

The quintessential Peter Thorogood

A Life with Music



Peter Thorogood's 80th birthday concert; this shows the performers (L to R) Neil Jenkins, Penny Jenkins, Peter Thorogood, Susan Jameson, Simon Brett

PETER THOROGOOD is both author and composer, and in each capacity he is dextrous and inventive. Following his 1952 Dublin piano recital in which he gave the first performance of his *Fantasy-Variations*, the *Irish Times* reported that "he thinks and plays creatively, and as a composer writes for the piano pianistically."

Peter, who was eighty years old on 2nd June this year, enjoyed what he calls 'a wonderfully traditional liberal education' at Brentwood School at a time when Hardy Amies and Sir Robin Day were senior boys (followed in more recent years by Noel Edmonds, Gryff Rhys Jones and Jack Straw). At the London School of Economics, his tutors were the criminologist, Karl Mannheim, and Labour Party guru, Harold Laski. Unaware of Peter's unassailable creative urge (as he says in his skittish poem, *Split Personality*) "to paint, compose, write poetry, do research," they were unable to prevent his dramatic decline in enthusiasm for economics and political science!

Peter had already completed his early compositions for piano, *Incidental Music to Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'*, three sets of *Soirées Musicales*, *Five Scenes from Childhood*, *Halcyon Suite*, *Sea Idyll* and *Fiesta* whilst at the Guildhall School of Music, where he studied with well-known teacher and broadcaster, Sydney Harrison.

In the same year (1946) he had the good fortune to meet Francis Poulenc, who recommended a study of the 'Groupe des Six', especially Germaine Tailleferre, with the advice: "Above all, be true to yourself." Facing all criticism and self-doubt, that is precisely what Peter decided to do. What he did not know was that it would take sixty years to achieve it!

He had an introduction to Adelina de Lara, the last surviving pupil of Schumann, and spent much time practising in her studios at Holland Park, when he should have been devoting himself to a career of some kind, on the advice of his loving and anxious father. Eventually, he settled to reading Modern Languages at Trinity College, Dublin, and continued his studies in piano and composition under the Swiss professor and musicologist, Francis Engel. Inspired by an admiration for the music of E. J. Moeran and Janacek, Peter completed his elaborate set of *Fantasy Variations on a Danish Folk Song*.

But destiny was once more to lead him

away from music. Upon graduation in 1952, he took up the post of Director of Studies of The British School of Milan, a large school of English for Italian business men, and a few years later became its Vice-Principal. Not to be outdone, he formed a small choir to introduce English madrigals and part-songs to the Milanese audiences and gave several broadcasts on Italian Radio.

In Italy, Peter continued his musical studies with the Italian concert pianist, Giuliana Brengola and completed an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's short story, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, for harp and speaking voice (now published as a suite for piano), which was performed in 1960 with the harpist, Susan Drake, and singer, Virginia Broadbent. English literature and linguistics began to dominate his life for a number of reasons.

He was at last brought face to face with practical economics and accepted a supplementary post as English Lecturer in the University. He also had the opportunity to help organise a major visit of the Royal Ballet, at which time he met the choreographer, John Cranko, and discovered an enthusiastic mutual interest in the characters of the 'commedia dell'arte', which led to Peter composing his own *Harlequin Suite*. The project was cut short by John's untimely death.

On returning to London from Milan, where he had been a lecturer in the University, he joined the British Council in the same capacity and resumed his musical and literary activities, giving recitals of words and music with Clemence Dane, Frank Thornton, Marie Ney, Donald Swann, Alan Wheatley, Rosalind Shanks, Joan Murray Simpson, and, at the annual series of concerts at his home, St. Mary's, Bramber, with Jack May, Michael Jayston, Patrick Garland, Gwyneth Powell, and Alan Leith.

He regularly presents recitals of his

writings and music with Susan Jameson, Simon Brett, international tenor Neil Jenkins, and pianist Terence Allbright, all of whom took part in a specially devised programme of his poetry, prose and music, 'Double Delight! – the Quintessential Peter Thorogood' in the Brighton Festival in May this year.

Of Peter's music for piano, pianist and composer, Terence Allbright, formerly Artistic Director of the Petworth Festival, has written: "Melody is the guiding light in Peter's considerable body of piano music. From the rhetorical and moving *Fantasy Variations* to the nostalgia of *Halcyon Days* and the quirky moods of *Harlequin Suite*, his pieces are always a delight. There are challenges here for the professional pianist, and a great deal of pleasure for the amateur too."

Peter has composed a number of songs for soprano or tenor – *Seven Songs* include settings of his own poems *Song of Countryside Waking* and his popular *Angel Carol* (to words by Neil Jenkins). He is also a distinguished scholar of the life and works of the Victorian poet and caricaturist, Thomas Hood, and has published five settings of Hood's poems.

In a programme note, the tenor, Neil Jenkins wrote: "I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know and performing Peter's songs. He has the happy knack of writing a vocal line which lies well in the voice and gets to the heart of the text in music which is both simple, agreeable and profound. In this he shares the same gift as composers like Schubert and Quilter. Peter's music is rooted in tonality, but shows the influence of early 20th century composers from both France and England. But it is the underlying strength and influence of 19th century German *lied* that give his songs their particular depth and memorability.

Once I had encountered Peter's setting of Hood's *Autumn*, it became a regular part of my song repertoire. Like Schubert's 'Der Leiermann' and 'Der Greise Kopf', there is not a note too many in it — and it is all the better for that."

Peter was awarded an MBE in the Queen's 80th Birthday Honours in June 2006 for services to conservation and the arts, and celebrated fifty years as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts last December. His music is published by Bramber Press, and may be ordered on the website www.bramberpress.co.uk.

The full programme of Peter's concert series at St. Mary's, together with a booking form, may be obtained from St. Mary's House, tel. 01903 816205, or by visiting the website www.stmarysbramber.co.uk, or emailing concerts@stmarysbramber.co.uk.



Peter Thorogood playing in Milan in the 1960s