# A voyage around my father

Julian Lloyd Webber pays tribute to a great composer he feels has been criminally neglected.

Family portrait of William Lloyd Webber: loathed anything to do with the 'business' side of music

'Music as sensuous as any you will find by a British composer." So wrote Edward Greenfield, reviewing my father's orchestral tone poem Aurora - the first recording of any of his music - in this newspaper in 1986. Yet, when my father died in October 1982, not one of his compositions had been recorded and virtually none were published. Today there are five complete CDs of his music and, next week, Radio 4 will broadcast a documentary about his life and work; In the Name of the Father is an appropriate title for a programme devoted to a musician whose life was intricately connected to the church, and whose family name has been "hijacked" by his two offspring.

The Radio Times blurb for the programme tells of "a story of the genius who spawned a musical dynasty". Can the much-abused word "genius" really be applied to my father? Given that I spent the best part of two years tracking down manuscripts he had either given away or mislaid in various cupboards around London, I am surely the last person to answer that question impartially. But our one-time family lodger, the concert pianist John Lill, remembers him as "one of the six or seven finest musicians I have ever known" - no mean compliment when he can number Barbirolli, Rattle, Shostakovich and Boult amongst his associates. The composer Malcolm Arnold once told me that in the two weeks my father had deputised for Arnold's regular composition professor at the Royal College of Music, "I learnt more in those two lessons than I had in the previous two years."

So what went wrong for the child prodigy organist and composer who also happened to be my father? How could he have died with hardly a note of his music known to the world? In attempting to unravel the mystery we must go back to the beginning.

Born into a poor London family at the outbreak of the first world war, William Lloyd Webber was the son of a self-employed plumber. His father was a keen organ buff who spent what little spare time and money he had on travelling to hear various instruments in and around the capital. Often he would take his son with him and, before long, young William asked to play the organ himself, rapidly developing an interest in the instrument that bordered on the obsessional.

By 14, my father had become a renowned organ recitalist - playing and broadcasting from churches and cathedrals all over the country. He won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition with Vaughan Williams and, by the time the second world war broke out, he had developed a parallel career as a composer and organist. At the college, he met my mother, Jean Hermione Johnstone - a pianist and violinist who was studying with Elgar's friend, the violinist Billy Reed - and they married in 1942.

My mother had suffered as a child. Not only had she never known her father - her parents had divorced when she was very young - but her beloved brother, Alastair, had drowned at sea when she was 13. Apparently the 18-year-old boy had shown great promise as a poet and, without wishing to play amateur psychologist to too great a degree, I believe Alastair's tragic death, added to the absence of a father figure, might well explain my mother's later obsession with nurturing young - always male - talent.

The years immediately after the war were my father's most prolific as a composer. Unencumbered by financial pressures, he lived in a flat rented for the three of them by his mother-in-law. This is when he wrote Aurora. A musical depiction of the goddess of the dawn, it is music that seethes with passion - ebbing and flowing like a great love affair. It was performed once, soon after its composition, by a BBC orchestra under Alexander Gibson, after which it was consigned to a dusty shelf. I have an old acetate recording of this marvellous performance. In later years, I would overhear my father listening to it in the middle of the night, crying his eyes out.

Andrew was born in 1948, the year Aurora was written, and I came along three years later. By the mid-1950s my father had virtually stopped composing - for three reasons, I believe. Firstly, he simply had to make some money to support his young family. Secondly, the kind of ultra-romantic music he was writing could not have been more out of fashion. Thirdly, he loathed anything to do with the "business" side of music. My mother told me that he once sent a score of Aurora to Malcolm Sargent. Not receiving a reply, he feared the worst and refused to send another score to anyone ever again. Conductors who were his colleagues, like Charles Groves, Neville Marriner and Vernon Handley, never realised that he had written music until I mentioned the fact when I was working with them years later.

My father could easily have taken other directions as a composer, had he wanted. He was well versed in the contemporary trends of the day but could also have chosen the "lighter" option of film music. Neither way was for him, as he was not one to compromise his style. So, more and more, he drifted into the academic side of London's musical life and became very successful in it - he was a professor at the Royal College until his death and, in 1964, was appointed director of the London College of Music. He was director of music at the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, and in 1980 was awarded a CBE for his services to music. Hardly a failure. Yet he had not succeeded at what he really wanted to be - a composer.

I look back on my childhood in the run-down, red-brick, Victorian block of flats in London's South Kensington with immense affection: 10 Harrington Court was an extraordinary place to be brought up. It was a crazy, hothouse atmosphere populated by exceptionally gifted, strong-willed characters who seemed to drift in and out whenever they pleased. Amid the electric organ, assorted pianos, violins, cellos, french horns and trumpets were "pedigree" mice, Siamese cats, ancient gas fires that farted, an aged, deaf, grandmother, a brother (and his lyricist) writing musicals, a concert pianist who was about to win the Tchaikovsky prize, and various girlfriends wandering about in equally varied states of undress. Expectations of excellence were the norm and achievement was the never-stated aim.

There were times of great humour and laughter. But always, in the background, was the sense that the head of family was a deeply disappointed, unhappy man who had not fulfilled his immense gift for composition. Alcohol was ever-present, tears and rage lay just beneath the surface, liable to erupt at any time. But my father loved the company of young people. He adored his students and, today, many testify to his personal help and kindness. He was a good listener and he remained steadfastly loyal to his restless, eccentric, intensely spiritual wife. Yet he was a curiously remote figure - a private, lonely man living among a crowd.

The real William Lloyd Webber is to be found in his music. There is a moment nearly three minutes into his early Fantasy Trio when the fragile facade falls away and we glimpse the man behind. I wish I had been allowed to know that person and his music. I would have asked him to write a cello concerto.

▪ In the Name of the Father is on Radio 4 next Tuesday at 1.30pm.