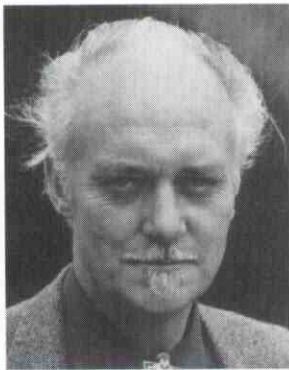


Photo of Ronald Stevenson by Ian Watson



COMPOSER IN INTERVIEW: RONALD STEVENSON — A SCOT IN ‘EMERGENT AFRICA’

Chris Walton

The Scottish composer and pianist Ronald Stevenson, who celebrated his 75th birthday on 6 March of this year, is a man about whom it is difficult to remain objective. His *Passacaglia on DSCH* for piano solo, one of the longest single-movement works in the literature, has for some already gained near-legendary status. Yet Stevenson himself remains serenely, even ascetically unaware of both the adulation he induces in some and the bemusement that this in turn can cause in others – a quality that is not a little reminiscent of Busoni, the musician whom Stevenson probably admires the most, and whose music he probably knows as does no other. Stevenson himself readily acknowledges his admiration of others – it is part of his ‘human counterpoint’ of life. Percy Grainger and Hugh MacDiarmid are two further artists who act as centripetal forces in Stevenson’s conversations. If there is something that was common to all three of these forbears, it was perhaps a striving to express in a single work of art a vast spectrum of human experience – one thinks of Busoni’s *Doktor Faust*, MacDiarmid’s *Drunk Man* or Grainger’s *Warriors*. And yet, in his *Passacaglia*, Stevenson has arguably been as successful as any of them. Frequent discussions in the press and on internet chatlines centre, oddly, on the work’s duration, ignoring the fact that the *Passacaglia* is less remarkable for its length of one-and-a-half hours than for the range of expression that is somehow set free, on a single keyboard instrument, by the most restrictive of musical forms (for it is, as the title suggests, a *passacaglia* on just four notes).

The *Passacaglia*, although his most-often recorded work and – justifiably – the one on which most commentators have concentrated their attention, is far from alone in his oeuvre in the strength of its material and execution. Stevenson’s work catalogue is large, including works for all manner of instruments and instrumental combinations. His corpus of piano transcriptions and arrangements continues a tradition begun by Liszt, and honed by – again – Busoni and Grainger. We live in times when the prolific itself seems suspect, when the notion is common that quantity somehow precludes quality. Those acquainted with Stevenson’s oeuvre would disagree; but the reader can judge for himself on the strength of the steady flow of new recordings of Stevenson’s music. A sceptic should perhaps begin with his vocal music, such as his solo songs or the 12-part motet *In Memoriam Robert Carver*, a work in which heart and head are undoubtedly at one.

Stevenson is also a keen and articulate observer of his times. The interview printed below is but a brief record of one of the most unexpected twists in his career, namely of the two years he spent at the University of Cape Town in South Africa from 1963 to 1965. Unexpected, not least because Stevenson, although never a member of a political party, has always championed individual freedoms, even

-serving a prison sentence at the age of 20 for being a conscientious objector. He had no love for the policies of *apartheid* – but nor did Erik Chisholm, then Professor and Chair of Music at Cape Town, whose own integrity was instrumental in convincing Stevenson to move to South Africa. In the early 1960s, the wily Hendrik Verwoerd was still in power (he was murdered in 1966) and *apartheid* was not yet the monolith it became under his successors. It was still being espoused by the National Party as a superficially paternalistic policy of segregation, though the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960 was an early demonstration that ‘separate development’ in fact meant separation for all, development for some, and the use of brute force against those who refused the former and demanded the latter. Nevertheless, the systematic, state-sanctioned use of censorship, banning, torture and assassination and the whole panoply of fascist rule under John Vorster and P. W. Botha still lay several years in the future.

