

ROOTS AND REALISATIONS

The composer Alun Hoddinott in conversation with A. J. Heward Rees



A.J.H.R.: First, a question I've been meaning to ask you for a long time: where does the name Hoddinott come from?

A.H.: It's Flemish originally. I'm told the Hoddinotts came over in the fourteenth century and settled in Somerset. My father's grandfather was a sea-captain and settled in South Wales, so on the paternal side we're only Welsh since about 1900 or so . . . Apparently there is a John Hoddinott buried in Worcester Cathedral, where he was the organist in 1710; he must be of the same family, since the spelling is correct, and it's the right part of the country. I really should follow this up — it would be nice to find a musical ancestor.

A.J.H.R.: I gather you were born in Bargoed but soon moved to Penllergaer, so your roots are mainly in West Glamorgan?

A.H.: Not entirely, because I was about seven when we moved there, where my father was the headmaster of the village school. You see, I started learning the violin when I was very small — three or so I think — and had lessons in Brithdir from Morfydd Meyrick, who still occasionally plays in the BBC Welsh Orchestra — I used to come down to Cardiff to play in Herbert Ware's Junior Orchestra; so I had already had a musical grounding before I left the area. After moving I had lessons from Morgan Lloyd in Swansea, and later piano instruction from his wife Dilys. Then — great step — to Gowerton Grammar School, where Cynwyd Watkins taught music. After that I came up to the University here in 1946, and I've really never left Cardiff since.

A.J.H.R.: Was your family background a musical one?

A.H.: No, not at all. My mother's father was musical, and used to write hymn tunes and that sort of thing, but apart from that there was nothing. But of course I got all the support and encouragement anybody could wish for. As soon as I showed I wanted to play the violin, that was taken care of, and things went on from there.

A.J.H.R.: Your interest was in a stringed instrument from the first, not in the keyboard?

A.H.: Yes, absolutely. I didn't really put a finger on the piano until I was about ten or eleven. I'm sure this has had a great influence on my attitude to music and how I write it. You see I was first brought up on the Italian baroque violin school, Corelli and similar composers. Now if you're a pianist you are given Clementi, Mozart, Haydn and so on; but I skipped out on the Classical period, and I must say I still don't like it very much. Later I was given music of the end of the 19th century, curious composers like Wieniawski — not very good music perhaps, but interesting — and then on to 20th century music. I was playing pieces like *The Lark Ascending* for example at about fourteen.

A.J.H.R.: You joined the National Youth Orchestra of Wales, didn't you?

A.H.: I was in the very first one, in the mid-forties. The course was held in Caerleon and it was quite something for those days, though of course the standards didn't match those of today. Clarence Raybould was a very fine all-round musician. I used to show him the things I was writing at the time, and he used to give me a lot of advice. I switched over to the viola after a year or two in the orchestra, as I developed a large hand with an useful span. One of the things I'm a bit sad about is that I no longer play. I miss chamber music playing, and used to do a lot. Up to my mid-twenties I led the Cardiff Chamber Orchestra... rather a long time ago!

A.J.H.R.: How about your musical contemporaries at school, did they share your interests?

A.H.: Yes except that I seem to remember that I was the only one who actually wanted to write music; many former Gowerton pupils have become performers and musical administrators and that kind of thing.

A.J.H.R.: What sort of music did you hear played as a child?

A.H.: There wasn't a great deal to be heard in fact. After 4'. it was war time and concerts in the area were few and far between. I think it was about 1944 before I actually heard a live professional orchestra in the Brangwyn Hall. It was

