

## MARCUS BLUNT (31<sup>st</sup> Dec.1947 - 21<sup>st</sup> July 2022) – Obituary and a tribute via some reminiscences

*Frank Bayford*

I was much saddened to hear that my old friend Marcus Blunt had passed away after a lengthy illness. He was a fine composer of much music that possessed a fascinating originality.

I first encountered his work in the 1970s, after I had co-founded, with John Mitchell, Compass Composers Association, a group which aimed to bring together composers 'not yet established' to the notice of sympathetic performers who would be likely to include their music in concerts. A call for enquiries and scores was placed in the *Musical Times* and amongst the very first replies that we received was one from Marcus. In a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> August 1975, he wrote:

*"I am aged 27 and my works so far are chamber pieces, and, as I write very slowly, are very few in number. My style is somewhere between tonal and atonal, and the technical standard required is ranging on the professional in most cases".*

When he contacted us again about a fortnight later, he suggested that four pieces by him might be suitable and these were duly received. Three of them - a *Sonatina* for clarinet and piano, some piano *Preludes* and *Three Pieces* for two clarinets, he described as 'neo-classical', whilst the fourth item, a *String Quartet (in Miniature)* was 'Shostakovich-influenced'. He also gave the then committee of Compass some pertinent advice about publicity for the organization, in the light of his own experience of working in music libraries and shops, and also for a music publisher.

What immediately struck the committee was the professional presentation of his scores. Although they were manuscripts (typesetting was not then widespread), they were in a beautifully neat hand with every fine detail all present and correct. What was also evident was his musical language, which 'spoke' with an individual voice and communicated in a distinct but approachable way. Later I was to learn that this individuality was due to a special harmonic system that he had devised, based on an ascending scale with the intervals diminishing by a semitone at each step.

One thing, however, somewhat intrigued us, and that was his then address - The Post Office, Fritchley, Derbyshire. 'Perhaps he is a postman?', someone mused waggishly. It was all explained later when John and I visited there one afternoon as a prelude to a holiday in 'Housman country' in May 1976. It was Marcus's eldest brother, Roger, who was the postmaster. Also resident at the Post Office were their parents and all three gave the 'Compass delegation' a warm and courteous welcome. We then met Marcus and my first impression of him was of a



Marcus Blunt, with his photographic 'snaps', at The Post Office, Fritchley, May 1976  
(Photo: John Mitchell)

somewhat quiet and reserved young man, already sporting the distinctive beard that he wore throughout his adult life. Born in Birmingham in 1947, he was a professional musician, having studied composition at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, graduating in 1970. His work was that of a peripatetic teacher of woodwind instruments, particularly his own instrument the clarinet, but previous jobs had included being a warehouse packer, photographic processor and department manager at a music publisher (Chesters). We also learnt that he was the third of four brothers – Roger, Adrian, then Marcus, and Jeremy.

He, John and I had a couple of hours chat about music (his and that of other composers) and he

showed us the manuscript of a symphony that he had written as a graduation piece. Another interest came to light when he produced a

pack of landscape photographs he had taken and they really were of excellent quality. I was to obtain an insight into how seriously he took his 'snaps' (as he humorously described them) during holidays we later shared in West Scotland and the Hebrides.

Many of his pieces were accepted for recommendation by Compass and because of his invaluable music-making experience, he was soon co-opted onto the committee. In 1977, the first concert of 'Compass Composers' music was given, at Trent Park Music Centre, near Enfield, and on the programme was Marcus's attractive *Serenade* for two clarinets, in which he ably participated with the distinguished player, Ian Mitchell. He also premiered pieces by John and me on that occasion.

In each of the first ten years of Compass's concert activities (1977-1986), many of Marcus's beautifully-crafted works were played; these included his first two *Piano Sonatas*, *Preludes 1-7*, *Iona Prelude and Caprice*, all given by another Compass stalwart, Derek Foster, who also premiered the *Two Nocturnes*, for solo vibraphone; at other times, Derek was joined by clarinetist, Judith Koral, in *Sonatina* and *Aspects of Venus*.

