

## **My Husband Christopher** *Anthea Steel in conversation with Paul Foster*

PF: Anthea, this concert is dedicated to the memory of your husband Christopher Steel. Please explain this special occasion.

AS: Last New Year's Eve would have been Christopher's 70th birthday, although he died when he was only 53. So we –our son Richard, our daughter Katy and I – wanted to celebrate his life and work. *Passion and Resurrection* is one of the few large-scale pieces that have never been published till now.

### **Early Years**

PF: To set it in context, could you tell me about his life, starting with the early years?

AS: He didn't have a very good start. The war soon broke out, and his (adoptive) parents sent him as an evacuee to Canada for two years, with a nanny – imagine the trauma of being handed back, aged four! He went to Beaudesert Park School in Minchinhampton, and on to Shrewsbury. Chris said that Bach's music inspired him to become a composer, and he was already composing seriously by his mid-teens. When he showed some of his early compositions to Imogen Holst, she said he should "definitely pursue a career in music."

PF: And his full-time musical studies?

AS: Christopher studied at the Royal Academy of Music under John Gardner and Denis Murdoch. Then he got a scholarship and studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich, under a pupil of Hindemith.

PF: So that takes us up to 1961/2. May I ask how you got to know each other?

AS: It's an unusual story. We met around Easter 1952 through my aunt, on a visit to Christopher's family home; he'd just started at Shrewsbury. During the next

few months he gave me chocolates, the second being for my twelfth birthday. He started a vigorous exchange of letters with me between our boarding schools and our homes, his in Oxfordshire and mine, by 1954, on our Devon farm. We managed to overcome the obstacle of distance by visiting each other as often as our parents allowed; the friendship became very intense and romantic. This intensity was characteristic of his enthusiasms, such as Wagner and history: he was very determined beneath a gentle exterior.

Later we both lived in London for a couple of years, he as a student and I as a secretary. We then drifted apart but in 1962 I decided to stop off and visit him in Munich for a couple of days en route to a job in Greece. We both realised that we felt more strongly than ever about each other, so six months later I returned to London. I needed to make sure that his proposal of marriage, repeated as soon as he had secured his job in Cheltenham, didn't get deflected by some rival in my absence!

PF: A really romantic story – he certainly set his heart on you, as well as on music, at an early age! So now we come on to Cheltenham?

### **Cheltenham and Bradfield**

AS: Christopher's first job was at Cheltenham College Junior School, from 1963 till December 1965. By this time he was writing quite a bit of music. Some of it was for the school – they sing his music to this day – and he had a lot of support from Laurence Hudson and his chamber orchestra. And some of his pieces were performed at the Three Choirs Festival. My parents moved here too, so we visited Cheltenham regularly after Christopher moved to Bradfield College for Christmas 1965.

PF: He was at Bradfield 15 years, till 1981, still managing to compose?

AS: Yes, but being Director of Music was very much a full-time job, and he used to write incidental music for their annual

Greek plays. Any composition had to be done in the holidays. But in 1977/8 we went on a teachers' exchange scheme to Minneapolis – he applied for either the East or the West Coast, so they put him in the middle! – and that gave him more time to write.

PF: And this is when he wrote *Passion and Resurrection according to St Mark*?

AS (*Pulling out two enormous manuscript scores*): He wrote it between 1976 and 1978. Much of it was done in the autumn of 1977, when he did a fairly complete composition sketch. He referred to it in his journal as “without doubt my chief and best work; perhaps the best I am capable of.” He then worked at a fair draft, completing the scoring back in England in the autumn of 1978.

PF: Why didn't it get published? I guess he would have had to pay for the printing, without any certainty of a performance?

AS: Well, when we got back there were some commissioned works, and these would get published and performed. But in *Passion and Resurrection* his heart had gone in to a statement of his Christian faith, and he had composed it without being sure of a planned performance. His publisher would not have printed anything until a performance was a certainty.

### ***The Composing Years***

PF: So now we come to Christopher's last ten years, 1981 to 1991, when he devoted himself to composing. A lot of us knew him as organist at Leckhampton and writer of attractive carols, but he has also left a legacy of large-scale works of national importance. Can you tell us about that time?

AS: Christopher took early retirement from Bradfield due to ill-health, the true cause of which was diagnosed ten years later as a rare genetic blood disorder. In the context of his becoming a freelance composer, he was awarded an Arts Council bursary. We spent some years with Chris's father in Nettlebed, and came

back to Cheltenham in 1988 so that I could take care of my mother. Christopher used to write in the mornings and take piano and composition pupils in the afternoons. He was a very disciplined writer and could be turned on by a blank piece of manuscript paper. A long period without composing would make him restless. So he wrote several big works without waiting for a commission. He wrote seven symphonies (the last is incomplete), several big choral works, concertos and orchestral pieces. Bryden Thompson and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra recorded and broadcast several of them.

PF: The Cheltenham Bach Choir put on his sixth symphony, *Sinfonia Sacra*, in 1987 – of course, only a few of today's singers were in the choir back then! The subject – though not the music – is related, isn't it?

AS: Yes. Christopher wrote in a programme note (*brings it out*): “*The idea of a Choral Symphony was suggested by the fact that the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus fall naturally into four movements with a slow, reflective penultimate movement and a vigorous finale.*”

PF: In the *Passion* and the *Sinfonia* there is this extraordinary clash of styles between chromatic and traditional harmony. How come?

AS: I am not a musician, but I understood what he said in a pre-concert talk on the *Sinfonia Sacra* which Tim Morris reminded me of. Christopher said he wanted to use as wide a range of expression as possible – the chromatic for (say) the anguished bits and the traditional for the joyful ones. Robert Crowley, in his overview article “Christopher Steel at 50” (Royal Academy of Music Magazine 1989) explained that, for example in the “exuberant climax” of the *Resurrection* section of *Passion and Resurrection* “Steel had been convinced that this kind of joy could not be expressed using serial techniques, and the work's confident assertion of tonality is very exciting.”

PF: Thank you very much for talking to me, and I hope we do justice to Christopher's memory.

AS: And thank you, Paul, for your patience and perception. This concert means so much to me and my family.

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2009