

Prelude and Allegro

An approach to the music and life of Anthony Watson

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In 1960 a composer still in his mid-twenties fulfilled an invitation to write a work for the Alex Lindsay Orchestra of Wellington. The piece was entitled *Prelude and Allegro for Strings*. When performed it exuded a unique feeling of vigour and power, and quickly found a niche in the then small repertoire of regularly played orchestral works written by New Zealanders. The composer of this remarkable piece was Anthony Watson.

Tony Watson was born in 1933, in the country town of Winton in Southland. Part of a large and happy family, he was the only one of his siblings to become a professional musician. His father, Charles Watson, was a keen amateur violinist. After work each day he would come home and play the violin for an hour or more, almost without fail. He seems to have been a natural musician, having taught himself to become proficient on the fiddle to the point where he was able to play the music he wanted to, which was popular dance music. Charles Watson was in demand in the local area as a dance music performer, usually as half of a violin and piano duo.

Tony Watson was the second to youngest of the children, though not all of them were still living at home by the time he was born. It was watching and hearing his father play the violin every day that sparked Tony's interest in the instrument, and naturally enough his father soon began teaching him. It wasn't long, though, before Charles Watson realised his son had outgrown what musical skills he could offer him and also had a talent which warranted further support. So Tony was sent to the Convent in Winton once a week for violin and basic theory lessons from the nuns there. His younger brother Rex used to go with him for piano lessons at the same time. Rex has recalled how they were given train

Anthony Watson playing at a party, c1952.



fares by their parents to make the trip from Centre Bush to Winton and back on the Lumsden Express, but that in fact they often used to walk the six miles each way so that they could spend the money on pies and sweets instead!

Tony Watson took most of his secondary schooling at Southland Boys' High School in Invercargill. He boarded in Invercargill during the week and caught the train home for the weekends. His close friend from high school and university days, Stuart Slater, recalls that Watson hated those weekly train trips to and from Invercargill – the journey became an ordeal of fighting and bullying. Later on he made it into the Rugby First Fifteen of Southland Boys' High School, and that probably curtailed much of the harassment.

At Southland Boys' High School Tony Watson joined the school orchestra. The make-up of this group varied from year to year, depending on which

instruments the boys in it happened to play. In 1948, for instance, it comprised something like six cornets, four clarinets, two first violins, one second violin, no violas, sometimes one cello, and occasionally there would be a piano. According to Stuart Slater, the conductor, Mr Partridge, was rather an unmusical person who conducted with both hands in a very rigorous sort of beat. The orchestra used to play works like *The Valiant Knight* by Charles Woodhouse. These were pieces of sheet music; one page long, in a kind of minuet and trio form, and adapted to virtually any possible arrangement. This was not inspiring fare for a sensitive or thoughtful young musician such as Tony Watson, and such a decrepit repertoire left no trace on his mature compositions. During this time, though, he continued to teach himself more about the real substance of classical music. By now his hero was Beethoven, and this admiration lasted through to the end of his life. In an effort to enlarge the school orchestra's repertoire beyond the adventures of the *Valiant Knight*, Watson daringly volunteered to arrange some Beethoven for the forces available. The offer was accepted, so the school orchestra played the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony no.1 — on six cornets, four clarinets, three violins and so on.

At the end of his sixth-form year, Tony Watson's family moved to Oamaru, necessitating a change of school for him. He began the seventh form at Waitaki Boys' High, but hated it, and left well before the year was out. Douglas Lilburn also attended Waitaki Boys', and apparently found his time there intolerable.

The following year Watson began studies at the Music Department in the University of Otago. During his student years he flatted in the upper floor of a large Dunedin house in the central city with Stuart Slater and students. The owner of the house was a lady called Honora Murphy. She was severe, Australian, and Catholic, with a paranoid personality. She seems to have spent her life in a state of anxiety about the possibility of people breaking into the place or shooting tiles off the roof, and of people giving the place a bad name by having girls in or drinking alcohol. There was an extraordinary notice in the stairwell of this house which read:

NO DRINK OR WESTPORT COAL NOR MUSICAL
INSTRUMENTS MAY BE BROUGHT INTO THE
HOUSE.
NO SMOKING IN THE HALL.
STRICTLY NO WOMEN GUESTS AT ALL.

It is unclear why Westport coal was banned, but Watson was exempted from the prohibition on musical instruments and all three flatmates in the upper floor sneaked copious amounts of alcohol into the house.

