

## **LORD BERNERS – A secret romantic?**

### **A personal view**

I have been interested in Lord Berners almost as long as I can remember. At a very young age (this would have been around 1960 when I was six) my brother and I were given a portable gramophone. It had an electric motor but an acoustic pick up with old fashioned needles. Our father passed on to us a pile of old 78s. These were mostly discs he had bought in the 40s and early 50s. We explored these records for ourselves. My introduction to classical music was unconventional. We worked our way through 12 sides of Berlioz' "Symphonie Fantastique", the first symphony I knew as a whole. This was hardly a straightforward introduction to symphonic form, with its excessively romantic Witches Sabbath and March to the Scaffold. There were also 1930s and 40s swing records, Count Basie and others. Many of these records had been bought by my Great Aunt Ethel following detailed instructions in my father's letters from army training or somewhere in Europe after D Day or Palestine after the war.

One set of 78s that stood out as something quite different and odd, even to a six year old's ears, was Sir Thomas Beecham's recording of the suite from Lord Berners' ballet "The Triumph of Neptune."

Who was this Lord Berners? The music was, even on 78s played on that old record player, bizarre and colourful. One movement included a drunken voice singing the old song "The last rose of summer." It was all quaint and slightly disturbing.

By my sixth form days I had discovered Berners' novels. He was, in the late 60s, a virtually forgotten character. The first sign of a small revival interest was a 1970 proms performance of his ballet "A Wedding Bouquet", conducted by another hero of mine, the composer Malcolm Arnold. I was unable to go, though some school friends did, but I was able to get a good recording.

After that I decided to find out more. I wrote to many people who I knew had known Berners, including the composer Sir William Walton, choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton and many others. I had many replies, nearly all of which referred me to Berners' heir Robert Heber-Percy. Robert had been Berners' companion for many years. He was much younger, a handsome and rather crazy character known as "the Mad Boy". After Berners' death he lived in Berners' country house, Faringdon, and added to its eccentricities and delights.

Sir William Walton sent a brief note from Ischia saying that "by an odd coincidence but a few days ago he had had a similar request from a Mr Philip Lane."

Philip Lane has become a valuable supporter of Berners, and has been involved in recordings of the music. Amongst other things he has laboriously transcribed the film music from "The Halfway House" for a superb recording on Chandos.

Sir Harold Acton wrote from Florence (16<sup>th</sup> July 1971):

"How adventurous of you to revive an interest in Lord Berners..."

...I first met him when he was attached to our embassy in Rome as Gerald Tyrwhitt. I was then in my teens but I was impressed by the originality of his apartment. Vast bowls of coloured water, marionettes, pictures of Marchesa Casati, paintings by Balla etc. He was then a pupil of Casella and had composed music for the Teatro dei Piccolo (a puppet theatre). Later I met him more frequently with Lady Cunard and the Sitwells, and stayed with him at Faringdon during and after the war."

Sir John Betjeman wrote a rather tetchy note:

"I don't think I'm the person to help you. I have little knowledge of Lord Berners and I honestly don't know who to suggest you try. Was there some special reason why you wrote to me, had you perhaps heard that I knew him?"

I replied, explaining that I had found stories of Betjeman and Berners in various other writers' autobiographies, including one by Osbert Sitwell. I knew that Betjeman and his wife Penelope had been close friends after they moved to Uffington in the Vale of the White Horse, not far from Faringdon. There is a famous photograph of Penelope Betjeman having tea with Berners and Robert in the drawing room at Faringdon with her white horse Moti standing calmly at the table with them.

I had also had a note from Sir Maurice Bowra, with whom Berners stayed in Oxford during the war saying "Of course I knew Gerald Berners" He apologised for being unwell and advised me to write to Sir John Betjeman. Bowra died two days after writing.

Soon afterwards I received a black and white postcard of a miserable looking caravan site. On the back Betjeman had scrawled "Come to lovely Cornwall" and, in more careful writing, a note:

"I have sent your admirable letter to Robert Heber-Percy Esq of Faringdon House, Berkshire, who can help you more than yours truly John Betjeman."

This gave a very strange impression, as if I was being put through a test..

