

# ANTONY HOPKINS – A PERSONAL MEMOIR AND OBITUARY

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By John Turner, UK, July 2014

As with most musicians and music listeners of my generation, the name and mellifluous vocal tones of **Antony Hopkins**, who died on May 6, 2014, have been a part of my musical consciousness since my childhood. Every weekend my parents used to take me in our car on a trip to the Wirral coast, or North Wales, or Derbyshire, and a highlight of the return journey was to switch on the car radio and listen to the week's *Talking about Music* programme. Each programme was a sheer delight, as in a non-technical way he explained a piece of music and its secrets in a way that fired you with enthusiasm to savour the work in full at the earliest opportunity.

As a young recorder player suddenly aware of the delights of contemporary music for my instrument (the catalyst for which had been the *Sonatina* by Stanley Bate, which my parents initially thought horrid and discordant but which I defended stoutly as I had bought it myself), I acquired a copy of Antony's delightful *Suite* for descant [soprano] recorder and piano and played it with my pianist mother on piano at our local music club. Sometime after he came to give a lecture at the local Lit and Phil [Literary & Philosophical Society, [www.litandphil.org.uk](http://www.litandphil.org.uk)]. I was not a member, so a family friend who was took my copy for him to autograph. I still have it, with the inscription in black ink, "Sorry to have missed you."

I first saw him in the flesh a year or two afterwards when he gave a talk in the Lesser Free Trade Hall, Manchester, about Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* just before it crossed the Atlantic—he must have seen it in New York. He just sat at the piano, and anal-

ysed the score in a revelatory way, playing through all the principal themes and pointing out relationships between them. His admiration for the brilliance of the work's construction and its sheer inspiration have never left me, and I think of that lecture every time I hear a note of *West Side Story*. His own "low life" musical *Johnny the Priest*, about a trendy Anglican vicar and a group of young layabouts, and set in the East London docklands, bears the clear influence of *West Side Story* but sadly failed to take off and lost money when it was produced in 1960 with no less than Jeremy Brett in the title role. It probably did not help that it was staged in Wimbledon, and the plot was weak! A CD of the songs, recorded at the time, has recently been issued.

When in 2006 I was planning a CD of concertos for recorder (the catalyst for which had been Elis Pehkonen's "Bonnie Prince Charlie" concerto *Over the Water*), I wondered if we could include on the disc an orchestral version of the Hopkins *Suite*, as we would have a string orchestra and a harp (the disc would include pieces by Arthur Butterworth and Anthony Hedges which both needed a harp), and the work seemed ideal for such an orchestration. It had been many years since those *Talking about Music* programmes, and Antony Hopkins's profile had faded from view—indeed I was not even sure if he was still alive!

I rang up my friend [music critic] John Amis (they had been great chums in Morley College days). He confirmed



that he was, and gave me his telephone number. "Don't say you got it from me," Amis advised—as there had been a longstanding and unhappy rift between them (happily later mended). Amis later told me that Hopkins had been offended by his suggestion that every piece he wrote had been merely an elaboration of a simple scale, but a humorously barbed (and unnecessary) comment in a review by Amis may have been the last straw!

So I rang Antony out of the blue. He agreed that the *Suite* would score well for recorder, strings and harp, but said he could not do it, as he had not written any music since a stroke in 1995, though he was still able to write poetry. He suggested that I do the orchestration, but I said no, as I was a not a proper composer. Ultimately we agreed that I was to send him a photocopy of the published score, and that he would annotate this with his suggestions for the orchestration—harp solo here, strings pizzicato there, etc. In fact he did this so thoroughly that I was able to process the score on the computer straight off with ease, and I sent it to him to check through. It was duly recorded and I gave the first live performance of this version with the Manchester Chamber Ensemble in St. Mary's Parish Church Stockport on May 10, 2008, in a programme which also included the première of the *Recorder Concerto* by Alan Bullard. The *Suite* also featured in a memorial concert for Antony at Berkhamsted School (his alma mater) on September 14, 2014.

Antony then said that he had written a group of French-Canadian folksong arrangements many years ago for the soprano Sophie Wyss, and these should really have had a recorder obbligato, as birds featured prominently in the text. We came to the same arrangement—but here Antony actually composed new parts for my instrument, and so I was very pleased to get some



brand new notes out of him. Again I did the computer setting, and I have performed this set on many occasions with the soprano Lesley-Jane Rogers, always to the delight of the audience. We gave the première of *Three French Folksongs* in a lunchtime concert at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester on September 12, 2008.