definitely a case of "make your own music". There were hardly any records, and not a great deal on the radio. I remember the first broadcast of Bartok's Second Concerto, and also of Vaughan Williams' Fifth Symphony; these stand out in the memory because they were rare events.) That is why we were so fortunate in our school. We simply got together and played our way through the sonata and chamber repertory, and the orchestra was good enough to perform the symphonic works of the Classical period. But it was when I came up to Cardiff that I got to know more and more music. Not so much at the University, though we did perform some adventurous things in the orchestra and choir — one of the first pieces I played in was Holst's Hymn of Jesus and we regularly played a lot of Vaughan Williams. But I was lucky in that a fellow student lived in Cheltenham, and invited a group of us to go over for the Festival, from my first year onwards, I think. That is really where I met people and heard all the new things — a very exciting period. After all, before the war, the names one knew about were Walton and Vaughan Williams and just after it Britten and Tippett were only beginning to make headway in the public arena. As for European music, one heard precious little: Sibelius and some Bartok of course, and a little Stravinsky, that's just about all. It's almost unbelievable the change in musical climate that has taken place since the early fifties.

A.J.H.R.: This is particularly true for Wales, isn't it?

A.H.: Yes, very! For instance I remember going along to the BBC studios sometime in the mid-forties to witness the premiere of Daniel Jones's First Symphony — a real land-mark of the times.

A.J.H.R.: Grace Williams told me that she found the University course insufferably dull.

A.H.: So did I! Writing all those minuets and fugues, Palestrina counterpoint and Bach chorales for three whole years . . . I was not a good student I'm afraid, simply because the teaching at my school had been so good I could do all this already and three more years was as much as I could stand. As soon as I myself came to a position where I could act on it, one of the first things I did was to change the syllabus. But against this must be set the fact that it was a firm grounding, particularly for those who had not been fortunate enough to have had the thorough teaching I had already had; this applied to most people, in what was a small department without the range of instruction available with us now. Indeed in many ways it was advanced and enlightened : for instance Professor Joseph Morgan insisted that we were taught from real scores, not artificial examples in textbooks; so it was Palestrina and William Byrd, not Kitson. That this music wasn't to my taste and that harmony in the style of, let's say, Debussy was not taught, just happened to be my bad luck I suppose . . .

A.J.H.R.: What about the teaching of composition — if indeed such a thing is possible?

A.H.: Well, let's put it like this: if you were a non-composer it was perfectly alright — you were taught imitation composition in certain styles. If on the other hand you were really a composer, it wasn't much use — though one took work along to show and have it commented upon, of course. I think composition is unteachable anyway; you have to learn from other composers. I remember going through many different styles: particularly Debussy, Delius and Vaughan Williams — which I got out of fairly quickly in fact. In that period I think the composers who

then influenced me most were Bartok, Rawsthorne and Hindemith. Theirs was the music we were playing, of course. We didn't come across twelve-note music at all.

A.J.H.R.: You studied with Arthur Benjamin. How did that come about?

A.H.: I met him at Cheltenham. I'd shown my music to the critic Scott Goddard, and he said "You must now show your work to someone who is an established composer." He knew Arthur Benjamin and introduced me. Then Benjamin had a look through my music and I started taking everything to him from then on — about 1948 I think.

A.J.H.R.: In what way did he help you?

A.H.: I don't think he actually liked what I was writing very much, but he taught me the technical things. We used to go through what I'd written and he used to point out what would be more effectively done in a different way. He was pretty infallible in matters of orchestration and was very insistent on the formal aspects of music. He used to try and make me see how everything ought to be derived from cells and patterns and so on. He also broadened my musical knowledge enormously. Being an excellent pianist he often demonstrated compositional techniques from the music of a wide variety of styles and composers at the keyboard — he had a remarkable memory — saying "why don't you try something along the same lines as this", while he played extracts from other people's works or sometimes his own. Also he was very much a composer for the theatre, and was largely responsible for creating my interest in opera.

A.J.H.R.: I suppose he showed you his own scores?

A.H.: Oh yes — we used to look at them together. I spent several periods with him when he was working on his opera *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Tartuffe*, his last one. Then again, I think he was the first composer to be commissioned to write a television opera, called *Mariana*, and he showed me the special kinds of problems he had to cope with. He wrote some film scores too; I remember him working on the music for *Everest*, and that was particularly interesting and instructive. Quite apart from all this he was a man of wide tastes and interests: he collected paintings, for instance, and he had an impressive knowledge of literature. This made him a stimulating person to be with.

