

Mark Marrington: Obituary for Denis ApIvor, British composer and doctor, born April 14 1916; died May 27 2004.

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Denis ApIvor, who has died aged 88, helped breathe new life into British ballet music during the 1950s with his often experimental contemporary idiom and willingness to take on unusual subjects.

ApIvor had already demonstrated a strong feeling for the dramatic in the work which first brought him to prominence in 1950, a highly original setting of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, which was broadcast by the BBC under the baton of his friend Constant Lambert. Such was Lambert's enthusiasm for this music that he immediately recommended ApIvor to Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, of which he was then artistic director. ApIvor's first ballet commission, an adaptation of Esther Forbes' *A Mirror for Witches* with the choreographer Andrée Howard, received its premiere at the Royal Opera House in March 1952. The work's horrifying scenario, dealing with witch-burning and devil worship in seventeenth century Brittany, brought forth highly dramatic music from the composer in an often astringent, modern-sounding idiom, which suited the subject matter perfectly. ApIvor's second collaboration with Howard, *The Goodman of Paris* (based on a Medieval tale, *The Ménagier de Paris*), was a less substantial twenty-minute work, first performed under the title, *Vis-à-vis*, in September 1953 by the short-lived Walter Gore Ballet company at the Prince's Theatre in London.

It was ApIvor's musical realisation of Federico García Lorca's tragedy *Blood Wedding*, in 1952, which brought him the greatest critical approval. This time the composer worked with the South African choreographer, Alfred Rodrigues, carefully adapting Lorca's dialogue to produce a ballet of considerable colour and vitality. Once again, ApIvor was not afraid to employ a contemporary language, successfully blending an expressionistic Berg-derived serialism with a hint of Spanishry. Rodrigues's exciting dances and Isabel Lambert's stage décor, which included a striking moon back-cloth, added to the atmosphere. *Blood Wedding* was hugely successful in its day and had the longest run of all ApIvor's ballets. The work toured the UK between 1953 and 1955, visiting, among other places, London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Cardiff, Dublin, Glasgow and Edinburgh. During the early 1960s the ballet was taken up by a number of

independent companies, leading to performances in Copenhagen, Düsseldorf, Münster, Vienna and Gelsenkirchen. It was revived briefly by Covent Garden in May 1968.

ApIvor's fourth work for the stage, *Veneziana*, provided a new departure and a point of contact with the *Commedia dell'arte* and Stravinskian neoclassicism, which had interested the composer since the early 1940s. The ballet, once again choreographed by Howard, consisted of arrangements and orchestrations of music from various operas by Donizetti, including *La Favorita*, *Roberto Devereux*, *La Parisiana*, *Il Castello di Kenilworth* and *Don Sebastiano*. *Veneziana* was first produced by the Sadler's Wells Ballet in London in April 1953 and was later revived for a brief period by the Royal Ballet in 1957.

ApIvor's last commission from the Royal Ballet, and final collaboration with Alfred Rodrigues, was *Saudades*, which was premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool in October 1955. This was a less successful work with the public, perhaps largely due to its uneventful story-line of nostalgic longing, derived from Portuguese legend. The work nonetheless contained some inspired passages of impressionistic music, exotic writing for percussion and notable experimentation with irregular time signatures.

With the end of his association with Sadler's Wells, no new ballet music emerged from ApIvor for more than a decade. In 1968 however, the BBC commissioned him to write his one-act *Corporal Jan*, another story of witchcraft, which was televised in the same year with choreography by Peter Wright. He composed one further ballet in 1977, *Glide the Dark Door Wide*, in collaboration with Janet Randell, which was inspired by Sumerian fertility rituals. At the present time, this work has not yet been performed on the stage, although the music has been privately recorded.

Most of ApIvor's performed ballets were featured in the *Dancing Times* during the 1950s and the composer himself contributed an engaging series of articles to the periodical in 1959, entitled 'The musician's role in ballet'. ApIvor was a long-time friend of the critic Fernau Hall, an admirer of his ballets since the early 1950s. His third wife, Rima Austin, was a ballet mistress with the Carla Rosa Opera company, subsequently teaching with Phyllis Bedells. She also worked for some time in close co-operation with Joan and Rudolf Benesh, founders of the Institute of Choreology. At the time of his death ApIvor was witnessing the beginnings of a general revival of interest in his music, with

major research at the University of Leeds and an increasing frequency of public performances of his works.

Mark Marrington