

Interlude

Before going up to Oxford, Victor was invited by some friends to join them at a resort in Switzerland. On arrival, with his usual conscientiousness, he learned how to ski. There was a good deal of friendly rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge men at the resort, in which Victor, as an Oxford elect, joined in. One evening a skiing contest was arranged between the universities. Everyone should take part and do what they could. Victor decided that it was his Gilbertian duty, rather than to slow himself down with the twists and turns he had been taught, to point his skis straight downhill. History does not relate whether he won the race while his friends controlled their progress by schussing left and right, or whether he obtained an Honorary Blue, but he did hit an obstacle on or beyond the course and escaped with mild concussion.

While in Europe, he was astonished for the first time by the resilience of German musicians immediately after a devastating war, a resilience which was to astonish him again after the second world war. He undertook a pilgrimage to Munich, and one of his impressions during a performance of “The Ring” agreed with that of Kobbe⁶, who said that the battle between Siegfried and the mechanical dragon usually descended into bathos. At another performance some years later, attended with his sister Natalie and her children², all that the audience could see were the dragon’s red eyes, and the action of the battle was left largely to the imagination, inspired by the music. This portrayal was much more effective. On this later visit, he met up again with Marmaduke Strickland Constable, who had married the daughter of a Bavarian Countess.

During Victor’s fallow year, he again (as at Heatherdown) needed to learn more from his contemporaries. In after years, he used to say that, if one worked really hard between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, one could master techniques which would last a lifetime. He certainly did.



10a. Balliol – the gardens
(Mary Levett archives)



10b. Balliol – from the street
(Mary Levett archives)

Thus, while waiting for the University year to begin, and even after he went up to Oxford, he studied with Adrian Boult, Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music. For the first time, he came under the influence of a music don at Oxford, Hugh Allen, who became a life-long friend. Hugh was a Scot who did not mince words. Once, after examining an untalented female candidate, he was heard to shout: “Weel, can ye cook, girrrl, can ye cook?”⁴

At this time he also learned to play one instrument from each of the sections of a symphony orchestra, to improve his understanding of orchestral writing. He did this so thoroughly that he could later play the double bass in the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra when their normal player was not available. During this period, he quite possibly also perfected his talent for reading and condensing orchestral scores at sight for the piano⁴.

The compositions which Victor may have written during this period probably reflected the styles of his mentors. Vaughan Williams and Holst would have introduced him to English folk songs, and led him to compose his many alternative settings of folk-songs and Christmas carols. His 5:4 setting of “Adam lay y-bounden” remained popular for many years. The influences of Holst, Vaughan Williams and Ireland are obvious in songs such as “Auld Robin Gray” and “Song of the soldiers”, which have recently been recorded. He may also, at this time, have assimilated the French impressionistic idiom, which figured prominently in his later incidental music. His settings of Blake’s “songs of innocence” may well have stemmed from his academic studies at Oxford.

Cyril Bailey resumes the story. *In fact Victor only stayed up at Oxford one full year. This meant that he could not enter for the Schools, which would have required two more years of residence, but he did pass the first part of the examination for B Mus.*

From the first it was clear that music was his main interest, and he became known as one of the best undergraduate pianists of his generation, and even then as a composer. During his year of residence he played three times at the informal Sunday evening concerts of the Balliol Music Society, but in those days programmes were not printed, and unfortunately no record has been taken of the music played.

He played tennis and in the summer term went to swim at Parson's Pleasure, but he was not prominent on the athletic side of college life. His rather shy sense of humour was well known to his friends and it was recognised that he was destined for a distinguished future in the musical world¹.