Sadly, I heard nothing from Berners' heir. Perhaps Robert had no interest in replying to a schoolboy's letters. Or to any letters. I sensed that he was a formidable character. Research of this kind was a very different business forty years ago. Nowadays important discoveries can be made in seconds without leaving your room – if you ask the right questions. Sadly, though, the vital witnesses are no longer there to answer our emails.

At the same time as this, around 1971, several of us at school, all keen composers and, interestingly, none of us actually studying music, formed a “Berners Society”, seeing Berners as a patron saint of amateur composers as well as a figure standing for the eccentric and light hearted. A year later, in 1972, several of us went to a truly extraordinary event, “An Evening of Lord Berners” at the Purcell Room on the South Bank. This was presented by Sir John Betjeman and included most of Berners’ songs and piano music as well as reminiscences and readings from the novels.

If only I had had the nerve I could have introduced myself to some of this astonishing array of characters from the past. It was as if all his surviving friends were there, including Sir Frederick Ashton, Margot Fonteyn, and the dramatic figure of Robert Heber-Percy in dinner jacket, a startling wing collar and bow tie.

Eleven years later my father, as librarian at Bedford, helped organise a Berners centenary exhibition, shared between Bedford Library (where Berners was always featured in their annual Music quiz series) and the Royal Festival Hall. My parents had lunch with Robert Heber-Percy at Faringdon. I never met him, but I did visit the gardens in 1982 and saw the famous fantailed pigeons fluttering about, dyed in pastel colours. At the Festival Hall launch surviving friends appeared again and I found myself standing next to Diana Mosley, originally Mitford. I was two degrees of separation from Hitler.

Lord Berners was born Gerald Tyrwhitt at Apley Park, a gloomy gothic revival house on the River Severn north of Bridgnorth in Shropshire. In his autobiography “First Childhood” he called it “Arley” which has caused confusion since as there is an Arley south of Bridgnorth. Even at the time of the 1983 centenary celebrations the name was generally given wrongly in reference books and articles. I went with my father to photograph the house for the exhibition and found it matched the illustration by Rex Whistler of “Arley” used as a frontispiece to the book. It was good to be able to clarify this one detail of Berners life.

It was his mother’s family home. She was born Julia Foster, daughter of a rich ironmaster who had made his fortune with the railway expansion. His father was a naval officer whom he rarely saw. Gerald’s childhood was Victorian and largely lonely, fostering a rather dark imagination. He was surrounded by eccentric or literally mad relations. It seems that his mother encouraged his artistic interests, even enjoying a funeral march he wrote for her when he was ten. Gerald’s father died in 1907 and his mother remarried very soon after, within a year. In later years, as Mrs Bennitt, she lived at the compact but attractive Faringdon House. She died in 1931, followed five weeks later by her second husband. Faringdon became Berners’ country home.

He seems never to have escaped his Victorian childhood and his Victorian imagination. It provides the nostalgic and fantastic quality of his mature music. There

is, in particular, a description of a Victorian screen, covered in pictures cut from magazines and varnished over, full of surreal juxtapositions.

“Against a background of Swiss mountains, chamois and chalets, glittering humming-birds thrust their rapier-like beaks into the calyxes of tropical flowers. A gigantic green and crimson parakeet appeared to have alighted on the spire of Cologne cathedral...”

This sounds like a key to his imaginative life. Highly coloured birds a recurring theme. He loved these exotic birds which appeared as pets or in pictures but one of earliest interests was ornithology. He knew the different birds that lived in the landscapes around the several houses where he spent his childhood years. Four volumes of British Birds with coloured illustrations were his one personal treasure when he was sent to boarding school.

Apley, with its dense interiors, large cast of family inhabitants and romantic setting, was also the place where he first began to love music. He taught himself to play, clearly very well, after hearing a visitor play Chopin. Chopin’s music became part of the ambience of this house. In his “First Childhood”, which is perhaps his masterpiece, published in 1934, he writes that Chopin’s music, with its associations with Apley, brought “a kind of nostalgia, perhaps for some visionary world built up of pre-natal memories.”

