

DAVID LUMSDAINE

A biographical appreciation written at the time of his sixtieth birthday (1991)

Born in Sydney in 1931, David Lumsdaine was educated at Sydney University and the N.S.W. Conservatorium. In 1953 he went to England to study with Matyas Seiber, and he then remained in the U.K., establishing his career there with such works as Kelly Ground, Flights, Mandalas 1 and 2.. During the sixties he was immersed in English contemporary musical life, and increasingly sought after as a composition teacher: this led to university appointments, first at Durham (where he founded and directed the Electronic Music Studio, and where he was awarded a D.Mus.) and subsequently at King's College, London.

In 1973 Lumsdaine returned to Australia, and since then his life has been divided between the two countries. Over the last twenty years he has composed a body of strikingly original music, commissioned and played by the leading ensembles throughout the world.

Although Lumsdaine has spent much of his adult life working in the U.K., he remains spiritually and musically an Australian. His music embodies all that is important to him in the Australian landscape - its shapes and rhythms, its creatures, its sudden violence , its sense of unlimited space.

His passion for the natural world and its conservation expresses itself more literally in his archive of recorded birdsong. Nowadays Lumsdaine has withdrawn from direct involvement in the organisations of the musical world: his time is devoted to composing, and if he is not to be found at his desk or with his students, he is likely to be in the bush with binoculars and microphones!

David Lumsdaine was born in Sydney on October 31st.,1931, and his early childhood was a happy one. He came from an old Australian family: pioneering farmers on his mother's side, professional people on his father's; both families had come to the colony before 1821. D.L. lived with his parents and two elder brothers in Paddington, in the heart of Sydney. At that date, it was still a city the size of Joyce's Dublin; a city where people recognised you everywhere and knew what you were up to. It was also a city having to come to terms with the poverty caused by the depression, and with the first wave of refugees from Hitler.

D.L.'s childhood was only partly spent in the city, for long visits (months rather than weeks) were spent on his relation's farms; distant country properties where he first knew the immensity of the Australian landscape and the marvellous, teeming life of the bush. This, above all, was home ground.

His musical gifts were apparent to his family from the beginning: from the age of about four he played the piano by ear -everything he could, whether inventions of his own, or attempts to recreate what he heard. Music meant first, family sing-songs; then piano lessons, then lessons at Sydney Conservatorium. Like his brothers, D.L. won a place to Sydney High School and there, in Gordon Day, he found the first music teacher who could give him the musical nourishment he needed. Day introduced him to the music of the twentieth century, and encouraged him to go on composing.

When D.L. was ten, his father died of cancer after a protracted and painful illness. Childhood stability was shattered: the city house was sold, his brothers (James, later a solicitor, and Geoffrey, who became a gifted architect), went straight from school to the war. D.L.'s solace was to go bush: solitary walks, sleeping overnight wherever he found himself, steeping himself in sounds and smells and textures and getting to know every bush creature.

When he emerged from adolescence it was as a restless, questing person; radical in politics and void of the conventional Christianity in which he had been brought up. Like so many of his contemporaries, he found the bourgeois white Australia of the late forties, unbearably constricting. Nevertheless, these years were not wasted ones. Under the direction of Eugene Goossens, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra played a repertoire which ranged right across the twentieth century. D.L. attended all the rehearsals he could, avidly studying the scores: Ravel and Stravinsky in particular. At the same time he was discovering a tradition of chamber music playing, hitherto unknown in Sydney, through his friendships with Jewish immigrants from central Europe. Although by now the hours spent composing meant that piano practice was almost always forgotten, D.L. did not neglect piano playing : Mozart and Schubert, Bach , and often, jazz.