Although Antony had more or less disappeared from public view in the later years of his life, he continued as president of various local music societies, including those in Berkhamsted, Little Gaddesden and Luton, and he had retained his connection with the local Women's Institute, whose monthly meetings he attended to play *Jerusalem!* On his 90th birthday on March 21, 2011, the local WI had its members out in force to greet him with a chorus in the garden. He rang and asked me to give his 90th birthday concert at the Berkhamsted Music Club, and this included what may have been the first public performance of another recorder work, the *Pastiche Suite* for treble [alto] recorder and piano. I had picked up for £2.99 several years ago in an Oxfam shop a copy of his entertaining and racy (but chronologically challenged) autobiography *Beating Time* (1982), and I had noticed that in the list of works at the back, there was

mention of a 1944 *Suite* for recorder and piano (the well-known one dates from 1952). When I queried this, he was adamant that it was a mistake, as he had only written the one recorder suite, and it was the one I knew.

Shortly after I had cause to investigate online the musical holdings at Sheffield University Library, in connection with a proposed article for the journal *Manchester Sounds* on the composer Phillip Lord, who had been a music lecturer at that University, and previously Aberdeen. Lo and behold, what did I chance upon in the library of Sir Thomas Beecham (whom Antony later told me he never knew) but the manuscript of a *Pastiche Suite* for recorder and piano by Antony Hopkins. The Special Collections Librarian said she would send a copy if the composer gave a letter of authority. Antony was incredulous, but agreed to supply the relevant authority. When the copy arrived, bearing a dedication to his old friend Walter Bergmann, he confirmed that it was in his handwriting and that he must have composed it, but he had no recollection of it whatsoever. It is shortly to be published by Schott.

The birthday concert, to a packed house, was a very happy occasion, and in the interval Antony gave a long and





witty speech thanking the assembled crowd for coming—even if, as he strongly suspected, most of them had only come for the cake! He retained at all times a mischievous sense of humour (letters to me were for example signed Wolfgang or Ludwig or Gesshoo). At the time I pointed out to him that almost none of his music was available on CD (with the exception of the *Melancholy Song*, which was and remains a favourite of many sopranos).

He agreed that I could organise a CD to celebrate his birthday ([www.divine-art.co.uk/CD/21217info.htm](http://www.divine-art.co.uk/CD/21217info.htm)), to include the *Viola Sonata* (played by Matthew Jones), which he thought his best work, the *Partita in G Minor* for solo violin (written for his student flatmate Neville Marriner), his delicious piano *Tango* (for the seductive British actress Vivien Leigh) and his *Piano Sonata No. 3* (played by Philip Fowke), his early cantata *A Humble Song to the Birds* (a copy of which I had acquired in my early teens when allowed to choose pieces from the collection of a deceased soprano whom my mother used to accompany), sung by James Gilchrist and various “mere morsels” for recorder including both suites. I had cajoled several of his admirers—David Matthews, Anthony Gilbert, Elis Pehkonen, Gordon Crosse, and David Duber—into writing tribute pieces for his birthday concert, and these were included on the CD together with new tributes from Andrew Plant, David Ellis (an ex-BBC colleague) and Joseph Phibbs. The funding came mainly from numerous friends and admirers—many very

distinguished (what is now euphemistically called crowd-funding—it works today just as it worked in the eighteenth century!). Most of the recording was done at and with the kind cooperation of the nearby Purcell School, to which Antony had donated a large quantity of music.

On the disc there are several poems by Antony himself—the risqué one about Charlie the cellist’s spike attaching to the contralto’s dress under the embarrassed eye of Sir Adrian (Boult, who else?) makes me guffaw each time I hear it. The poems were beautifully recited by Antony himself for the CD in one-off takes, without any edits.

Our last musical collaboration was for my 70th birthday in 2013. Antony had written a set of *Four Dances*, in Elizabethan style, in 1946 for an Arts Theatre production of George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah*, directed by Noel Wilman, and these short pieces are beloved of most recorder players. The original scoring was for recorder and spinet, but when we recorded these “mere morsels” for the CD he said he preferred them with piano accompaniment.