His musical interests did embrace lighter things. When he went to Eton in 1897 he had promised his mother that he would not let his musical interests get in the way of his education. He was already intended for a career in the diplomatic service. He tried to resist the temptation but, according to his second volume of autobiography “A Distant Prospect” he became popular with slightly older boys, “members of the Library” for his performances of music from popular shows of the day. He writes that “I started to practise all the light music I possessed, “The Geisha”, “The Shop Girl” and some of the popular waltzes of the day.”

That this was music that was important to him is shown by his comment that he “knew most of ‘The Geisha’ by heart.” His mother had taken him to see popular shows like this, and “Charley’s Aunt” to sugar the pill of his journeys from home to boarding school. This might have added another quality to his later memories of popular theatre.

The popularity with the older set that his performances produced was misinterpreted by his own contemporaries and led him, still an innocent, to his first understanding of the possible varieties of sexual experience.

Though he was a figure of the modernist cultural circle of the 20s and 30s he was of an older generation than many of its characteristic inhabitants. He enjoyed Victorian traditions of dress, country life. He was, in part a countryman, occasionally even a horseback. He kept a traditional household staff, complete with formal butlers. All

this conservative side of his life was spiced by his own quirky touches, just as he liked to spice old prints of religious scenes or portraits by pasting on the odd naked woman, or moustache.

Berners was always an outsider as far as the musical world was concerned. As Gerald Tyrwhitt, and, as far as he knew, fairly remote from inheriting a title he was prepared for a career in the diplomatic service by travelling to France and Germany to learn the languages. He had no opportunity to study music at one of the London colleges. It's clear from his autobiographies, though they are partly fictionalised, that music was always his driving force. He wanted to be a composer above everything. When he was in Dresden studying German he became a student of Edmund Kretschmer. Kretschmer was an old fashioned teacher, and a link with a much older musical world. He was already an old man. He had been born in 1830 and died only a few years after Berners knew him, in 1908.

Whatever his own musical interests and whatever musical style he was experimenting in he was determined to have some serious and disciplined training. This desire to assure himself that he had a serious grounding in technique never left him. Possibly due to his constant lack of self-confidence he even became a student again while living in Oxford in the 1940s, asking Sir Thomas Armstrong, the organist of Christ Church, to give him lessons in strict counterpoint in the style of Palestrina. This seems as far from his own highly coloured style as he could go. Armstrong was amazed by Berners understanding of the style, how the rules worked and why.

What kind of music did he dream of composing in his early days? He writes about his obsession with Wagner in "A Distant Prospect", his own account of his time at Eton. While in France, after leaving Eton, he would play his first love, Chopin. His descriptions of his studies in Dresden suggest that he had perfectly serious intentions of being a perfectly serious composer. The attraction of Wagner's vast operas seems to have faded. What Berners did write belongs to a very different world but his early music uses very advanced harmony for the time which seems close to the music of the German and Austrian tradition following Wagner, including Arnold Schoenberg who took traditional harmony to the absolute limit before inventing a system of his own that threw traditional harmony out of the window. Many years later Berners wrote:

"He opened up for me the new territory of atonal music but this territory, that at one time seemed almost a promised land, has proved itself infertile, an enclosed, dry, rocky academic valley with no issue."

From the perspective of today this seems a very forward looking view at a time when contemporary music had become dominated by Schoenberg and his heirs. In the 1920s there is no doubt Berners admired Schoenberg. He played his pieces to Siegfried Sassoon. Though Berners may have turned away from the European atonal avant-garde he has to be seen as a composer in that European tradition, with

no links at all to the English mainstream that was emerging at the same time with Vaughan Williams as its figurehead.

And yet much of Berners' own music is very peculiarly English, but in a very different way to the pastoral or visionary world of Vaughan Williams and others.

Berners became honorary attaché in Constantinople and then Rome, an unpaid post for a gentleman of independent means, and was there throughout the First World War. The war, on the whole, was far away, though there was an air of tension behind the music-making and party-going.

In Rome, in 1911, Berners introduced himself to Stravinsky, already a towering and influential figure in modern music. Berners had published no music in 1911. His only surviving unpublished work is an operetta "An Egyptian Princess" which had had privately printed, perhaps for performance when he was at the embassy Constantinople in about 1910. This is in the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition and would probably not have impressed Stravinsky. It seems likely that Berners had written more serious music during his studies in Dresden and his early years in the diplomatic service but none of this is known to have survived. Stravinsky did take him seriously.