Soon after he arrived, he was asked to assess a new musical instrument, the Moor piano (appendix 8). Numerous attempts had been made, over the years, to popularise pianofortes with more than one keyboard, and even pedals, and even to combine them with organs and harpsichords. Franz Liszt was said to have performed on a monster compound instrument³. The aim of the Moor piano was to extend the flexibility of the pianist by placing the keyboards close together. These could be coupled, in order for instance to enable octaves to be played with one finger. Tovey found that, with sophisticated fingering, completely new sound-combinations could be generated, greatly enhancing the flexibility of the soloist. Both Tovey and Victor felt that this new instrument would soon be exploited by a new generation of pianists, and that the conventional pianoforte would soon become redundant^{5,7}.

Nevertheless, even after numerous demonstrations, the Moor piano did not catch on. Grierson suggests that the difficulty lay in the greater intelligence needed by performers to play piano duets without a partner⁷. However, this should not have been a problem, since independence of hands and feet was part of the stock-in-trade of organists, yet even a virtuoso such as Liszt could not make compound instruments popular. The problem possibly lay with the

listeners. Where there's a will there's a way, and if piano duets had been more acceptable to listeners, they would be more popular today than piano solos. This is not the case. A sympathetically played piano solo probably generates a sufficiently satisfying sound to a listener. Extra complicated sound is possibly confusing.

So far as Victor is concerned, the incident shows his open-mindedness, and his interest, not only in new techniques of using musical instruments, but also in the instruments themselves. This interest would later extend to the way the sound was conveyed to the audience, and his open-mindedness would enable him to fit naturally into the much more complicated, but ultimately successful technical milieu - radio, and to help engineers iron out its initial glitches (appendix 9).

Of his social activities, Godfrey Turton, his room-mate, wrote: *The old Etonians who landed up at Balliol shared a life which was at first so strange in the novel surroundings, that they seemed to enjoy between them the familiarity of old friends. With many, the link weakened as the strangeness of the University wore off and new friendships were made. Nothing of the sort, however, could happen with Victor, once one got to know him well. It was not that he himself was "cliquey", refusing, as some did, to associate with anyone but his former schoolfellows. He was, on the contrary, among the most catholic of "mixers". To him, however, the acquisition of new friends never meant the dropping of old, and no one who had known the charm of his close acquaintance was likely to forget it or give it up.*

The fundamental element in his personal charm remained his sense of humour. It was that which distinguished him from many other musicians in the University who, inferior to him in genius, loved to pose in bardic robes. No one was less of a poseur or less self-conscious about his music than Victor. It was possible to know him quite well, as a superficial acquaintance, without being aware that he was a musician at all, so little did he thrust his genius upon one.

As friendship improved it became clear what a predominant interest music was in his life; but even so he refrained from intruding it on the non-musical, and found sufficient interests outside it to arouse his attention and enthusiasm in their company. One had the impression that music was a precious possession which he kept to himself, unwilling to depreciate it by flaunting it in inappropriate surroundings. At the same time there was nothing forced about the way in which he entered into other activities. As long as he was taking part in them he did so with gusto, giving himself to them wholeheartedly as if he cared for nothing else. One is reminded of the story told of Sir Walter Scott, that his son never knew his father wrote books till he went to school and the other boys talked of it. One could imagine the same sort of thing happening to Victor. That, at any rate, was the impression he gave at Balliol in the early 1920s.

At Oxford, it was, in those days, the custom for undergraduates to spend their first two years in residence at the main college, then to move into lodgings in the town so as to make way for newcomers. One usually shared a lodging house with a friend or friends carefully chosen to be congenial, and it was surprising to hear that Victor intended to go into "digs" by himself. Such solitude was seldom deliberately sought, except by a few recluses, studious or morose. Victor was too sociable and had too many friends to be the type either to desire or to be reduced to it. Nothing however would at first persuade him to change his mind. The reason, he explained, was that he was reading for a degree in music, and he could not expect anyone to put up with him in the same room when, in his own words, he would be incessantly "strumming on the piano". I thought that this was a polite way of saying that he did not want to have anyone hanging about to irritate and distract him when he was in the throes of composition. This conclusion was wrong. He was in fact genuinely worried about the nuisance he himself might be to a room-mate, and was not afraid - as many a composer might be, that the presence of someone else in the room would get on his nerves. When he discovered that I regarded an

accompaniment of inarticulate sound as a help rather than a hindrance to reading for Greats, and was too unmusical even to be conscious of the incoherence and possible discord of an embryonic melody, he agreed without further objection to go house-hunting with me.

