

The music of Anthony Burgess

by [Paul S. Phillips](#)

Despite his fame as a literary figure, Anthony Burgess has been remarkably unrecognized and underappreciated as a composer. Known to the public almost exclusively as an author, Burgess was also a talented and prolific composer who wrote over 175 musical works during a compositional career that spanned more than 60 years. The literary and musical sides of Burgess's creative life are far more evenly balanced than they appeared in public and to a large degree are interrelated, as future studies of Burgess's books and compositions will be certain to illuminate.

Burgess's music covers a wide range of genres, including symphony, concerto, opera, ballet, and chamber music. His eclectic and ebullient style draws upon classical as well as jazz and popular music. Grounded in the tradition of tonality that spans the Baroque period through late 19th-century Romanticism and early 20th-century French Impressionism, Burgess's music is strongly influenced by the works of Debussy and the English school of Elgar, Delius, Holst, Walton, and Vaughan Williams. Although the majority of his music is what might be termed "serious", he wrote numerous works based on popular styles; sometimes jazz and blues-inflected harmonies reminiscent of Gershwin emerge unexpectedly in Burgess's symphonic compositions.

Often daringly experimental as a novelist, Burgess as a composer was essentially conservative. He often wrote in conventional musical forms, such as sonata and passacaglia, and tended to write traditionally structured works such as four-movement symphonies and three-movement concertos. Burgess had a deep love of polyphony and composed untold amounts of counterpoint; in his autobiography he wrote that each morning he tried "to emulate Bach and compose at least a fugal exposition." Curiosity compelled him to experiment with twelve-tone

music, but his conservative musical tendencies led him no further in the direction of the *avant-garde*

As he wrote in 1982, "I have not finished with the orchestra of Strauss, and I am too old now ever to be ready for the aleatory or the electronic or the Cagean space of silence. I have had enough silence."

Burgess's initial fascination with music was sparked by listening to the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* on his self-made crystal radio in early 1929. The sensuality and originality of Claude Debussy's eight-minute masterpiece made a powerful impression on the twelve-year-old Burgess (actually John Burgess Wilson, as he was known until the age of thirty-nine). As a highly imaginative young man afflicted with daltonism, or colorblindness, Burgess took delight in the evocative blend of orchestral color in the *Prélude*

. "My impaired colour sense was already finding, in the quiet impact of Debussy's orchestra, an auditory compensation." Having heard Debussy's vivid orchestral timbres, he felt compelled to see them as well, and undertook a mostly self-taught study of music notation.

Determined to become a great composer, Burgess worked his way through Handel, Beethoven and Schumann while aiming to be 'modern' like Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Debussy remained his principal influence – "it seemed to me that he was the primal force that charged all musical innovation." One of Burgess's lasting musical memories was attending the premiere of Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande* with his father in November 1929. Lambert's music, like Gershwin's, combined jazz with classical traditions in a way that Burgess himself would undertake nearly five decades later in his *Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra in E flat*.

Burgess came by his musical talent honestly, that is to say, genetically. His mother Elizabeth was a music hall performer known in her native Scotland as the "Beautiful Belle Burgess". She was a dancer and singer, a member of the chorus who rose to the status of soubrette. Burgess's father, Joe Wilson, was a piano player from Manchester who accompanied silent films and played in the orchestra pits of music halls by night while plying such trades as bookkeeper, cashier and tobacco shop manager by day. It was while playing piano in a Glasgow music hall that Joe Wilson first caught sight of the blond, beautiful Elizabeth Burgess "by way of her ankles". By the time Joe returned home to Manchester, Elizabeth had become his wife.

Sadly, Elizabeth Burgess never had an opportunity to pass her knowledge on to her son. He was less than two years old when she and his older sister Muriel, born in 1914, died of Spanish

influenza in the pandemic that struck in early 1919. Knowing her only as an insubstantial memory, Burgess in later life was attracted to fictional characters whose lives bore a resemblance to his deceased mother, especially Molly Bloom, the music hall soubrette who is the principal female character of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Of his mother, Burgess wrote that, "It would be easier to recreate her in fiction, relating her to Molly Bloom and Rosie Driffield, than to wrestle with a virtually non-existent reality." Burgess's lifelong fascination with the book and its heroine culminated in his operetta *Bloom*

ms of Dublin

, a musical version of

Ulysses

that was produced jointly for radio by Radio Telefis Eireann and the BBC for the Joyce centenary in 1982.