Berners and Stravinsky became close friends for the rest of Berners' life. Stravinsky would stay with Berners when in England. His wife supplied the harmless vegetable dyes for the fantail pigeons at Faringdon. They were still there when I visited in 1982, their pastel blue yellow and pink reflecting the colours of the Spring daffodils and hyacinths which grew through the uncut grass. Stravinsky does appear to have valued Berners' music highly, though he was, himself, a fairly inscrutable character. There are curious similarities in their music at times, especially in Stravinsky's later dance music, "Danses Concertantes" and "Scenes de Ballet" where a love of theatre and old-fashioned ballet music comes to the surface but through a harmonic distorting mirror similar to Berners own style.

Siegfried Sassoon met Berners in Rome in October 1921. Berners introduced him to Prince Philip of Hesse, who would become Sassoon's lover for a while. Sassoon remembered Berners, at his home in Rome, reading St Augustine's "Confessions" in bed. This spiritual classic contains a famous account of a vision which Augustine shared with his mother in a garden.

Berners then went on to say:

"What a bloody bore "The City of God" is."

But that is a quite different book. This sounds very much like a joke added as an after-thought to disguise something too revealing. Could there be a thread linking St Augustine and Berners' own youthful experiences?

In June 1922 the poet was at Bray, staying with his elderly admirer Frank Schuster. Schuster was a patron of Elgar who was there too. Later that summer Schuster was back in Europe and he met Berners, and William Walton (who was there with the mutual friends the Sitwells) in Munich. While there he wrote a poem "Clavichord Recital" inspired by Berners' playing on his own Dolmetsch instrument which could fit neatly under the front seat of his car. Whether Berners actually played this while travelling, as is often said, is unknown but if "front seat" means the front passenger seats rather than his chauffeur William Crack's position, this is quite possible. It may sometimes have been placed on, rather than under, the backward facing seat of the large and elegant Rolls Royce. The driver, in his open position, was quite separate from the passengers in the saloon and would have been unaware of what was going on.

Sassoon and his lover, Prince Philip of Hesse, travelled down to Italy in Berners' car.

It was in Rome that Berners became known as a composer. His first published works are all short pieces. They are miniatures, mostly with a touch of bizarre or even grotesque comedy, but written in a very advanced style. The extremely discordant harmony is justified and made palatable by the subject matter. The first set of piano pieces "Fragments Psychologiques" (1916) use this very extreme style of harmony to depict emotional moods. The idea is very clear, hate, laughter, a sigh, so the style of writing is palatable to a listener who would never accept a piano piece by Schoenberg in a similar language. The most successful pieces, becoming relatively well known, are the "Trois Petites Marches Funebres", Three Little Funeral Marches. These are more obviously comic. The first is a pompous march for a statesman, the second for a canary, and the third a fast and lively one for a rich aunt.

The French titles are reminiscent of the music of Erik Satie, who specialised in pieces with surreal titles and sometimes commentaries in the music. Did Berners know these pieces at that time? Satie was not at all pleased when Berners was described as "An English Satie", seeing Berners as an amateur, which he was.

Satie's style, and the tone of his humour, are very different and Berners music developed in a very different direction.

It is very difficult to know what Berners' intentions were at any time in his life. In his own, much later, autobiographies, there is nothing to suggest that he had anything but a serious desire to be a composer. He was, though, always modest in his ambitions, perhaps too modest. If only had had written more music purely for his own pleasure and to satisfy his own sense of vocation – but almost all his music after the mid 1920s was written to commission, as if he would only write when someone else

wanted it. This came, probably, from a serious lack of confidence as a composer, but before 1920 he may have felt differently.

There is always, with Berners, a pragmatic, realistic and practical attitude. There may be eccentric or jokey ideas behind the music and the style may be tinged with strange harmonies and quirky melodies but the execution is always completely professional. This suggests a mind that is not at all eccentric at its root. There might be an element of calculation in these early works.

They are modernistic, but they are understandable by anyone. They show off a serious avant-garde technique in a way that is designed to get them noticed. They are a very carefully considered first step in a career for a composer setting off from a position so removed from the English musical establishment.

