

## CONCERT 31<sup>st</sup> Aug 2020

Dear WHO and friends,

As mentioned last week, I would like this week to delve into the life and times of the great Australian opera conductor Sir Charles Mackerras, who was an excellent interpreter of eighteenth century orchestration and an expert and champion of the music of Janáček. The subject of his professional life with famous European opera companies and symphony orchestras is vast. Let us, however, consider his legacy to Australia and the main Eastern seaboard orchestras of SSO, MSO and QSO. This week we begin with his early years growing up in Australia.

Although he was born in the US in November 1925, Mackerras' parents both came from Sydney-based families who treasured music as an important accomplishment, but not as a profession. His mother, Catherine, came from a highly educated and musical family. She and her husband met at Sydney University where they were both outstanding students. After years of searching for meaning, Catherine began to take instruction at the Sacré Coeur Convent in Rose Bay and, in 1930, without forewarning her husband Alan, she was received into the Catholic Church. Alan, Charles's father, had developed a cool scientific dismissal of religion in any form. They had seven children of whom Charles was the eldest. Brothers Alistair and Neil were next, followed by sisters Joan and Elizabeth and finally twin boys Malcolm and Colin. Both parents put great store in education and encouraged Charles, who showed great intelligence, in his endeavours. However, a distancing did occur between the parents, though this was not publicly displayed. According to family sources, this was very much based on father Alan's growing scepticism and derision of his wife's religious devotion. This manifested itself in Alan spending most of his time, when not working as an engineer for the Sydney City Council, with his beloved boat and sailing on the water. After the birth of their third son Neil, they bought a house in the then rural surrounds of Turramurra where Catherine started a kitchen garden, tended her chickens, looked after the children and ran a well-ordered and happy home full of music and activity. As the family grew it was full of noise, Catherine playing the piano, the children practising and Alan using the gramophone player he had designed and made. He was becoming more of a recluse and left most of the children's rearing to their mother. The underlying tensions between the parents was not apparent to outsiders but some suggest it was a catalyst for Charles and some siblings developing what was mistaken as a haughty or arrogant manner later in life. I must say I never witnessed this but his ability to corral and placate temperamental singers certainly was evident and a greatly welcomed trait.

When the children were old enough, the boys caught the train to Sydney's St. Aloysius College and the girls to Loretto Convent. All were highly regarded as alarmingly clever and precocious by their teachers.

Charles began violin lessons at the age of seven. He taught himself instrumentation from a textbook by Ebenezer Prout and by 12 had written a piano concerto. Even though he enjoyed sailing, swimming and tennis he thought of nothing but music. His mother had once found him checking the score of Handel's Messiah to verify that good composers didn't use consecutive fifths or octaves. He studied and analysed Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and had decided that he wanted more than anything to be a conductor. The Savoy operas were an important part of family life. They heard them on the gramophone and every year their school put on a performance of a G. and S. opera at the Sydney Conservatorium in which the boys took roles. Charles had also taken up piano and flute and played around on a neighbour's harmonium, being encouraged by this music loving family, to experiment with stops and effects. This early experience was to prompt Charles to take up organ studies while at school. His first flute which he bought from a student at the Conservatorium had a beautiful tone but a continental pitch so to play with the piano he had to learn to transpose.

According to an agreement his mother and father came to, when Charles was twelve he left St. Aloysius for his father's old school, Sydney Grammar. The school was only ten minutes away from the Conservatorium which was a complete magnet for Charles. While other boys played sport he was there making friends, discussing all things music with the students and spending much more time there than his parents realised. He went to his piano lessons and studied harmony and counterpoint in a small class conducting a performance of Mozart's Bastien and Bastienne at the age of thirteen. He had orchestrated the opera from a vocal score and only later, when in Europe, realised he had been far

