

Layton Ring (31st July 1922 – 18th February 2019) – An Appreciation

Layton Ring wrote a short article entitled ‘*Some memories of Haslemere*’ in which he reminisced about the 1950s, what he called his ‘golden age’ of discovery, describing the seminal influence the Dolmetsch family and their colleagues had on his career as a player of the harpsichord, clavichord, viol and recorder, as a musicologist and as a teacher of music.¹ This would sustain him for over 60 years, working mostly in North-East England where he and his wife Christine shared their love of early music with professional musicians and amateurs alike.

In the 1930s Layton heard a recording of Wanda Landowska playing J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and realised that the music was far more convincing on the harpsichord than on the piano. He became passionate about early music and its performance on the appropriate instruments. In 1941 Layton acquired Arnold Dolmetsch’s ‘*The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*’ including the Appendix with its musical examples.

From a Royal New Zealand Air Force base in Fiji, Layton wrote to Carl Dolmetsch in 1945 seeking to purchase one of the ‘new’ triangular harpsichords. The Dolmetsch company was still reorganising itself after a period dedicated to the war effort. Keyboard production had not yet restarted, and a 1758 single-manual instrument by Jacob Kirckman was offered instead, for the princely sum of £150. This duly arrived, but, as Layton recounted in a recorded interview, disaster was narrowly averted when he and a colleague intervened just as dock workers were about to insert a crowbar between the case and the lid after it had been unloaded upside-down on the wharf. The instrument was later acquired by the music department of the Victoria University of Wellington and now forms part of the collection of period instruments belonging to the New Zealand School of Music.

William Ring, Layton’s older son, commented that Layton’s foray into the arts (his first degree was in English Literature) was atypical of members of the Ring family. Layton’s father, William Charles Ring, who died in 1950, was a veterinary surgeon with a special interest in horses. He served in the NZ Veterinary Corps during both world wars. W. C. Ring’s grandfather, Charles Ring, had emigrated from the Channel Islands via Tasmania, arriving in New Zealand in 1841 to set up farms, run sheep, and dabble in various ‘gold rushes’ in California and the Coromandel Ranges of New Zealand. Ring made the first commercial gold discovery in New Zealand in 1852.²

Layton’s older brother Calvin, born in 1914, became a noted eye surgeon and Calvin’s son Peter continues in the same profession.

Demobbed from the Air Force and Army Signals Corps, Layton joined the New Zealand Community Arts Service (CAS) as a junior music tutor. CAS was a response to the result of decades of austerity caused by the economic recession of the 1930s and the war-related privations of the early 1940s. As Phillippa Ulenberg explains in her MA thesis, CAS’s role was to organise “tours of music, drama, opera, dance and art exhibitions to smaller centres and isolated rural areas throughout New Zealand,

¹ Early Music, Volume XXVI, Issue 1, February 1998, pp 180-181

² <https://teara.govt.nz/en/gold-and-gold-mining>

and later into Australia.”³ Its models were the English Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) and the Rural Music Schools Movement. Orchestras, ballet and opera companies were newly established and later the Music Federation of New Zealand promoted chamber music throughout the country. To this burgeoning activity Layton brought the promotion of interest in early music, which effect, in the opinion of Ulenburg, “was particularly extensive and long-lasting.”

In 1950, supported by a two-year Government bursary confirmed after his arrival in England, Layton travelled to Haslemere to study early music ‘in all its aspects’ with the Dolmetsch family. His motherly but formidable Northamptonshire-born landlady, Lily Hayes, he shared with Joseph Saxby. Days might be spent learning to maintain harpsichords or to voice and tune recorders in the workshops. Alternatively, instruction from Carl on the recorder, from Nathalie Dolmetsch on the viol, from Dorothy Swainson⁴ on the clavichord, or dancing on Wednesday evenings under the auspices of Mabel Dolmetsch and Nathalie prepared him for his life’s work.

