

CLASSICAL

George Lloyd: Medium with a message

Ian MacDonald on the tuneful but controversial British composer

Since around 1950, classical music has been ruled by an academic style obscure to the ordinary listener – an abstract, quantified art in which what happens next is determined chiefly by numbers, and tunes don't get much of a look in. George Lloyd calls this 'Squeaky Gate music'. His own stuff, by contrast, is tuneful enough to get thousands on their feet cheering it after an average performance – but does the average review mention this? No. Why not? Because the average reviewer, raised in the ruling academic tradition, sits grimly on his hands muttering about 'Victorian parlour music' and refusing to say a good word for it.

Not surprisingly, there's a whiff of popular revolution in the classical air and Peter Kermani, American millionaire vice-president of Lloyd's record label Albany, has no qualms about drawing an immediate political parallel: "Like communism and the Berlin Wall, the music of the Squeaky Gate is tumbling down. Audiences have had enough of listening to music they simply do not enjoy."

Till recently, the Lloyd cult was treated by most spokesmen for the establishment as a kitsch anomaly and, as such, ignored. Now, however, a spate of new recordings of the composer's work on the Albany, Conifer and Argo labels has sparked off a hot debate in the letters pages of the classical magazines with Lloyd fans attacking the likes of Stockhausen and Carter as pretentious nonsense and modernists retaliating against Lloyd's 'naive eclecticism' and 'bland predictability'.

At the centre of the controversy is a courteous Cornishman living quietly with his wife in a flat near London's Regent's Park, where he continues to compose at the age of 77. Not that Lloyd holds himself aloof from the modern-versus-traditional dispute his scores have ignited – he'd rather talk about that than the story of his strange career. Yet so relevant is his life, both to his music and the arguments it provokes, that a resumé is unavoidable.

Born in St Ives in 1913, George Lloyd grew up in a musical home and, owing to illnesses which kept

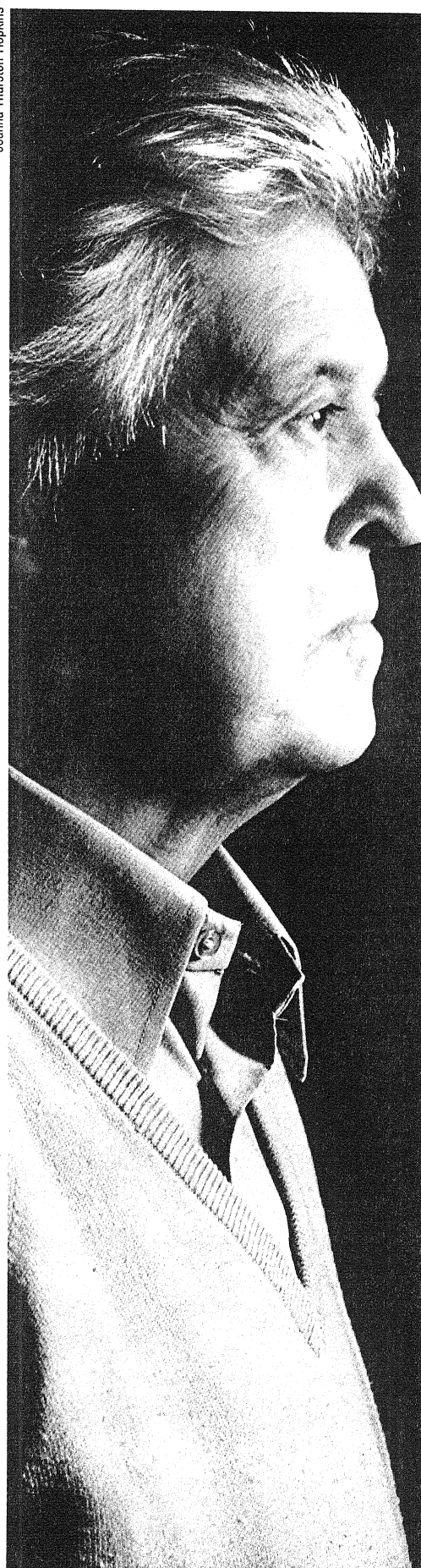
him from school, received an almost entirely musical education. His father's love of Italian opera was an early influence, audible in a vein of lyric nostalgia running from the Verdian second subject of his First Symphony (composed in 1932 when he was 19) to the Puccinian waltz in the third movement of his Eleventh (written at the age of 72 in 1985). This naturally drew him to write for the stage and, by 1939, the success of his operas *Iernin* and *The Serf* appeared to have secured his career.

