

Trevor Duncan (b. 1924)

Trevor Duncan (real name Leonard Charles Trebilco) was born in Camberwell, London, England, on 27th February 1924. I visited him at his Somerset home in April 1994 to discuss these new recordings of some of his best works, and he explained to me that his skills as a composer were almost totally self-taught.

By the age of twelve he could play by ear, but two years later he wanted to learn to read music and study a technical analysis of what he was doing by instinct. He gained this knowledge at Streatham Library where he found books by academics, and full scores to examine. For a year he attended the Trinity College of Music for an external course on violin, harmony and counterpoint. Although the violin study helped him later in scoring for strings, he was very disappointed by the other aspects of the course. Like many of his contemporaries working in the same musical spheres, he was to discover that practical experience would ultimately prove to be the best tutor.

When he reached eighteen, Duncan joined the British Broadcasting Corporation assisting in radio plays by doing sound effects and playing discs of incidental music. This was to be short-lived, because he was conscripted into the Royal Air Force in 1943 where he became a wireless operator. He saw active service in Stirling aircraft with 38 Group (glider tugs and supply drops), and in his spare time he played in various RAF station dance-bands. His war service included eighteen months in India, before he was discharged from the RAF in 1947.

Duncan had the opportunity to go to Cambridge University, but decided, unwisely, he now thinks, to return to BBC Radio where he was in his element as a sound and balance engineer working with many light orchestras. At school he had been good at mathematics, and this led to a lifetime's interest in science. His passion for music not only embraces the technique of the composer, but also the means by which musical sounds are carried via radio or recordings to today's listeners. It is Duncan's belief that a good composer must have an awareness of the physics of music and the geometry of composition.

His post-war years at the BBC allowed him to experiment with microphone placings, often to the annoyance of producers, but the musicians appreciated that he was merely trying to ensure that their music was heard to the best advantage, and composer-conductors willingly answered his frequent questions on aspects of scoring. Together with studying the scores of Rimsky-Korsakov, Duncan learned at first hand what certain combinations of instruments could or could not successfully achieve; if a certain passage of music sounded particularly effective in the sound control room, he would dash into the studio to study the relevant manuscripts - perfect self tuition.

Trevor Duncan credits the late Ray Martin for giving him the necessary encouragement to explore his talent in orchestration. For some while he had been balancing Martin's *Melody-From-The-Sky* programmes, and he eventually plucked up courage to show him the piano score of *Vision in Velvet*. Seeing a favourable reaction from the maestro, Duncan asked that Martin might consider orchestrating it for a subsequent broadcast performance with his orchestra. The refusal was instant: "No, *you* do it, it's all there already in your piano part." A few weeks later a complete score was duly delivered to Ray Martin, and for the first time Duncan heard one of his works performed by a large orchestra. Martin suggested the title *Morning Star* for the broadcast, and this was also to be the first occasion that 'Trevor Duncan' became a recognised composer.

For some while Leonard Trebilco, as the BBC knew him, had cherished an ambition to compose, but he knew that strict rules originally imposed by the former BBC Director-General John (later Lord) Reith made it almost impossible for BBC employees to have their music broadcast on the radio. Since radio was closed to him, he concentrated on music to be recorded for newsreels and films outlets not connected with the BBC. He also realised that he would have to use a pseudonym, and he had decided what it would be, long before it finally became necessary. At school his Cornish surname had often been shortened to 'Treb' which gradually became corrupted to Trev - then Trevor. He chose Duncan because it was euphonious, although he now recognises that its Scottish connotation may have been a subconscious acknowledgement of his mother's Glaswegian connections. (The only other pseudonym that the young Trebilco ever used was Steve Bretton for a very brief period).

