accelerando which ends with a very short pedal solo, the opening is recapitulated now sounding quite familiar after the middle section. The piece ends with a little coda - a kind of afterthought.

**Pastoral Sketch**

A calm opening is rudely interrupted by five discordant notes on the clarinet. Calm is restored and after a melodic solo, the clarinet enters as if it now knows which notes to play. A tonic pedal prepares us for the final cadence. A rough rustic interpretation of the pastoral scene.

**LULLABY** for Organ, July 1935, to my Mother

The earliest known organ composition that had to wait until 1937 to be published by Oxford University Press. It begins with a rocking motion conveyed by a pedal part off-beat simulating a gently swinging cradle. The middle section at a slightly increased tempo, takes fragmentary ideas which pass from key to key in the manner of a fleeting dream. This section ends with a pause and then a sense of semi-consciousness returns with the repeat of the opening again accompanied by the off-beat pedal part. The piece ends with the dreamlike theme heard again this time on the clarinet suggesting that a sound sleep will follow.

**THREE MINIATURES** for Organ, September 1935, to Frank Wright

Gordon Phillips is perhaps at his best with small scale works and these three pieces are an excellent example of musical thought written in a concise and highly expressive way. They are shapely with balance and proportion which add to their charm and instant appeal.

**Adagio**

This piece has phrases of unconventional length. The first phrase starts on the weak beat and is answered by one starting on the strong beat. This pattern is then repeated to complete the first section of the piece. The middle section has the melody played on a solo stop and exploits the idea of phrases starting on the off-beat. The piece ends with the opening phrase played again, this time over a tonic pedal, and it is answered by a phrase constructed from the last three notes of the first phrase - a downward leap followed by a semitone rise.

**Allegretto**

The shortest piece, which opens with a very brief playful fragment of melody that is answered by an upward scale in thirds ending in an attempt to change key but fails. Then follows a kind of middle section with the fragment modified to enable two quick attempts at key change but to no avail. These two bars are balanced by two cadence bars and still we have not changed key. The opening phrase and its answer are repeated in a modified form and lead straight into a variant of the middle idea. The piece ends abruptly with a two bar cadence.

**Andante tranquillo**

The interest lies in the unusual re-arrangement of what might be called a siciliana rhythm, heard at the beginning on a solo stop in the treble register. The first two bars of the opening theme are repeated in the tenor register and a new ending is added with the melody back in the treble. The second half starts with our modified dotted rhythm but this is the last time we shall hear it as the more conventional pattern now takes over. The piece ends with the first four notes of the opening melody harmonised and presented in 3/4 time.

**SUITE IN F MINOR**

The first large scale work to be published (O.U.P. 1937) and was dedicated to Dr George Thalben-Ball who, it is believed, only played it once, as was his wont with much of the music that came his way.

**Pontifical March**

This is best regarded as a piece of programme music depicting the arrival of the dignitary at the door of the church through to his reaching the High Altar for the start of the Service. The dissonant fanfare-like opening draws attention to the arrival as well as acting as a welcome. The March that follows takes the procession to the sacristy for the Pontiff to robe for the ceremony. The middle section starts with a change of manual, symbolic of the closing of the sacristy door and with nothing to be seen, the music, with an increase in tempo, depicts by means of short phrases over a running staccato part, a congregation given over to chatting. A crescendo is needed to engender a feeling of expectation and when the pedal enters on bottom C and remains for the last nine bars of this section, we are ready for the second procession to start. It is greeted again with the welcome fanfare and then the March takes the dignitaries to the Sanctuary.

**Minuet**

Here we have a piece in three sections, corresponding to the Minuet-Trio-Minuet form of the classical period, with conventional four-bar phrases. However, in all other respects it does not conform. The key is not established until the end of the second phrase (half way through the first section). The second section, that which corresponds to the Trio of the classical compositions, is a dialogue between the clarinet stop and a flute stop over a pedal point. The third section is a repeat of the first but this time a staccato bass is added.

**Toccata**

This movement falls into three sections. In the first we are presented with a fast-moving theme consisting of rapidly changing chords on the manuals. The first half of this opening section is made up of six short fragments of melody. Just as we get used to this, one of the fragments is extended, and the opening pattern returns until the piece modulates to the major key for the second section. This is noticeable, and made more significant, by a change of manual, which gives the effect of the music being temporarily, if partially, muted. The same melodic and rhythmic material is used for this section as before, but it does pass from key to key with greater ease and frequency, until three flourishes announce a cadence-like section which exploits the opening ideas, in the guise of crescendos which suddenly stop, with a short pause on the first two and a longer pause on the final one. This is followed by a recapitulation of the first section now fully developed. This time there is a full pedal part which until now has only been hinted at. The listener may at this point suddenly realize that all the ideas presented up to now have been brought together in their fully developed form.

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The above organ works are performed by Jonathan Melling and David Cook on the organ of All Hallows-by-the-Tower. The CD is available from All Hallows at [www.allhallowsbythetower.org.uk](http://www.allhallowsbythetower.org.uk/)

The organ music of Gordon Phillips is currently published by *Animus* Publications, Cumbria ([http://www.animusi.co.uk](http://www.animusi.co.uk/)).

A book on Gordon Phillips has been produced by Mrs. Hilary Sewell (a former pupil) and Mrs. Jenny Phillips (a relation of Gordon). For more information on this book and other Gordon Phillips aspects (biography, compositions, publications, his recitals at All Hallows, and the organ at All Hallows), please contact Peter Hunter, as below.

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