

Repertoire guide

Owen Leech provides an introduction to the music of Eleanor Alberga



Eleanor Alberga

Few composers active in Britain today can have taken such an unconventional route to their profession as Jamaica-born Eleanor Alberga. As a small child in Kingston she dreamt of becoming a concert pianist, and fortune amiably conspired to help her on her way; not only did the Jamaican School of Music helpfully move next door when she was ten years old, but her obvious talent ensured that she won the biennial West Indian Associated Board Scholarship in 1970, enabling her to continue her piano studies in London at the Royal Academy of Music.

Thus far, allowing for the exotic Caribbean background, all seems fairly orthodox. However, following the completion of her studies, Alberga's career took some fascinating detours, including a three-year stretch with an authentic African dance company and membership of the Jamaican Folk Singers, in addition to her rather more predictable work as a performing pianist. But it was not until her time as musical director and pianist for the ground-breaking London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT), in the 1980s, that the practical experience of improvising for classes and the constant need for new dance music decisively revealed an irresistible urge to compose.

Unsurprisingly then, Alberga's earliest acknowledged works from the 80s are either dance related (and scored for practical chamber forces) or written for the piano, her own instrument. Among the latter are the piano quintet *Clouds* (1984), commissioned and choreographed by LCDT's distinguished artistic director Robert Cohan, and the propulsive and joyously rhythmic *Dancing with the Shadow* (1990) for mixed sextet including percussion, from which she drew a concert suite the following year. Solo piano works from these years include two that she performed extensively herself: an unashamedly patriotic *Jamaican Medley* (1983), composed for a concert to mark the 21st anniversary of her homeland's independence, and the brief, ebullient *Fizz* (1988) which betrays her enthusiasm for African rhythms.

In fact it is fair to say that rhythm is absolutely central to Alberga's work; she is obviously fascinated by it, and it is tempting in a glib journalistic way to ascribe this both to her Caribbean background and to her involvement with African and contemporary dance. But while all these have almost certainly contributed to the development of her musical language, she is resistant, allergic even, to lazy pigeon-holing and stereotyping on the grounds of race and gender. Although she came relatively late to composition, and although she is largely self-taught, her music is notable for its craft and for its often uncompromising preoccupation with the central 'European' concerns of form and material. Even works with programmatic impulses, such as the moving *No-Man's Land Lullaby* (1997) for violin and piano – which was inspired by the suffering of

soldiers in the First World War – and the recent ensemble pieces *On a Bat's Back I do Fly* (2000) and *Tiger Dream in Forest Green* (2004), are rigorous in their adherence to the ideal of abstract instrumental discourse.

Alberga's ensemble and chamber works are frequently virtuosic, immensely physical and full of the confident communicative gestures of a musician who understands the experience of performance from the inside. In this regard, her three string quartets – two for the Maggini Quartet and one for the Smith – are absolutely typical. Writing about the third quartet, the Maggini's violinist David Angel accurately pinpoints Alberga's invaluable insights as 'a brilliant performer... with an uncanny feel for what can work', even when her demands can initially seem excessive.

In recent years her performing career has been dominated by the duo partnership 'Double Exposure' which she formed with her violinist husband Thomas Bowes, with whom she has toured extensively both home and abroad. Unsurprisingly, she has composed a number of important works for Bowes, including *The Wild Blue Yonder* (1995) and *No-Man's Land Lullaby*, but most notably the intensely dramatic and passionate Violin Concerto, which premiered in 2001 to huge acclaim from audience and critics alike.

Alberga has also contributed challenging and attractive pieces to the first two volumes of Thalia Myers' invaluable *Spectrum* series of contemporary piano miniatures, published by ABRSM in 1996 and 1999 respectively: the rhythmically testing *If the Silver Bird could speak* and the elegantly pithy *Only a wish away*. Myers is the instigator of the Chamber Music Exchange project, administered through the British Music Information Centre, for which Alberga composed *Remember* (2000), a short elegiac movement for string quartet dedicated to the memory of her mother, into which she poignantly weaves the Jamaican folk song *Come back Liza*.

However, the work which will have brought Eleanor Alberga's music to most young listeners is her stunning treatment of Roald Dahl's 'Revolt Rhyme' *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1994) for large orchestra and narrators, commissioned by the Roald Dahl Foundation following the success of Paul Patterson's *Little Red Riding Hood*. This exciting and colourful score makes few concessions to its youthful audience, and the delight with which the composer tackled her first full orchestral work is palpable in the dramatic pacing, detailed textures and sheer quality of invention. As with the other works in this series, there is an excellent recording (featuring the vocal talents of Danny DeVito, Joanna Lumley and Griff Rhys Jones), and a slimmed-down version for chamber ensemble; and the Dahl Foundation also produces educational packs to enhance the fairly frequent live performances.

Alberga's current projects include an opera based on Isabel Allende's *Letters of a Love Betrayed* for the Royal Opera House's 'OperaGenesis' programme, to a libretto by her former *Snow White* collaborator Donald Sturrock. ■

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