A.J.H.R.: Did you find the music of any other particular composer crucial to your development at this period, or later?

A.H.: Well, to a certain extent obviously, I must mention Bartok again, for his structural ideas — the palindromic and 'arch' forms and so on — I learnt a lot from him. Berg also, in his free use of note-rows, always allowing the tonal feeling to be present to a particular degree. In point of fact, while talking about serial music, I don't care for Schoenberg or Webern; I simply don't like the sound of the music itself. And on the subject of likes and dislikes — purely a personal reaction, this — I like Hindemith, for instance and admire Britten very much. Henze, is another composer I like a great deal. But on the whole I tend to like particular works rather than composers themselves. Apart from all this, as far as my own music is concerned, the earliest work which I think is a decent piece is the *Clarinet Concerto*.

A.J.H.R.: This was one of the works that launched you at Cheltenham, wasn't it?

- A.H.: Yes, but although it arrived in Cheltenham in 1954, it was written earlier — unless I'm mistaken I think it was part of my B.Mus. exercise in 1949 — at the end of my student period. Then from 1950 to 1960 I didn't release very much music, I was busy finding a distinctive style and a different kind of idiom. I worked it out for myself by trial and error, having a lot of music performed and then throwing it away. I think I learned something from everything, and having once found, let's say, the parameters of the style, I worked more or less within it, henceforth. I think this then continues right up to Falesâ (1970-74), before there are any signs of real change. After that it's a change which I think of as being in a forward direction, not backwards, into a particular kind of simplified triadic style, but incorporating various other elements. From about the Third Piano Concerto (1966) up to then, almost every piece is serially written, because I found this suited the kind of music which I wanted to write. In fact as far back as the first Nocturne for Orchestra which dates from 1952 — I happened to be looking at it the other day — the tunes are twelve-note in character, instinctively so without being serial. So I find that it really was a process of intensification of the various elements of style and idiom.
- A.J.H.R.: These changes you mention are generally current in much of the most striking music of our day aren't they? People have found certain psychological — even physiological — limitations do apply very significantly when it comes to communication in the arts as a whole. Even electronic music seems to have got nowhere of late, after all the publicity.
- A.H.: Oh yes, absolutely! I can't think of any promising younger composers who are now wedded to electronics. And as you say these limitations have had their eventual influence. In my experience nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the use of the human voice, which has a pretty fundamental role in many of these things. What I find interesting is that younger composers are writing simpler music — they feel they must communicate — and they are turning again to a different kind of diatonicism, or to what I call more triadic harmony
- A.J.H.R.: From your point of view as a teacher, obviously you must find that budding composers are able to get to know much wider variety of music than was the case in your youth How has this affected the situation?
- A.H.: Well, if anything it's more difficult nowadays. because there are so very many different types of sound available - I hesitate to call them styles — that there's such a great deal to get through, and so much more to learn. I often wonder if it's really worth setting exercises in writing in past styles and so on, and yet the basic grounding is essential, I feel, and must be done. I think young composers tend to be far later in finding their own style, but of course if there's an individual voice it does eventually come through. On a technical level, it's not difficult to teach, for example, serial techniques, but it still amounts to a kind of pastiche.
- A.J.H.R.: The universities are playing a much more prominent role as nurturers of composition than used to be the case in the past, don't you think? Then it used to be the specialised colleges, The Royal College or The Royal Academy, mainly. Even people like Vaughan Williams went on to such a place as well as studying in Cambridge, whereas Holst just went to the RCM, and Elgar of course was self-taught.