At this point it may be helpful to recall that, during the 1940s, several major London music publishers were busily establishing prestigious libraries of recorded music. In those days 78 rpm discs were still in universal use, partly because of the ease in editing, and hundreds of special records were made for the exclusive use of radio, films, television and especially newsreels. These were almost entirely orchestral, portraying virtually every imaginable mood. The majority of works lasted around three minutes, but some were only a few seconds in duration. Occasionally a catchy number would get used as a radio signature-tune, which often ensured that it would be played by other light orchestras. Once in a while a commercial recording would follow, giving a warm comforting glow to the publisher and later the composer, when he received the royalties. Every cinema programme included a newsreel, often changed twice-weekly, but primitive sound-recording techniques, by today's standards, meant that newsreels rarely had synchronised sound to accompany the pictures, so the problem was solved by commentaries and the use of background or 'mood' music, more commonly known today as 'production' music. The demand for this music proved virtually insatiable, and publishers were always seeking composers with the gift to write in the wide variety of styles required. Very occasionally a work could be quite individual, but most of the time the main requirement was for something suitable in the background that would not be obtrusive.

This was the musical world that Trevor Duncan felt was right for him at the time. Ray Martin's approval of his next piece *High Heels* encouraged Duncan to approach Tom Elliott, the Manager of Light Music Exploitation at Boosey & Hawkes. Bob Dibden was then running their Recorded Music Library, and he put out both *Vision in Velvet* and *High Heels* on a 12 inch 78 in 1949, recorded at EMI's Abbey Road studios by the New Concert Orchestra conducted by Jack Leon.

Bassett Silver, whom Duncan remembers as a musically sensitive, gentle man, was soon to take over the Library, and thus began a long and very successful partnership between Trevor Duncan and Boosey & Hawkes. *High Heels* enjoyed immediate success, with numerous radio performances and a commercial recording by Sidney Torch for Parlophone. Unfortunately a British Musicians' Union dispute with the publishers meant that future mood music recordings had to be made outside Britain, and Duncan admits that he was close to tears when he heard the results of some of the first sessions in continental Europe. Sections of his scores were sometimes completely lost by the sound engineers, and in later years he often travelled abroad to supervise technically the sessions.

In the next few years Duncan composed numerous works, making him one of the most prolific writers of mood music. His catchy numbers caught the public's attention, and many broadcasts followed. For some while he managed to keep his Trebilco BBC identity separate from his growing fame as the composer Duncan, but inevitably the BBC came to realise that the two were really just one. In 1954 Duncan was promoted as a music producer, and this conflict of interests meant that the BBC could not schedule any of his works in its programmes. This irked him at the time, but upon reflection he accepts that the ruling was correct; it would have been wrong for BBC employees to have a seemingly unfair advantage over other equally talented composers.

Problems arose at Boosey and Hawkes. When 'library' music became popular, printed scores usually followed, both in orchestral form for broadcasting and other public performances, and also in piano copies for players at home, but with a virtual BBC embargo on broadcasts of Trevor Duncan's music, demand for printed scores fell dramatically, although professional usage for films, television and so on was increasing all the time.

Duncan had to make the almost inevitable decision to concentrate full time on composing, and he left the BBC in 1956. Ironically, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, employing composers, was formed two years later. With the former constraints now removed, Duncan's music again received frequent radio airings. His output was more than one publisher could handle, so his works were also eagerly accepted by other mood music libraries.

Two compositions, both written in 1959, were to assume great importance in furthering Duncan's career. *The Girl From Corsica* was heard almost daily on British radio, helped in no small measure by a fine commercial recording by the Ron Goodwin Orchestra, but of even greater significance was the BBC's decision to choose the *March* from his *Little Suite* as the signature tune for *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, one of BBC Television's biggest successes in the 1960s. By now the name Trevor Duncan was known to everyone who enjoyed light music.