Marcus also introduced to us three friends of his, Pauline Alder, Peter Gosling and John Gough, who made up the soprano/clarinet/piano trio Microcosmos, and they became regular participants in our concerts; Peter and John (Gough) played not only the *Sonatina* but also *Aspects of Venus* and *Venus Eclipsed*. After a concert in 1982, I received a letter from them in which their performance of *Aspects of Venus* was mentioned:

*“The trouble with ‘Aspects’ is that we are so exhausted afterwards...!!”*

In retrospect, what I think they meant was not only was it a virtuoso piece, but it was also highly emotionally charged with a passion that communicates to both audience and the players. This view is confirmed by what the composer himself wrote in a programme note for its premiere by Gosling and Gough in September 1979 at Birmingham Centre for the Arts:

*“The title of this work reflects the composer’s interest in astrology, and is also meant to convey the music’s exploration of the world of Romantic emotions.....building to a climax of tremendous power and intensity. The tension is unresolved, but finds its release in a coda of pure energy and vitality”.*

Astrology was a subject that seriously occupied his interest and often he would calculate if a particular day was to have a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ aspect and then plan accordingly. Personally, I could not fully ‘go along’ with it all, but I did wholeheartedly admire another of his pursuits. I have already mentioned how John Mitchell and I were shown examples of his ‘snaps’ when we first met him in 1976. Photography of the landscape he took to a skilled and professional level, and I encountered this clearly when, in the 1980s, I went on several holidays with him to Scotland, more particularly the West Coast and the islands of the Inner Hebrides. The often spectacular beauties of Skye, Mull, Iona, Staffa and Inverewe Gardens provided ideal subjects to whet his innate sense of what was photogenic. Sunsets seen from the west coast of Mull were fascinations for both of us, for I too always took my camera along on those vacations. However, Marcus also possessed an extraordinary head for heights, unlike me. I have a superb photograph of Fingal’s Cave on Staffa that he took looking right down into its opening from above, a view that he could only have obtained whilst standing on the very edge of the high cliff over it (the palms of my hands still go clammy whenever I look at that picture!).

Those Scottish trips occasionally stirred him to write music. Once, on Iona, we stayed in a hotel that had a piano in its sitting room. It was at this instrument that, when the room was empty of other guests, Marcus improvised what was to become his *Iona Prelude*. He also had an ear for birdsong - there is a delightful study for solo clarinet that he wrote in 1970 called *A Song-thrush at Tidbury Green*; one year (1980) when we were on Skye visiting Dunvegan Castle, he heard the distinct call of a chiffchaff in the gardens, and that was enough to set his creative mind functioning. I was politely asked to leave him by himself for a time whilst he jotted down some ideas. The result, completed two years later, was a piece for solo violin and orchestra, echoing with those Skye birdsongs. He

could not think of a suitable title for it at first - I suggested 'Once in a Western Island...', an indication of its place of origin, an idea that he happily accepted.

What composers did he admire? I had a revealing reply to a remark that I made to him shortly after Benjamin Britten had died. I said how sad it was and how much I liked Britten's music. I felt that Marcus only half-heartedly agreed with me but added that there was another composer whose recent demise he regretted much more - Shostakovich. There was, however, another Russian composer whose music and composing methods had influenced him and that was Scriabin. In an article that appeared in Modus Music News No. 38, June 2010, (*Scriabin - a composer's view*), Marcus wrote:

*"Scriabin may now be one of my favourite composers...."*

He went on to say that he was 'bowled over' by a performance of Scriabin's *Fourth Piano Sonata* played in a memorable recital by Stephen Blackshaw in the composer's centenary year, 1972. He borrowed one of the Peters volumes of the *Preludes and Poems* to explore and he found that:

*"clearly these were not aimless, self-indulgent ramblings; there was a highly disciplined intellect at work, fashioning exquisite miniatures from deliberately limited resources..."*

He ended the article: *"I keep returning to his music (mostly as a mere listener, regrettably!), only to uncover yet more felicitous details of harmony and counterpoint that have previously gone unnoticed..."*

The article gives a useful insight into Marcus's way of composing, including the use of his own harmonic system and how the musical letters of a person's name could be used thematically. It is not surprising that in 1992 he wrote a piano piece entitled *Fantasy on SCRiABin*.

