

Susan Bradshaw – an inspiration and a force in the musical life of this country for half a century.



Susan's lifelong journey through 20th century music began during her student years, both in and outside the Royal Academy of Music. Whatever she knew before, it was her friends and teachers at the RAM and, soon after, her growing range of contacts with her contemporaries in Britain and then abroad that set her mind moving and most profoundly shaped her outlook.

Her piano teacher at the Academy was Harold Craxton. It was his approach to Bach that she most often recalled to her own pupils in later years. Her composition teachers were Mátyás Seiber, with whom she studied privately, and Howard Ferguson, who was her RAM professor. From both she learnt scrupulous musical honesty. Seiber encouraged her to take an analytical view, to hone her sense of the right note in the right place.

Through him she found herself connected, at least by proxy, to the Eastern European world of Bartók and Kodály. Ferguson was different. Despite his Irish background, his musical roots were English and in the solidly old-fashioned and classical traditions of R.O. Morris and Harold Samuel. Susan was amusing about Howard's teaching methods. Apparently, when he could think of nothing to tell her or when she turned up unprepared for her lesson, they would pass the time working their way through the piano duet repertory. She remembered those occasions fondly, describing the experience as 'like being in the workshop of a mediaeval artist' - one absorbed by example. Oddly it was Ferguson rather than Seiber who, when she found herself creatively blocked, suggested she look at Bartók's collections of Hungarian tunes. The result was her only published composition, 'Eight Hungarian Melodies'.

Her friends among her fellow students were even more important to her than her teachers. Chief among them was Richard Rodney Bennett, whom she met towards the end of his time at the RAM. To her younger colleagues and pupils in later life she would happily recall her awe and amazement when she first encountered the scale and breadth of Richard's talent as a composer and player, younger than her but already knowing so much more about music and having written so much. Richard recalls that in those days – rather improbably - Susan wore plaits. This will remind many of her friends that hair-style remained a curiously enduring and comical problem for Susan. She disapproved of spending money on such a worldly and frivolous luxury as a trip to the hairdresser and was delighted in the 1970s to discover that Boots sold a small plastic comb into which one could insert a razor-blade. With this apparatus she would chop at her hair, pleased at the financial saving. When she washed the results, her hair stood up like an untended piece of undergrowth, a problem she neatly solved by the liberal application of strips of cellotape. This made a startling sight on hairwashing day.

All her life, playing duets and two-piano music was a key way for Susan to engage with those around her. Having explored the literature with Howard Ferguson in her student years, she soon started forming duo teams with her friends, especially Susan McGaw ('The Two Susans' is such a wonderful name, like an old and much-loved music-hall act!), and John Streets with whom she had a two-piano partnership that began with a historic student performance at the RAM of Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. It seems amazing now, but the piece was so little known in those days that the occasion caused a scandal. Various solemn-faced harmony professors made it clear that they strongly disapproved of their students playing such avant-garde stuff. There was a further problem when it turned out that the RAM did not own a xylophone, but the situation was saved by Howard Ferguson who stepped in and hired one himself. Susan's partnership with John continued for ten years of concerts before he went to live in France. By that time Susan had another duo-team with Richard Bennett, which began in Paris during the time they were both studying with Boulez and continued for many decades of inspiring concerts, broadcasts and commissions. It was in her French years too that Susan really launched her lifelong work as an accompanist of instrumentalists and singers of every kind. For many years one of her most important musical partners was the flautist William Bennett. It was in France that Susan and Wibb, together with the oboist Philip Jones, formed the Mabillon Trio. Apparently the name came from a favourite Parisian café.

Susan's interest in new music took her, along with several of her contemporaries, to Darmstadt for the Summer Schools (she had a good anecdote about Cage holding forth in a café at the expense of a lecture Stockhausen had just given). And then came the celebrated post-graduate journey to Paris, when she and Richard Bennett went to study with Pierre Boulez. It was a daring - even shocking - move. And a pioneering one too. Richard and Susan were the first British musicians to engage directly with Boulez, who himself was still a young man, hardly a traditional teacher and with a daunting reputation as the greatest and most intellectually fearsome exponent of European modernism.

The Parisian stint was critical for Susan. She met many other young musicians from Europe and North America, listened to vast amounts of new music and began another long career as a giver of first performances. To her lasting but rarely expressed sorrow, her lessons with Boulez had the effect of convincing her that she herself wasn't really a composer. So she gave up that ambition and turned instead to playing and criticism, and later to teaching and scholarship. When questioned in detail about what actually went on note by note in her lessons with Boulez, Susan was reticent. But no one was ever left in any doubt of her deep and enduring admiration of Boulez as a composer and musician and her unstinting loyalty and affection for him as a man.

For the rest of her life after her return to Britain, Susan devoted vast amounts of energy to organisations promoting the music she cared about. She joined John Woolf as a pioneering spirit of the Park Lane Group, an organisation now celebrating its 50th season. She was an early participant in William Glock's Dartington Summer Schools and there, in 1965, with Glock's encouragement, she co-founded, with William Bennett and others, the Vesuvius Ensemble. The Vesuvius began with the specific purpose of giving performances of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, and their recording of that work is now recognised as a classic. It was for this original project that Susan had the brilliant idea of bringing the soprano Jane Manning into the picture. Susan had first met Jane in 1963 when she accompanied her audition for the Park Lane Group. This was soon followed by a PLG recital of Webern, Messiaen and Dallapiccola that the two of them gave in April 1964. Vesuvius's performances of *Pierrot Lunaire* with Jane were a notable success and a landmark in British musical life at the time. Largely as a result, the group quickly broadened into an adaptable collective that toured for 10 years with concerts of every kind of modern music in almost every corner of the UK.