New works continued unabated, with numerous catchy novelty numbers taking their place alongside more substantial suites. The latter included:

Overland to Oregon, The Unwanted, Nature Scenes, The Challenge of Space, The House of Tranquillity, Café Bon Accueil, The Spirit of Industry, Men Before Adam, Green Heritage, The Spirit of Progress, The Navigators, Aim and Endeavour, Psycho Suite, Crankcraft, Colourations, Stranger In The City, Four Evil Men, A Tale of Two Hearts, One Man's Story.

Possibly Trevor Duncan's most serious major orchestral work for Boosey & Hawkes is his *Sinfonia Tellurica* (1970), lasting 32 minutes. The first three movements *Mare, Terra* and *Ventus et Ignis* depict the Elements; the fourth, *Homines*, visualises mankind's endeavours and achievements.

Duncan's love of the sea and the majesty of nature is portrayed in many other works: *Panoramic Splendour*, *Schooner Bay*, *Broad Horizons*, *Passage to Windward* and so on. Duncan finds that inspiration often comes to him at night; most of his works have been composed between the hours of 11.00 pm and 4.00 am in the morning. He writes directly on to score paper, only checking later on a keyboard before orchestrating. From his experience of many years as a sound engineer, he knows exactly how his music will sound. At times he can be sparing in his use of instruments; one of his trademarks embodies clear strings sustaining high notes while woodwinds bubble away in the background, often underscored by cellos and double basses. Violas, which he loves, always have an interesting part. In his early works he deliberately set out to recapture the exciting sounds and atmosphere that a visit to the cinema offered audiences in the austere 1940s. Lush orchestral sounds were the order of the day. In Hollywood the great film-composers, Steiner, Korngold, Waxman, Young, Rozsa, were dictating the styles that many other were to follow, and their influence also extended to the great recording orchestras. Inevitably the young Trevor Duncan recreated those sumptuous harmonies, but he also ventured into dramatic areas with equal success; *Pictures In A Fog* and *Inhumanity* are just two examples of his versatility from the very beginning. In turn he was to exert his own style on British cinema audiences - his magnificent fanfare *Grand Vista* introduced the Pearl and Dean advertisements for many years.

By the 1960s Duncan was identified as a talented composer of symphonic stature in the English tradition. He developed an individual style that became instantly recognised by his admirers. He emerged as a real composer of original material, unlike some of his contemporaries working in the mood music business who were really just arrangers. Perhaps the greatest accolade is when a composer becomes an inspiration to others, and Duncan has certainly achieved that status.

Today Trevor Duncan lives with his wife Susan and daughter Zoe in the remaining part of a large Georgian folly, next to a twelfth century church set in beautiful Somerset countryside. He is currently writing a musical, so he could yet gain recognition as a composer for the theatre. In the past he has declined to write an opera (he still feels he was right to turn down that particular offer) although he now wishes that he had received a commission to score a ballet. He dislikes the cultural snobbery, unhappily still rife among some of the musical fraternity in Britain, which tends to scorn accessible music, although he is far from being a bitter man. There is an inner warmth that comes from a sense of satisfaction with much of his writing, yet he holds a view, not uncommon among composers, that some of his most successful works, commercially speaking, are not those of which he feels most proud.

Duncan does not boast of his achievements. It is likely that few of his fellow villagers know that one of this century's great light music composers accompanies their hymn singing on the church organ each Sunday. His family, healthily, are unimpressed, but the quality of his music, as exemplified in these new recordings, will ensure that Trevor Duncan's unique talents will be appreciated by new generations of music lovers for a very long time indeed.

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1. **20th Century Express (1953)**

Trevor Duncan had been writing descriptive music for over four years by the time that *20th Century Express* caught the public's attention. He originally called it *Making tracks* (a railway/disc cutting pun) but later decided a change of title would help to emphasise the inspiration behind the composition. It is common practice among many music publishers to decide for themselves what a particular work should be called, but Duncan has always been allowed the freedom to choose the titles for his own compositions.