Around the time of his marriage to Maureen in 1988, he wrote the third of his piano sonatas, entitled *The Life Force*, which he dedicated to his wife. It was also in homage to two literary figures who had influenced him, firstly, George Bernard Shaw, whose *Man and Superman* he had seen twenty years earlier in a TV production and, secondly the 'inspirational' Colin Wilson. As a direct result of a Radio 3 broadcast of the sonata in 1992 (in a splendid performance by Kathryn Stott), Colin Wilson invited him and Maureen to visit him at his home in Cornwall on several occasions. Marcus later wrote:

*"My favourite author by far is Colin Wilson... His central belief is that there is far more to life than what our everyday consciousness encompasses, and that we need to find ways of expanding our consciousness beyond these narrow limits".*

That statement surely explains to some degree the almost mystical quality of some of Marcus's music.

In his marriage to Maureen, he had a partner who gave him unwavering support. Their comfortable and elegant homes were most congenial environments for him to pursue his compositional activities. They lived in Derby for a short time but decided to move to Scotland 'to enjoy a gentler pace of life' in 1990, firstly to Birrens Cottage at Ecclefechan, near Lockerbie. This was just across the road from the site of the ancient Roman fort of Birrens and not far away was an impressive hill called 'Burnswark'. He captured an essence of that landscape in the only piece he wrote whilst living there, aptly entitled *Birrens to Burnswark*. The hill was not visible from the cottage and so Marcus wanted the music to express a feeling of making a journey that begins tentatively and gradually gains in sense of purpose and direction. The following year saw the Blunts in a new home a little nearer to Lockerbie, at 'Craig's Cottage' on the outskirts of Lochmaben, with wonderful views of the distant Moffat Hills. They moved to their final abode, in Gatehouse of Fleet, in 2019.

He received a commission from Northern Arts in 1991 to write a piece for the Wigton Festival. It was to be played by the North Pennine Chamber, with Schubert's *Octet* also on the programme. Marcus decided that the instrumentation for his piece should be the same as that for the Schubert and so he scored it for string quartet, double bass, clarinet, bassoon and horn. The title has another ornithological dimension as Marcus chose for it *The Throstle-nest in Spring*, throstle being another name for the song thrush. It seems that Wigton was in the past referred to as The Throstle Nest. I attended the premiere in Wigton in May 1992 and in retrospect I now realise how much musically Marcus had travelled since he had heard another song thrush twenty years before at Tidbury Green.

At this point I should clarify a situation concerning Marcus's symphonies. There was the student work that he showed me when I first met him in 1976 and which remains unperformed. In 1988/9, he composed what he called his *Symphony No. 1*, again an as yet unperformed piece. He described it as being "a spontaneous outpouring of feelings following his recent marriage". Shortly afterwards he was commissioned to write a piece to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the Sutton Coldfield Chamber and he responded with a work that he entitled *Symphony No. 2 (A Sutton Symphony)*. That piece was premiered by the orchestra under its conductor Anthony Miller at Sutton Coldfield Town Hall on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1990. The leader on that occasion was Jeremy Blunt, Marcus's youngest brother. I was able to attend both the afternoon rehearsal and the evening performance and I remember the local mayor and mayoress holding a congratulatory conversation with Marcus and Maureen after the concert. However, a 'new' *Symphony No. 2* replaced the Sutton composition in 2002, using refashioned material from *The Throstle-nest in Spring*, reducing the original five movements to four and increasing the instrumentation from that for an octet to the numbers required for a modest-sized orchestra. It seems that for a while, Marcus called the new work *Sinfonietta*. Both *The Throstle-nest in Spring* and *A Sutton Symphony* were

withdrawn from his list of compositions, but the central movement of that symphony was re-used later as a piece for string orchestra, *Aspects of Saturn*.

