

A PROFILE OF PERCY TURNBULL

by *Mary Turnbull*

Percy Turnbull was born in Old Benwell, Newcastle upon Tyne, on July 14th 1902 and died at West Broomers, Broomers Hill, Pulborough, Sussex on December 9th 1976.

His father was a master builder with many interests, including two-piano playing at home with his sons, organ work for the local parish church, photography and telescope making and observing. Together with these interests the father handed on to Percy a bubbling, ironic sense of humour. Indeed, Percy was known to make people cry with laughter at his mimicry and nonsense stories.

Percy's paternal grandfather had been a lexicographer, specialising in the German language. His grandmother's beautiful speaking voice was indelibly printed on his inner ear, and his Scottish mother's wonderful cooking and constant singing while at work, whether in the house or the garden, which she kept replenished with the brightest flowers, never faded from his memory.

He attended two schools in Benwell where, in one, a young lady teacher spotted how well he could draw. This led eventually to Mr. Lamb, the Headmaster, recommending him for art school. At school the see-sawing outcome of fisticuffs, conker competitions and cigarette-card collecting were the main interludes between lessons, but from a very young age, he formed the habit of reading in the library of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle, to which his father belonged. The reading rooms where he spent this period of his life still occupy the same premises in a much changed Newcastle, and it was here he could lay his hand on the whole of English literature.

His own collection of books, gathered throughout his life, reflected this early training, and included every branch of English and French (in translation) literature. In his last days he kept the complete works of Shakespeare and two-volume Oxford edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* beside him, dipping into them when his illness relented and gave him a peaceful interlude. Another great literary love was Sir Walter Scott.

His paternal home, a well-built ex-farmhouse, was surrounded by beautiful, wild and rolling hills intersected by little burns. He would walk in the fields and lanes for hours dreaming in creative solitude. That scenery and atmosphere has been sadly diminished since the 1939 war by encroachments from urban Newcastle, but there still seems to be no shortage of the local brand of Airedale-like terrier, one of which shared the Turnbull household, much to Percy's joy. Animals gave him great pleasure throughout his life and in later years he befriended a series of Sussex cats.

Sigmund Oppenheim of Newcastle was his most important piano teacher and at home Percy and his father played two-piano arrangements of all the classical composers. Symphonies and chamber works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven predominated, but the works of J. S. Bach were what Percy loved the most.

He became a chorister in the Cathedral Church of St. Nicholas in Newcastle, where much later he was offered, but did not accept, the post of Assistant Organist. He did, however, give a recital there.

After leaving school he won a place at the Armstrong College of Art, where he was recommended to study the art of designing jewellery, but this was cut short when his father was called up into the army for the First World War. Thus in his early teens he had to earn his own keep, and in fact he worked for the Tyne Improvement commission, where, amongst other duties, he gave divers the latest river soundings and tidal news.

During these days of his boyhood and youth, music was pouring out from composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Delius, John Ireland and many more, and Percy devoured it as it appeared. He was lucky in this musical context in being befriended by G. H. Whittaker of the Bach Society.

Time went on as he worked in the Commission's offices but he never lost his grip on music, and by 1922 he was successful in the A.R.C.M. and L.R.A.M. pianoforte examinations. He travelled to London by boat with his father in order to take these. Later, in 1923, he won a Foundation Scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. On the strength of the compositions he submitted he won the Mendelssohn Scholarship and, soon afterwards, the Arthur Sullivan Prize.

He remained in college until 1927, being a private student for the last year. While there he studied with Gustav Holst, Vaughan Williams and John Ireland, also attending classes with R. O. Morris, Thomas Dunhill and George Dyson. This study period, with the performances he gave then, was perhaps the happiest of his life.

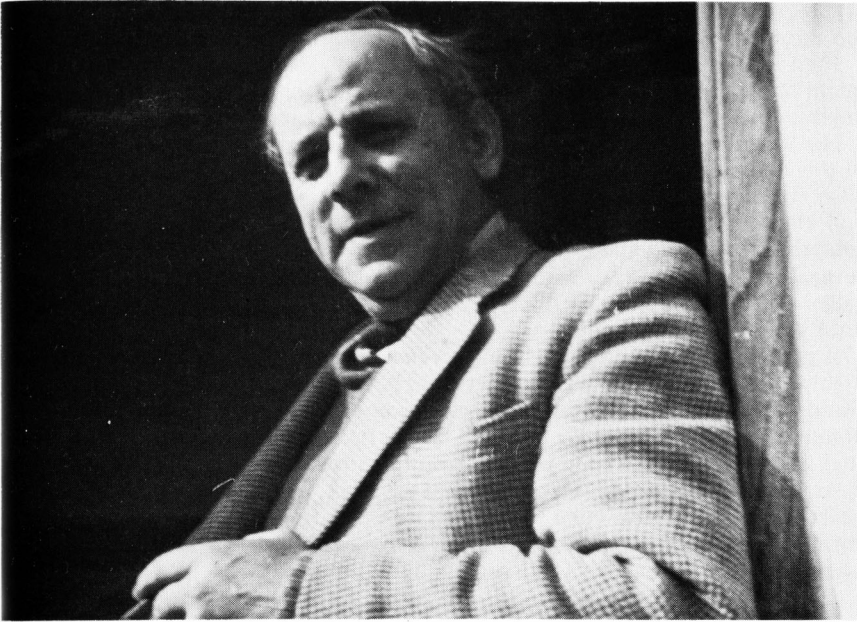
He composed several chamber works, piano pieces, songs and one or two orchestral works, in quick succession, in this larger world of London. He gained musical experience from his peers, and was playing his own pianoforte pieces and those of the then modern French and Russian composers in recitals, as well as accompanying singers and violinists on 2LO (predecessor of the BBC) and later the BBC itself.