Cape Town, which for long had enjoyed a more relaxed atmosphere than did the cities in the hinterland, was in these years a vibrant place where jazz flourished, and Dollar Brand and his colleagues both white and non-white still played openly together. Not until Stevenson had been in South Africa for several months did a ban fall upon racially-integrated music groups.¹ The notion of Cape Town’s ‘halcyon days’ of the 1950s and early ‘60s is, perhaps, how it is seen from a largely white perspective; but it would also be naïve to imagine that any immigrant from Britain – and there were many in those years – would have discerned much difference in everyday life between the two countries (except, no doubt, for the weather). However, once the authoritarianism of South Africa became not just obvious, but threatened to impinge upon his family – namely the impending forced induction of his young son into school-time militaristic rites largely inherited from the Hitler Youth – Stevenson, his wife Marjorie and their children packed their bags and left.

While Stevenson was keen to explore the indigenous music traditions of his new home, the abiding result of his two years abroad seems to have been a realization of the importance of his Scottish roots. Nevertheless, it is not a little ironic that it was not an African, but a Scottish composer, fresh to the continent, who in the passage in his *Passacaglia* marked ‘to emergent Africa’ (in which the performer has to drum on the open strings of his instrument) gave us one of the very first successful examples of a ‘Western’ composer attempting a creative *rapprochement* with African musics. Not until some 20 years later, in the work of Stefans Grové, Kevin Volans and others, did South African composers themselves attempt and achieve the same.² That Stevenson was inspired by a virtuosic drummer he had happened upon while in the middle of a field, on his way to the toilet, is an absurdity of which MacDiarmid and Percy Grainger would surely have approved.



CW: *How did your move to South Africa come about?*

RS: Professor Erik Chisholm³ of the University of Cape Town had a sabbatical, and he visited his and my friend, the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid (the pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve). He went with the mission of trying to find a successor to

¹ See, for example, Lars Rasmussen, ed.: *Cape Town Jazz 1959–1963. The photographs of Hardy Stockmann*. Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2001.

² See e.g. Stephanus Muller & Chris Walton, ed.: *Stefans Grové. An African Composer*. Pretoria: Protea, in the press.

Stanley Glasser,⁴ namely a senior lecturer in music. And MacDiarmid was one of the very few anywhere I think, certainly on the Scottish scene, who kept his finger on the pulse of time and the arts. He said: go and see Ronald Stevenson in the next village. And he did. Erik Chisholm came here, though I wasn't in at the time. My wife, Marjorie, was in, and she said to him when he put forward this proposition of our going to South Africa: 'Oh, Ronald won't thank you for that. It's a fascist country'. Erik tried to put up a good case, which he could do, about the University of Cape Town. Well, when I returned home, and Marjorie told me all this, I thought: it could be something new, and it doesn't mean to say that I agree with South African *apartheid* if I go there; there are others who don't agree with it either (I think that's the correct pronunciation, isn't it? *Apart-hate*. With hate in it. H-A-T-E). Well, I'm very glad I went. A very, very beautiful country, especially the Cape, and I must say that I liked many people I met there.

Erik Chisholm met us off the ship. It was a wonderful voyage. My luggage included a small spinet, which was actually a miniature harpsichord, made by Dolmetsch and decorated, most beautifully, by the original Dolmetsch's widow, Mable Dolmetsch. I was intrigued by it, because Busoni had got Dolmetsch to make him a harpsichord. Erik Chisholm said, 'What's that you've got? That's a keyboard instrument, isn't it?' I said, 'Yes, it's a spinet.' He said, 'You're playing that tonight in the opera.' I played it in *Don Giovanni* every evening for a fortnight. He really got on with things. And I got to know *Don Giovanni* very well.

