

# Michael Short at 60

interviewed by Mark Uglow

*Michael Short was born in Bermuda in 1937 and was educated at Gillingham Grammar School and Bristol University. He then studied music at Morley College and London University and won a Mendelssohn Scholarship to study composition with Goffredo Petrassi in Italy and with Lennox Berkeley in London. Although well-known as a composer of band music, his output in fact covers a much wider range, including choral, orchestral, chamber and educational music, together with big-band jazz and advertising jingles. He has held various academic appointments, but now devotes his time entirely to composition. To mark his 60th birthday last year he was interviewed on behalf of WINDS magazine by Mark Uglow.*

MU *Has being a composer always been your first aim in life?*

MS As a child I went through the usual grind of learning the piano, but it wasn't until I was at university that I began to take music seriously and realised that I wanted to be a composer. After graduating I moved to London, where I was able to construct my own curriculum from evening classes available at London University and Morley College. At Morley I studied harmony and counterpoint with Anthony Milner and conducting with Guy Woolfenden.

MU *Were these years the finishing of your musical education?*

MS Well, I went on to win a Mendelssohn scholarship, but I'm particularly glad that I did the History of Music Diploma at London University because it gave me an insight into a wide range of music that I would never otherwise have come across. I also attended a summer-school composition course given by Matyas Seiber, and this had a big influence on me even though it only lasted a week or so. His approach was quite rigorous and exacting and inspired a self-discipline which has served me well to the present day. It was a great shock when he was killed in a car crash in 1960, and this was why I had to choose alternative teachers.

MU *Did you actually live in Italy or just visit for a few weeks?*

MS I had a year's sabbatical, during which I studied with Petrassi in Siena, followed by a few months in Rome, and then I was a private pupil of Lennox Berkeley in London. I chose Petrassi because of his international reputation as a teacher, and Berkeley because I admired some of his music, particularly the *Serenade* for strings, the *Sonatina* for guitar and the *Songs of the Half Light* for voice and guitar.

MU *Did you learn a great deal from your composition studies?*

MS A certain amount of basics, but the most important lesson was the realisation that original composition can't really be learnt. You have to find your own way, and all that a teacher can do is to help you achieve your own musical objectives. I had quite a mixture of teachers; Berkeley was basically a tonal composer, whereas Seiber and Petrassi were serialists.

MU *Have you used serialism in your own compositions?*

MS Now and then, in order to achieve a particular effect. Seiber's *Third Quartet* is a good example of the lyrical use of serial technique, and I have tried to use it in this way in pieces such as my *Fourth String Quartet*, while in the wind band piece *Countdown* the strange chords in the slow central section were derived from serial technique.

MU *I know that you are something of a jazz pianist: has jazz been an important influence?*

MS I have always loved jazz, which is excellent for developing practical musicianship in the form of aural perception and improvisational skills.

The richness of jazz harmony, voicing of chords, and textures have been a great help in writing for the wind band.

MU *How did your involvement with the wind band begin?*

MS My first successful piece was the *Lyric Suite*, which reached the final in the 1984 Worshipful Company of Musicians' competition. Although it didn't win the prize, I was consoled by the fact that in the same competition in 1909 Gustav Holst's now famous *Suite No. 1 in E flat* didn't win either! This event opened up the wind band world for me; I hadn't previously realised how much was going on across the country. I joined BASBWE and was inspired by the enthusiasm and commitment of players and conductors, particularly of the youth bands which achieve such high standards. As a result of this I have written many pieces for band, some commissioned by particular bands, some at the request of publishers, and others to express particular musical ideas. What I like about the band world is that performers are keen to play new pieces, and a composer can hear his music as soon as it is written, whereas works for full orchestra, if not specially commissioned, often have to wait years before they are performed.

MU *Have you any favourites among your band compositions?*

MS I think they all have something to offer, but in different ways. The more substantial pieces such as *Countdown*, *A Derbyshire Suite*, *Our Fighting Ships* and *Seven Steps to Heaven* all include passages which I think are particularly effective, but some of the shorter pieces also have their moments. I particularly enjoy the *Old English Suite*, which was written for players of intermediate ability, and *Estonia!* which resulted from a WASBE international exchange visit. But perhaps my favourite is the suite *Making Tracks*, which was commissioned by one of the British army's tank regiments. As I know nothing about tanks or about military music, this was quite a tall order, but I managed to come up with something which served the purpose but which is also useful to a wide range of bands. (I must also confess that my ignorance of military music has not deterred me from writing a march, which has recently been recorded 'Fools rush in'.)