The only music lesson Burgess's father ever gave him occurred shortly after the epiphany of hearing the crackling transmission of Debussy' *Faune* over the crystal radio. Just before going off to the neighborhood pub, Joe Wilson pointed out to his son the slow movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in a volume of

The Music Lover's Portfolio

. Pointing to the second theme, he played it on the piano with a cigarette dangling from his lips. "All you have to do is copy it out. That, by the way,' pointing with a nicotined index, 'is middle C. Under the treble stave or over the bass stave, it's still middle C. And here it is on the joanna.' He prodded and it sounded." Armed with the knowledge of middle C bestowed to him by his father, Burgess figured out the rest by himself. His novel

The Pianoplayers

, an homage of sorts, was published in 1986. This novel, which contains a short piece of music for "fiddles" (playing only the open strings) and piano on its final pages, is the rather harrowing story of a child and pianoplaying father. Recalling Burgess's own experience, it includes a detailed description of teaching oneself scales and chords navigated from the fixed star of middle C.

Burgess never aimed to become a concert pianist, eschewing scales and technical exercises in favor of big chords. With a keen ear for jazz, film music and popular song ("I have shameful total recall of all the theme songs of the time"), Burgess in his teens developed into a talented player of 'standards' who "could, at a pinch, find employment as a cocktail pianist." He found the piano useful for learning how to compose, but by the age of seventeen chose no longer to compose at the keyboard. "I realized how valueless the piano is as an aid to orchestral composition. A piano misleads, sets up the wrong sounds in one's head. I ceased to pity Beethoven, Smetana and Fauré for their deafness. Deafness was no great handicap: it shut in sonic realities against the intrusive and impertinent noises of the world."

By the age of eighteen, Burgess had composed a trio for flute, oboe and bassoon, a prelude and fugue for organ, song settings of Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, a setting of lines from Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* for male chorus, a Dead March for orchestra, and his first symphony. This opus, a four-movement work in E major, was composed with the sounds of symphonies by Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and Walton "too much in my ears. My orchestration was Elgarian with Holstian condiments; from *The Planets*

I stole a bass flute, six horns and four trumpets...What was the language of this symphony? A language altogether proper for a young man composing music in England in 1935. Diatonic, swift to modulate, inclined to the modal, Vaughan Williams harmonies, occasional tearing dissonances like someone farting at a teaparty, bland, meditative, with patches of vulgar triumph. Totally English music, hardly able to jump twenty-two miles into Europe."

Failure to pass a course in physics kept Burgess from pursuing music studies in college; music students were to have the knowledge of acoustics that a course in physics was expected to provide. He turned to the department of English instead, earning a B.A. with honors for a thesis on Christopher Marlowe. He continued writing music, however, composing a choral setting of lines from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, a string quartet, twelve-tone studies for piano, *Caedmon's Hymn* for male voices, an Irish song for soprano and flageolet, a piano sonatina, incidental music for Flecker's *Hassan*, words and music for a group of cabaret songs in English and another group in German, a chamber music setting of Eliot's *Lines for an Old Man*, and the draft of *Dr Faustus*, a projected one-act opera, by the time of his graduation from the University of Manchester in 1940.

Burgess's desire to become a major composer continued to be his dominant career aspiration for nearly another two decades. His eventual decision to pursue a career primarily in literature over music left Burgess with an anxiety that, in 1985, continued to distress him: "At the age of thirteen I decided that I was to be a great composer... It was an ambition that only really faded in my late thirties, and sometimes, in my late sixties, it is encouraged to re-emerge...The appreciation...of my [musical] work disturbs me into worrying whether I was wrong in turning to literature and taming an old ambition into a diversion like knitting. I am receiving musical encouragement too late."

