

Michael Berkeley

Composer



“ Berkeley’s brightly-coloured work sounded like a new-minted classic ”

The Independent

Michael Berkeley was born in 1948, the eldest son of the composer Sir Lennox Berkeley and a godson of Benjamin Britten.

He studied composition, singing, and piano at the Royal Academy of Music, but it was not until his late twenties, when he went to study with Richard Rodney Bennett, that Berkeley began to concentrate exclusively on composing. In 1977 he was awarded the Guinness Prize for Composition; two years later he was appointed Associate Composer to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Since then Berkeley’s music has been played all over the globe and by some of the world’s finest musicians.

Major works of the 1980s include *Gregorian Variations* conducted in England and America by Andre Previn; the 1982 oratorio *Or Shall We Die?* to a text specially written by Ian McEwan, and made into a film by Richard Eyre;

For the Savage Messiah, Songs of Awakening Love, composed for Heather Harper and performed at the 1988 Proms; *the Concerto for Organ*; *Keening* for the saxophonist John Harle; *Fierce Tears I* and *Fierce Tears II* for the oboist Nicholas Daniel; the *Quartet Study* and the two pieces for strings, *Coronach* and *Gethsemane fragment*.

The 1990s began with the powerful and expressionist *Concerto for Clarinet* at the Huddersfield Festival while his first opera, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, based on the childhood of Rudyard Kipling, was premiered at the Cheltenham Festival to enormous public and critical acclaim in 1993. It was subsequently broadcast by BBC radio and television and recorded on CD for Chandos. The London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis premièred and took on tour *Secret Garden* and then in August 1998, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a BBC Proms commission, was premièred by the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain under Mstislav Rostropovich.

As part of Berkeley’s tenure as Composer in Association to the BBC National Orchestra of Wales he was commissioned to write three new works, and the second, the *Concerto for Orchestra*, was premièred at the 2005 Proms. This piece, as with most of Berkeley’s significant orchestral work, much of his chamber music and his operas, is available on CD as part of the Chandos Berkeley Edition. His final commission for the National Orchestra of Wales was for chorus and orchestra, a haunting lament written in memory of a young family friend, Gabriel Bailey, and Berkeley’s long-time friend and collaborator, Richard Hickox.

Berkeley’s second opera, *Jane Eyre*, written to David Malouf’s libretto, has been produced in the UK, Australia and America. His third opera, *For You*, was written to a libretto by Ian McEwan and commissioned by Music Theatre Wales. It was released on the Signum label.

In the last few years, Berkeley’s compositions have included an Oboe Quintet *Into the Ravine* for Nicholas Daniel and the Carducci String Quartet and Three *Rilke Sonnets* for Claire Booth and the Nash Ensemble who gave a second performance at the Wigmore Hall.

Michael Berkeley has written incidental music for radio and three film scores: *Captive* (1986),

starring Oliver Reed and Irina Brook, directed by Paul Mayersberg for which he collaborated with The Edge of U2; *Goldeneye* (1991) – a dramatised life of Ian Fleming starring Charles Dance and directed by Don Boyd and another Don Boyd film, *Twenty One* (1991) starring Patsy Kensit and Rufus Sewell.

For ten years from 1995 Michael was Artistic Director of the Cheltenham International Music Festival, where he premiered over a hundred new works and initiated a policy of having a contemporary work in every programme. He built the music programme for the Sydney Festival for three years at the beginning of the millennium and, with Judith Weir and Anthony Payne, jointly directed the Spitalfields Festival in the previous decade. He was the featured composer for the New York Philharmonica. He currently presents Radio 3’s *Private Passions*, which won the Broadcasting Press Guild’s Radio Programme of the Year Award in 1996, and for nine years was Chairman of the Governors of The Royal Ballet until 2012.

Recent commissions have included a new anthem for the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury (*Listen, Listen, O my Child*), Cabaret Songs for Barbara Hannigan and Angela Hewitt, a Motet (*Super Flumina Babylonis*) commissioned by the RVW Trust for the Festival of St Cecilia at Westminster Cathedral and the new Carol for the 2016 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols which was broadcast around the world on Christmas Eve from King’s College, Cambridge. He also wrote two major orchestral scores, a Violin Concerto premiered by Chloe Hanslip at the BBC Proms in 2016 and *Two Farewells* for cello and orchestra for the VIVACELLO Festival in Moscow in 2017. For his 70th birthday in 2018, he was commissioned by Wigmore Hall for a celebration concert by the Britten Sinfonia and writes a new Mass for Wells Cathedral.

Michael was appointed a CBE for services to music in the Queen’s Birthday Honours published on June 16th 2012. In 2013 he was also appointed a non-party political member of the House of Lords. 

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