Berners was noticed and written about as a result of these early pieces...

They were taken up by the avant-garde world. Berners became a friend of the Italian composer Casella who arranged a selection of them for a small orchestra to make a short ballet for puppets called "L'uomo dai baffi." This puppet ballet is a harbinger of the kind of world Berners music was going to occupy for the rest of his career.

The early Avant grade works have a historical interest and have been studied in more recent years but they are, at least in size and duration, a very small part of his work. Are they the real Berners or a calculated device to launch a career? There is always the sense of a serious face under the joker's mask.

Perhaps at this point Berners had no clear idea of what kind of music he wanted to compose or what kind of feelings he wanted to express. Did this exceptionally shy and sardonic figure have feelings?

Whether he was aware of it or not there are signs of the later Berners even in these early works.

"Valses Bourgeoises" for piano duet is, fundamentally, a parody of waltz composers, Johann Strauss, Richard Strauss (the overblown waltzes of his opera *Der Rosenkavalier*) and the operetta composer Oscar Strauss, with touches of Ravel thrown in. There are two important features, though. The music can't escape actual sentiment. Berners can't help revealing how much he loves the waltz as a dance and an idea. Much later this love of the waltz becomes a characteristic feature in his later ballets, but it was there in 1919. There is also a mysteriously hazy waltz in his "Trois Morceaux" for orchestra.

The exquisite and very camp novelist Roland Firbank picked up this waltz-loving and even romantic Berners as early as this in his novel "Valmouth" published in 1919.

"The maître d'orchestre had struck up a capricious waltz, an enigmatic *au dela* laden air: Lord Berners? Scriabin? Tchaikovski?"

The other feature of *Valses Bourgeoises* is the style of the published score. All the other early works have modernistic or futurist designs on the covers placing Berners in an avant-garde world, but *Valses Bourgeoises* has a deliberately nostalgic cover in the style of Victorian sheet music.

This is the “real” Berners emerging. The element of parody is outweighed by nostalgia. From the mid 1920s all Berners music is inspired by powerful, possibly escapist, desire for a lost world, the visionary nostalgia that he was able to describe vividly in his autobiographies. His modernist harmonies help create an exaggerated and distorted vision of the past. In his early years as a composer he may not have been aware of this tendency, but the seeds were already there. The futurist Berners gave way to the dreamer. His world would be the world of his own earliest memories, of Apley and the Victorian and Edwardian theatre looked back on as magical, glittering with tinsel, with its surreal juxtapositions and transformation scenes recalling the scrapwork screen.

In the early twenties Berners’ composed his largest and most sophisticated work so far, a one act opera “*Le Carrosse du Saint-Sacrement*”. He wrote his own libretto based on a play by Prosper Merimee. Though a comic opera this was a serious piece of work, recognisably in his own style. It was performed in Paris in 24<sup>th</sup> April 1924. The Times called it “an unqualified success” but it was never revived and was not performed again until a BBC recording in the 1990s. It is as if Berners lost confidence after this. He had made a step towards being a serious composer, a European rather than provincial one, but the stress of it was too much. After “*Le Carrosse*” he only composed to commission. There is no sign that he ever composed privately, though there were once rumours of manuscripts hidden under the carpets of Faringdon House.

While working on the opera Berners had come to the notice of the great impresario Serge Diaghilev. Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet had thrilled audiences with its spectacular dancing, designs and promotion of new music. The company was particularly successful in London and Diaghilev wanted a ballet that would be uniquely English. There was some indecision about what this might be. In the end Sacheverell Sitwell, youngest of the Sitwell siblings, came up with the idea of a ballet based on Pollock’s toy theatres. These mid nineteenth century paper cut-out theatres, famously available in black and white for a penny or “tuppence coloured” were still available in the 1920s, and still are today in a revival of the original business. The style is magical, preserving the fantasy and glitter of early nineteenth century pantomime.

Whether consciously or not the ballet may also look back to the completely lost tradition of English ballet that the more sophisticated Russian ballet had replaced, of the shows at The Alhambra which had mixed ballet with fantasy elements from

pantomime and had been popular with audiences who liked colour and a shapely leg well into the Edwardian period – a period that already seemed so far away in 1926. “The Triumph of Neptune” is part of the new iconoclastic frivolity of the twenties while, at the same time, having no trace of 1920s popular music or jazz and looking back longingly into the past.