After leaving the Royal College of Music, he led a very varied life, endeavouring to earn a living. The Aeolian Piano Player Company employed him as an editor under Dr. Percy Scholes and he also acted as a reader for the Oxford University Press for a time. After marrying in 1930 he left London for Swansea. Here he played the piano nightly in a theatre, and took piano pupils during the day. He did a little broadcast accompanying and continued to copy band parts and copy scores for several composers including Vaughan Williams. However, during this period of his life he never stopped composing.

Much the same sort of activities continued when he moved from Wales to Chalfont St. Giles in Buckinghamshire, but by this time he was also spending much of his time binding his books and sheet music between beautiful buckram and leather covers – a craft he continued until well into his old age.

In 1941 he was conscripted into the army, where he served until 1945 in a Royal Artillery Mixed Anti-Aircraft Battery, moving up and down the north-east coast of England. From 1946, after demobilisation, he became principal piano teacher at the Surrey College of Music at Fitznells, and it was during this period that he had many devoted pupils who went all over the British Isles, having gained musical insight and material diplomas under his guidance. Also during this period he published a few compositions, including a *Sonatina for Piano*, *Two Studies* (one for left-hand) and composed the *Pasticcio Variations on a Theme of Mozart* (published in 1957).

"Fortunately, I've got something to pre-occupy me in revising a bunch of things which Augeners are going to publish," he said at the time. "Among them is a piece in more or less ancient style for left-hand *alone*, which I frankly thought they'd fight shy



PERCY TURNBULL (1969); by permission of Mary Turnbull.

of. Now I can honestly say – I have never on any occasion bothered a pupil of mine with any effusion of my own, but this chronic state of most left hands will tempt me to violate this rule; my name will be mud, but I'll chance it (though I suspect the first occasion will be the last)"

He also did some extramural lecturing for the University of London at this time, and this again was a happy period in his life, though he was beset with financial worries. The Surrey College of Music, in its original foundation, closed in 1956 and in that year, after divorce, he remarried. Thereafter most of his time was devoted to practising his second artistic gift – that of drawing and painting.

"I suppose folk could say, 'why do you spend a whole vacation on a sketch hunt when you grumble about not having time for a bit of musical composition?'" he said. "Well yes, but a round of teaching like mine forces me to fly music during the vacations, and more forcibly to fly it during the breathing spaces in term time." Old farm buildings, river mud-banks strewn with picturesque hulks of boats were his preferred subjects, and he always seemed able to depict beautiful cloud-filled skies, reminiscent of his melody-filled piano pieces.

Particular favourites among the nineteenth century artists were Constable and Turner. The former, "in some rough and ready way", seemed to him to be "almost the best of English painters." The "far more brilliant and versatile" Turner could, in his estimation, weave rings around Constable yet, somehow, he preferred Constable.

When Percy moved to his final address in Sussex, he not only painted but also went back to a youthful passion and taught himself to play the violin. It is true to say that all

his life, until very near the end, he could play any and all piano music with complete technical mastery and interpretive beauty. His ability to sight read was phenomenal.

John Ireland confirmed that Turnbull had an individual voice as a composer – an idiom of his own – and it is true that he never composed to order, nor did he write anything which did not engage all his thoughts and feelings.

His *Sonatina for Piano* (published in 1948) for example, epitomises the three facets of this musical personality; in its three movements the lyricism predominates, but clear contrapuntal logic underpins it, and in the last movement wonderful humour and elation punches out the jazz-like tune and rhythm to sum up an exuberant celebration of joy, laughter and a zest for life. This individual voice is marked in several of his piano pieces and, in fact, manifests itself early in life in a little song called *Chloris in the Snow*, written when he was 18 or 19 years old, but not published until 1950.

A pupil of his has written that he had an elusive personality that seems to go with a highly imaginative person and really creative gifts – musical, literary and artistic. He could talk on any subject with touches of humour which saved him from sounding pompous – that he would have hated. In fact his humour and gentle concern are what stick in the mind when recalling his smallish, sturdy figure with his fine head and clear, blue enquiring eyes. He was modest to a fault. He had a brave and generous heart. His truth-seeking mind illuminated the darkeest intellectual corners, and he stirred more joy and created more laughter with such selfless art in so many forms that he could truly be likened to a 20th century ‘Renaissance’ man.