I later suggested scoring them for recorder and string quartet, and we worked together as before, though this was a very easy task as most of the keyboard writing was four-part anyway. Antony did the annotations as previously, and suggested that the four dances, to be retitled *Methuselah Dances*, should become five by the repetition of the first dance at the end. And he could not resist writing in some new ornaments for me. This version was premièred in a concert in Gatley,

Cheshire, on February 12, 2013, and we have just recorded them for issue on the Prima Facie label.

In the preface to *Beating Time*, Antony said that he had no wish to live to so great an age as 90 or more. He *did* though, perhaps therefore himself still beating time to some extent, dying at the grand old age of 93, in his own bed (as he wished) in the cottage, acquired by his adoptive father, deep in the woodland of the Ashridge Estate, which had been his much-loved home since his early childhood.

His real father, Hugh Reynolds, was a promising writer and good amateur pianist who died of heart problems on the Italian Riviera, where he had gone with his family for health reasons, at the age of 34. Antony barely remembered him, but poignantly, *Beating Time* is dedicated to the memory of his father “who left me his talents that I might develop them in ways that fate denied him.”

His mother rushed back to England with her four small children in deep distress and financially bereft (Antony’s paternal grandfather’s substantial fortune had vanished when the gold mine in Wanganui, New Zealand, that he had discovered and run, had flooded). In desperation she asked for help from the Headmaster of her husband’s old school, Berkhamsted (he was father of the author Graham Greene). Providentially, one of the Housemasters, history and classics teacher Major Hopkins, offered to take him in, with the family visiting regularly. The Major and his animal-loving wife, known to Antony for ever as Signora (presumably a relic of his short Italian stay), treated him as their own son and formally adopted him at the age of 13, when he assumed the name Hopkins.

The household was not a musical one, but Antony was fascinated by their pianola, which he taught himself to play and improvise on, and he enjoyed a diet of Sullivan, Suppé, “manly ditties sung by Peter Dawson” and the heart-stopping finale of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 4* on both the piano rolls and 78s. By chance his improvisations were heard by the House Mistress and this resulted in Antony being given piano lessons, with his teacher writing down his improvisation in a small blue manuscript book as a reward for “Good Work.”

On leaving school Antony taught for two terms at Bromsgrove School before going in September 1939 to the Royal College of Music in preparation for attempting an organ scholarship at New College Oxford, which he failed miserably. However the short stay in Bromsgrove was memorable—both for seeing Rachmaninov perform with the City of Birmingham Orchestra, and for meeting and falling for his future (but then married) wife, the soprano **Alison Purves**, with her beguiling film star looks, when he was engaged as a rehearsal pianist for a cancelled production of *Chu Chin Chow*. Alison died in 1991 after 44 years of married life.

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Despite the fiasco of the Oxford organ scholarship, Antony won several prizes, for organ improvisation and piano playing, at the College (including the prestigious Chappell Gold Medal), and this in spite of his own severe reservations about the level of his practical skills (he said that on the piano his right hand moved faster than his left, and that on the organ he had a shortage of legs). Clearly his innate musicality, his remarkable ability to think on his feet, and his engaging personality compensated for whatever shortcomings of technique there might have been.

He always remained deeply grateful to the pianist Cyril Smith, whom he had timorously collared on the College staircase, for his help and encouragement, and he also relished the kind comments of Harold Darke about his early compositions (though he was never formally taught composition, save for a few orchestration lessons from Gordon Jacob). He later lectured at the RCM on general musicality (basically, whatever he wanted to talk about!) and I understand from some of those who attended that these highly entertaining talks were always relished and well attended.

During the war Antony was in the Home Guard (a cartilage operation having precluded his intended active service). He enrolled with Alison to sing in the choir at Morley College under Michael Tippett, who was to become a close friend and an inspirational influence on his musical life, and they both particularly relished discovering music by Monteverdi and the English madrigalists. Tippett had just written *A Child of our Time*, and with other friends they had a play through of the oratorio, with Antony on the piano, to establish the tempi for the published score. For the rest of his life Antony felt guilty that he had ignored the fact that a performance with the full choral and orchestral forces would inevitably be slower than the natural piano speed, and as a consequence the published metronome marks were therefore quite wrong.