2. – 4. **Little Suite: March, Lullaby, Jogtrot (1959)**

The composer describes the *Little Suite* as absolute music. The use of the march by BBC Television for its *Dr. Finlay's Casebook* series resulted in numerous commercial recordings, but this is the first time that the other movements have been included as well. The Scottish setting for the Finlay stories convinced listeners that the inspiration came from north of the border, but Duncan insists that he was thinking of England, not Scotland, when he penned these miniature masterpieces. In certain passages deliberate repetition is used to create a stunning effect, especially in *Jogtrot*, that could only be attempted by a composer so sure of his ability to change the sequence at precisely the right moment. It is interesting to hear melodies from both the *March* and Lullaby worked into the *Jogtrot*.

5. **High Heels (1949)**

High Heels is the famous composition that allowed Trevor Duncan to consider the possibility that he might become a professional composer. It possesses warmth, charm and a fresh appeal that set it apart from many other works of that period. Of course, Duncan acknowledges the influence of David Rose's *Holiday For Strings*, but this work probably owes its joie de vivre to the fact that it was written at the time when the composer married his first wife Becky, sadly now deceased. Despite being a very early work, he never felt the need to revise it. In fact he cannot remember ever rewriting any of his works, once completed. He does not claim this to be a virtue.

6. – 8. **Children In the Park: Dancing For Joy, At the Pool, Hide and Seek (1954)**

Children In the Park is a delightful series of short musical portraits which cleverly reflect the carefree, innocent world of young children.

9. **Serenade (from Maestro Variations) (1967)**

Serenade comes from a full suite in which the composer attempted to recreate the various styles of some of the great classical writers. It is inspired by the melodic Schubert. Other movements not on this recording are: *Symphony, Voluntary & Andante, Allegro* and *Vivace*.

10. **The Girl From Corsica (1959)**

Such a wistful work as *The Girl From Corsica* could not have been entirely imaginary, and Trevor Duncan used as his inspiration the memory of a girl he had met on holiday a year before he actually immortalised her charms in music. Half French, and half Corsican, this young lady realised the impression she had made, but the relationship remained spiritual. The coda, you will notice, ends suspended on an unresolved chord.

11. **Meadow Mist (1954)**

Meadow Mist is a delicate tone-poem. The composer tells me that he, like almost every harmony conscious musician on earth, applauds the contribution of Robert Farnon to music. He acknowledges his influence deep down among the string harmonies that you hear in this sensuous piece.

12. **Valse Mignonette (1959)**

Quite simply, *Valse Mignonette* is a musical portrait of a little French child, happily at play. A special feature is the close contact of piccolo and flute, making a pleasing dissonance. It is interesting to note that the legato section is the same melody, and again Duncan cleverly employs a repetitive figure, with agreeable results.

13. **Wine Festival (1964)**

The welcome success of *The Girl From Corsica* prompted his publishers to ask Trevor Duncan to compose more pieces with a Mediterranean flavour. In *Wine Festival* he imagines the sunny south of France where no one really needs an excuse to celebrate the riches of the vines.

14. **Sixpenny Ride (1964)**

Sixpenny Ride is a bright and breezy number, faithfully conveying the open-air freshness intended. There is a companion piece *Tenbob Tour* in 5/4 rhythm, not on this recording.

15. **Enchanted April (1958)**

Trevor Duncan originally called *Enchanted April*, *The Olive Grove*, but the public came to know it by the name of a television programme for which it was used as the title music.

16. **St Boniface Down (1956)**

St Boniface Down, named after an area on the south coast of the Isle of Wight, was composed in October 1956, and was not a commissioned work or programmatic. It is dedicated to C. Gurrieri (the Girl from Corsica) who came from the Auvergne. The composer enigmatically tells me: "The work celebrates a silent walk along the ridge of St Boniface Down; it was followed by a beautiful correspondence for some weeks." In the string subject, the metre of a Paul Verlaine line is heard: *Il pleure dans mon cœur comme il pleut sur la ville*.

17. **La Torrida (1958)**