We took a set of rooms in St Michael Street, with a large sitting room overlooking Cornmarket Street, a busy thoroughfare even in those days, though less strident with the din of traffic than it is now. It soon became clear that neither the noise outside the windows nor my movements in the room were of the least concern to Victor when he was composing. He had enormous powers of concentration which few interruptions could penetrate. He had the habit when he was working out a theme on the piano of humming it to himself while he played; at least that was what his humming probably sounded like to himself, but others could neither perceive any resemblance between notes and the voice nor indeed any tune in the voice at all. Every musician has his instrument; Victor's as he was the first to admit, was not his voice. That is not to say that the sound was in the least displeasing. On the contrary it had an agreeably soothing effect, like the soporific buzzing of a huge bumble-bee in a room where music is being played. Studies of Kant, Bradley and Plato's Republic echoed that familiar buzz for me long afterwards.

It is strange how little Victor spoke about the music on which at that time he must have been concentrating his whole mind. I remembered mainly the Nonsense Club and the Hysteron-Proteron Club, societies of which they were both members. The former met on Sundays to hear a member read a paper which might be on any subject as long as it had no sense. When Victor read his own, which admirably complied with the rules, he brought Professor Donald Tovey to the meeting as his guest. The most lasting impression of that meeting, which was held in their rooms in St Michael Street, was a rendering of "nonsense" music on Victor's piano. It was a characteristic of Victor that, despite the great reputation which Tovey then enjoyed, he so described him that

for years the name of Tovey remained associated in my mind with a sort of Gilbert-and-Sullivan-esque nonsense.

The Hysteron-Proteron Club was another student society, formed for the purpose of eating its meals backwards. A ceremonial dinner was held once a term, and began with coffee and liqueurs and ended with soup. Neville Shute described a much-extended meal which lasted for twelve hours, from nine in the morning till nine at night⁸, starting with after-dinner coffee and finishing with a “pre-breakfast” swim at Parsons’ Pleasure. On one occasion an additional refinement of topsy-turveydom was introduced by the institution of a “circular feast”, of which not only had the courses to be eaten backwards but each had also to be eaten at a different rendezvous, the last to be the same as the first. The members and guests who attended this function had to tour most of Oxford to eat their meal, stopping now at one house and now at another on the way to the inverted courses. The proceedings began and ended at St Michael Street, and the two Trinity men who had the adjoining set of rooms, and who had made frequent complaints about the continual piano playing, went to their landlady the very same night and gave in their notice.

While most of his friends saw Victor only in the high spirits, the keen sense of humour and the great capacity for friendship which endeared him to them, he was making progress which we little suspected in a pursuit which at that time meant more to him than anything else. The outcome of this progress was not merely a complete surprise; it arrived so suddenly that almost before his friends became aware of it had swept him away. One evening he told me he had been offered a job in Cape Town, which must either be taken immediately or not at all. It was a job which held great opportunities for anyone making music his career; that he should have been offered it at so early an age showed how highly his abilities already were esteemed. But it meant leaving Oxford in the middle of the time he had expected to stay there, cutting short his interests abruptly and sacrificing his chance of taking a degree. For several days he

seemed to hesitate, but it may be that his hesitation was more apparent than real. At the bottom of his heart he probably knew that the choice lay between a brilliant future in his chosen profession, or an extra year or so in the delightful but unreal backwater of Oxford. He left almost at once to take up his appointment at Cape Town, and I finished the term at St Michaels Street alone. I missed him enormously⁹.