Induction into the British Army during World War II did not interrupt Burgess's musical creativity

so much as divert it in the direction of dance and popular music. As musical director of the 54th Division Entertainment Section (1940-43), he wrote and arranged many pieces for dance band. Reassigned to Gibraltar (1943-46), he wrote a *Cello Sonata* in G minor, *Passacaglia* for orchestra,

Gibraltar

Overture for large orchestra, and numerous smaller works.

From 1946-54, Burgess held a series of academic positions in England in Bedford and Banbury, teaching music, speech, drama, English literature and phonetics while beginning to write fiction. (His first novel, *Vision of Battlements*, dates from 1949). Musical works from this period include

Ludus Polytonalis for

recorders,

M

oto Perpetuo

for large orchestra,

Partita

for string orchestra,

Wiegenlied

for piano, and incidental music for

Murder in the Cathedral

(Eliot),

The Ascent of F6

(Auden), and

A Midsummer Night's Dream

(Shakespeare).

As an Education Officer in Malaya and Borneo from 1954-59, he composed Malayan-influenced works such as *Kalau Tuan Mudek Ka-Ulu*: five Malay pantuns for soprano and native instruments; Suite for Small Orchestra of Indians, Chinese and Malays; and his second symphony,

Sinfoni Malaya for orchestra and brass

band. He began writing more seriously in the mid-1950s. With his first major publication, the novel

Time for a Tiger in

1956, he adopted the pseudonym Anthony Burgess, adapted from his confirmation name Anthony and given name John Burgess Wilson.

Following a physical collapse in Borneo, Burgess returned to England in late 1959, was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, and given less than a year to live. Determined to provide an income for his first wife Lynne (née Llewela Isherwood Jones, 1921-1968), he wrote furiously, producing five and a half novels within twelve months, at the end of which time there were no longer any signs of ill health. Now an established author, he continued writing, producing novels, non-fiction, essays, and reviews of literature, television, and drama. As his

fame and reputation as a writer grew, his musical production temporarily declined. The few works he composed in the sixties include *Fantasia* for two recorders and piano, *Concerto* for flute and strings,

Twelve-Tone Polyrhythmics

for piano,

Preludes

for piano,

Passacaglia

for orchestra,

Song of a Northern City

for piano, and

Minuets in E minor

for guitar.

Beginning in the late sixties, Burgess wrote scripts and music for a number of film, television, video and theatre projects: *Will!* (1968), a film musical on the life of William Shakespeare based on his novel

Nothing Like the Sun (music recorded but film

never produced);

Moses the

Lawgiver

(1

973), a TV series starring Burt Lancaster (music rejected by producer Lew Grade); and

The Eyes of New York

(1975), an hour-long video produced by Mondadori (music recorded, video completed but never released). In 1971 he composed the incidental music for an acclaimed production of

Cyrano de Bergerac

, using his translation, at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. He wrote that the \$500 he received for the music, the first income he had ever earned for composing, "thrilled me far more than the far more substantial earnings that would accrue from the play." The success of the production led to a Broadway musical, with book and lyrics by Burgess and music by Michael Lewis.

Cyrano,

starring Christopher Plummer in the title role, opened in New York at the Palace Theatre on May 13, 1973 to mixed reviews. It closed after 49 performances; a cast recording was issued by A&M Records. Other compositions from this period include a choral setting of

Bethlehem Palmtrees

(Lope de Vega, transl. Ezra Pound), a Malay

pantun

for voice, alto flute, and xylophone composed for soprano Cathy Berberian, music for an Italian production of John Osborne's play

The Entertainer,

and a suite for piano duet.

Symphony No. 3 (1974-75) marks a turning point in Burgess's compositional career.

Commissioned in 1974 by conductor James Dixon for the University of Iowa Symphony Orchestra and completed in April 1975, the symphony was premiered in Iowa on October 22, 1975. It was the first public performance of any of Burgess's orchestral works and an overwhelming experience for the composer: "I had written over 30 books, but this was the truly great artistic moment." Doubts about his musical competence, fueled by years of neglect and rejection of his compositions, were dispelled by the successful performance of the symphony. From that point on, Burgess began to compose with a prolificity that would make many a full-time composer proud. That he did so while writing another 30 books and hundreds of reviews, essays, and articles is a phenomenal achievement.