more ambitious and advanced than the original as he had only heard the composer's mature works and this was penned in Mozart's childhood. Charles's reputation was spreading and the ABC Bulletin of 7th July 1940 stated "Something of a prodigy is Charles Mackerras of Turrumurra. Recently his composition Marsyas, a pastorale, was performed in the Sydney Conservatorium. Charles is now fourteen but this work was composed, orchestrated and everything, by him when he was thirteen. His mother, who wrote the libretto, is justly proud of the achievement". His extended family were there in force. Charles played oboe in the performance instead of flute as he had read that the Con. was offering scholarships in oboe, French horn and bassoon. He applied and won free tuition. This in fact was to become his first instrument, one he ended up later playing professionally in the SSO. Charles was not unhappy at Sydney Grammar, indeed one of his masters, Arnold Mote, helped him greatly with his composing. His reports, however, were very poor, except for music and he was spending more and more time away with his musician friends. His parents thought it best that he be sent to The King's School Parramatta about 16 miles from Sydney. This was a prestigious boarding school for boys, especially for sons of wealthy graziers. It is the oldest private school in Australia with an emphasis on producing distinguished alumni. In those days the school was run along military lines, excelled in sports and certain subject areas but not in music. His trips to the Con. were now only on weekends. Charles concentrated on getting himself expelled, ran away several times and was eventually successful in this endeavour. His parents and many family members lovingly tried to persuade him from following his obsession with music, but to no avail. In the end he was allowed to return to the Con as a full-time student. He had oboe, piano and began to study harmony and counterpoint with Father Muset at St. Patrick's seminary in Manly. The priest predicted that Charles would earn enough with the oboe to send himself abroad to become a conductor before he was thirty. Charles's great love was music of the 18th century, especially Mozart, Haydn and Handel. It probably didn't occur to him then that his interpretation of this music in performance would become pioneering. Much to the frustration of the Director of the Con., Dr. Bainton, Charles was becoming very well regarded in the commercial field both as an oboe player and an arranger. His work included theatre shows, concerts and radio station orchestras where his skills were in great demand. By now he was making a great deal of money even though he was still in his teen years. His parents were very concerned with his hectic lifestyle and health and were greatly relieved when in 1943, he secured the position as second oboe in the SSO. His first concert was, ironically, conducted by Dr. Bainton with whom he had often had words. He was to become a strong supporter. Charles was soon appointed principal oboe, when aged only nineteen and later became Professor of Oboe at the Conservatorium, the youngest person ever to hold a professorship there. Conducting was still a way off for Charles, despite doing auditions for the ABC. His oboe playing was however greatly admired, and Malcolm Sargent who was touring for the ABC requested him as first oboe for all his concerts. It was on this tour in Brisbane that Charles began to realise that many of the performances of 18<sup>th</sup> century composers were being played and recorded with orchestrations unlike the way the composer intended. He began to question why eminent conductors of the day performed these works so they sounded more like 19th century symphonic music. This was the beginning of a lifetime of interest and research on the subject. Charles was extremely busy during these years, not only playing but writing the music for the films like *Namatjira* and *The Rats of Tobruk*. All this time he was saving up to leave Australia and follow his quest to become a conductor. It was on February 6, 1947 that Charles embarked on board the ship *Rangitiki* for London, one of the first passenger ships to leave Sydney after the war. All his family came to the docks to bid him farewell and it would be 13 years before most would see him again.

To be continued.

This weeks suggestion for your listening pleasure and to prepare for next weeks instalment.

1/ Janacek "Sinfonietta"

Performance with LSO and Sir Simon Rattle at the Barbican Hall 2018 sorry about the adds but what a wonderful performance. Trumpets a must watch, nine playing, a whole brass section of 25. This piece of five movements was composed in 1926 for a gymnastic festival that celebrated youth, sport and independent nationhood. It was dedicated to the Czechoslovak Armed Forces.

2/ Lucia Popp singing “queen of the night” aria from the Mozart Magic Flute. I was fortunate to hear her in Munich in the early 80’s and what a voice! She was one of Mackerras’s favourite sopranos. Listen to the bell like tones of her high notes and slower tempo than usual allowing time for each note to sound out.

3/ Janacek “Idyll Suite for String Orchestra”.

Performed by “A Far Cry” this is a fine young chamber orchestra from Boston. Founded in 2007 it was nominated for a Grammy Award in the best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble category. They now have their own label called “crier” launched in 2014. This is a beautiful performance of the work and visually very dynamic.