For the rest of Susan's life the music of all three of the Viennese triumvirate - Schoenberg, Berg and Webern - remained extremely important. Especially noteworthy was the way she treated those then much less often heard composers as though they were (as she firmly believed them to be) the logical continuation of the great tradition that ran from Bach, through Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, to Brahms. The songs of these composers of the Second Viennese School were a key part of the many performances in which Susan partnered Jane, who was by then transforming the whole way that British music-lovers listened to vocal music of the 20th century. Susan played another role in Jane's life, as her bridesmaid when Jane married the composer Anthony Payne. Occasions of this kind were not by any means Susan's natural environment but Jane remembers that 'she suffered the embarrassment with good grace' and then went on to give the couple accommodation in her own first home in Bayswater, charging them 'less than a peppercorn rent'.

In later years, Susan withdrew from performing - she always suffered from concert-nerve - and spent more and more time teaching and writing. For a long time she taught at Goldsmith's College, but private lessons were perhaps the most important part of her work. Many in the audience today will have first met Susan when they went to her spacious house in Islington where she lived for more than three decades, to study with her, play for her or show her their music. Lessons often involved steering her students back to what remained for her the sacred exempla of musical first principles: Bach Inventions. Beethoven Bagatelles, Brahms Intermezzi, Debussy Preludes. Afterwards, depending on the time of day, there would be drinks or strong coffee (if you wanted tea, you had to make it yourself). There would also be cats on the kitchen table.

Susan's literary work covered innumerable book reviews, articles, chapters in anthologies and translations. With Richard Rodney Bennett she made the English version of Boulez's influential theoretical and aesthetic treatise *Penser la Musique Aujourd'hui* (as *Boulez On Music Today*, 1971), although she later delighted in telling how one of its most baffling musical examples was in fact incomprehensible, even to Boulez himself. Unable to explain it and to save the situation, Boulez declared, to the amusement of both Richard and Susan: 'Let it remain a General Case!' Susan also translated Dominique Jameux's *Pierre Boulez* (1991). Her own writings about her erstwhile mentor included a definitive chapter on the Frenchman's vocal and instrumental music in William Glock's 1986 anthology *Pierre Boulez: A Symposium*. In magazines such as *The Musical Times* and *Tempo* she often appeared, commenting sometimes sceptically on the latest fashions in jargon-ridden analysis or greeting warmly the music of some little known composer from the old Soviet Union. She was also a tireless source of programme notes. In everything she wrote she stood for the highest standards of civilised taste and robust good sense, always expressed in clear and attractive English.

Susan championed a whole swathe of composers from the recent past, some famous and expected, some unknown or some just plain unexpected. At different points in her life, she was one of the first to take part in the revival of interest in Lord Berners, spent many years promoting the music of Schoenberg's Spanish pupil Roberto Gerhard, and was a dauntless exponent of Webern. Occasionally, after a whisky or two, she would bring out for comic effect an old recording of a performance of Webern's op.22 Quartet for violin, clarinet, saxophone and piano, in which the tape had managed to wind itself around a spool so that Webern's exquisite textures transformed themselves step by step into improbably preposterous squeaks and shrieks. At the same time, Stravinsky was always somewhere near the centre of her pantheon. Although she never met him, she recalled with pride being in his presence at a London rehearsal of his music. While Stravinsky worked and listened, she sat not far away in the audience. Someone had left a bag beside her. Suddenly Vera Stravinsky called out imperiously: 'Pass the bag! It is Stravinsky's bag.' Susan giggled at the innocent but faintly odd memory of hearing the composer's wife refer to her husband in this way.

Innumerable are the composers who loved and valued her support and friendship, from Richard Rodney Bennett, Hugh Wood, Anthony Payne and Thea Musgrave, to countless younger figures including Giles Swayne, Brian Elias and Robert Saxton. She also had close friendships with colleagues who, like her, were essentially the animators, stirrers and critical dissenters of our musical culture, including William Glock and, especially, Hans Keller. With Hans she would talk into the small hours about Haydn String Quartets and Beethoven Sonatas. When he died in 1985 she wrote movingly that 'he was the only person I ever met to whom everything (particularly, of course, musical things) really mattered: I miss him for this above all'. It is a sentiment that her own friends might well echo about her, even though, rather more than Keller, she was someone who placed strict and sometimes even restrictive limits on what she was

prepared to be interested in. If something struck her as beyond the pale, she would crisply dismiss it as 'Just silly!' There will be few of her friends who did not sometimes feel the lash of Susan's intolerance, often followed by a swift act of apologetic affection. Susan's friends and the music she loved mattered more than anything to her, but perhaps because she felt so strongly about both she did not always find her relations with either to be easy.

Susan was a surprisingly, though quietly political person. In her early years, through visits to the Warsaw Autumn festival, she came into contact with many composers of the Eastern Bloc. Outraged by the attitude of the postwar communist regimes to their artists, she did her best to stay in contact with those she met or whose music she heard, maintaining a lifelong correspondence with several leading Soviet composers of her generation, including Alfred Schnittke, Edison Denisov and Arvo Pärt, and encouraging the early commissioning and performing of their works in the West. When the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, she took a plane to neighbouring Poland, for the simple purpose of reassuring her Polish musical friends that they mattered to her. When younger Soviet composers visited or moved to the West from the 1980s onwards, she was tirelessly supportive and financially generous.

Susan was an inspiration and a force in the musical life of this country for half a century. We salute her, we honour her achievement and we remember her with love and admiration and thanks. With the founding of the Susan Bradshaw Composer's Fund we look forward to continuing that part of her work that she was most proud of, the encouragement of the performance of new music.

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RPS Susan Bradshaw Composers Fund: www.royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk/new_music/bradshaw/