While still an undergraduate student, Watson already was drinking heavily. Although no-one realised it at the time — after all, drinking is a traditional student pastime — this was the beginning of an addiction which was to prove catastrophic and eventually destroy him.

In the later 1950s, after finishing music studies at Otago University, Watson worked freelance as violinist, teacher and composer. His first commissioned work to be played in public, and the earliest of his compositions still extant today, was incidental music for a production of the play *Journey's End*, by R.C. Sherriff. Symptomatically, this piece does not appear in any published list of Watson's complete works, such as been the fragmentary nature of information about Watson until now.

This production was directed in 1957 by Patric Carey, recently arrived in Dunedin from Britain. He and his wife Rosalie went on to found the Globe Theatre in Dunedin, and to establish its remarkable reputation. Watson was to work there himself in later years.

Journey's End is set in World War I, so most of the short passages Watson composed reflect the ominous military nature of the action, while there are a few lyrical interludes. To save money, Watson's score was recorded for performances of the play. The City of Invercargill Orchestra made the recording with the composer very likely playing in the violin section.

In 1959 Watson moved from the Otago/Southland area he had always lived in, to Wellington. His aim was to find full-time work as a professional string player. He auditioned unsuccessfully for a position as violinist with the National Orchestra (later to be called the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra), but was advised there was a shortage of good viola players. Accordingly, he went away and practiced the viola hard for a month or two and auditioned again, this time for the viola section. He was successful, and played with the orchestra until resigning to take up the Mozart Fellowship in 1970. During its short life in the early 1960s, he switched from the National Orchestra to the ill-fated Concert Orchestra, re-joining the main orchestra again after its collapse in 1962. So most of Tony Watson's working life was spent in Wellington as an orchestral string player.

In Wellington he lived at first in the inner city area — the Aro Valley and Brooklyn — then moved to Eastbourne with Helen Veitch, whom he had married in September 1959. With Helen he went on to have two children, Charles and Jean. 1959 was a momentous year in other ways too. His String Quartet no.1 was completed. From its first performance it commanded admiration and established him as a major New Zea-

land composer. It had been long in the writing, and is an astonishing tour-de-force for a young composer. The String Quartet no.1 was only his second composition to be presented to the public, but is completely assured and mature. It is incomparably more advanced than the incidental music for *Journey's End*. Somehow, he seemed to have matured artistically in the years 1957-1959.

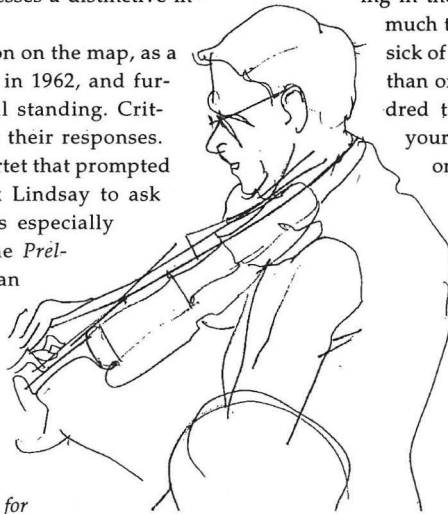
A striking feature of the String Quartet no.1 is the way in which Watson pays homage to his favourite work by his most venerated composer but still manages to write in his own musical voice. Beethoven's *Große Fuge* was a piece of music that fascinated Watson for most of his life. In the First Quartet the Beethoven homage is deliberate and unmistakable, but already the composer's voice also possesses a distinctive individuality.

The First Quartet put Watson on the map, as a composer. A Second followed in 1962, and further enhanced his professional standing. Critics, generally were positive in their responses. It was on hearing the First Quartet that prompted the outstanding violinist Alex Lindsay to ask Watson for a work for strings especially for the Lindsay Orchestra. The *Prelude and Allegro for Strings* was an immediate success.

As a result, Watson's composing career seemed very promising in the early 1960s. Professional musicians believed in him, and several asked him to write works for them. In 1964 he composed the *Concert Piece for Violin and Piano* at the request of violinist Ruth Pearl, and she gave the first performance of it with pianist Margaret Nielsen.