This re-use of material bears out a comment made by Marcus himself that he was a keen recycler. One piece, *Lorenzo the Much Travel'd Clown*, originally written in 1988/9 for bassoon and piano, was in 1996 transformed into a *Sonata for viola and piano*. That piece went on to exist in versions for clarinet, oboe, tarogato, basset-horn and soprano saxophone as well as an adaptation for string quartet - the latter was originally called *Serenatina*, as its character felt quite different from the original *Lorenzo* piece but after its premiere, Marcus decided that it didn't sound very serene and so it became *Fantasina*.

In 1997, he was appointed Honorary Composer-in-residence to Dumfries Music Club and several of his instrumental works, including the afore-mentioned '*Serenatina/Fantasina*', featured in their concerts. During his residency, an article by Abigail Walmsley about it appeared in *Classical Music* (29.3.2003).

A prestigious event took place in July 2002 when the Victoria International Arts Festival, Gozo (Malta) made him a featured composer; seven of his works were played, there was a pre-concert talk and it was all broadcast on local radio.

By then, noted groups and performers such as the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, the Joachim Piano Trio, Peter Evans, John Lenehan and Ian Brown had programmed his work and it had 'become international' with performances in Canada, Finland, France, India, Japan, the Netherlands and Portugal, to name but a few. I remember two wonderful events nearer home when the venues made a superb backdrop to two of his larger pieces - a rehearsal of his early but still impressive *The Rings of Saturn* in Derby Cathedral and at London's St Paul's Cathedral Marcus himself directed the St Helen's Brass Ensemble from Derby in a glorious reading of *Venice Suite*. The final "*Serenissima*" movement of the latter was, Marcus confided to me, much influenced by the triumphal 'Appian Way' ending of Respighi's *Pines of Rome!*

Over the years, he gradually built up a corpus of works that included orchestral items, chamber and instrumental pieces and much solo piano music (his vocal music consisted only of two short choral settings of Robert Burns). Modus Music, the publishing division of Compass Composers Association issued many of his pieces - undoubtedly the most frequently requested was *Canons and Jiglets*, a set of eight delightful duets for woodwind, and I was delighted when he asked me to design a cover for it. It was obvious that Marcus also possessed a good sense of humour, for he appreciated the whimsical 'piglets' and 'canonic insects' that I had drawn.

Being himself a clarinetist and a teacher of woodwind inevitably meant that many of his works would showcase those instruments, especially the clarinet. His knowledge of their workings and possibilities meant that what he wrote for



them was always well-considered but at the same time offered surmountable challenges for the players. I know that I gained much helpful technical advice from him concerning my own woodwind pieces.

Certainly a major milestone for Marcus's music was reached when an article by Murray McLachlan appeared in the July/August 2005 Edition of *Piano Magazine*. It was in the series 'Unsung Heroes' and entitled 'Intervallic Symbols'. Its author sympathetically discussed all of Marcus's piano works, with an especial mention of the 'substantial' *Piano Concerto*, completed twenty years earlier but still unperformed. A year later, Divine Arts issued a CD of the solo piano works, played by Murray McLachlan, a recording which gained much critical acclaim, both for the music itself and for the performances. It was re-issued in 2014 and again it received excellent reviews.

The *Piano Concerto* did not have long to wait for its own sight of the light of day. At the beginning of August 2016, Marcus wrote in a letter: "*already the Piano Concerto recording session seems ages ago - and yet it's only three weeks!...Stephen Threlfall [the conductor] is very thorough and meticulous*".



Celebrating at the Midland Hotel, Manchester, following the recording of Marcus Blunt's *Piano Concerto* on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2016. L.to R.: Marcus Blunt; Murray McLachlan; Kathryn Page; Stephen Threlfall; Maureen Blunt; Lesley Wilson.