- A.H.: There was a time when you could go through the list of teachers at many universities and not find a single composer among them; the tide has certainly turned now, and at York for instance every member of the music staff is a composer. I think you'll be hard-pressed to find an university music department without at least one composer now, which is a good thing, except that it's essential to have a balance between the composer, the musicologist and the performer. Looking back, I suppose you could say that Stanford and Hubert Parry, who held positions in both kinds of institutions, were able to give the university tradition of producing composers the first real impetus. But don't forget that performers, especially conductors, are university products too, nowadays. I think one reason for this is the awareness that music is not merely an intellectual discipline; it needs to be performed. These days you can get as much practical music-making in many universities as at any of the colleges.
- A.J.H.R.: To change the subject: do you revise your work a lot?
- A.H.: Well what I tend to do now, really, is to look at a work after it's been performed, to see if anything needs attention then, but not after that. I revise as I'm going along. I find I've never had to do very much other than that. I've been revising some earlier pieces, but this is to thin them out, as it were, not a revision of the music or anything like that. In quite a few early pieces the orchestration was pretty heavy, and I was interested in a large harmonic spread, so that the chording was rather thick, and I also had a fondness (which I still have) for the lower register of instruments.
- A.J.H.R.: Different composers have contrasted ways of writing music — some accumulate ideas and then reject or discard them, paring away at the content, as it were. Others build up by developing ideas, perhaps of a cellular nature. How does it work with you?
- A.H.: I think I rather tend to build up from cellular patterns. But on the other hand I know what the piece is going to sound like; it's a question of filling out the structure.
- A.J.H.R.: Britten said something of the kind didn't he — about having a sort of overall vision of a work, and then needing only to work at details?
- A.H.: Yes, and Hindemith also put it in rather a curious way which I think has misled many people. He said he saw a composition in terms of a visionary landscape, all laid out in his mind. This doesn't mean you've got every note there in front of you in a kind of impossible flash of inspiration, and all you have to do is copy it down. I mean that I know what the piece is going to be about, as it were, in an abstract way.
- A.J.H.R.: Do you consciously think this out, deciding on a shape first?
- A.H.: No, and this is difficult to explain intelligently in words. One knows the kind of piece one wants to write in terms of atmosphere and emotional content, and then the type of structure needed to attain this. But I'd certainly get the sound or the feel of the music in my mind at an early stage. It's a question of working away at the process of putting it into shape. A lot of the work is purely technical, in fact.
- A.J.H.R.: When you are setting words — and of course you've done a great deal of this — choosing and possibly combining and reshaping texts must give extra problems?

A.H.: Finding suitable words is the most difficult thing of all. I'm asked very often to write choral pieces, and it may take me years before I can find the right text for the right piece. And, you know, my problem is that I have to find exactly the right text for me personally — by that I mean that one word, even, in a poem or whatever, will make me not set it to music. This is particularly the case with choral pieces. I feel also that with vocal music one should be able to hear the words, so this means that you're almost limited to a syllabic setting — the minute you cross one syllable with another between voices and parts you blur the meaning. That's one reason why I choose so many Latin texts : few people understand the language nowadays, and it can be read in advance or separately to appreciate the sense, so the problem doesn't arise. I can treat it in a way I would avoid doing with English or Welsh words.

A.J.H.R.: Latin is a more impersonal, almost a monumental language isn't it?

A.H.: Yes indeed. It's a very nice language to work in, I find it a more malleable material. But texts really are a problem. Luckily I've had some collaborators who have been able to give me exactly what I want; I'm thinking of Jon Manchip White, Emyr Humphreys, Christopher Cory and Myfanwy Piper. For example Manchip White provided the words for *Voyagers*, a piece I wrote for the Pendyrus Choir; I wanted several contrasted movements for a work which would have something of the sea in it. He turned up with five poems on seamen voyaging round the world which suited me, particularly as he changed some words which were difficult to set. It's the same with Emyr Humphreys, whom I've found the most congenial modern poet to set to music. I find I've got an instinctive sympathy with what he writes, and the music seems to come very easily with his words. With Myfanwy Piper, on the other hand, she also has the gift for being able to choose an anthology of poetry which appeals instantly to me — she selected the texts for *A Contemplation on Flowers*, for example, which was performed at Fishguard. I asked for words on a particular aspect of living and dying, and she found me three very beautiful poems. I find this a great help.

A.J.H.R.: Do you read a great deal?