But it was to be 1969 before Watson finished another substantial work. This was a *Sonata for Solo Viola*. The repertoire of solo viola sonatas being rather slim, a new work of high calibre was certain to be welcomed by players, and indeed most of the country's leading violists have tackled it over the years. The Viola Sonata was commissioned not by a performer but by APRA, the Australasian Performing Rights Association, which protects and administers copyright for composers. Watson never played the sonata himself, declaring it was beyond him, and that he would prefer to leave it to the best violists around. He could have played it had he been committed to doing so, but it is extremely challenging for a performer. The late Gavin

Anthony Watson playing the viola, by Michael Smither (1970). Collection of Peter Platt.



Sanders, formerly viola tutor in the Music Department at Victoria University of Wellington, made the first commercial recording of the piece and played it in concert a number of times. He told me that although he liked the Sonata, he didn't play it more than once every two or three years because it was so taxing and took such an enormous amount of practice to master.

Although he was respected as a composer, and could have had his music played relatively easily since he knew so many sympathetic professional players, Watson's output during the 1960s – that is, after the first String Quartet – amounted to only four main pieces. That is very little for a decade. There seem to have been two major reasons why he didn't write more. Most significant were the constant demands of playing in the National Orchestra, including much travelling. Watson became quite sick of the orchestral routine, and more than once remarked that it was a hundred times more rewarding to write your own music than to play someone else's! But with a family to support there seemed no alternative. Secondly, an increasing, and increasingly debilitating, addiction to alcohol may have mitigated against his fulfilling his creative potential from his mid twenties on.

Then, in 1970, the University of Otago for the first time offered a new creative fellowship. This was the Mozart Fellowship, established through the support of Charles Brasch. This is a composer in residence position, and pays the lucky appointee a lecturer's salary to work full-time at composing. There are no other requirements.

For Watson it was a godsend. He resigned from the Orchestra, and with the family moved down to Dunedin. In his first year there he became close friends with the painter Michael Smither (Hodgkins Fellow) and O.E. Middleton (Burns Fellow). However, while the Mozart Fellowship released the composer from the necessity of having to waste his time doing bread-and-butter orchestral playing to earn a living, it could not solve the problem of his advancing alcoholism. It may even be that the good salary and complete freedom offered by the Mozart Fellowship had a deleterious effect on him in the long term. Nevertheless, during his two years as Mozart fellow from 1970 to 1971, Watson composed a number of pieces. His first work in Dunedin saw a return to the theatre.



Patric Carey, at this time driving the Globe Theatre along its amazing course, was busy directing the premieres of James K. Baxter's new plays. In 1970 he was creating *The Temptations of Oedipus*. Baxter was living in Dunedin at this time. Ralph Hotere, who had been Hodgkins Fellow in 1969 and had stayed on in Dunedin as so many ex-fellows do, designed sets, costumes and masks, and at Patric Carey's invitation Tony Watson provided incidental music. Watson provided a wordless chorus to evoke feelings of ominous supernatural intervention in the lives of the characters

Watson's other premiere in 1970 was undoubtedly his most unusual commission, a cantata to celebrate the centenary of the town of Balclutha. In retrospect, Watson seems to be an unlikely choice for this kind of work, which calls for more craft than inspiration. But he created an interesting score which performers enjoyed, and he did this without compromising his artistic integrity, despite writing for non-professionals. Most of his music is very demanding and well beyond the abilities of amateurs. In fulfilling the Balclutha commission, Watson seems to have felt he was repaying the generosity of the Otago region in providing him with the means to be a professional, full-time composer at last. This south eastern corner of the South Island was his homeland as well, and a part of the world he always was attached to.

In 1971 the University appointed Watson to a second year as Mozart Fellow, the maximum term permitted under the regulations. This was to be his most productive year. He wrote a short *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* to a commission for the Dunedin Diocesan Centennial Mass, premiered in St Joseph's Cathedral, Dunedin. There was a lament for voices and instruments composed on the death of Stravinsky, performed as part of

a memorial concert in Dunedin that year. There were three larger works as well: a cantata called *In Memoriam 29th October*, setting texts by left-wing South American poets, Three Bagatelles for string trio and bassoon written for his friend the painter Michael Smither, and most importantly, the String Quartet no.3.

The Third Quartet is so tightly structured that it feels almost desperate at times. It's obsessive and volatile – and can be both rewarding and emotionally

draining in concert. The obsessive, circling, repetitive nature of some of the work reflects, perhaps, a side of Watson's personality which was beginning to overbalance him at this time. His drinking had reached a point where it threatened his health and even his life. He sought professional treatment for alcoholism and managed to stay off drink for a while. But in the end, the addiction was simply too strong, and he returned to it, knowing that it was killing him.