That was the start of work on another CD that would include another three orchestral pieces by Marcus, the *Symphony No. 2, Aspects of Saturn* and

*Concertino* for bassoon and strings. Needless to say, the insightful and persuasive Murray McLachlan was the soloist in the *Piano Concerto*. Another great supporter of Marcus, Lesley Wilson, was the soloist in the *Concertino*. She had once been Principal Bassoon in the Scottish National Orchestra and shortly after her retirement in 1989, Marcus had sent her copies of his music for her instrument. She went on to premiere *Lorenzo the Much-Travel'd Clown*, for bassoon and piano, and also included in her programmes a solo piece, *Caprice and Scotch Song*. Both works were also included on a CD she recorded for the Vox Regis label. I heard from Marcus that without her generous sponsorship, the whole recording project of the orchestral CD would not have taken place.

The invariably positive reviews of that CD gave Marcus much pleasure, and thankfully so. His health had been causing concern for some time, resulting in him having to undergo various surgical procedures.

The last time that we had met was on a happy afternoon in September 2012, when he and Maureen, his mother Kathleen and Gerald, a family friend, visited me at my home in Enfield on their way to Kent to attend the premiere of his *Concertino* for viola and string orchestra. It was included in a concert to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Oare String Orchestra and it won the Judges' Prize. John Mitchell attended the event and he told me later that the judge who had presented the prize to Marcus was John McCabe, who bore a striking resemblance to Marcus. There was an amusing incident when Marcus arrived at the Hall and the orchestra's Chairman came up to him and said 'Hallo, John'.

We continued to exchange letters as we had done regularly since 1976, correspondence that was full of news about his works and their progress, and which often enclosed concert programmes detailing an ever-growing number of their performances. The last, short, letter was sent in December 2021, with the sad news of the passing of his eldest brother Roger. By that time his own health had deteriorated and he was unable to attend the funeral. Marcus's own demise seven months later came as a huge shock, for it ended a friendship of 46 years. Murray McLachlan posted a warm tribute on Facebook and this attracted many wonderful responses from Marcus's friends, colleagues and former pupils. They expressed sorrow along with condolences to Maureen and the family, but were also full of happy memories and gratitude.

I choose to end this 'tribute via reminiscences' with an apt and revealing remark he once made when questioned about *why* he wrote music. His reply was:

*"In a way that cannot be expressed in words, music has the power to help us understand what life is all about. I write music because I feel impelled to, and if it moves other people and helps them to feel that life is a truly meaningful experience, so much the better".*

Nothing else needs to be added to that honest summary of his own life's work.



Frank Bayford, 10.9.2022

Frank Bayford was born in London in 1941. He was educated at the Grammar School, Enfield, and then went on to study Pharmacy at Portsmouth College of Science and Technology.

Most of his professional career was spent at Chase Farm Hospital, where he was for many years Head of Pharmacy and also Guest Lecturer in pharmaceuticals to the medical and nursing staff. He took an early retirement from the Health Service in 1988. He was a founder member of the Chase Farm Hospital Archive Group, and his book *Memories of Chase Farm* was completed in 2017. With John Mitchell he founded the Compass Composers Association and its publishing arm, Modus Music.

He is a composer and an Academy Member of the Ivors Academy of Music Creators. He has written over 100 concert works, ranging from solo piano pieces to orchestral items, including three symphonies. The Enfield Chamber Orchestra, of which he is Patron, has frequently premiered his work.

His 'stepping stones towards an autobiography', *Dispensing Notes*, was published by Fand Music Press in 2017. *A Folder of Verselets*, a collection of short poems, illustrated by the author, came out in 2021.

His interests include history, gardening, Scotland, old churches, and photography. Many of his slides formed the basis for the talks he used to give about places in the British Isles.

Because the Covid pandemic has caused that activity to end, he is now writing an illustrated book, *Visits and Reminiscences*, which brings together much of the subject matter of those talks