There are similarities in style with the music of younger composers, including the fascination with what were already very old-fashioned popular styles. A very significant distinction though between Berners and, for example, Poulenc, whose music can sound like Berners at times, is that Berners was that bit older and his nostalgia was based on memory rather than pure fantasy.

This was something uniquely English that was very far removed from the English pastoral musical style of Vaughan Williams and yet equally English.

Though Sitwell is credited with the concept it matched Berners’ own imagination perfectly. The resulting ballet “The Triumph of Neptune” features a fairy Princess, Harlequin, (the slightly sinister hero or anti-hero of many traditional pantomimes) a sailor hero “Tom Tug” and pantomime style spectacles of a Frozen Forest and Cloudland. This gave Berners opportunities for parody, colour, fantasy and an opening into the world of kaleidoscopic nostalgia that had already crept in to his earlier works.

The theatre, and ballet, would be Berners’ musical milieu for the rest of his career.

Berners bought 3 Halkin Street, a smart Georgian style house in Belgravia, in 1931 after his mother’s death. He had previously lived at 3 Chesham Place. He took with him his butler, Herbert Marshall (not to be confused with the suave actor of the same name), and Lydia Lyndon, whom I assume to have been the cook. He clearly enjoyed having a formal household, managed in traditional aristocratic style.

According to Osbert Sitwell:

“On one occasion when my brother Sacheverell, my sister-in-law and I were lunching with Gerald, his stately, gloomy, immense butler, Marshall, entered the dining-room bearing a huge placard. ‘The gentleman outside says will you be good enough to sign this, my Lord.’

“Gerald inspected the placard and wriggled nervously. ‘It wouldn’t be any use, Marshall,’ he exclaimed. ‘He won’t know who I am – probably has never heard of me.’

“It transpired eventually that the placard was ‘An Appeal to God that We May Have Peace in Our Time.’”

Marshall was, it seems, a traditional and imposing butler, but according to William Crack "he'd done a bit of fiddling and he used to drink quite a lot." Berners had to ask Marshall to go in 1932. Marshall advertised for employment in *The Times* in February 1933. His advertisement was successful and his later employer telephoned Lord Berners to say "what do you mean by recommending this man? He drinks like a fish." This story can only have been passed on by Berners himself.

Berners must have written Marshall a "good reference."

Constant Lambert, musical director of Sadlers Wells and conductor of Berners three last ballets, described Halkin Street in the late thirties:

"In the hall busts of generals and statesmen were notably improved by the addition of pantomime masks representing negroes and cats. Half-way up the stairs was a large cage housing a rare and exquisite tropical bird. In the drawing room the piano was littered with an extraordinary heterogenous collection of objects ranging from a fish in copper dating from the renaissance to a beer mug representing the Duke of Windsor which played the National Anthem when lifted. But on the piano desk itself might easily be the latest work of Stravinsky with a dedication by the composer and after tearing one's eyes away from the more facetious objects on the mantelpiece one would be enhanced by an exceptionally fine early Corot, flanked by a Sisley and a Matisse."

Some years earlier Berners had amused his mother by putting his bowler hat over his pet bird and setting bird-animated hat walking across the floor.

In the early thirties he turned away from music. The success of "The Triumph of Neptune" had not led to other projects apart from a short ballet score in 1930 "Luna Park". He may have felt he had passed the brief moment of opportunity to be taken seriously. Both these ballet scores were successful in themselves and had several performances, and there was a recording (the 78s conducted by Beecham) of "The Triumph of Neptune" suite. His "Fantasie Espagnole", an orchestral showpiece that may or may not be intended as a parody of other Spanish style pieces by Rimsky Korsakov, Ravel others, was performed at the proms in ten times between 1919 and 1943. He was by no means an unsuccessful composer but the lack of self confidence made Berners turn to painting and writing.

He was a skilled painter of landscapes and he had successful exhibitions of his modest and attractive pictures. He also published, in 1936, the first of his short fanciful novels, "The Camel", a story of a camel that appears one day in an English village and the effect it has on the lives of the various local characters.