Partway through 1970 he had left his wife and children to live with another woman he had met early that year. He remained with her until his death. It was a supportive partnership, but his alcoholism would have strained any relationship. On the other hand, it would be wrong to imply that he had become hopelessly maudlin or impossibly boorish because of drink. The sparkling Bagatelles for Michael Smither reveal the impish comic spirit he still had.

In 1972 Watson decided to stay on in Dunedin, rather than attempting to return to professional string playing. He was fortunate to have the company of fellow composer Lyell Cresswell and his wife Catherine in Dunedin that year. Tony Watson scratched out a meagre living in 1972 through teaching violin, viola and theory privately. He seems not to have taught composition. This was a year of disintegration for him. Without the financial freedom of the Mozart Fellowship he had to go backwards and do mundane hack work again to make a living. He completed no more significant pieces. Sketches in the Hocken Library Ar-

ABOVE: Anthony Watson at home in Dunedin, 1972.
Photo: Stephen Estall.

OPPOSITE: Tony Watson at Riverton Rocks, 1938.
Photo: May Watson. Collection of Rex Watson.

chive show that he had a number of ideas – some very interesting indeed, and that he started to jot down thoughts about these projects. There was a cello concerto being drafted for Wilfrid Simenauer, and a ballet score based on Kafka's novel *The Trial*. He even had the librettist of the Balclutha Cantata start work on a text for a projected opera called *A Pot of Basil*, based on the grisly poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil* by Keats.

But none of these projects developed very far. It seems that he could no longer muster the will power to maintain the battle with alcohol and discipline himself to creative work. By now he had advanced cirrhosis of the liver, and had been warned by doctors that by continuing to drink at the current rate, he was quite literally killing himself. But there was no way to stop.

In 1973 he advertised for private pupils again, and started teaching as before. But the severity of his illness, depression at the difficulty of existing as a freelance composer in New Zealand in those times, and perhaps a drying up of creativity as well, together seem to have become overwhelming.

On the sixth of March 1973 Tony Watson took his own life. The act was done in a determined way, such that it was highly unlikely anyone would find him before he was dead. He was 39 years old. Lyell Cresswell composed a plangent piece for solo cello called *In Memory of ...* for his friend, and Ralph Hotere commemorated Watson's death with a series of black paintings called *Requiem*.

Tony Watson is without question one of the most original and gifted composers this country has produced. His output is not large overall, but the set of three string quartets form a core of such solidity and importance that his place in New Zealand music history is assured. The quartets are by far the most impressive works in the quartet medium yet written by any New Zealand composer – and that assessment includes comparison with other major figures such as Douglas Lilburn and David Farquhar. They have all now been published, and recorded by the New Zealand String Quartet on compact disc.

As excellent new recordings like this appear, Watson's place in our music history will begin to be properly appreciated. He was a loner. As a composer he was *sui generis*. He was not part of the university composers set, and the supportive network of the Composers' Association of New Zealand did not then exist. Although a friend of Douglas Lilburn and an admirer of his work, Watson did not follow his stylistic lead – nor anyone else's. Watson never travelled outside New Zealand, yet his music is in tune with the international musical trends of his time. He largely taught himself the advanced musical techniques he mastered, and, until the very last year or so, was continually listening

to new music on the radio or records, and kept studying scores to learn new techniques he thought could be of use to him. In many ways his story is a typically old-New Zealand 'do it yourself' one in that regard.

His tragedy is unavoidably linked with incurable alcoholism. Had he been successfully treated, he might very well be alive today. If he were, he'd be 62, and respected as one of our pre-eminent composers. That was not to be, and we're left to be grateful for the music he did manage to complete in the short time he had.

On the southern coast of the South Island is a beach with no official name and not easily accessible to the public. Access to it is through a farm which members of the Watson family have owned and run for many years. The composer's brother and nephew still run it today. During his many visits here, Tony Watson would go across the paddocks and down to the beach. Often, because it's on the edge of Foveaux Strait, the wind blasts this beach, whipping up breakers and sand. It's a lonely, tumultuous situation, and Tony Watson gave it his own name 'Wild Beach'. This became the composer's last resting place. His ashes were scattered there after his death in 1973 and there could be no more appropriate spot for him. His life was as turbulent and restless as the beach he loved, and these same qualities permeate much of his music.