CW: *What was your contact with local musicians?*

RS: I knew on meeting Arnold van Wyk⁵ that I had found a real composer, I found him very sympathetic company. I spent a good few hours with him, and spent more hours studying his music on my own. I also met Hubert du Plessis, another good composer, from what I knew of his music.⁶

My most memorable experience in South Africa was my visit to a 'location', called, I think, Nyanga. I was asked if I would adjudicate a singing competition. This wasn't entirely out of my field of interest, because, as you know, I've written many songs. And, being in correspondence with Percy Grainger, I was profoundly interested in folk music. The children in Nyanga sang Scottish folk songs mainly, because a minister of religion in the

³ Erik Chisholm (1904–1965), Glasgow-born composer, teacher, conductor, performer, founded the Active Society for Music in Glasgow in 1929, bringing Hindemith, Bartók, Sorabji and others to the city. Studied piano with Lev Pouishnoff and composition under Donald Tovey. Presented the UK premières of Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Berlioz's *The Trojans* in Glasgow, 1934 and 1935 respectively. Spent the war conducting around the globe for ENSA. Became Professor and Chair of the Faculty of Music, University of Cape Town, in 1946. He died there in 1965, a few days after completing his pioneering book on the operas of Janáček. Composed ten operas and a wealth of orchestral, piano, choral and vocal music, a little of which is now being recorded. His manuscripts are held today by the University of Cape Town.

⁴ Stanley Glasser (b.1926) had to leave South Africa for political reasons. He emigrated to London and taught at Goldsmiths' College, where he later founded the Electronic Music Workshop and became head of the Music Department. He is now Emeritus Professor of the University of London. Glasser's self-imposed exile from South Africa ended after the advent of democracy, though the pull of his native land never ceased to be felt in his creative oeuvre.

⁵ Arnold van Wyk (1916–1983), South African composer, lecturer at Stellenbosch University, near Cape Town, from 1961 to 1978.

⁶ Hubert du Plessis (b.1922), South African composer, lecturer at Stellenbosch University from 1958 to 1982. During his studies in London, he took lessons from Alan Bush, among others.

community had visited Scotland, and had taken back a collection of songs from the Glasgow Orpheus Choir Publications. Now, it was fascinating for me to hear these children sing these songs because, naturally, they sang a very accented performance, though with their own accent. Rhythmically it was fascinating. I asked if I could visit a toilet, but there was none in that building where we were at all. The African who was advising me seemed slightly embarrassed at pointing out that I would have to cross over a field to get to the toilets, which were actually large tin cans (rather dangerous, in a way!). I was glad that I went across that field, because I heard a performance going on that made me stop in my tracks. It was midday, and there was a black man there, wearing a loincloth, and playing drums. I always exaggerate this because it was so amazing. My wife, Marjorie, says that I put the number of drums round about him too high. I think we've come down to about fifteen, but in my memory, there were about twenty-five drums. And he was virtuosic. He was all over the place on these drums, making this music. At that time, I had come to a passage in my *Passacaglia* in which I wanted to use some African drumming with the direct contact of the hand on the strings of the piano, and this experience made me revise that passage, improving its impact.

CW: *Did you have any other contact with African indigenous music? How was it viewed by the musical establishment in Cape Town?*

RS: There was a very remarkable man, Hugh Tracey, who made what to me were wonderful, Graingeresque films. I spent a lot of time with him, and invited him to our home in Cape Town.⁷ When I left, the staff of the University Music Department passed the hat around, so to speak, and bought me Alexander Willcox's book *The Rock Art of South Africa*,⁸ inscribed by all the members of staff, and Percival Kirby's *The musical instruments of the native races of South Africa*,⁹ which I admire very much. I would like to think that there was still material in it for me to use in my own compositions, because I do invade music literature to find material, particularly in the folk music field. I think that a great deal still remains to be done. It's amazing to think that Scottish Gaelic music is unknown territory to many people. One should really do what Grainger did and learn the language – Scots Gaelic. Grainger, of course, knew all the Scandinavian languages. He didn't know them academically, and would make mistakes in grammar, but he said that he wanted to learn how the peasants – at that time they were called peasants – spoke the Norwegian languages. That's the language he wanted. He didn't want 'correct' language. He said, 'I don't even speak English in the correct manner.'