A.H.: Yes I'm reading all the time, very rapidly and widely. But, you know, I'm always asking myself if the words can be set, or — with a novel — if it would make an opera, so I don't get the full pleasure I should, I'm sure!

A.J.H.R.: Since you mentioned Jon Manchip White, I'll ask you what became of your joint plan to write the opera *Rawlins White*, about the Cardiff protestant martyr — has that been shelved completely?

A.H. : Oh, by no means. That's exactly the kind of thing that happens when you plan a large work, particularly an opera. I couldn't get on with the libretto he gave me, and before he went to work in America we decided to wait until he'd written a novel on the subject. He must have practically finished it by now, and I think that if we could go on with it, it should make a first class dramatic piece. I must say it would be rather nice to write an opera based on a historical incident which happened locally here in Cardiff.

A.J.H.R.: I'll ask you the obvious question: what attracts you to opera?

- A.H.: I like the combination of theatre and music. if it works properly the combination of words, music, movement, and the range of visual elements can provide an overwhelming experience.
- A.J.H.R.: Isn't there a problem of control for a composer? I mean that you must have an idea how you want your opera to look as well as sound; and all this is at the mercy of so many other people, producer, designer and so on, not to mention singers and of course the conductor. All this is out of your hands at one stage or another, isn't it?
- A.H.: Oh yes! I must say that the only production of any opera of mine that I've ever been remotely happy with was the second one of my children's opera *What the Old Man Does is Always Right*, here in Cardiff. You see, if things aren't done in the way you imagined them, they don't have the impact you've hoped for. The *Trumpet Major* for instance, turned out to be a very beautiful production, too beautiful in fact !
- A.J.H.R.: I remember the production as a series of very attractive tableaux.
- A.H.: But you see, there's a lot of music in it which certainly doesn't aim at a chocolate box effect, because country people of the period portrayed did not lead a life which was consistently pleasant. What was seen on the stage looked too good; it was often at variance with what went on in the orchestra pit.
- A.J.H.R.: This doesn't put you off opera at all?
- A.H.: No, not really. One goes on, you know . . . but it's an immense amount of work, very time-consuming. But by now I'm aware of the various problems, and have learned the techniques.
- A.J.H.R.: The techniques are quite different for television opera, of course.
- A.H.: Totally different. My small opera *The Magician* happens to work on stage as well as on TV, but *The Rajah's Diamond* certainly does not. The trouble with the production of that opera was the mixture of the realistic with the obvious stage sets — a superb and meticulously reproduced interior of a Victorian train, but rather obvious backcloths for Paris street scenes. Filming on location would have been terribly expensive, of course. As indeed is any opera. I'm drawn to the possibilities of full-length opera, with the marvellous opportunities of a large orchestra, but I'm also attracted to the small-scale pieces. For *The Magician* and for the children's opera I only used an orchestra of seven players. This can produce quite enough sound when properly managed. One of the things you learn at an early stage is how a voice, particularly in its lower registers, can be so easily covered and obscured by just two instruments; but with TV opera, as with records, this can be adjusted. This is one of the interesting things, one of the techniques. Then there's the all-important question of timing — down to the second. On stage in opera you have to allow for movement from A to B; on TV this can be done by close-ups, camera work, different sets and so on, all spliced together; you don't have to repeat, and of course there's greater intimacy. Broad themes and broad action are much more successful on the stage.
- A.J.H.R.: Which medium do you prefer?
- A.H.: Oh, the stage. For the moment, at least, I'm disillusioned with television opera, for all its advantages of mass communication. Even the technical advantages can have their drawbacks. If an intimate scene on the stage can look almost comic,

because of the broad gestures and so on, the camera's close-up view of a singer's face can be equally off-putting. But apart from all that, I feel that live performances have so much more to offer. Recorded versions, and broadcast transmissions of the real thing can fall absolutely flat, however excellent the performance in the flesh, and vice versa of course. Mind you, I'd be the last to condemn the marvellous advantages, particularly in the past. Without recordings how else would you or I have got to know a Bruckner symphony, for example? On the whole, however, I'm not entirely persuaded that television music can be all that successful. An orchestra, for example, does not look attractive, and the sound is limited — the acoustic sense you have when you're on the spot is totally lost, not to mention the sense of occasion. Give me a live performance, any day, warts and all!