MU *I see that you have written a number of concertos for solo wind instruments and string orchestra.*

MS There is a danger in specialising too much in band music. Although a composer may develop technical expertise, it's possible to become rather narrow in outlook and fall into routine procedures. However, I don't regard myself as a 'band composer', because band music is only one aspect of my work, which includes orchestral, choral, and chamber music. I believe that a composer who also writes string quartets is more likely to produce interesting part-writing in band music. The *Apollo* concertos for wind instruments and strings were written for Eric Roseberry's Apollo Ensemble of Bath, and were originally intended to be six, like the *Brandenburgs*, but now there are more, and the list seems to be growing. The sound of strings provides a nice foil to the wind soloist, and makes a pleasant change from the wind band! (Some years ago the BASBWE conference was shared with the string association ESTA - a nice idea which ought to be repeated.)

MU *It seems to me that pitching the interest and complexity of a piece at exactly the right level is fundamental to its success, and presumably this is a major reason for your success in the wind band world?*

MS I try to write all my music for what I regard as the 'average' player, and to provide them with something interesting to play, as well as interesting for the listeners to hear. Gustav Holst had a knack of writing music such as the *St Paul's Suite* which is at exactly the right level for both amateurs and professionals. He didn't 'write down' to amateurs, but

# COMPOSERS

offered them music which has just enough challenge to excite their enthusiasm without involving complex technical difficulties. Most of Haydn's music is written at a similar level, and Holst recommended the study of Haydn's symphonies to all his pupils.

*MU How do you see your future now that you have retired?*

MS Composers never retire; they simply go on till they drop! I have only retired from part-time teaching, and I can now devote my life entirely to composition. In his memoirs, Berlioz spoke of his relief at being able to give up journalism at the age of 60, but by that time he had written most of his major works. I feel the same relief, but unlike Berlioz I have a lot more left to do, so watch out for some more *Apollo* concertos!

## Wind Music by Michael Short

### Wind Band

- Lyric Suite* (Studio Music): recorded on Polyphonic LP PRM HD  
*Countdown (to Eternity?)* (Studio Music): recorded on Polyphonic CD QPRM 1 15D  
*A Derbyshire Suite* (Studio Music): recorded on Polyphonic CD QPRM 120D  
*Stonehenge* (Bandleader Publications)  
*Old English Suite* (Studio Music): recorded on Polyphonic CD QPRM 124D  
*Caledonia* (Bandleader Publications)  
*Making Tracks* (Bandleader Publications): recorded on Music Masters CD MMCD 428  
*Our Fighting Ships* (Bandleader Publications)  
*Estonia!* (Bandleader Publications)  
*Short Shift: march* (Bandleader Publications): recorded on Droit Music CD FANOO1  
*Gaudamus: fanfare for brass section* (Bandleader Publications)  
Gustav Holst: *The Perfect Fool* ballet music arr. Short (Bandleader Publications)

### Brass Band

*Intrada Song & Dance* (Bandleader Publications): recorded on Bandleader CD BNA 5078

### Solo & string orchestra

*Apollo Concertos* (Goodmusic in preparation):—

- No. 1 for Flute & strings  
No. 2 for oboe & strings  
No. 3 for clarinet & strings  
No. 4 for bassoon & strings  
No. 5 for horn & strings  
No. 6 for trumpet & strings

### Smaller Ensembles

- Six Poems* for wind quintet (Studio Music)  
*Three Pieces* for wind octet (Studio Music)  
*Four Fantasies* for saxophone quartet (Studio Music)  
*Impromptu* for saxophone quintet (Studio Music)  
*Jazz Preludes* for brass quartet (Boosey & Hawkes)  
*Divertimento* for brass quintet (Studio Music)

### Solo

- Lullaby* for solo flute (Studio Music)  
*Soliloquy* for solo oboe (Studio Music)  
*Five Inventions* for solo trumpet (Studio Music)

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