CW: *Chisholm was considered quite left wing. Did either of you have any unpleasant political experiences?*

RS: Well, I wrote a programme note on my *Passacaglia* that included a quotation from Lenin. 'The three necessities of mankind: peace, bread and the land'. I don't like slogans very much, they

⁷ Hugh Tracey (1903–77), pioneer ethnomusicologist, began recording and seeking to publicize sub-Saharan African music in the 1920s (he received encouragement from Holst and Vaughan Williams). He founded the International Library of African Music, which is today housed at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in South Africa and is run by Tracey's son Andrew, also an ethnomusicologist of international repute.

⁸ Johannesburg: Nelson, 1963.

⁹ Second edition: Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1965. Kirby was for many years on the staff of the Music Department of the University of the Witwatersrand.

may save your breath, but they also economize on thought. But I used that in my *Passacaglia* in a passage which has the speech rhythm of 'peace, bread and the land' – again and again. That was in the programme and I think the audience were talking about this. Some of them: 'That's communist, you know'. And at the passage where I used the direct contact of the hand to the strings, I had marked in the score, 'to emergent Africa', and that was put into the programme as well. That probably meant more to the South African representatives, government representatives, or the police, or whoever it was, than 'peace, bread and the land'. (I now doubt whether one should use too many literary allusions in a score of music. I think it's better to let the music speak for itself.) Anyway, the very next day, there was a police invasion of Erik Chisholm's study. And they emptied the drawers, emptied everything, trying to search for incriminating evidence, because he had been to Russia and indeed he had at least one volume of Scottish folk songs published in the Soviet Union. But Erik Chisholm was not particularly political at that time. Perhaps that could be said about myself too, because I was never a member of any political party, and had no intention of being. Though there were one or two figures in the history of music who were in politics whom I admired very much, Pablo Casals for one. And Alan Bush, of course, who was a member of the British communist party. I liked Alan very much.

CW: *What were the students like at Cape Town?*

RS: I had one Cape Coloured South African student, only one. I had met him in the grounds of the University and got into conversation with him. I invited him to my home, my staff house, and offered to teach him piano, and some composition too. He was called Alec Moses. He was a very good student, the only Coloured student I had in Cape Town. I met his lovely wife and family, and he kept up contact with me. He wanted to emigrate, although he was very torn about the idea of it – and he did come over to the UK for a time, and visited us here in Scotland. The other students were, well, rather privileged, I think, in South African terms.

CW: *Did you find the students and staff open to new ideas?*

RS: Yes. There were many discussions – and, of course, I encouraged and provoked discussion. For instance, one of the students was very keen on Stravinsky. This is one of my shortcomings – I'm blinkered about Stravinsky, or rather the oral equivalent to being blinkered. I encouraged the student to demonstrate and said, well, come on and put it on the blackboard and tell us, point out things and anything you want, come on. He demonstrated very well, worthy of a university lecturer, or even a senior lecturer, which I was supposed to be. I said to him rather provocatively: 'I heard black music in Nyanga yesterday. And all that you're saying about Stravinsky's marvellous rhythm isn't a patch on this music I heard from the black Africans. In fact, African rhythm is very sophisticated, and what you're showing us is extremely simple. In fact, a simplification.'

CW: *How was African music regarded by the rest of the Western music staff?*

RS: The European-based staff, excepting Leonard Hall, thought it was a waste of time to study African music. They wanted to study Beethoven and Chopin, the usual stuff. But for me this was a great opportunity to learn something about African culture.

