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# MAN OF PARTS

*The Versatile Genius of Constant Lambert*

CONSTANT LAMBERT is the most popular ballet conductor in Britain to-day. His compositions also command great respect. In this article C. B. REES gives a vivid sketch of this musician



CONSTANT LAMBERT  
"No self-conscious virtuoso"

ALTHOUGH British people are inclined to distrust versatility, this prejudice has not prevented Constant Lambert from establishing himself as one of the outstanding figures in modern British music and music-making. He is amazingly versatile, he composes; he conducts; he criticises. He can talk learnedly about Stravinsky, and enthusiastically about Sousa. He has a genius for writing comic verse as well as for conducting ballet. If, to air your knowledge, you mention a little-known French author, you are likely to find that Lambert knows all about him.

This is all wrong to those who believe that a conductor should only wave a stick, that a composer should only put crotchets and quavers on a piece of paper, and that a critic should only tell both how ineffectual they are. Constant Lambert has not even the grace to look the part. He is no preoccupied brooder, no self-conscious virtuoso. When he comes into a room, his broad shoulders, his high colour, his strong, burly figure at once suggest country life and open air. Yet the truth is that he is a cosmopolitan. He loves the life of the city, the talk, the excitement, the stimulus.

The son of a painter, the late G. W. Lambert, A.R.A., he and his brother, Maurice, a sculptor, were brought up among interesting, unusual people. Bad health prevented Constant, who was born in 1905, from becoming an athlete, but accelerated his journey to the Royal College of Music, to study composition under Vaughan Williams and R. C. Morris, and conducting under Sir Adrian Boult and Dr. Malcolm Sargent. At the age of seven he could play the Beethoven Sonatas, together with much Bach and Mozart.

## Ballet and Film Music

The first composition of his that he thought worth preserving (he says that he had "turned out a lot of crude stuff for the waste-paper basket") is *Prize Flight* (1923, revised in 1925), intended as a music-hall turn and written for a small music hall orchestra. "Ten minutes of sheer rowdiness" he called it. In 1925-26 he wrote the ballets *Romeo and Juliet* and *Pomona*. Introduced to Diaghilev by Edmund Dulac, the painter, he went to Monte Carlo, where he saw his ballet produced by Nijinski, with Lfhar as Romeo and Karsavina as Juliet. Nijinski also produced *Pomona* in Buenos Aires in 1927; while Diaghilev was responsible for the first production of his *Music for Orchestra* and his arrangements of 18th Century music.

Between 1926 and 1929 Lambert was writing about music and films, playing

the piano at a school of dancing, running a bookshop during the proprietor's holidays, and arranging music. His first job as a conductor came from Matheson Lang, at whose request he arranged the music for the films *Jew Süss* and *Elizabeth of England*.

His first big success was *Rio Grande*, for chorus and orchestra, a rhapsody based on modern dance forms, which revealed his mastery in adapting the jazz idiom to serious musical purposes. His Piano Sonata and Piano Concerto confirmed and strengthened his mastery.

## War-time Compositions

His *Summer's Last Will and Testament*—considered by many to be his best work—enhanced his reputation as a creative artist considerably among the discriminating, but it is a woefully neglected work. After the outbreak of the war, Lambert became extremely busy as a conductor, directing the Sadler's Wells Ballet and symphony concerts. In London and the provinces he worked—and still works—like a Trojan. Two significant works have made a considerable impression: *Aubade Heroique* and the *Merchant Seamen Suite*.

*Aubade Heroique* is the result of a thrilling war-time experience when the composer and the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company escaped (only just in time) from Holland as the Germans came in to occupy the country. While waiting anxiously for one of the last boats to leave for England, Lambert was moved by the grim contrast between the calm beauty of the countryside on a sunlit morning and the horrific events then impending.

The *Merchant Seamen Suite* is an eloquent tribute to the contribution made by the sailors to the victory of the Allies.

Lambert played an important part as associate conductor in the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts in the 1945 and 1946 seasons, and conducted opera and ballet at Covent Garden Theatre in 1947. Since the end of the war he has visited Poland and France as composer-conductor and has introduced some interesting modern Polish music to British audiences and in broadcasts for the BBC.

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