LIST OF WORKS BY PERCY TURNBULL

Copies of the published works and manuscripts of the unpublished ones are held by Mary Turnbull, who also has several fragments of unfinished pieces.

PUBLISHED WORKS

Songs:

To God (Herrick) for voice and Pf. Forsyth Bros.

Ejaculation to God for voice and Pf. Forsyth Bros.

Piping Down the Valleys Wild (Blake) for unison soprano and Pf. 1925. O.U.P.

A Boys' Song (James Hogg) for unison and Pf. O.U.P.

The Shower (Henry Vaughan) for S.A.T.B. with practice Pf. part. 1926. Stainer & Bell.

The Cavalier (Masefield) for baritone and Pf. O.U.P.

You Spotted Snakes with Double Tongue (Shakespeare) for S.A.T.B. with practice Pf. part. 1928. O.U.P.

There was a simple Maiden (an old tune) arranged for S.A.T.B. with practice Pf. part. 1928. O.U.P.

Chloris in the Snow (William Strode)¹ for baritone or soprano and Pf. 1950. Joseph Williams.

My Bed is a Boat (R. L. Stevenson) for voice and Pf. 1928. Edward Arnold.

Simple Simon (nursery rhyme) for voice and Pf. c. 1946. Douglas Clayton Music Press

Piano Pieces:

Rondel. 1926. Pub. Forsyth Bros.
Piano Suite: Prelude, Passepied, Pastoral Dance, Bourree, Gigue. 1929. O.U.P.
Eight Short Piano Pieces by Peter Thrale. 1931. O.U.P.
The High Road. 1934. Schott & Co. Ltd.
Six Pastoral Miniatures. 1938. Schott & Co. Ltd.
Country Days. 1938. Schott & Co. Ltd.
Sonatina. 1948. Lengnick.
Two Studies in Allemande Style. No. 1 for left-hand only. 1954. Augener Ltd.
Two Studies in Allemande Style. No. 2 for both hands. 1954. Augener Ltd.
*Pasticcio on a Theme of Mozart*² 1957. Augener Ltd.

UNPUBLISHED WORKS

Songs:

The Rainy Day (Longfellow) for soprano and Pf. 1922.
To Julia (Herrick) for soprano and Pf. 1922.
Guess, Guess (Thomas Moore) for soprano and Pf. 1924?
My Mopsa is Little (Thomas Moore) for soprano and Pf. 1924.
Cargoes (Masefield) for S.A.T.B. and Pf. 1927.
When Daffodils Begin to Peer (Shakespeare) for soprano and Pf. 1927.
Where Go the Boats (R. L. Stevenson) for three sopranos and Pf. 1927.
Take Me to the North Countrie arranged for mixed chorus and piano. 1927.
If Doughty Deeds (Scott) for soprano and Pf. 1927.
The Moon (R. L. Stevenson) for soprano (Two versions).
In Fountain Court (A. Symons) for soprano and Pf.
The Reminder (Thomas Hardy) for soprano/contralto (Two versions).

Piano Pieces:

A Scarf Dance; Seven Character Sketches; Prelude; Andante in the Style of Mozart; Variations on an Original Theme; Minuet in A; A Choral Prelude in Five Parts; Gigue for Piano; An Epigram – Character Sketch; Scherzo and Trio in Imitation of Beethoven; Sonnet; Three Pieces for the Piano – Minuet, Marionettes Dance, Toccatina; Valse for Piano; Minuet; Intermezzo; Rondoletter for Pianoforte; Endymion Suite for Piano (Three pieces with quotations from *Endymion*); *Six Preludes for Piano; Three pieces for Pianoforte – Rondo (Carolando), Air, Ballatella; Serenade; Tribute to Maurice Ravel; Canzonet for Piano*.

Violin Pieces:

Sonata for Violin and Piano; Suite for Violin and Piano; English Dance for Violins; Rondino for Violin and Piano (Toccatina); Romance for Violin and Piano; Dance an Saraband for Violin and Piano.

Cello Pieces:

Variations for Cello and Piano on a Theme by Purcell. 1924.

Works for String Quartet:

Variations on an Original Theme. 1923.

Works for String Orchestra:*Andante con Moto**Sarabanda for String Orchestra**Suite for Strings in Four Parts: Preamble, Interlude, Slow Air, Finale.***Orchestral Works:***A Northumbrian Rhapsody 1927?**Overture for Orchestra**Allegro con Brio***NOTES**

¹Although *Chloris in the Snow* was published in 1950, it was written in Turnbull's late teens, probably 1919 or 1920.

²There were three more variations to *Pasticcio* in the styles of Delius, Fauré and Ravel, and one in the style of Bartok, which Turnbull may not have wished to include in the set. The publishers, afraid of copyright infringements, refused to publish these, though they were assured of the originality of the variations.