Compositions of the seventies include *Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra in E flat* (1976); three works for chamber ensemble –

The Brides of Enderby

(1977);

The Waste Land

(1978);

Quartet Giovanni Guglielmi

(ca. 1978);

Song for Saint Cecilia's Day

(1978);

Master Coale's Pieces

, for piano (1978);

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

(1979); and

Mr W.S.

– Ballet Suite for Orchestra (1979). A series of works for harmonica written for harmonica virtuosos John Sebastian, Tommy Reilly and Larry Adler, date from these years into the early eighties.

In 1971, Burgess wrote the text for *MND Show*, a "madrigal comedy" based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*;

the music was by Stanley Silverman, a theatre composer he knew from the Guthrie. In 1972, Silverman wrote the music for the Guthrie production of

Oedipus Tyrannus

based on Burgess's translation; subsequently Burgess and Silverman turned the work into a cantata for speaker, chorus and orchestra,

Oedipus the King,

which premiered in New York in 1973. They planned to collaborate on an off-Broadway musical called

Trotsky's in New York!

for which Burgess wrote the text in 1975, but he ended up writing the music for the two-act show himself, completing it around 1979-80. The libretto was later published as one of three

intertwoven plots in
The End of the World News
(1982).

A still grander project occupied Burgess from 1973-82 – *Blooms of Dublin*, a full-length, two-act musical based on

Ulysses

by James Joyce, a writer of enormous influence on Burgess. The musical style of the show stems less from opera than "the tonalities of the music hall", a tradition inherited from both his parents. The radio production of

Blooms of Dublin

was produced in 1982 and broadcast twice – on February 2, Joyce's birthday, and June 16, Bloomsday. To date, no stage production has ever taken place.

Works of the eighties include a *String Quartet* (1980), *Nocturne* for four Bassoons (1980), *A Glasgow Overture*

for orchestra (1981),

In memoriam Princess Grace

for strings (1982),

The Wreck of the Deutschland

(1982), music for the film

A.D.

(1983),

Man Who Has Come Through

(D. H. Lawrence) for tenor and chamber ensemble (1983), an unfinished Symphony (1984),

In Time of Plague

(Nashe) for chorus (1984), 24 Preludes and Fugues –

The Bad-Tempered Electronic Keyboard

(1985), three guitar quartets (1986, '88 & '89), Guitar Concerto (1987),

Mr Burgess's Almanack

for 14 players (1987), Concerto Grosso for guitar quartet and orchestra (1987), Quartet for

Oboe, Violin Viola & Violoncello (1987), A Little Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (1987),

La pioggia nel pineto

(D'Annunzio) for tenor and piano (1988), Concertino for English Horn and Orchestra (1988),

Petite Symphonie pour Strasbourg

(1988),

Meditations and Fugues

for Brass Band (1989),

Marche pour une Révolution 1789-1989

for orchestra (1989), and

A Manchester Overture

for orchestra (1989). He also wrote guitar quartet arrangements of

Oberon

Overture by Weber, "Mercury" from
The Planets
by Holst, and Irish folksongs.

In 1985, Burgess was commissioned by Scottish Opera to write a new libretto for Weber's *Oberon* (1826), replacing the stilted, original English language text of J. R. Planché with an updated story about hijackers and hostages set in the contemporary Middle East. It premiered on October 25, 1986 to generally positive reviews. Burgess's translation of *Carmen* was performed by the English National Opera in 1986. The same year, 25 years after writing the book for which he remained best known, Burgess rewrote *A Clockwork Orange* as "a play with music," restoring the original ending of the novel, which had been omitted from Stanley Kubrick's film (1972), and supplying his own incidental music, based heavily on Beethoven. The play was published in 1986 by Hutchinson and performed, with music, in Bonn. In 1998, it was republished in London by Methuen in a softcover edition that includes a reproduction of Burgess's handwritten manuscript of the incidental music.

