

A Lost Generation Refound.

By Andy Glover

Between the post pastoral conservatism of Britten, Tippett, Arnold, Rubbra and Walton and the avant-garde credentials of Maxwell Davies, Goehr (60's and 70's) and Birtwistle there was a small trio of composers who in their own way were no less revolutionary than any of the names stated above. They were not ultra conservatives and yet nor ultra-modern but in their own ways they were just as important for they were the bridge that allowed the avant-garde to come into existence while taking the lessons of their conservative predecessors and looking towards Europe for their inspiration and techniques and creating a British modernism that was uncompromising and yet beautifully wrought.

The composers I am talking of were Peter Racine-Fricker (1920-1990), Humphrey Searle (1915-1983) and Iain Hamilton (1922 -2000). Some of you may have come across their names in exam syllabuses for the ABRSM or Trinity but these three were much more than just small eccentric style pieces under the 20th century category. They were great technicians with wonderful imaginations who wrote Symphonies, Concerto's, Operas and some amazing, if difficult, chamber music. Their style challenged conventions and pushed British music with seismic effect towards a true modernistic language paralleled by literature, art and architecture.



Peter Racine-Fricker



Humphrey Searle



Iain Hamilton

Most people won't know their music due to the fact very little has been recorded and what has is usually on rare or hard to find labels long out of print. There are the odd pieces on organ recitals or wind quintet releases or alongside other now long forgotten names. Having said this all of Humphrey Searle's Symphonies are available on the German CPO label and some of his chamber music is available as parts of compilations of this period. Peter Racine-Fricker is represented on compilations by his Second Symphony, his Wind Quintet, Cello and Violin Sonatas and Violin Concerto No.1 and little else. Iain Hamilton is served even worse with nothing in the catalogues at all.

All three although of a genre were very different composers. Searle had been taught by Anton Webern and this strict serial style permeates his music in a unique and not unattractive way. Racine-Fricker's style while being informed by the techniques of serialism take on a very individual sound-world that is approachable even if a little abrasive to many people. It is always powerful but always emotional and beautifully written for the instruments used. Iain Hamilton's style was never so fixed by serial techniques and always showed a side of tonal romanticism that was rare and unexpected in this period (1950's and early 60's) of writing. Strangely enough when the avant-garde composers took hold all three composers found refuge in the U.S.A at some point in their lives and were very highly considered there as composers and teachers.

Humphrey Searle was born in 1915 and died in 1982. He was born in Oxford where he was a classics scholar before studying with John Ireland at the Royal College of Music in London. He then went to Vienna on a six month scholarship to become a private pupil of Anton Webern. Webern was the influential influence on Searle's compositional path and career.

Searle became one of the foremost pioneers of serial music in the United Kingdom, and used his role as a producer at the BBC from 1946 to 1948 to promote this new modernism. He was General Secretary of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) from 1947 to 1949. He was always considered the '*enfant terrible*' of this generation

Searle wrote his Piano Sonata, Op. 21 for a recital at the Wigmore Hall on 22 October 1951, given by the Australian pianist Gordon Watson to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the birth of Franz Liszt. The Sonata has been described as "*probably, both the finest and most original piano work ever produced by a British composer*".

Searle also contributed humorous pieces to some of the Hoffnung Music Festivals, including a setting of "*Young Lochinvar*" and a parody of serialism, "*Punkt Kontrapunkt*" where his sense of humour and self-deprecation was at the fore.

Symphony No.1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfyT3jLkNxs>

Peter Racine-Fricker was born in 1920 and died in 1990. He spent the last thirty years of his life in California U.S.A where he was seen as a very important musical figure and teacher.

Racine-Fricker was born in London, and studied with R. O. Morris and Ernest Bullock at the Royal College of Music. Racine-Fricker then undertook a period of study with the Hungarian emigree composer Mátyás Seiber. He held a post as professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in London, and in 1952 he became director of music at Morley College, succeeding Michael Tippett. He was surprisingly an FRCO but only ever wrote a few short sublime works for the Organ including "*Intrada*" and "*Pastorale*". His First Symphony was written in 1949 and was very well received. Four more symphonies (1951, 1960, 1966, 1976) followed, which are among his most appreciated works, the third Symphony is a tour-de-force that should be in most orchestras portfolios but ashamedly is not. He wrote two very fine Violin Concertos, and a Viola Concerto that stands alongside Walton's as one of the finest ever written for the instrument as well as two little known Piano Concerti.

Stylistically his music was significantly different from the then mainstream of English music of the mid-20th century. His music was recognised as being highly chromatic, contrapuntal, and acerbic but always with a tonal basis to most of it that was unique at the time.

Racine-Fricker became visiting professor of music at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1964. Six years later, he took a permanent position at the university; he became chairman of the Music Department in 1970, and was appointed "*faculty research lecturer*" in 1979 which was the highest academic honour the university could bestow on its faculty. He died in 1990 aged 70 years old.

Symphony No.3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9VesogB_ds

Iain Hamilton was born in 1922 and died in 2000. He was born in Glasgow, but was educated in London, where he became an apprentice engineer. He undertook the study of music in his spare time while remaining as an engineer for seven years. He always stated that his training as an engineer helped him construct his works clearly as if from a Technical Drawing. After winning a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Music (1947) he decided to devote himself to a musical career. He earned the Bachelor of Music degree from the University of London and was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Music from the

University of Glasgow. He wrote four very richly scored Symphonies and various concertos and chamber works that show a striking individuality of musical thought.

Hamilton moved to the United States in 1962 due to being ignored and overlooked by others that he considered unworthy of praise, strangely though he died in London, aged 78 on a rare trip back to Britain.

Symphony No.3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUZtMIZY3TU>

Of the three composers the most approachable is Hamilton for the great beauty of his melodic writing and rich orchestrations. For technicality, expression, emotion, and simple beauty of sound then Racine-Fricker's music is well worth searching out. I am lucky enough to have recordings of both composers Symphonies recorded by the BBC and broadcast by them in the 1960's and 70's. Fricker's third Symphony is the one that truly stands out as his finest masterpiece, a work that is powerful from the outset and yet subtle in its energy with tone colours that stand out as original and some fifty years later the work still sounds fresh and invigorating. For Searle try his Second and Third Symphonies. They are very individual works from an age of great experimentation and confidence in the modernism of the world they lived in.

They were superseded by the likes of the Manchester School who were out and out avant-gardists. This generation of Searle et al all used the older forms, Symphonies, String Quartets, Sonatas etc to get their ideas across. The new generation swept not only this generation away but also these forms, until much later on when Maxwell Davies turned to Symphonic argument and String Quartets and Concertos.

The music of the 1940's, 50's and early 60's is due a reappraisal, and these three names rehabilitating to the positions they rightly deserve, as progressive modernists with an original and unique British slant on European models of that period. Without them we would still be listening to the pastoral world of Vaughan Williams and his many imitators, and for the world that we now live in that would be rather disjoint, very boring, and very stale. They were of their time and this time should be enjoyed and accepted as part of our musical heritage instead of swept away under the carpet of the British musical establishment as being irrelevant and of no consequence which is far from the truth.