

## A summary of the Aplvor digitization project (Special Collections, University of Leeds)

The Aplvor collection was acquired in 2001 by Special Collections, University of Leeds, at a time when key doctoral research was being undertaken into the composer's work by Mark Marrington. Encouraged by the fact that an academic institution finally was giving his music serious attention, Aplvor, who was in his eighties at this time, agreed to donate his remaining manuscripts and related musical effects to Special Collections as a means of providing an accessible research source for his work. We are fortunate to possess a complete set of Aplvor's works, which exist in the form of either copies made by the composer or original handwritten MS. The library also possesses excellent holdings of shorthand sketches of works in progress, personal memoirs, autobiographical material, press cuttings, letters etc which give a very rich picture of his life and work.

The current archival project has been funded by Special Collections with principal aim to create in digital form a scholarly resource which can accessed online, featuring specific 'narratives' which introduce key facets of the composer's work. Using scans of manuscripts, audio clips from recordings, examples of Aplvor's writings and reviews of his work, this is intended to offer insight into his music from a number of perspectives, shedding light on his working processes, sources of inspiration for works (particularly art and literature), highlighting major contributions to repertoire (especially opera, ballet, choral works and music for the classical guitar). This will help to position his output in the context British music in general terms as well as provide a basis for future research.

### **Who was Denis Aplvor?**

Aplvor is typically associated with the small circle of British composers that emerged in London during the mid-1930s, which also included names like Humphrey Searle and Elisabeth Lutyens (contemporaries of Walton, Tippett and Britten). He was one of the first British composers to explore modernist composition techniques (particularly serialism) in the early post-war period, preparing the ground for the more radical experiments of such groups as the Manchester School during the 1960s. A medical man (an anaesthetist) by profession, Aplvor retained a distance from the music establishment for much of his career, composing without recourse to the musical dictates of the time. His stylistic decisions were, in and out of step with developments in British music, making his compositions difficult to categorize or contextualize, yet at the same time highly individual and often innovative.

Aplvor's public career reached its peak during the mid-1950s: he achieved his first major breakthrough with a highly original choral-orchestral setting of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1939), which was broadcast by the BBC in 1950. He then proceeded to make his reputation as a composer for the stage, receiving several commissions from the Royal Ballet, of which the most successful was his adaptation of Lorca's play *Blood Wedding* (1953). Aplvor continued to receive commissions and broadcasts of his music from/by the BBC during the 1960s and 1970s (benefitting from the pro-modernist William Glock climate in particular), but by the mid-1980s his work was beginning to fall into obscurity. In recent years there has been a revival of interest in Aplvor's music, marked in particular by an increased frequency of public performances of his smaller chamber and vocal works. Much of Aplvor's music is notable for its drawing on extra-musical sources – literature and art in particular. He is particular known for his adaptations of Lorca plays for opera and ballet and his settings of T. S. Eliot and also composed a number of pieces that were inspired by the work of the painter Paul Klee.

### **Denis Aplvor and the classical guitar**

Of particular interest is the sizeable body of work Aplvor created for the classical guitar which is characterized by a breadth of output found in few British non-guitarist composers, with the notable exception of Peter Maxwell Davies. Aplvor was among the first British composers to write for the classical guitar in the post-war period, alongside Reginald Smith Brindle and John Duarte. Between 1954 and 1991 he produced a substantial body of work for the instrument, including it in a wide variety of solo, chamber and orchestral contexts. Although not a player, he was taught the guitar for a brief period, enabling him to gain insight into the problems of writing for the instrument. He was painstakingly conscientious in this respect, composing music that was always idiomatic and highly knowledgeable of the guitar's colouristic resources without compromising his contemporary style and avoiding the clichés of the then dominant Spanish repertoire. Over the years Aplvor's music attracted the attention of several well-known performers. Julian Bream premiered his *Concertino for Guitar and Orchestra* (1954) in a broadcast by the BBC in 1958 and commissioned Aplvor's first work for solo guitar, the *Variations Op. 29* (1959). Both were subsequently published by Schott. The *Concertino*, undoubtedly the first British guitar concerto of the post-war period, is an exciting showcase for the instrument, displaying a particular debt to Stravinsky in its driving rhythmic character. The *Variations*, performed by Isabel Smith in 1968, are completely serial in conception and yet highly playable.

Aplvor's chamber and orchestral music including the guitar was mainly composed during the 1960s and is particularly influenced by Anton Webern in its often pointillist employment of the timbres of the instrument. Notable pieces written and performed during this period include *Overtones* (1962) (in which Ivor Mairants took the guitar part), *Symphony No. 2* (1963), *Crystals* (1965) and *Ten String Design* (1968).

The early 1970s saw two of Aplvor's new solo works – *Discanti* (1970) and *Saeta* (1972) - published by Angelo Gilardino's company Bèrben, the former piece being premiered by Julian Byzantine in 1971. A second remarkable concerto-like work also emerged during this period, *El Silencio Ondulado* (after Lorca) for guitar and chamber orchestra (1972).

During the early 1980s there was a brief resurgence of interest in Aplvor's music in the guitar world. A number of his works were performed at the Royal Northern College of Music by the young guitarist James Woodrow, including a second reading of the Concertino and the premieres of *El Silencio Ondulado* and the eleven-minute *Sonatina* (1983) for solo guitar. His unusual book *An Introduction to Serial Composition for Guitarists* was published by George Clinton's Musical New Services in 1982, along with ten solo pieces. The most recent performance of an Aplvor guitar work – the brief but haunting *Nocturne* (1985) - was given by Helen Sanderson in 1995.

As well as comprising a unique contribution to the contemporary classical guitar repertoire in its own terms, Aplvor's guitar music when taken as a whole provides an excellent introduction to his musical personality and his stylistic development during the course of his long career. A retrospective recording of selected solo and ensemble works would thus serve a dual purpose in laying the groundwork for both a re-appraisal of British guitar repertoire in the light of these pieces and a general appreciation of this neglected composer's contribution to the landscape of British music.

Mark Marrington, March 2014

Any queries relating to the project or Aplvor's work in general should be addressed to:

Mark Marrington  
Brotherton Fellow  
Special Collections, Brotherton Library  
University of Leeds, LS2 9JT  
E: [m.d.marrington@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:m.d.marrington@leeds.ac.uk)