

BIOGRAPHY: ELEANOR ALBERGA, Composer, April 2020

With her 2015 Last Night of the Proms opener *ARISE ATHENA!* Eleanor Alberga cemented a reputation as a composer of international stature. Performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Chorus and conducted by Marin Alsop, the work was heard and seen by millions.

Her music is not easy to pigeon-hole. The musical language of her opera *LETTERS OF A LOVE BETRAYED* (2009), premiered at the Royal Opera House's Linbury stage, has drawn comparisons with Berg's *Wozzeck* and Debussy's *Pelleas*, while her lighter works draw more obviously on her Jamaican heritage and time as a singer with the Jamaican Folk Singers and as a member of an African Dance company. But the emotional range of her language, her structural clarity and a fabulously assured technique as an orchestrator have always drawn high praise.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Alberga decided at the age of five to be a concert pianist, though five years later she was already composing works for the piano.

In 1970 she won the biennial Royal Schools of Music Scholarship for the West Indies which she took up at the Royal Academy of Music in London, studying piano and singing. But a budding career as a solo pianist - she was among the 3 finalists in the International Piano Concerto Competition in Dudley, UK in 1974 - was augmented by composition with her arrival at The London Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1978. Under the inspirational leadership of its Artistic Director Robert Cohan, she became one of the very few pianists with the deepest understanding of modern dance and her company class improvisations became the stuff of legend. These in turn led to works commissioned and conceived for dance from the company, most notably the piano quintet *CLOUDS* (1984). Alberga later became the company's Musical Director, conducting, composing and playing on all LCDT's many tours.

The orchestral works, *SUN WARRIOR* (1990) written for the inaugural Women in Music Festival and her dramatic adaptation of Roald Dahl's *SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARVES* (1994) for large symphony orchestra and narrators, premiered at the Royal Festival Hall in 1994 with Franz Welser Möst and the LPO, helped build her growing reputation. In 2001 she was awarded a NESTA Fellowship for composition.

2001 also saw the completion and premiere of a highly praised first *VIOLIN CONCERTO*, written for Thomas Bowes and commissioned by The Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Joseph Swensen. A second violin concerto entitled *NARCISSUS* was premiered in 2020. Also written for Thomas Bowes, it was premiered with the NFM Leopoldinum Orchestra in Wroclaw, Poland and conducted by Joseph Swensen.

Chamber music, both in the more traditional form of three String Quartets and a Piano Quintet, and for more unusual line-ups, abounds. An unfolding series of Nocturnes - notably, *SHINING GATE OF MORPHEUS* and *SUCCUBUS MOON* - featuring horn and oboe respectively with string quartet, is an expanding project. Works for voice have more recently come to the fore with a luminous setting of George Herbert's *THE GLIMPSE* and most recently the song cycle *THE SOUL'S EXPRESSION* to poetry by George Eliot, Emily Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; both premiered by the baritone Jeremy Huw Williams.

Other recent works include *AWED LIGHT ITS CHANT ENTRANCES* for Chorus and piano. It was commissioned by and premiered at the 2019 Dartington Festival with Joanna MacGregor and the festival chorus to text by the poet Alice Oswald. 2019 also saw the completion and premiere of the first portion of a large tripartite piano Sonata *SERAPH*. Entitled *PRESENCE* it was performed by Alberga herself at the 2019 Arcadia Festival.

Alberga now lives in the Herefordshire countryside with her husband the violinist Thomas Bowes and together they have founded and nurtured an original festival - Arcadia. In 2019 a prestigious Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award was presented to Eleanor for composition. This year she is to receive the honour of 'Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music'.