

Friday July 9 2010 |

Obituaries

# David Fanshawe

Composer and explorer who wrote the bestselling *African Sanctus*, a setting of the Mass based on his recordings of native song

David Fanshawe's business card declared him a "composer and explorer", and his life and music amply bear out this unconventional job description. He achieved international fame in the 1970s with his first major work, the remarkable *African Sanctus*. This substantial setting of the Mass brings together the Western choral tradition with recordings of African traditional music in a thrilling cross-cultural collision. It also incorporates the rhythms and instruments of pop music, and was many years ahead of its time in treating sacred and profane, Western and non-Western, musics as equivalent and equal entities.

While *African Sanctus* is adventurous musically, it gives few hints as to the risks taken in its creation. The work is substantially based on recordings Fanshawe made himself in the field, in some of the most inaccessible and dangerous regions of Africa. Although he did not consider himself an ethnomusicologist, his contribution to that field is immense: on those and later travels he documented a huge range of local music traditions, many of which have since died out.

David Arthur Fanshawe was born in Paignton, Devon, in 1942. His father was a successful artillery officer who played a crucial role in the planning of D-Day, and whose tales of service abroad, particularly in India, gave Fanshawe an early taste for adventure. His first ambition was to be an explorer, but at the choir school of St George's, Windsor, he also discovered a love of music. Severe dyslexia caused him great difficulty, however, and his inability to read a score prevented him from becoming a chorister.

At Stowe School he devoted much of his spare time to playing the piano, and, at 17, he was spotted by a schoolfriend's mother, a French baroness, who realised that he was talented but woefully untutored. She took on his musical education herself, continuing to teach him the piano after he left school in 1959 and went to work as a film editor for a small production company in Wimbledon, southwest London.

In 1965 Fanshawe won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with John Lambert — this despite leaving his harmony paper entirely blank, apart from a note apologising for his inability to answer a single question. He devoted his holidays to exhaustive travels in the Middle East and Europe, spending one summer hitchhiking to Afghanistan. During this journey he heard Islamic music for the first time, and was immediately struck by its beauty and novelty to Western ears. On subsequent travels through Iraq and Bahrain he recorded the traditional music of the peoples he encountered; the chants of the pearl divers of Bahrain provided the basis for a later work, *Salaams*.

When Fanshawe completed his studies in 1969 he set off on a hugely ambitious journey up the River Nile, through Egypt, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. Starting on the Mediterranean seaboard, he took three years to reach his destination, Lake Victoria, travelling by foot, donkey, camel, canoe and barge. He sought out local musicians and persuaded them, whenever



Fanshawe recording the Luo tribe in Kenya in 1973. He travelled by foot, donkey, camel, canoe and barge and on occasion was attacked and imprisoned

possible, to perform for him. Among his few possessions was a small stereo tape recorder, with which he recorded whatever he could.

Fanshawe's progress was fraught with difficulties. Some of the countries he travelled through were in the throes of bloody unrest. He passed through Uganda as Idi Amin came to power, and recorded the traditional Bwala dance of the Acholi tribe just before Amin's genocide nearly wiped them out. In other countries Fanshawe was attacked or imprisoned, and on one occasion he was nearly killed by a black mamba snake. He later took great delight in explaining how his life had been saved by a quick-witted child aged 5 who decapitated it with a spear as it prepared to strike.

Returning from Africa in 1972 with several hundred hours of recordings, Fanshawe set about composing a work which would, in his words, "communicate a message of love, peace and faith in the One God". A key moment for the conception of *African Sanctus* came at the beginning of his journey, in Egypt. Sitting in a Christian church, he heard the muezzin of a nearby mosque calling the faithful to prayer, and suddenly imagined this melodious sound in

counterpoint with Western choral harmony.

The resulting work — originally called *African Revelations* — was first performed at St John's, Smith Square in 1972. Fanshawe also managed to persuade Philips to record it, but it was not until three years later that it reached much wider attention. The composer and documentary-maker Herbert Chappell heard an excerpt from the

## He set out on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific islands

work on the radio, and within an hour had arrived on Fanshawe's doorstep proposing to make a television programme about it. The two men retraced Fanshawe's original journey, trying (largely unsuccessfully) to track down the musicians he had recorded on his original trip. The documentary was nominated for the Prix Italia, and within a few weeks of its broadcast on Easter Day 1975, the LP of *African Sanctus* had become a bestseller.