CW: *What did those two years in South Africa do for you creatively?*

RS: Well, being so far away from Europe and America, I felt that I had to correspond with musicians. I didn't want to lose perspective. I had a wonderful correspondence with the widow of Percy Grainger, who was in America. Previously in the UK, I'd been in correspondence with Percy Grainger, who had died in 1960. And I also had a very good friend in Moscow, who sent me a whole lot of stuff. It was Grigori Kogan (not the violinist Kogan). Grigori Kogan was a Busonian and had published two editions of a remarkable book about Busoni. He also produced a marvellous book of the history of piano transcription, in which he gives dozens of examples of such transcriptions, and he published several volumes of transcriptions. America has a high reputation for musicological scholarship, but in terms of pianism it's not a patch on what the USSR was. And as I said I admired Hugh Tracey's writing and films on African music, and I met him too, and discussed with him.

CW: *Was it not a problem sending and receiving correspondence to and from the Soviet Union in Cape Town? Were your letters ever opened?*

RS: Yes, they were. They were also edited by the people who opened them. Things were crossed out. Oh yes, that happened, certainly. Perhaps things were crossed out in the Soviet Union as well. But I had to keep up correspondence. I had to have lifelines. My best correspondence, in fact the most creative correspondence I have ever had, was with that very great man of the theatre, Edward Gordon Craig, the son of Ellen Terry, who was living in the South of France. Like Yessenin, he'd had a great love affair with

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Isadora Duncan, and in fact, had a child by her. As a boy, Craig had even heard Franz Liszt playing privately in London, and he wrote to me a superbly descriptive letter about him.

CW: *What kind of a Head of Department was Chisholm?*

RS: Erik Chisholm was a very unusual, eccentric and imaginative professor. They had a ballet school, they had an opera school, and that was unique. There wasn't any British university with a ballet school and an opera school that I knew of at the time – or now. In fact, I think there were more varied opportunities in Cape Town than in Britain. Erik Chisholm also ran a film club that was very, very good indeed, where he showed some Eisenstein films.

CW: *Showing Soviet films in Cape Town must have been rather daring?*

RS: Yes, though Chisholm thought of it culturally, not politically. That was an education for me, as it was the first time I'd seen an Eisenstein film. In South Africa, of all places! And they were very well attended by the students, though I don't know if they realized what they were looking at. And, of course, Hugh Tracey was invited to show his ethnomusicological films as well, which were political in a sense, although Tracey himself was very guarded about politics. The Tracey films were much appreciated by the students, of whom some were sophisticated, very argumentative and very knowledgeable.

CW: *How was Chisholm the man and the composer?*

RS: Well, I admire his music, and I think it is the usual disgrace that Scotland has forgotten him. Scotland tends to forget her own people. They even forgot Robert Louis Stevenson – there is no monument to him in Edinburgh, the city of his birth! It's curious how Erik Chisholm and I had similar interests, a very similar aesthetic in some ways. I was glad that I had a companion in art, a comrade in art. But he and I didn't get on humanly. Human counterpoint is much more difficult than the musical one. I'm a natural contrapuntist, I always think contrapuntally, in many voices. It's a symbol of what society should or might be.

I don't want to go through the whole rigmarole of my criticism of Erik Chisholm. But he did become very dictatorial to the students, and I wasn't going to put up with that. That was one of the things that separated us. But I don't want to say negative things. I'd rather think of his music. Isn't it strange that one can admire music without admiring the man who made it?

Chisholm had done wonderful work in Edinburgh and in Glasgow in the 1930s. He had even invited Hindemith to come to Glasgow. And Bernard van Dieren, too (who went back to London on the next train!). And Chisholm organized the first performance of [Kaikhosru] Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in Glasgow, played by the composer. He and Sorabji were very great friends. I think now that he exaggerated Sorabji's importance. Erik Chisholm had a shortcoming which I think errs on the side of the positive (though it sounds a contradiction in terms). He promoted the music of his friends. And that even applied to me when we were friends in the early days. And he certainly did a great deal to encourage people to study Sorabji. And, as a young man, I was very impressed by that, because Sorabji had been in the Busoni circle to some extent. Erik Chisholm was really the only composer from Scotland who had a European view. And he was a great gift to South Africa with his openness and his awareness.