Music would not go away in spite of these distractions. The score of "Luna Park" was taken up by the young dancer and choreographer Frederick Ashton and used for a completely different ballet "Foyer de Danse," The association with Ashton determined the direction of Berners future musical career. Ashton became resident

choreographer of the Sadlers Wells (later Royal) Ballet and Berners was able to compose three new scores for him in which his attraction to a nostalgic old-world theatre could be fulfilled.



The first of his ballets for Frederick Ashton, and the only one to be a lasting success, was “A Wedding Bouquet.”

According to Frederick Ashton the ballet was Berners’s idea. It was an unusual concept, a ballet with chorus, with the words selected by Berners himself from a play by the American writer Gertrude Stein “They must. Be wedded. To their wife.” The setting is a French country wedding at the turn of the century. This may have appealed to Berners for several reasons She was a notorious figure in the arts for her work and her lifestyle. . Stein’s language was extremely eccentric, with endless repetitions and variations of phrases. She lived as a couple with Alice B Toklas. Stein was a heavily built woman in tweeds with cropped hair. Toklas was unassuming and tiny. A collaboration with Stein would be good for publicity. Berners was always interested in promoting his works, at least when lack of confidence ad melancholy had not got the upper hand.

Another appeal of this play was the setting itself.

Even in childhood landscape and place could fill him with

“a yearning after some mysterious ideal, that most intoxicating form of *Sehnsucht*, the yearning of William Blake’s little figure stretching out his ladder to the moon.”

At the end of his life (it was announced as “in preparation” in 1945) Berners wrote a further volume of autobiography which was not published until sixty years later as “The Chateau of Resenlieu.” This describes the teenage Berners’ visit to France to learn the language in 1900, about the time the ballet takes place. The time in France

was an idyllic experience and there are suggestions of romantic and even spiritual awakenings.

“All at once my tranquil enjoyment seemed to swell to a greater intenseness, my senses to be endowed with a magical receptive capacity. It was as if the silvery radiance of the sky, the deep, velvety shadows of the woods, the gleaming surface of the lake, were about to reveal some rapturous significance, some glorious reality hitherto concealed from my normal vision.”

“A Wedding Bouquet” may have begun as an idea for a concert work, without dancing, a kind of cantata or oratorio. The surreal words and undefined plot allowed Berners to give the work a string musical form, building in a waltz, of course, a fugue (suggesting the element of oratorio) and a tango. The chorus sometimes speaks in character, though the words sung include the characters’ names from the play-script. Only occasionally can the audience relate the sung words to the characters or the action, such as it is. The effect is oddly moving. The various characters at the wedding, include the bridegroom, obviously a roué, the forlorn and slightly mad Julia (danced in the first production by Margot Fonteyn), and a dog, Pepe, based on Stein’s own dog.

It is all allusive and delightful. The effect of the work was largely lost when it was revived with a narrator reading the text rather than the chorus, as it was, to save money in the 1940s. “A Wedding Bouquet” works well as a choral work. Unusually for any stage work the composer also designed the settings and costumes in appropriate pastel colours.

When I first heard the work in the 1970 prom broadcast, divorced from the dance aspect, there were moments that struck me as genuinely romantic, completely free of any sense of parody or sarcasm. There is a purely orchestral interlude, in particular, that expands expressively and lushly on music that had earlier set the words:

“They see a river that runs through a marsh

They might think that the mother was unhappy

But not at all, she has hopes for her future.”

No-one would have thought of this in 1937, or even in 1970, but now his beautiful book “The Chateau of Resenlieu”, has been published this music seems to come from the same nostalgic memory and feeling as his reminiscences of his teenage time in France.

“On one bank there was a line of poplars, on the other a clump of willows overhanging the pool with a strip of turf going down to the water where once could lie in the shade....Of these bathing expeditions I retain ecstatic memories, of the air

quivering in the summer heat, the silver luminosity of the sky and the joy of lying naked on the grass and thinking of nothing.”

This reveals a side of this complex man that might have been well hidden for most of his life but could be allowed to appear in the music, even if partially obscured by the theatrical setting. It would be easy to imagine that the reference to the mother might also have touched a sensitive nerve.