Over the next 30 years *African Sanctus* was taken up by artists including

the eminent choral conductor Sir David Willcocks, and received well over a thousand performances, from North America to the Far East. Fanshawe often supervised these, sometimes accompanying the work with a slide show of his superb photographs of the musicians he had recorded. In 1994, when the work was recorded for a second time, Fanshawe added an additional movement, the *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

During the 1970s Fanshawe became a prolific and successful composer of film and television music, his work including the score for the 1979 adaptation of *Tarka the Otter*. But travel remained an obsession, and in 1978 he embarked on a ten-year project to collect music from the islands of the Pacific. He spent some time living in Fiji and Australia, and — although often thwarted by local bureaucracy — made several thousand recordings of local musicians. These form the backbone of an enormous archive of world music, the Fanshawe Collections, which at almost 2,000 hours of audio is one of the largest ever assembled.

In 2007 a movement based on this material, *Pacific Song*, was given its premiere in Miami. It was the first

completed section of *Pacific Odyssey*, a choral work Fanshawe conceived on an even greater scale than *African Sanctus*, but which remains incomplete at his death.

A gentle and charming eccentric with infectious enthusiasm for all he did, Fanshawe was a popular figure with a close circle of devoted friends. He was keenly interested in the lives of the musicians he had recorded. Deeply affected by the realisation that many of the Africans he had met between 1969 and 1972 had died not long afterwards through civil unrest or disease, he donated a proportion of his royalties to local Aids charities and hospitals.

Fanshawe was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the West of England in 2007; he was also the recipient of a Churchill Fellowship, and received a nomination for an Ivor Novello award for the recording of *African Sanctus*.

He is survived by his wife, Jane, whom he married in 1985, and by their daughter, and by two children from an earlier marriage.

David Fanshawe, composer, was born on April 19, 1942. He died after a stroke on July 5, 2010, aged 68

Friday July 9 2010 |

Obituaries

# David Fanshawe

Composer and explorer who wrote the bestselling *African Sanctus*, a setting of the Mass based on his recordings of native song

David Fanshawe's business card declared him a "composer and explorer", and his life and music amply bear out this unconventional job description. He achieved international fame in the 1970s with his first major work, the remarkable *African Sanctus*. This substantial setting of the Mass brings together the Western choral tradition with recordings of African traditional music in a thrilling cross-cultural collision. It also incorporates the rhythms and instruments of pop music, and was many years ahead of its time in treating sacred and profane, Western and non-Western, musics as equivalent and equal entities.

While *African Sanctus* is adventurous musically, it gives few hints as to the risks taken in its creation. The work is substantially based on recordings Fanshawe made himself in the field, in some of the most inaccessible and dangerous regions of Africa. Although he did not consider himself an ethnomusicologist, his contribution to that field is immense: on those and later travels he documented a huge range of local music traditions, many of which have since died out.

David Arthur Fanshawe was born in Paignton, Devon, in 1942. His father was a successful artillery officer who played a crucial role in the planning of D-Day, and whose tales of service abroad, particularly in India, gave Fanshawe an early taste for adventure. His first ambition was to be an explorer, but at the choir school of St George's, Windsor, he also discovered a love of music. Severe dyslexia caused him great difficulty, however, and his inability to read a score prevented him from becoming a chorister.

At Stowe School he devoted much of his spare time to playing the piano, and, at 17, he was spotted by a schoolfriend's mother, a French baroness, who realised that he was talented but woefully untutored. She took on his musical education herself, continuing to teach him the piano after he left school in 1959 and went to work as a film editor for a small production company in Wimbledon, southwest London.

In 1965 Fanshawe won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with John Lambert — this despite leaving his harmony paper entirely blank, apart from a note apologising for his inability to answer a single question. He devoted his holidays to exhaustive travels in the Middle East and Europe, spending one summer hitchhiking to Afghanistan. During this journey he heard Islamic music for the first time, and was immediately struck by its beauty and novelty to Western ears. On subsequent travels through Iraq and Bahrain he recorded the traditional music of the peoples he encountered; the chants of the pearl divers of Bahrain provided the basis for a later work, *Salaams*.