Compositions of the nineties include *Quartet for Flute, Oboe, 'Cello and Piano* (1990), the orchestral work

Sinfonietta for Liana

(1990; for his second wife, née Liliana Macellari, whom he married in 1968), and several sonatas for recorder and piano, most of them dedicated to their son, Andrew Burgess Wilson (born 1964), who plays recorders, oboe and English horn. At the time of his death in 1993, Burgess was at work on an Italian version of

Blooms of Dublin

called

I Blum di Dublino

, which was to have been presented in Trieste.

An angular, vigorous style, often dissonant although mostly tonal, characterizes much of Burgess's music – a hybrid of Holst and Hindemith. There is a great deal of counterpoint in his music and few of his large-scale works do not contain fugal passages. Harmonically, his music tends toward dense sonorities often built upon fourths; melodically, fourths also predominate, usually in combination with seconds. His music possesses great rhythmic vitality, sometimes bordering on the symphonic jazz style of Bernstein, and playful exploitation of metrical ambiguity occurs frequently. Most of his pre-1970 compositions are lost, but the few that survive are similar in style to the later works. Extensive passages from early works occasionally turn up

in later compositions, as in the *Preludes* for piano (1964), which serve as source material for the *Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra* (1976). Several manuscripts from the seventies contain lost compositions from the thirties and forties written out from memory, including a keyboard version of *Symphony No. 1* (1935).

Burgess composed away from the keyboard; he sent the score of his *Symphony No. 3* to the conductor "without my having checked a note of it aurally." Works were rarely sketched in advance – even the orchestral works were written directly as full scores without preliminary drafts – and pencils were eschewed in favor of pens. "I have always approached the writing of an orchestral score with a draughtsman's hand and a draughtsman's materials – ruler, black ink, sharp nibs. I have never used a pencil and an eraser, working out each measure thoroughly in my brain before setting it down in ink." He wrote quickly, often completing works (*Master Coale's Pieces* for piano, *Guitar Quartet No. 1*) within a few days, and considered prolificity obligatory. He composed many incidental pieces for friends or family, sometimes writing them out on the spot, and frequently presented brief works as birthday gifts or *pieces d'occasion* . An abundance of extant fugues and contrapuntal sketches support his claim that he wrote at least the exposition of a fugue every morning.

There are lighter works, such as the satirical 'Song by George Mikes and Anthony Burgess's (1983) and *Tango* for piano (1984), as well as the two large-scale theatre works, *Trotsky's in New York!*

and

Blooms of Dublin

, which display his love of popular music and English music hall traditions. His talent as a parodist is evident in his Elizabethan ballet score

Mr W.S.

and Beethovenian score for the Singspiel version of *A Clockwork Orange*

. An accomplished pianist, at parties he would often play popular tunes and cocktail music and, like his father, was adept at improvising silent film accompaniment, as he did for a screening of Fritz Lang's

Metropolis

at the University of Iowa in 1975.

Musical elements figure prominently in many of Burgess's books. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex, a malevolent young

droog

, is inspired to commit acts of violence by listening to Beethoven's

Ninth

. Musical references abound in

Nothing Like the Sun

(1964), a novel about Shakespeare's love life written to celebrate the quatercentenary of the bard's birth. Several novels are structured according to musical form. A. A. DeVitis has written of the correspondences between musical form and literary structure in

The Long Day Wanes

(1965), Burgess's Malayan trilogy, while James Bly perceives the use of sonata form in

Tremor of Intent

(1966). In

Napoleon Symphony

(1974), Burgess set out deliberately to base the structure of the novel on Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, as he explains in

This Man and Music

.

Interrelationships between Burgess's novels and compositions are numerous. *The Eve of Saint Venus*

, originally intended and partially completed as an opera, was transformed into a novella(1964).

The Brides of Enderby

, a song cycle for soprano and chamber ensemble, is a setting of verses from

Inside Mr Enderby

(1963) and

Enderby Outside

(1968) attributed to Burgess's fictional poet-protagonist F. X. Enderby. In

A Clockwork Testament

(1974), Enderby's film treatment of Gerard Manley Hopkins' epic poem

The Wreck of the Deutschland

, transformed into a violent film of the same name, brings fame and notoriety to the poet, parallelling Burgess's experience with

A Clockwork Orange;

in 1982, he completed a setting of the poem for baritone, chorus and orchestra. Toward the end of Burgess's quasi-autobiographical novel

Beard's Roman Women

(1975), two characters listen to a recording of Dryden's 'Song for Saint Cecilia's Day'; in 1978, Burgess composed a setting of the poem for chorus and orchestra.

