

## Erik Chisholm 1904-1965

### A tribute from Divine Art and Murray McLachlan by Robert Matthew-Walker

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Despite relatively widespread media reporting, claiming that the international classical record business is on its last legs, anyone who has to trawl through the hundreds of monthly issues from across the globe – at *International Record Review's* offices, never fewer than 500 new titles a month – will point to the exact opposite being the case. In terms of repertoire, the classical record business has never offered such a frequently astonishing selection of product as it does today; in those terms, alone, we certainly have never had it so good, but quantity brings its own problems.

With 500 new records last month, 500 this month and 500 next month, in such a world of teeming activity it is only to be expected that previously unknown music, despite being of high quality in itself and well presented by artists and record companies, runs great danger of being overlooked, simply because it is unknown. The adage – ‘it is easy to be successful in the classical record business: all you do is issue records that people want to buy, not what artists want to make’ – still rings true, but when the music is unknown (being rarely performed, perhaps surviving only in manuscript) and when the composer is infrequently encountered, other factors need to apply in alerting the public to the existence of worthwhile recordings.

This is where the record critic can play an important role. Speaking personally, at least my friends outside the world of classical music have given up asking me. ‘When are you going to get a proper job?’, finding it inexplicable that one can go on listening to music and writing about it as a life-supporting career (just), but when in the course of such listening one comes into contact with a body of work about which one was largely unaware and is convinced by its excellence, it boils down to two things: you can either keep quiet about your discoveries or tell people about them.

For many readers the name Erik Chisholm will mean little. On the basis of a number of recently issued records, and an outstanding recent book by John Purser- *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist 1904-1965: Chasing a restless muse* (Boydell and Brewer; 2009) – we have opportunities to investigate Chisholm’s work in a way denied to earlier generations. In my opinion, as well as that of others, it is certainly worth the effort, for, as late as Charles Mackerras wrote: ‘Chisholm was a musician of rare capabilities. He was a pianist and organist, a conductor, a composer, a lecturer on music, an entrepreneur and an administrator, and to all them he brought a unique blend of originality, flair and energy.’

Chisholm was born in Glasgow and his Scottishness is clearly a significant aspect of his work as a composer, yet he travelled widely, becoming Professor of Music at Cape Town University just before the Second World War. Before the War, he had conducted the British premiere of Berlioz’s *The Trojans* and had also invited Bartok, Hindemith, Casella and other international figures to Glasgow to participate in performances of their music. He was a piano pupil of the great Lev Pouishnoff (Russian *émigré*, a long-time British resident), whose early 1950’s BBC – television live studio recitals older music lovers will recall with affection.

Despite Chisholm's qualities in other areas, it is as a composer that we assess him today, and there can be no doubt, on the evidence of these recent recordings, that he was the most significant Scottish composer (possibly the most significant all-round Scottish musician) of the first half of the twentieth century – and even, in some respects, the most important Scottish composer of all.

The centenary of Chisholm's birth fell in 2004, and it was during that year that Murray McLachlan began his heroic traversal on disc of Chisholm's solo piano music for Dunelm Records, with the first two volumes, following an earlier CD for Olympia. A few years later, the administration of the Dunelm catalogue was taken over by the Divine Art group, and four further CDs in the series have now appeared. This series has coincided with releases from Dutton, featuring two of Chisholm's impressive orchestral works; gradually, therefore, as the catalogue expands, it appears that Chisholm's importance as a creative figure is beginning at last to find its true significance. These releases are dominated by McLachlan's currently available six CDs of solo piano music (some of which have been covered over the years in these pages), all now on Divine Art and a more recent single disc of two Chisholm ballets, *The Forsaken Mermaid* and *The Hoodie Crow*, in versions for two pianos, played by McLachlan and Graham Scott (ECT Records ECT2010.1, 1hour 3minutes, website [www.erikchisholm.com](http://www.erikchisholm.com)).