Then came the war. Joining the Marines, Lloyd found himself serving on escort duty with the merchant convoys supplying Russia through the Arctic port of Murmansk. In spring 1942, his ship, the *Trinidad*, was crippled by German destroyers off North Cape and he was invalided home to England with shell-shock. Doctors pronounced him incurable. "I was," the composer recalls, "just one sort of lump of jelly that jumped around." It was three years before Lloyd could concentrate his mind enough to relearn how to write music.

After the war, Nancy Lloyd took her husband to convalesce at her family home in Switzerland where, within a year, he had reassembled himself sufficiently to write his huge Fourth Symphony. Living by the lake at Neuchatel, Lloyd then produced his masterpiece: the Fifth. Such spectacular proof of recovery suggested it was time to return to England, a decision confirmed in 1949 when the Festival of Britain commissioned his third opera, *John Sockman*. However, two years of intensive work on the piece wore him out and several more months of backstage back-stabbing during its production broke him.

Fleeing London and the music world in general, the Lloyds settled in a dilapidated Dorset cottage where they struggled to earn a living from market-gardening. The composer rose at dawn to work on symphonies and concertos before his day's labour in the mushroom patch – a routine he endured for 20 years. Throughout this period (the heyday of the avant-garde), his music was consistently rejected by both critics and promoters as dated and irrelevant.

Joanna Thurston-Hopkins



Almost no-one he approached about it took him seriously except the late John Ogdon, for whom he wrote his explosively anguished quasi-sonata *An African Shrine* in 1966.

Finally, with the aid of conductor Edward Downes and critic Hans Keller, Lloyd's Eighth Symphony was broadcast by the BBC in 1977. Public enthusiasm was instant and his music has since blossomed in popularity, currently occupying a dozen briskly selling CDs which include self-conducted recordings of nearly all his 12 symphonies. An extraordinary story of heroic persistence in the face of concerted neglect, Lloyd's career might have been purpose-designed as a parable of the relationship between art and ideology in our time. Symbolism aside, though, how significant is his music?

Lloyd-lovers talk most often of his tunes and it's true that on simple hummability he knocks his avant-garde opponents out of the ring. As for how he rates as a melodist beside native composers closer to his style, the probable answer would be: higher than Bax, sometimes as high as Delius and Ireland, but generally lower than Elgar, Holst, Vaughan Williams and Walton. Though attractive in themselves, Lloyd's

mistaken for an evaluation of worth. Used to assessing people on the immediate impression they make, we tend to judge by dress-sense rather than from a necessarily less instant exploration of the inner world of thought and feeling. Because of this, the Gallic sarcasm discernable in works like Lloyd's Ninth Symphony and Fourth Piano Concerto – which, on the face of it, belies his image as an antiquated innocent abroad – cuts no ice with his enemies. That he uses irony is, to them, of no consequence in itself; the point is, it isn't today's irony. Worse, it sometimes seems (as in his Eleventh Symphony) to be yesterday's ironic view of today. How, they demand, can a contemporary of Benjamin Britten claim to write in a musical language and from a creative outlook obsolete before either composer was born?

Lloyd's defenders point out that notions of musical obsolescence depend on stand-point – that, while many avant-garde celebrities are already *passé*, Late Romantics like Busoni, Zemlinsky and Szymanowski, once sidelined by Schoenberg's serial revolution, are suddenly all the rage. Why exclude our man? Here, the opposition wheels out the heavy artillery. Not only, they say, does George Lloyd

anchored at the turn of the century. His music's predominant joyousness – in itself naive to any consciously modern person – can thus be seen as an expression of the optimism of the early 1900s when the ideal of humane progress sold by positivists like Shaw and Wells had yet to encounter the massed machine-guns of the Somme. It reflects the confidence of a pre-psychological era in which the basic unit of human identity was not the mind but the immortal soul. Though born in the same year as the modernist Britten, Lloyd was drawn instinctively to the nearest musical expression of what might be called 'soul feeling': Elgar's generation. He took no interest in modernism for the simple reason that his inner being isn't modern. He believes in the soul and feels uncomfortable with a state of mind – and a related repertoire of techniques – which does not.

On uneasy terms with Christianity, Lloyd is a sort of *fin-de-siècle* Hellenic pantheist in the mould of Swinburne. As such, the image of joyless Calvinism in the second movement of his Fifth Symphony is redeemed in the pagan ecstasy of his oratorio *The Vigil of Venus*, a celebration of the life-force based on a fourth-century cult hymn.