CW: *Did Chisholm invite foreign musicians to visit Cape Town?*

RS: Yes. One was Humphrey Searle,¹⁰ the expert on Liszt and a pupil of Webern. But he was a poor lecturer and had a terrible stutter. He was foolish enough to try and demonstrate the piano music of Liszt. He looked down hard at the page, then changed his spectacles, and with a new pair of spectacles, looked even harder at the page, and then began by playing wrong notes! But he was supposed to be the great authority on Liszt. That was very poor indeed!

CW: *Did you talk about composition with Chisholm?*

RS: When we arrived, we stayed with him for a time. And therefore I saw what was on the piano. He was writing operas. He wrote a lot of operas. I don't know if he finished them all. And his method of writing an opera – I'm sorry, this is rather a tale against him – was to stick another opera score on the piano, and go through it, scene by scene, and do the same kind of thing in the opera he was writing. He needed that security. That was his *modus operandi*. I haven't heard any of his operas. He was writing an opera based on Oscar Wilde at the time [*The Importance of Being Earnest*]. It was Chisholm who arranged for the first performance of my *Passacaglia*, and he turned pages for me. He was a terrible turner of pages!

CW: *What was it that made you leave Cape Town?*

RS: That's a very easy question to answer. In South Africa, there was square-bashing, military training at the age of eleven at that time. My son Gordon had been to primary school and was going to go to secondary school. And we knew that when he went, he would have to do military training. That I could not stomach – I would not have anything to do with that. That was the reason why we left South Africa. It wasn't because of myself so much as because of our son. Also, Gordon didn't like learning Afrikaans! He'd had Afrikaans lessons from James May,¹¹ whom he liked, though he just didn't like Afrikaans.

CW: *Was there a particular legacy that your two years in South Africa left you?*

RS: I composed a lot of songs there. The idea of addressing myself to Scottish song I think was probably the influence of Erik Chisholm – though in the aesthetic, not in the actual music. At that time, he was collecting and arranging Scottish folk songs from books in South Africa, and having them published in the Soviet Union. Being in South Africa, I felt the need to keep contact with Scotland, particularly with MacDiarmid. We corresponded, and I set many of his poems to music. And that, I think was, tendentially influenced by Erik Chisholm, though he didn't know MacDiarmid very well, and I don't think he ever set to music any poems by him. The Scottish composer Francis George Scott had done that. Erik Chisholm's second wife Lillias was the daughter of F.G. Scott. For Lillias's sake, he would put on songs by F. G. Scott, but I don't think he was particularly interested. He thought that Scott was a lesser composer. I think that, on the Scottish scene – though that's not saying very much – Scott is a *major* composer. There are some very fine songs.

¹⁰ Searle had a further connection to South Africa in that he taught Graham Newcater, by all accounts the first South African composer to adopt dodecaphony.

¹¹ James May, later professor and (until 2001) Head of Music Department at the University of Cape Town.

MacDiarmid wrote an amazing little book *F.G. Scott*. It's impossible, very polemical and in the worst taste. At his best, MacDiarmid was marvellous and very sensitive. At his worst, he lacked sensitivity. F.G. Scott had set the earlier poems of MacDiarmid. I felt that they had been done once and for all. Some of them are very, very musical. I would say that about three of them are great songs by any standard in the 20th century. I've concentrated on the later MacDiarmid poems. Scott set the early ones. I felt that it's not necessary for me to set the same poems that F.G. Scott set.

CW: *So, in a sense, in South Africa you rediscovered your Scottish roots?*

RS: Yes, it was the perspective it gave me, as they say. And I suppose that Erik Chisholm's presence and the fact that he had written a quite wonderful Scottish piano concerto¹² – I suppose all that went into it.

¹² Chisholm's Piano Concerto No.1, *Pìobaireachd* (which he premièred in Amsterdam in 1933 and, in its revised form, in Edinburgh in 1938) has been recorded by Murray McLachlan and the Kelvin Ensemble on Dunelm Records DRDO 174. For a review, see *Tempo* 219 (January 2002), p.60 (Ed).

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