Newcomers to Chisholm's piano music will invariably find it profoundly musical characteristics first, it is supremely well written for the keyboard, by a composer who we know was a keyboard virtuoso himself – there is nothing 'unpianistic' in his writing. This should surely endear Chisholm's music to pianists, for pianist-composers today are thin on the ground. Secondly, in almost all of his (what one might term) Scottish-Celtic compositions the material is taken immediately from pre-existing traditional material endemic to Scotland. As John Purser writes, 'The music that inspires these pieces is some of the oldest and most deeply entrenched in Scottish culture. The provenance of the music, therefore, is ethno-musicologically natural, later curbed and directed by Chisholm's evolved creative intelligence so that his mature work takes various archaic elements further embracing the organization of structure, equating rhythmic elements to a degree with tonal forces. In Chisholm's music, it seems as if the entire syntax was being newly built up, from old, pre-existing forces.

The one great composer of an earlier generation to whose musical language such comments can also apply is Bartok (another composer-virtuoso), who stayed at the Chisholm household on each of his visits to Glasgow in 1932 and 1933. If the Bartok connection can be stretched too far, the newcomer to Chisholm's music should bear the similarities in mind – Chisholm's work is not 'Bartok with a Scottish accent'! – yet the composers share an intensity of expression, even in their miniature pieces.

Nor is Chisholm's Scottishness merely melodic and rhythmic colouration – having played each of these records quite a few times over several months. I have no doubt that there is deeply creative musical intelligence at work here. In Volume 1 (Divine Art ddv24131) 1 hour 18 minutes, website [www.divine-art.com](http://www.divine-art.com)), we encounter three very varied works. These are the *Straloch Suite*, *Scottish Airs for Children* and the abridged (second) version of Chisholm's Sonata in A in 1939. They are all founded on Scottish airs, and the Suite – which existed in various forms – is based upon Scottish lute sources first published in 1627, transmuted into piano music of quality. At once, we are drawn into Chisholm's new musical world, a singular, fascinating and unique tapestry of sound, very well played by McLachlan; the *Airs for*

*Children* are surely the equal of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* (25 minatures lasting 27'54"), but perhaps the most impressive achievement is the *Sonata, An Riobain Dearg* ('The Red Ribbon'). McLachlan played a fuller version of this remarkable work at the Wigmore Hall in 2004, when it made a very deep impression and later recorded it in a recital disc (Dunelm DRD0219 1 hour 14 minutes). The slow movement – a threnodial commemoration of the *Thetis* submarine disaster in June 19\*\* when over a 100 lives were lost in the vessel's trials – remains substantially the same in both versions. In whichever edition, the Sonata is an astoundingly original piano composition: the technique is unique yet inherently pianistic. On this CD we encounter three very different works, yet which are equally clearly the product of the same impressive mind.

Volume 1 having introduced us to the nature of Chisholm's creativity, Volume 2 (Divine Art ddv24132 1 hour 19 minutes) explores what one might term Chisholm the miniaturist. There are 42 individual tracks here, comprising three groups of short pieces: ten of the *24 Preludes from the True Edge of the Great World 1943*, *26 Airs from the Patrick MacDonald Collection* and the six movement *Petite Suite*. If you are minded to sample the music, try playing the first *Prelude*: if this doesn't immediately grab you and draw you into Chisholm's world, then I dare say nothing will – it's a quite wonderfully unique gem, a description which can be applied to every other track here.

Volume 3 (Divine Art ddv24133, hour 17 minutes), introduces us to Chisholm's series of Sonatinas for piano, of which he eventually composed six as a group in 1947, with the overall title *E Praeterita* ('From the past'), the group constituting one of the first of his South African works. The Sonatinas are more formal structures, less overtly Scottish in their melodic provenance: in these, Chisholm identified composers from the sixteenth century (note that this approach was decades before other British composers followed him – even if they had been aware of the existence of his music – so removed from 'neo-Classicism'), but the disc opens with *Piobaireachd*, a set of pibrochs (from a much larger collection), the music of which I am sure would have appealed to Percy Grainger in its proud statements of musical originality and ethnicity. The piano writing in 'Salute to Clan Ranald' is astonishingly virtuosic and tingling in its sense of growing excitement and forward momentum. Perhaps the technical difficulties in these larger works have led to their neglect (this is assuredly not music that 'plays itself'), but there is an inherent immediacy of communication with the listener that marks Chisholm out as a truly genuine creative figure – and throughout his output, his is music that simply had to be written down. McLachlan plays the pieces most admirably, and the last work here, the Cornish Dance Sonata, is a quite dazzling piece of composition – a four movement, 34 minute work of extraordinarily original inspiration.