Rom im Regen,

the title of the German translation of

Beard's Roman Women,

corresponds with a concertino for piano and orchestra titled

Rome in the Rain

The Pianoplayers

(1986), as mentioned earlier, is a tribute to his father, Joe Wilson, a piano-player in pubs and silent movie houses. Portions of

Mozart and the Wolf Gang

(U.S.:

On Mozart

, 1992), Burgess's bicentennial homage to Mozart, were performed as a play with music at the Université de Bourgogne in 1997.

Burgess wrote the scripts for BBC programs on composers Bohuslav Martinu (*The Music of Exile*, 1967) and Igor Stravinsky (1982). Gilbert and Sullivan, Sarasate, and Debussy appear as characters in the short stories collected in

The Devil's Mode

(1989), which also contains "The Cavalier of the Rose", Burgess's version of the story of

Der Rosenkavalier

. Essays and articles on musical subjects were published in

Homage to QWERT YUIOP

(1986; U.S. edition:

But Do Blondes Prefer Gentlemen?

) and

One Man's Chorus

(1998) as well as

The Listener

,
The Musical Times

,
Times Literary Supplement,

Manchester Guardian

,
The New York Times

, and numerous other magazines and newspapers.

The two volumes of Burgess's "confessions", *Little Wilson and Big God* (1986) and *You've Had Your Time*

(1990), are primary sources of information about Burgess's life and music.

This Man and Music

(1982) is a combination of musical autobiography and essays; it includes a work list which, although not error-free, is an important guide to Burgess's compositions.

Contemporary Composers,

published by St. James Press in 1992, contains a brief essay by Brian Morton, an abbreviated list of works, and this comment by Burgess: "As a practising novelist and critic, I must relegate my music to a secondary role that is, as I grow older, becoming possibly primary. My work is hardly known in Britain, but this will soon be remedied. Style? Eclectic."

Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians

contains a short but insightful entry by Nicolas Slonimsky. Although there was no entry on Burgess in the 1980 edition of

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians

, one did appear in the

The New Grove Dictionary of Opera,

and a new entry on Burgess will appear in the second edition of

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians

scheduled to be published in 2001.

Recent live presentations of Burgess's music include performances by the Brown University Orchestra of his *Symphony No. 3* in December 1997 and the U.S. premiere of *In memoriam Princess Grace*

in December 1998. In January 1999, soprano Kathyne Jennings and pianist Paul Phillips gave the world premiere of "Strings" and "Ecce Puer", two James Joyce settings composed in 1982, along with performances of "Under the Greenwood Tree" (Shakespeare) and "The Oxen" (Hardy). The Pioneer Valley Symphony with piano soloist Gary Steigerwalt gave the world premiere of his

Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra in E flat

on February 13, 1999 in Greenfield, Massachusetts. An all-Burgess concert at Brown University on February 26, 1999 included the first performance of

The Brides of Enderby

since 1978,

Nocturne

and

Bergamasque

for oboe and piano, and a number of piano works:

Wiegenlied, Preludes, Schnee in Savosa, Master Coale's Pieces, Brief Suite for Piano, A Scottish Rhapsody,

and

Tango

The manuscripts of most of Burgess's music compositions are located in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas-Austin, which purchased them from Liana Burgess in 1997. Other manuscripts are located at McMaster University in Ontario and in private collections. The only commercial recording of his music currently available is *Burgess: Musique d'un écrivain anglais sur la Riviera*

, a CD of his three guitar quartets performed by the Aïghetta Quartet, which was issued by *Harmonia mundi* in 1996. Burgess's music is published in England by Saga Music and in the U.S. by Barnard Street Music.

[Paul Schuyler Phillips](#) © 1999