The work was composed during in 1936 and first performed at Sadlers Wells in April 1937. Stein and Toklas lived in France and Berners brought them to England for the rehearsals and performance. They would have stayed at Halkin Street.

Stein described the premiere of “A Wedding Bouquet” on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1937:

“...and then gradually it was ending and we went out and on to the stage and there where I never had been with everything in front all dark and we bowing and all of them coming and going and bowing, and then again not only bowing but coming again and then again as if it was everything, it was all over and we went back to sit down.

“I guess it was a great success.”



Berners and Gertrude Stein attempted a collaboration on an opera after the success of “A Wedding Bouquet” but his heart wasn’t in it and it came to nothing. He did complete another ballet for Frederick Ashton in 1939. This was also Berners own idea, and followed a scenario of his own devising “Cupid and Psyche”, inspired by a love of classical mythology which he had had since childhood. Composing to his

own scenario shows that he had an understanding of form and what would work, of both music and dance. When he did have to make changes to suit the dance and action he was, according to Ashton, completely professional. This experience of dramatic form, mood and timing was later useful when he came to write his film scores for "The Halfway House" and "Nicholas Nickleby."

The new ballet was a failure. The Greek myth was to be told in a light hearted style, but the mixture of classicism and farce confused the critics. In particular the appearance of Jupiter in the style of Mussolini was seen as a bad joke. There were, apparently, boos, though other reviews were less critical. The music suggests that the goose-stepping Jupiter was probably Berners's idea (was he thinking of Oswald Mosely?) but in this case the visual design was the work not of the composer himself but Francis Rose, a young protégée of Gertrude Stein.

The music, though, is pure Berners. It is nothing like the cool classicism of Stravinsky's ballets "Orpheus" or "Apollo". Here, again, is the atmosphere of nostalgic nineteenth century theatre, with the usual sentimental waltzes and some very beautiful moments. A less satirical production might have saved it. As often was the case with these ballets time was short and tempers were thin. Spring 1939 was very much the wrong time for frivolity.

As an old friend of Diana Mosley from long before her last marriage, Berners knew the fascist Oswald Mosley well. He even composed a few bars of a fascist march in 1934, but as this is only known in a newspaper article it is probably a joke. Though Berners claimed to have had tea with Hitler on one occasion while in Germany, which may have been a touch of exaggeration – they may have been in the same restaurant - there is no reason to suppose he had much sympathy for Mosley's politics, even though the would-be dictator was, many people said, likeable as a person.

In strong contrast to the Mosleys a new friend, and enthusiast for his music, in 1938 was the American composer and conductor Bernard Herrmann, later the great film composer for Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock. This new acquaintance led Berners to make his only trip to America with Herrmann in 1938. This is hard to imagine – if only I had been there – but Berners is said to have enjoyed a typical Jewish meal with Herrmann's mother in New York.

Back in Halkin Street there were other visitors who reveal evidence that Berners was, privately, an unexpectedly serious supporter of new music and younger composers. In 1933 the young composer Lennox Berkeley had visited Halkin Street to meet his teacher, Nadia Boulanger who was visiting from France and, it appears, staying there. Boulanger was an enormously important influence, teaching many composers in the first half of the twentieth century, including many famous French names but also British and American, including Aaron Copland. At that 1933 visit Berners introduced Berkeley to his own publishers, Chesters.

This was not Nadia Boulanger's only visit to Halkin Street. In 1939 she was there using it as a base for teaching. There may have been others, but the South African born composer Priaux Rainier came there for tutorials. There is a letter to Rainier from Boulanger in the National Archives:

"Shall arrive Sunday morning at 9 and shall give the lessons at Lord Berners' home, 3 Halkin Street, SW1"

This is yet another hint that Berners' musical interests, and perhaps his life as a whole, were more serious than they have often been considered.

After "Cupid and Psyche" time was running out for Halkin Street. Another regular visitor was the photographer and designer Ceil Beaton. According to Hugo Vickers' biography of Beaton, just as Cecil was getting into his bath at Halkin St. on a particular day in September 1939:

"Lord Berners' deaf butler, Nelson, (successor to Marshall) suddenly shouted 'The war has started.'"

Soon after a depressed Berners closed down Halkin Street and moved to Oxford.