Simultaneously a student at Sydney Conservatorium and a general arts student at Sydney University, D.L. became engrossed in theatre, in philosophy and discovered his lifelong passion for anthropology. He

formed alliances and friendships with many of the men and women who were later to play an important part in changing Australian society, most notably, perhaps, his brilliant cousin Hal Wootten. D.L. graduated in 1951, though it is not easy to see where he made the time for study: by day he was caught up in political activism, campaigning (successfully) against the move to outlaw the communist party; by night he was a tram conductor, to supplement his university scholarship; and he composed without ceasing, producing a number of orchestral works as well as a succession of chamber pieces and songs.

Composing was as natural to him as dreaming or breathing, but he had some insight into the nature of the journey he needed to make in order to truly realise his vision. It would have to be both an inward journey of self-discovery and a literal journey: which he undertook in 1952 when he left Australia to go and study in England with Matyas Seiber.

Lumsdaine's letters home to his mother paint a vivid picture of musical life in London in the early fifties. Outstanding among his early impressions were performances by Britten and Pears, of Purcell, Bach and Schubert as well as new works of Britten. D.L. found the orchestral repertoire less adventurous than that of Goossens, but the general cultural life of a European city was enthralling, as were his new friendships with writers, journalists and artists, as well as musicians. Some months after his arrival he met his compatriot, the poet Peter Porter, and they have been friends ever since. There are many anecdotes of their early friendship: both were more or less penniless; they earned their suppers through P.P.'s brilliant talk and caustic wit, and D.L.'s piano playing and enviable repertory of bawdy songs. Marie de Lepervanche has recalled the occasion when Ian Hogben, the anthropologist, was visiting London one winter, and D.L. invited him to dinner. As neither P.P. or D.L. could afford heating, their flat was perishingly cold; in the end, they made a small fire in the open grate and P.P.'s precious collection of *New Statesman* was sacrificed as fuel.

The many collaborations P.P. and D.L. have made began at this time: a series of cantatas, and a number of attempts at operas: on the *Children's Crusade*, on Voltaire's *Candide* and on Ned Kelly. Most of the material was afterwards lost or destroyed, though some of the later cantatas have survived: *Temptations in the Wilderness*, *Story from a time of Disturbance*, and *Annotations of Auschwitz*.

Of the many musical friendships D.L. made, the closest was with Don Banks, who had left Australia a little earlier to study with Dallapiccola. They had many musical interests in common (not least, jazz) and remained friends until Banks' untimely death.

After a year or so in London and Madrid, D.L. moved to Surrey so as to be closer to Seiber, and settled down to study in earnest. The lessons were in analysis, harmony and counterpoint, moving on later to composition proper. He found in Seiber's teaching exactly what he had missed in Sydney, and felt that at last he was coming to grips with compositional technique.

To support himself, Lumsdaine worked initially as a schoolteacher, gradually moving on to general freelance musical work, conducting, teaching lecturing and so on. His passion for the natural world began to express itself in studies of birdsong, and he made his first forays into the world of wildlife sound recording. Another characteristic preoccupation was his work in the peace movement. D.L. was one of the original members of the Committee of a Hundred, and his tireless involvement with the early groups working for nuclear disarmament ended on more than one occasion in arrest and imprisonment.

Throughout the fifties and early sixties D.L. drove himself relentlessly as a composer, sketching, composing, destroying work and beginning again. As far as the quality of his own work was concerned he was much more than is implied by the word perfectionist. He was an idealist, who saw no point in releasing works that might have been composed by someone else. Virtually nothing survives of the enormous body of work composed before 1964. One might say that he was ruthlessly ambitious for his own muse, but utterly without worldly ambition. It was then, as now, foreign to his nature to seek out 'contacts', to take care to be in the right place at the right time, or to go in for any of the ruses by which young men usually promote their careers. As Louise Varese said of her husband ' he was as uncalculating as a little child' and D.L. was -and is - incapable of self promotion. Very gradually, however, the music began to attract attention to itself; for example the Variations for Orchestra , the Short Symphony, and the cantatas to texts by Porter. As D.L. approaches maturity in these works, the polarities of his musical background are strikingly apparent. On the one hand is his new understanding of European music: he uses post-serial procedures with ease; and in the canonic writing, the counterpoint and the control of line in the larger voice leading, it is clear how fruitful his studies with Seiber had been. On the other hand, the rhythmic