A.J.H.R.: Are you on tenterhooks if you are present during a performance of your own music?

A.H.: Yes I am rather; and you know the curious thing is, even if it's a piece of mine I haven't looked at for ages, the minute I hear the first bar, I seem to recall it all in detail, and I'm listening for every note.

A.J.H.R.: You've written a substantial number of works on texts of religious character. Is this mainly because of commissions, or the availability of texts, or are you drawn to the underlying ideas?

A.H.: The ideas mainly, I think, I'm particularly drawn to the works of the metaphysical poets and their period, for example. There is a grandeur which provokes an emotional response and triggers off something in my imagination. But you'll find that few of my choral works have actual biblical texts, which I don't find very settable. I have difficulty in writing the occasional anthem, or something of the kind for that reason. Religious poetry is another matter.

A.J.H.R.: Is there another opera in the pipeline?

A.H.: Writing opera is such a physically exhausting business. I'm only just getting over the long months of work on *The Trumpet Major*, and I feel the need to do something rather different, quite apart from the fact that I've got quite a backlog of commissions of various kinds to catch up with. I feel the urge to write more chamber music, which I've rather neglected for a long time.

A.J.H.R.: You haven't written a symphony since your fifth — some time ago now, isn't it?

A.H.: Yes, that's true — since *Falesâ* in fact; but again, having written another four operas in some eight years, there simply hasn't been the time or the opportunity. If I were commissioned perhaps . . . but on the other hand I've been more attracted to orchestral works which don't have the formal associations and requirements of a symphony, as in my *Landscapes* or *Passaggio* for instance.

A.J.H.R.: Do you find deadlines, and the other things that go with commissioning at all inhibiting?

A.H.: A deadline is a good discipline to have — though I often break it! It makes you get down to it, I find. In any case, even if I'm tired, or not in the mood, once I start on something, I soon get engrossed, and I'm scarcely aware of the time spent. I'm forever writing, or correcting proofs and so on. As for commissions, generally I can choose the ones that appeal to me nowadays. Although I often write a piece for the sheer pleasure of it, as I did with a work for solo flute the

other day, with no particular performance in view.

A.J.H.R.: Do you have a set routine for working, such as writing in the mornings and afternoons only, or something like that?

A.H.: No, I just couldn't bear that, I need change, and the stimulus of meeting people and doing things. I work when it's necessary, for hours without a set routine.

A.J.H.R.: Are you able to keep more than one work going, as it were, at a time?

A.H.: No, I couldn't do that, though other composers can. I may have ideas for more than one piece, but I must finish one before I begin writing the other. What has happened lately is that I've been interested in writing works which have material links with each other but the connection is only of personal interest to myself, and not meant to govern performance, or anything of that sort. This applies to certain chamber pieces of mine.

A.J.H.R.: In the physical or technical sense, how do you set about writing your music?

A.H.: There are three or four stages, beginning with a very rough draft, which could consist of a single line plus an odd chord progression, or whatever; then if it is an orchestral piece I make a roughish short score, and any revisions or second thoughts then follow. When it comes to the full score, that's written straight out, generally without any amendments. The business of planning and control of the shape comes earlier. Timing, in large works, is crucially important — this seems to be where many composers go wrong: things have to happen at the right time in a piece, for it to have its effect, and hold together. This is of course an intellectual business, as composing generally is. In any case I enjoy the physical act of writing out the completed work; I like to see the music realised in this way, filling up the page. It's a small pleasure perhaps, but it's one I appreciate!



Alun Hoddinott conducting the University College Cardiff Symphony Orchestra in a performance of his **Quodlibet on Welsh Nursery Tunes** at St.David's Hall, Cardiff in 1985.