His other contacts from that period included Alfred Deller (with whom he sang a Purcell countertenor duet!), Walter Bergmann (who got him to write for the recorder), John Amis and Thurston Dart. He even accompanied Peter Pears in Britten’s *Michelangelo Sonnets* with Benjamin Britten in the audience.

After a period of lecturing at Morley College his time became more and more taken up with composition.





Tippett asked him to be his amanuensis for the incidental music for a production of Marlowe's play *Dr. Faustus* at the Liverpool Old Vic, but then at short notice asked him to do the whole score himself. The first night was a disaster, as the conductor beat time with a knitting needle, the trumpeter split or transposed most of the notes as he had a blister on his lip, and the orchestra got into a muddle with the cues, playing different ones simultaneously. Despite this he got a call from Louis MacNeice with an urgent commission for incidental music for two radio plays, and he wrote 134 pages of full score in 10 days. His facility was noticed in high places and led to a deluge of commissions for the screen (including the films *Billy Budd*, *Cast a Dark Shadow*, *Vice Versa* and *The Pickwick Papers*), steam radio, and the theatre (there were memorable collaborations with Sir Laurence Olivier, Sybil Thorndike, Peter Ustinov *et al*). Concert music inevitably took a back seat, though in 1947 he wrote his comic opera *Lady Rohesia*, which was produced in 1947 at Sadlers Wells to a delighted audience, though with mixed critical reviews. Opera continued to be a fascination and in 1952 he took over and revitalised the Intimate Opera Company which put on small scale budget productions of operas by himself (*Three's Company*, to a libretto by Michael Flanders) and others including Joseph Horowitz and Geoffrey Bush.

His career as a broadcaster started in earnest in 1954, following a glowing review in *The Listener* of his broadcast analysis of a Bach Fugue, which was categorised as "amusing entertainment ... a fascinating performance." The producer

Roger Fiske asked him what he would like to do next, and he asked for and was given a weekly half-hour slot to talk about a work to be broadcast in the following week.

The series continued for nearly 40 years, and constituted (perhaps with David Munrow's *Pied Piper*) one of the jewels of British broadcasting, yet Antony was only ever contracted on a three-monthly basis. The neat scripts (now preserved in the University Library in Cambridge) were written quickly with no need for revision. Even when he did not know a work, he only needed to hear it once before starting with his pen. Those of us who were privileged to hear the talks will not forget their sheer *elan* and musical insight: no academic pretensions, no technical terms, warm delivery just as if he was in the room with you. They will probably be his most lasting legacy, though the music that he wrote is much better than he himself frequently suggested and will give pleasure to listeners and performers alike for many years. He was hurt when the BBC failed to renew his contract.

An unexpected spin-off from the radio talks was the series of books that resulted—*Talking about Symphonies*, *Talking about Concertos*, *Talking about Sonatas*, *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven*, *The Concertgoer's Companion*, etc. Many of these were immaculately typed up for him by **Beatrix Taylor**, a fan from her childhood days, though the initial family contact was hardly promising—her mother was introduced to Antony as the adjudicator's assistant at a competitive music festival in Oxford. His first words to her—"Don't they come any younger?"—were hardly the most tactful and unsurprisingly caused some offence! Antony and Beatrix were married in 2012, and she cared for him lovingly in his declining months.

One particular bugbear of the last few years was the confusion with the actor (Sir) Anthony (with the H) Hopkins, who in his youth wrote our Antony a fan letter. When the actor started composing under his own name, the inevitable result was that royalties started going in the wrong direction and infuriatingly had to be repaid. Anyone who tries to look up Antony Hopkins on the internet will appreciate the problems straight away. Google seems to think you are getting your spelling wrong!

If he hadn't been a musician Antony would almost certainly have wanted to be a racing driver. He loved speed and very fast cars, often (?deliberately) terrifying his passengers. He used to swap his Jags once a year, and though his memory for dates was somewhat hazy, he could always relate an event to the car he owned at the time, be it the white XK 120 or the green E Type. He adored owning the registration plate **ICAH**. Other passions were golf and horses: other careers (some short-lived!) were conductor, solo pianist, choral conductor, accompanist, educator, and lecture-recitalist.

What a full and wonderful life!