characterisation and the formal shapes of the music show that he was already creating a musical imagery quite unlike anything in European new music. With hindsight, we may say that it is not just the years of study that were bearing fruit, but the years spent as a child with ears attuned to Australia's unique soundscape: the rhythms of the Pacific breakers which he heard from his bedroom window; the density and brilliance of the birdsong; the sound of wind travelling across mile after mile of outback country.

None of these things have a literal place in D.L.'s musical language, which is in no way programmatic. Together, they led him to a radically different way of thinking about music: about alternatives to European models of musical syntax, musical causality. Most crucially, they led him to an altered perception of time. Just as the European's need for chronology is irrelevant to the Aboriginal, so D.L. began to explore new ways of relating time and space. Over the next twenty years he dedicated himself to forging an appropriate rhythmic and harmonic language to realise these ideas. In the extraordinary succession of works he has produced, certain compositions stand out as milestones along the way: Kelly Ground (1964), Aria for Edward John Eyre (1972) Hagaromo (1977) Mandala 5 (1988). In Kelly and Aria, Australian mythology is allowed into the foreground; in the two orchestral works it is subsumed.

In the works of his maturity D.L. achieves the technical mastery he had sought so long. He moves effortlessly in an harmonic/rhythmic language of great complexity, and through it he discovers the directness of expression, the translucency, which is a hallmark of his work. The complexity lies behind the music, so the listeners need never be aware of it (how unlike so much contemporary music): rather it is the structure which allows the music to flower and proliferate in Lumsdaine's dazzling, dancing textures; it is the means by which the music attains a shimmering radiance all its own.

It is hard to reconcile the achievements of these works with their neglect. Lumsdaine's music has never lacked for musicians who wish to commission it, but whilst there have always been professional colleagues who are passionate advocates of his music, it has been largely ignored by musical establishments for the greater part of the time. Only in the last few years have performances in Australia begun to build up, reflecting the capacity of the music to speak to the general public. To be unperformed is a kind of death for a composer; D.L. has often spoken of how music is a social art, an act of celebration; it exists only in performance, a score being

merely an aide-memoire. Therefore, to speak of D.L. composing effortlessly could be misleading: there have been many times when black despair made it seem impossible that the next work would ever be written. Yet suddenly, seemingly without warning, the next work would emerge, unscathed and triumphantly itself; and at this point the fluency and speed with which D.L. composes - straight into fair score - has to be seen to be believed.

I first knew D.L. and his music in 1972, when he was writing *Aria*. This work was an overwhelming experience for me, as it was for a number of other young composers, and it rapidly acquired the status of a myth, with tape copies circulating like samizdat. The intellectual prowess of the piece was awe-inspiring, but it was the sensuous physicality of the music that impressed us first and last: the fecundity of the rhythmic imagination, the richness of the harmonic palette, the everchanging textures; maybe wild, extreme, demanding virtuoso performance technique; maybe gentle, inward, tiny details as telling as the grandest gesture.

Looking back over the twenty years that have elapsed since *Aria*, I feel something of what Louise Varese must have felt as she contemplated writing her husband's biography. However, I have the advantage of also being a composer, and I trust my judgement of this music absolutely. The world may never have much time for as unworldly a man as D.L., but the music is going to take its rightful place in the hearts and ears of musicians, moving and delighting us when the minimalisms, maximalisms and 'new-music-without-tears' brigade of today are all long forgotten.. It has seemed necessary to set on record something of the paradoxes of achievement and neglect in Lumsdaine's career - a man for whom the words 'making a career' have, in the conventional sense, no meaning. Lumsdaine's ambition was solely to discover the musical language which could begin to express the music of his dreams.

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