He also met and played with musicians involved in the 1950-1952 Haslemere Festivals, many becoming life-long friends. Layton himself mentions Jean Pougnet, Archie and Anthony Camden, James Whitehead, Alfred Deller and Elizabeth Harwood, but there were many more stretching through to the early 1970s. Travelling up to London, Layton made visits to the British Museum where he rediscovered works by Purcell, Alessandro Scarlatti and Paisible.⁵ He also published his first of three articles in *The Consort*.⁶

Returning to New Zealand in late 1952, and now the proud possessor of a consort of viols, a double manual concert harpsichord, clavichord and handmade recorders, the construction of most in which he had played a part, Layton embarked on a recital tour. His new instruments featured at the annual CAS Cambridge Music School held during the antipodean summer. He participated in a five-week tour of North Island towns staging performances of *La Serva Padrona* by Pergolesi, in which he played the harpsichord and the recorder. He promoted the new Dolmetsch plastic recorders, and invited Carl and Joseph to tour New Zealand, which they did in the autumn of 1953. In the same year Layton helped to found the New Zealand Society of Recorder Players. On a more personal note he became engaged to a young flautist, Christine Kellie and they married in December 1953.

Despite this frenetic activity, Layton missed the Haslemere ‘buzz’. With the help of the Dolmetsch family, he and Christine took the four-week sea journey to England which became their permanent home. Arriving in the late Spring of 1954, and after a short period staying with Carl and his family, they purchased a small house at 35 Lower Street, which from 1867 to 1918 was a public house called ‘The Good Intent’. Later they would move into a purpose-built house, ‘Roundabouts’, in Three Gates Lane.

³ *The Community Arts Service: History and Social Context* (The University of Waikato, 2009)

⁴ Dorothy Swainson studied with Arnold Dolmetsch and was editor of *The Consort*.

⁵ Two, by Purcell and A. Scarlatti, received their first modern performances at the 1952 Haslemere Festival.

⁶ ‘Some Observations on the Henry Watson Music Library’, vol.9, 1952

From 1954 the Rings worked closely with members of the Dolmetsch family. Christine soon became remarkably proficient on the one-keyed flute, learned the recorder, viol and harp.⁷ They both became members of the Haslemere Festival Early Dancers and performed at many annual Haslemere Festivals. They were also part of many recitals involving members of the Dolmetsch family, including those for viol consort at Fenton House. That consort included Nathalie, Ruth Daniells, Dietrich Kessler, Christine, Layton and Kenneth Skeaping.

Layton and Christine taught music too. Marguerite remembers taking harpsichord lessons with Layton, as did her sister Jeanne and their brother Richard and their cousin Tésa, Nathalie's younger daughter. In the late 1950s, Christine with the harpist Anne Forsythe and pianist Mrs Archie Camden (wife of the bassoonist) was engaged by Twickenham Education Committee to give illustrated talks to primary and secondary schools. Layton published his second article in *The Consort*⁸, and became joint editor, with Carl, of the Universal Edition recorder music series *Il Flauto Dolce*.

Layton had fallen in love with the music of William Lawes, which was to become a life-long fixation. As the late Tristram Robson records in his PhD thesis, Layton claimed that in 1956 he had concluded 'that the Irish harp was the instrument intended by Lawes' rather than the triple harp suggested by others.⁹ This was prompted by a comment in Francis Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum*: 'As the Irish Harpe and Base Viall agree well'.¹⁰ Layton was to explore this further in his MA thesis.¹¹ Many years later Layton and Christine travelled to Ireland to see and hear a 'Lawes' Harp, a chromatic double harp of the 17th century, made by Tristram Robson, which would be gifted to the Historical Harp Society of Ireland.

In the Bulletin's previous issue, Simon Waters noted that the move to the North-East was important for the Rings. Mirroring the condition of music in New Zealand after the second world war, as Bill Griffith noted in his history of the Northern Sinfonia, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne 'music and quality of life alike left a lot to be desired and an orchestral concert was something that had to be supplied from outside.'¹²

By the time Layton and Christine moved to Newcastle, accompanied by their first son William, the Northern Sinfonia had established a core of contracted players to which, according to its repertoire, freelancers could be added. In 1962 Layton was appointed the orchestra's harpsichordist, and Christine freelanced as second flute to the principal David Haslam. Others then in the orchestra included the oboeist Anthony Camden and cellist Adam Skeaping. Both had Ring connections through their fathers, the bassoonist Archie Camden (and his wife) and the violinist and viol player Kenneth Skeaping were both regular performers at the Haslemere Festival.