When Fanshawe completed his studies in 1969 he set off on a hugely ambitious journey up the River Nile, through Egypt, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. Starting on the Mediterranean seaboard, he took three years to reach his destination, Lake Victoria, travelling by foot, donkey, camel, canoe and barge. He sought out local musicians and persuaded them, whenever



Fanshawe recording the Luo tribe in Kenya in 1973. He travelled by foot, donkey, camel, canoe and barge and on occasion was attacked and imprisoned

possible, to perform for him. Among his few possessions was a small stereo tape recorder, with which he recorded whatever he could.

Fanshawe's progress was fraught with difficulties. Some of the countries he travelled through were in the throes of bloody unrest. He passed through Uganda as Idi Amin came to power, and recorded the traditional Bwala dance of the Acholi tribe just before Amin's genocide nearly wiped them out. In other countries Fanshawe was attacked or imprisoned, and on one occasion he was nearly killed by a black mamba snake. He later took great delight in explaining how his life had been saved by a quick-witted child aged 5 who decapitated it with a spear as it prepared to strike.

Returning from Africa in 1972 with several hundred hours of recordings, Fanshawe set about composing a work which would, in his words, "communicate a message of love, peace and faith in the One God". A key moment for the conception of *African Sanctus* came at the beginning of his journey, in Egypt. Sitting in a Christian church, he heard the muezzin of a nearby mosque calling the faithful to prayer, and suddenly imagined this melodious sound in

counterpoint with Western choral harmony.

The resulting work — originally called *African Revelations* — was first performed at St John's, Smith Square in 1972. Fanshawe also managed to persuade Philips to record it, but it was not until three years later that it reached much wider attention. The composer and documentary-maker Herbert Chappell heard an excerpt from the

## He set out on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific islands

work on the radio, and within an hour had arrived on Fanshawe's doorstep proposing to make a television programme about it. The two men retraced Fanshawe's original journey, trying (largely unsuccessfully) to track down the musicians he had recorded on his original trip. The documentary was nominated for the Prix Italia, and within a few weeks of its broadcast on Easter Day 1975, the LP of *African Sanctus* had become a bestseller.

Over the next 30 years *African Sanctus* was taken up by artists including

the eminent choral conductor Sir David Willcocks, and received well over a thousand performances, from North America to the Far East. Fanshawe often supervised these, sometimes accompanying the work with a slide show of his superb photographs of the musicians he had recorded. In 1994, when the work was recorded for a second time, Fanshawe added an additional movement, the *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

During the 1970s Fanshawe became a prolific and successful composer of film and television music, his work including the score for the 1979 adaptation of *Tarka the Otter*. But travel remained an obsession, and in 1978 he embarked on a ten-year project to collect music from the islands of the Pacific. He spent some time living in Fiji and Australia, and — although often thwarted by local bureaucracy — made several thousand recordings of local musicians. These form the backbone of an enormous archive of world music, the Fanshawe Collections, which at almost 2,000 hours of audio is one of the largest ever assembled.

In 2007 a movement based on this material, *Pacific Song*, was given its premiere in Miami. It was the first

completed section of *Pacific Odyssey*, a choral work Fanshawe conceived on an even greater scale than *African Sanctus*, but which remains incomplete at his death.

A gentle and charming eccentric with infectious enthusiasm for all he did, Fanshawe was a popular figure with a close circle of devoted friends. He was keenly interested in the lives of the musicians he had recorded. Deeply affected by the realisation that many of the Africans he had met between 1969 and 1972 had died not long afterwards through civil unrest or disease, he donated a proportion of his royalties to local Aids charities and hospitals.

Fanshawe was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the West of England in 2007; he was also the recipient of a Churchill Fellowship, and received a nomination for an Ivor Novello award for the recording of *African Sanctus*.

He is survived by his wife, Jane, whom he married in 1985, and by their daughter, and by two children from an earlier marriage.

David Fanshawe, composer, was born on April 19, 1942. He died after a stroke on July 5, 2010, aged 68