

Stanley Glasser Obituary

b. Johannesburg, 28 Feb 1926; d. London, 5 Aug 2018.

I first heard Stanley Glasser's music not long before I met him: the King's Singers toured South Africa in 1976 and performed his *Lalela Zulu*, six beautiful close harmony songs for six-part male voice ensemble to Zulu texts by Lewis Nkosi. For the first I was struck by a white South African composer who was able to get to the heart of one of our indigenous traditions and re-imagine it for western audiences. None of his music was available on record, nothing was ever heard on the SABC, and no other music of his had any currency in South Africa, largely I guess because he had emigrated to the UK in the 1960s and that was where his musical career developed.

I first met him in August that same year at his home in London. Rarely do you meet a stranger who immediately makes you feel like an old friend: of course it was the South African *bonhomie* which binds those of us from the tip of Africa, something that was very important to him. Stanley was about to leave for France on holiday with his wife Liz and their two young sons, and there and then he asked me to house sit, putting his home, study, piano, musical resources at my disposal.

The following year I went to study on the Masters programme at Goldsmiths College, where he headed up the Music Department for 22 years until his retirement in 1991. During the 1980s he was Dean of Humanities and in 1989, when Goldsmiths achieved full status in the University of London, he was appointed the first Chair in Music. On his retirement he became Emeritus Professor.

His lasting legacy will always include the founding in 1968 of the first electronic music studio and the instituting of an electronic music course at any British higher education institution; the studio still bears his name. His enthusiasm for the electronic music medium comes as no surprise because I learnt that in 1960 his incidental music to Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, staged by Union Artists in the Wits Great Hall, would have made him South Africa's first composer of electronic music.

In 1998 I returned to South Africa and when we formed an ISCM section in 1999 he took a special interest, having been involved himself in both the Cape Town section started by Erik Chisholm in 1948 and in the international body when he was elected Treasurer of the ISCM Executive in 1952. Before we had even launched our festival in 2000, we started looking ahead to the 2001 festival and the idea of having Stanley as composer-in-residence in his 75th birthday year. He was an extremely gracious festival guest, and was happy to accept the first honorary membership of NewMusicSA.

That year and in subsequent years, we performed a number of his works at the New Music Indaba, most notably his 1970 cantata *The Chameleon and the Lizard*, with a Zulu text by Lewis Nkosi, its subject a familiar southern African legend about the origin of death. Mokale Koapeng and the UP Chorale, consisting mostly of black student singers, took up the challenge at the 2003 New Music Indaba. We were all greatly surprised when he turned up unannounced at the 2004 New Music Indaba. He was visiting South Africa and the festival,

and there was a short work of his on the programme. We immediately rearranged the schedule to give him the opportunity to address the young composers and to comment on their works.

There has been a great deal of vying for pioneering positions in the South African composition narrative, but Stanley was experimenting in the late 1940s already with the incorporation of traditional African music into his work. Where Stanley differed from his contemporaries in South Africa, especially those who used indigenous music, was his intimate knowledge as a researcher of the music he was working with. I think history may eventually decide that Stanley was the most progressive and important white South African composer of his generation.

He spoke about his dreams for a future multiracial, multicultural South Africa from the first time we met. While his own research encompassed Pedi and Venda music, he loved all manner of South African music: Zulu music, township jazz, Afrikaans vastrap. In the international context, he was adamant that one could always hear that Berio was Italian, Boulez French, Ligeti Hungarian, Stockhausen German etc, as if it was there in the DNA.

Stanley could turn his hand to almost anything: after his retirement from academia in the 1990s, he wrote and presented the 'A-Z of Classical Music' for the recently established Classic FM radio station in the UK, which was also broadcast in South Africa. I remember catching some episodes, or parts of them, and marvelling at his great gift of explaining often tricky musical concepts to the person in the street. One thinks of Leonard Bernstein in this respect and I think Stanley was something of a Leonard Bernstein figure in music, though definitely the better composer when it came to serious music.

Earlier this year I was able to organise what was probably the first performance of his 1987 saxophone quartet *Week-end Music*, which uses South African popular music and introduces elements of music theatre. It was played by the Stockholm Saxophone Quartet before a mostly black audience in a community hall in Hout Bay in the Cape, where people responded spontaneously, both during and at the end of the performance. I think Stanley would have appreciated and enjoyed the occasion.

Michael Blake, 25 August 2018