Lloyd's ultimate spiritual home is ancient Greece with its nature spirits, Celtic 'Hyperboreans', oracular mediums and Elysian Fields. In terms of the Late Romanticism to which his musical sensibility inclines, it's no accident that (similarities with Elgar and Delius aside) he sounds less like a British composer than a votary of the Arcadian spirit of rustic Bohemia as represented by Dvorak, Smetana, Suk and Wunderhorn-period Mahler.

Lloyd's Celtic/Hellenic otherworldliness explains much about him which academic analyses of his style and formal techniques can't. For example, his traditionalist sense of 'meaning' in music and life, naive to the modernist, clearly derives from intimations of a spiritual dimension co-existent with the material one. The same can be said of his ideas about creative inspiration, so similar to those of mediums: "Something comes into my head and I see either a colour or a sound. It's not at all intellectual. I don't manipulate notes. I just get a feeling and then the notes come along." Possibly Lloyd is himself mediumistic (his childhood illnesses and experience of shell-shock point that way). This might explain the uneven quality of his inspiration, dependent, like a medium's 'communications', on fluctuations in his physical vitality. It would also account for Lloyd's trancelike Schubertian expansiveness and sometimes rather inconsequential movement-sequences (not to mention his inadvertent 'borrowings' from other composers, understandable in parapsychological terms as a form of cryptomnesia).

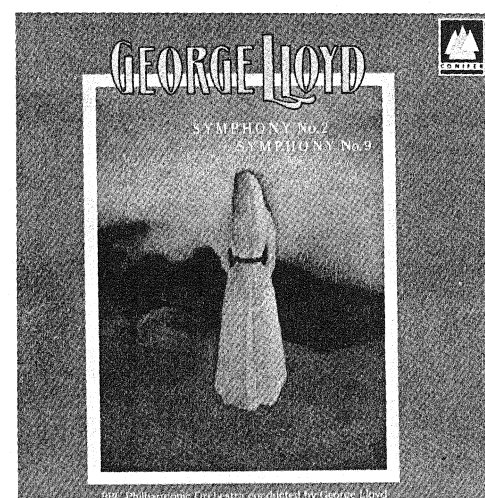
While this will seem like nonsense to militant modernists, it needs pointing out that their scepticism, whether philosophical or artistic, explains little of any interest about an anomaly like George Lloyd. If he truly is *en rapport* with another era – a composer of Elgar's time alive and writing in, and about, ours – we ought, rather than sneer, to be grateful for the alternative view. For one thing, it's not as if his contemporary competitors are composing so much that's worth getting excited about. For another, it's a safe bet that the best of Lloyd's music will outlive them all.

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compose in a style 80 years out of date, but he has no identity of his own. Play those glamorous CDs, listing all the music by other people it reminds you of; after three hours, you'll have noted nearly every composer active between 1870 and 1930. Lloyd's not just an epigone – he's a plagiarist.

The argument usually goes no further. This is a pity since the next step discloses a crucial truth, long lost amid the surface-fixated decadence of our post-modernist age – which is: *style is being*. That is, before our contemporary state of mind became so empty that it could no longer emanate expressive forms of its own, what we call 'style' (and treat as something as detachable as a suit of clothes) had been an external expression of inner experience. In a nut-shell: every artistic 'ism' is primarily a state of mind and only secondarily a repertoire of techniques. Clearly, then, the debate about George Lloyd has so far touched only the surface of the issues involved. That his music is tuneful and ingratiating, though true, is incidental. The real question is: what does it express?

Clues are not hard to find. Aside from the odd anachronistic lurch, Lloyd's musical sensibility is



tunes only occasionally lodge in the memory. His appeal, however, runs deeper than mere tunefulness, deriving just as much from his expansive and rarely dissonant harmonic schemes with their distinctive, if sometimes dense, orchestration.

Lloyd's advocate Peter Kermani is forthright about the allure of his music for the CD generation: "He writes the big romantic orchestral sound and it sounds damn good on their stereo sets." Most modernists, weaned on the asceticism of Schoenberg, find such sensuality distasteful in itself. Their objection to Lloyd is not, however, that he uses orthodox keys and structures *per se*; the same can be said of the Minimalists. What the avant-garde hate about Lloyd is that he isn't sufficiently calculating to be the Quinlan Terry of contemporary music. Lacking the currently fashionable synoptic detachment, he plays it straight, writing not 'in the manner of' a composer from an earlier era, but as if he were one. To trendy young things of all ages, he is guilty of post-modernism's worst sin: naivety.

In our consumer age, this sort of verdict – really no more than a judgement about style – is easily