An attempt had been made, before Layton's arrival, to make the Sinfonia's baroque performances more 'historically-aware'. Kenneth Skeaping came up to demonstrate

⁷ Christine's harp was made by Rolf Wilhelm who worked in the Dolmetsch workshops in the 1950s.

⁸ 'Two recent finds in Durham Cathedral Library', vol.13, 1956

⁹ *Irish Harp and Art Music c.1550 – c.1650* (Durham University, 1997)

¹⁰ *Sylva Sylvarum: Or a Natural History in Ten Centuries (1626/7)*

¹¹ 'A Preliminary Inquiry into Continuo Parts of William Lawes for Organ, Harp and Theorbo' (University of Nottingham, 1972)

¹² *Northern Sinfonia: a magic of its own pub*. Northumbria University Press, 2004

baroque string technique and the use of the appropriate bow, but without funds to purchase suitable instruments that idea foundered.

For Chalmers Burns, then director of the Newcastle Bach Choir, and Dean of Music at Kings College, Newcastle, an established local orchestra could be a godsend. In his mordant musical memoirs, the cellist Ian Hampton recounts an occasion when an 'outside' orchestra was engaged for a concert directed by Chalmers who was Ian's mother's cousin.¹³

Booking the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO) for a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Chalmers was approached after the afternoon rehearsal by the orchestra's manager who warned him that, unless the concert started promptly and progressed at a goodly pace, the orchestra was likely to miss the last train back to London. It had been booked for a recording session the following day. Unaware of this, Chalmers had reserved hotel rooms for the whole orchestra. After the intermission, with it clear the performance would overrun, cuts were made 'on the hoof', and with the benefit of a fortuitously late train the players managed to reach London in the early morning. Three days later Chalmers received a bill for the ECO's unused overnight accommodation!

Chalmers' family home was only three miles from Haslemere, and he knew the Dolmetsch family well. He was a governor of The Dolmetsch Foundation. Carl, Layton and Joseph performed with the Newcastle Bach Choir on 9 February 1952. Four years later, Carl, Layton and Joseph were joined by Christine for a Newcastle Bach Choir concert that included Bach cantatas, instrumental concerti by Telemann and Bach and Rubbra's *Fantasia on a theme of Machaut*. Layton and Carl played recorders, Joseph played the harpsichord and Christine played the flute. Chalmers conducted both performances.

Layton enjoyed several years working with the Northern Sinfonia, touring the UK and travelling abroad as the orchestra expanded its horizons. He also toured with some of his colleagues. For example, in September 1963 Layton, Christine and Anthony Camden, billed as the Ring-Camden Trio, performed in Auckland as part of a tour of New Zealand. Unfortunately in late 1968, just as the Rings were moving from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Hexham, Layton was made redundant. Without a regular income, he and Christine plunged into an exhausting schedule of concerts, course tutoring (including courses organised by Durham County Council: weekends at Lambton Castle, and later at Beamish Hall) and private teaching. Christine and Layton later become Vice-Presidents of the Newcastle branch of the Society of Recorder Players.

William Ring estimates that in the first year they gave up to 300 schools concerts in the North-East, and the strain of freelancing was a major reason Layton went to the University of Nottingham for a music-related MA to boost his employability as a member of a college music staff. In 1974 Layton was appointed head of department at the newly established Ulster Polytechnic, set on a green-field campus beside Belfast Lough, and little affected by some of the worst years of the 'Troubles'.

