

# The lost world of LLOYD WEBBER

His fame may have been eclipsed by his sons but, as his centenary approaches, William Lloyd Webber is a composer we should celebrate, says *Andrew Green*

Imagine. You go to your father's memorial service and are shocked to hear music you never knew he'd written.

That was the experience of Andrew and Julian Lloyd Webber at Central Hall, Westminster when they joined hundreds gathered to remember William Lloyd Webber, following his death in 1982. There were more surprises at the family home in South Kensington as their father's study was explored. 'My father would never talk about his work as a composer,' says Julian Lloyd Webber, 'so it was very difficult to find out what he'd written. Now we found lots of his music, but in disarray, stashed away in cupboards, interleaved with loads of other music. Lots of it unpublished.'

Who was interested in Lloyd Webber Sr then? Today, a substantial range of his music is in print, across the many genres that occupied him in the 1940s and '50s, especially – from orchestral, organ and chamber music to songs and choral works. Various CDs demonstrate the craftsmanship of someone who was 'essentially an outstanding miniaturist,' as the pianist and long-term friend of the composer, John Lill, puts it. 'He had a wonderful ability to embrace essence rather than excess, yet his music is full of interest and variety.'

Julian Lloyd Webber has laboured long 'to help make my father's music available for people to take up if they wish'. One childhood memory perhaps spurred him on. 'I was woken in the middle of the night by the sound of my father playing a recording of his symphonic poem, *Aurora*, and sobbing while he listened.'

*Aurora* is the great 'what might have been' work – a sensuous, richly scored hymn to the Roman goddess of the dawn. It stands virtually on its own in his output, yet is accomplished

enough for conductor Lorin Maazel to have recorded it. He describes it as 'a lovely piece, well crafted and showing great sensitivity'.

Record producer Andrew Keener, who has overseen two CDs-worth of Lloyd Webber's music, sees *Aurora* as 'hugely opulent in an almost Baxian way. Lovers of *Tintagel* will adore it.' And legendary film director Ken Russell reportedly declared it 'about the most sexual piece of music I've heard in my life.'

Why the weeping over *Aurora* in those early hours? It's hard not to see the work as a

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touchstone for its composer's deep sense of perceived failure as a composer, its status as a one-off work a rebuke, not least to the person he was. The Lloyd Webber family's one-time lodger, Sir Tim Rice, sums up his former landlord's predicament. 'He was a very shy and withdrawn person who nonetheless showed through his music that he was a passionate man.'

This passionate man could do no other than express his feelings in a warm, romantic, even voluptuous style (flavoured by the likes of Puccini and Rachmaninov, Sibelius

and Franck) which he could see was losing favour with the British musical elite – rapidly so, as avant-garde adventurism held sway in the post-war world. The 'shy, withdrawn person' who squirmed at the idea of promoting himself couldn't bear the thought that the musical fruits of his sensitive nature would be 'rubbished', as Julian Lloyd Webber puts it, by fashion-minded critics.

Andrew Lloyd Webber – now Lord Lloyd Webber – has said he's '101 per cent sure' his father's character was what stopped him being an achiever as a composer. William Lloyd Webber's wife, Jean (a musician herself) pushed him to push himself, to no avail.

William Webber (the 'Lloyd') was added to differentiate himself from a musical namesake) was the son of a London plumber who lived for the sound of organ pipes. Dragged round the capital's churches and cathedrals, the youngster

didn't stand a chance. By early teenage years his organ-playing skills and schedule of recitals had captured the attention of the BBC. 'Absolutely faultless' was how the late music writer Felix Aprahamian once described to me his playing at this time.

Lloyd Webber dazzled at the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition with Vaughan Williams and made the transition from being a student to a musical theory teacher.

The 1930s were days of optimism for the young musician. Actor Peter Hughes, now in his 90s, sang in the 1930s as treble soloist in Lloyd Webber's choir at St Cyprrian's ▶