In Volume 4 (Divine Art ddv24134, 1 hour 16 minutes), in which McLachlan continues to explore further the composer's Scottishness, we also encounter Chisholm in more cosmopolitan vein, through the 'Portraits' suite, which contains a movement that ought to be in the collection of any anorak. This is 'Porgy', but it has nothing to do with Gershwin's music, although it was inspired by the DuBose Heyward novel. The novel appeared in 1924, when Chisholm's music was also written – a dozen years before *Porgy and Bess* – dedicated to (later Sir) Hugh Robertson, conductor of the great Glasgow Orpheus Choir. One wonders what Gershwin would have made of this music, no doubt instinctively recognizing Chisholm's musical qualities as well as his human ones: the empathy of both composers with the dispossessed black character is clear, although differently expressed, and is of great significance in the

light of Chisholm's later hatred of, and resistance to the rise of apartheid in South Africa. 'Portraits' ends with 'A Portrait of a Fashionable Gentlewoman' (1925), which begins as a suitable cocktail-music but which eventually probes the character more deeply, *a la* Bill Mayer!- or even Cyril Scott in relaxed mood – to reveal another side of Chisholm's remarkable artistry. There are eight further *Probaireachd* here, the Third Sonatina (on early sixteenth century lute pieces), eight little 'Cameos' and two *Highland Sketches*, works which reinforce the composer's apparent limitless energy and sense of ethnicity.

Volume 5 (Divine Art ddv24140, 1 hour 15 minutes) reinforces impressions that the first four volumes have engendered; the Fifth and Sixth Sonatas are joined by a *Sonatine Ecossaïse* which Chisholm originally wrote in the late 1920s. The Fifth Sonatina is based on even earlier music – thirteenth and fourteenth-century material (this is 1947!!) – and, as this entire conspectus unfolds, the extent and nature of Chisholm's achievement becomes clear. Perhaps the most fascinating titled work here is the "Lament for King George III" (the German – speaking Hanoverian now as Scottish as they come, so far removed from Haydn and J.C. Bach), but there is no denying the genuine qualities of this Lament.

At first sight the contents of Volume 6 (Divine Art ddv 24149, 1 hour 18 minutes) would seem to continue the exploration of what is undoubtedly a major body of piano music, until now unknown to very many people, and offering no new surprises, but this would be a superficial assessment. For it contains two of what appear to me to be among Chisholm's finest achievements – vastly different though they be. These are the *Six Bards*, a group of six Nocturnes, the quality of which has caused me to question whether any comparable set by a British composer constitutes their equal – certainly not their superior. This is music of quite outstanding quality as music and not as a kind of pleasant travelogue north of the Border, and the other achievement is the set of pieces that prefaces the Nocturnes "The Book of Wisdom" – made up of tiny children's pieces, written for children to play (perhaps at a school concert, or to their family) and with fabulous titles: 'He comes in with his 5 eggs and 4 of them rotten': 'Let him that's culd blow out the cole (*sic*) – this is utterly delightful stuff, yet the musicianship behind the composition of these tiny miniatures is such as to enter the child – pianist's sub – consciousness and plant seeds which virtually no other music since Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Bartok's *Children's Pieces* have done with such quality.

There is no doubt that Murray McLachlan's enterprise is deserving of the highest praise. There is a seventh volume to come, and in great contrast – later this year Hyperion will record Chisholm's two piano Concertos in its Romantic Series with the excellent Danny Driver as soloist, a disc one anticipates eagerly. By the way- there are 12 operas by Chisholm, including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Caucasian Chalk-Circle*, and three on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – all from the 1960s and all in English: any takers, English National Opera?