¹³ *Jan in 35 Pieces* pub. The Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ontario, Canada, 2018

Michael Russ ¹⁴ writes: “Layton’s enthusiasms were soon evident to us.” Demonstrations of appropriate dances steps often prefaced performances of Renaissance and Baroque music. On one occasion. Layton and Michael made a special trip to The Early Music Shop in Bradford to purchase viols and a small portative organ, but without the requisite prior approval from the finance department. Michael comments: “while he could be inspirational with students, ... institutional rules and procedures were not considered significant.”

What brought this period to an end, sometime in 1976, was as much the daunting ferry trip and four-hour drive back to Hexham, where Christine and their sons William and Rupert remained, as Layton’s unyielding aversion to institutional politics and bureaucracy. Layton’s successor was another New Zealander, Hilary Bracefield.

The return to England, to the Newcastle College of Art & Technology as a music lecturer, would make life more bearable. As in Belfast, Layton ran viol and recorder classes, and in an echo of his CAS days organised a production of Mozart’s *La Finta Semplice*. His disdain for bureaucracy persisted. David Murray ¹⁵ writes, “He was a complete one-off. Totally eccentric and capable of anything literally. He was very amusing and totally sabotaged rather unpleasant staff meetings by coming out with Latin or Greek quotations.”

But probably more interesting is David’s observation that “he [Layton] encouraged a lot of students who were often weaker students and seemed to get things out of them that the rest of us couldn’t.” And indeed, this talent led him to take part in and organise numerous music courses in the UK and abroad of which their participants have the fondest memories.

NORVIS, founded by Layton and Christine as The Northumbrian Recorder and Viol School in 1971, has grown to encompass lutes, Baroque strings, voices and dance, as well as recorders and viols. Layton and Christine had already spent several years teaching early music in France at the *Semaines musicales internationales d’Amiens* directed by Canon René Reboud. Françoise Deconinck-Brossard, who attended both courses, believes the Amiens experience helped refine their plans for NORVIS, as did Layton’s earlier experiences teaching on the Recorder in Education courses at Roehampton.

Françoise picks out one aspect of NORVIS, the afternoon ‘Choice of delights’, a session that changed every day to ‘broaden the students’ musical and personal experience.’ I remember a recital Layton gave at one of the very early Dolmetsch Summer Schools that was a miniature ‘choice of delights.’ Layton, brandishing an opera hat filled with small pieces of paper, invited in turn members of the assembled throng to take a lucky dip, to select the next topic for the evening. All his favourites were there: clavichord, Delius, early dance, Larkin, Lawes – and in this way, we rambled with him through his obsessions.

¹⁴ Professor Michael Russ, Dean of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield who worked with Layton at the Ulster Polytechnic, has provided a colourful portrait of Layton’s interactions with administration, staff and students.

¹⁵ A former colleague, David Murray, has filled in some details of this period, which ended when Layton retired in 1987 at the age of 65.

Layton's interests were enduring. Sending some poems to Philip Larkin (who was only ten days younger than Layton), he received back characteristically ambiguous encouragement that he should 'publish by all means.' So he did, publishing eight volumes of poetry which are referenced in James Booth's moving obituary published in *About Larkin*. Booth believes that some of Layton's finest poems are 'translations of Greek lyrics, or Horace or Catullus', as well as the 'tetrameter couplets of Fontaine's *Fables*.'

He became infatuated with the music of Delius, orchestrating Delius' Cello Sonata and the Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 3, with guidance from Eric Fenby, Delius' amanuensis. William Ring remembers Fenby coming to stay with the family in Hexham. Layton also arranged works by Delius for recorders and for viols.

He edited and arranged for performance Rudolph Dolmetsch's Concerto for Viola da Gamba and small orchestra, with Jane Ryan as soloist. Jane was the wife of Dietrich Kessler with whom Layton had played in the old Fenton House viol consort days. Layton also encouraged performance of works by young composers: for example, in 1992, Layton conducted the Newcastle Chamber Orchestra in a performance of Stephen Potts' *Romanza* for Violin and orchestra.

Layton was an unashamed aesthete, the scourge of bureaucrats, and the encourager of those who needed encouragement most. One might say that the first was how he was born, the second was how he chose to live his life, and the last will be his legacy.