



A COMPOSER IN MALAYA

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by Islay Attenborough

In a quiet street in Belfast about 32 years ago, a six-year old boy was running along, looking furtively over his shoulder. Suddenly a ground-floor window shot up and a head came out.

“Bill, come right back here at once. What do you mean running off? You’ve got another hour’s piano practice left. You wait till your father comes home.” But Bill’s heels had already disappeared around the corner and he was fast on the way to Mrs. O’Leary’s sweet shop.

You may say ‘That’s not particularly unusual. Small boys are invariably like that.’ This small boy, however, grew up to win the First Prize in the Festival of Britain Competition for Piano Sonatas, and he is now in Singapore with Radio Malaya.

When William Andrew Rea reached the age of fifteen, he changed his mind about the piano and began practising four hours a day. By the time he reached sixteen it was 10 hours a day. He listened to all the classical concerts on the B.B.C. and bought as many classical records as he could afford.

He then began to play the organ and started studying music and composition at home after school with books borrowed from the local library.

Bill Rea was only twenty when he broadcast for the first time. He attended an audition for pianists and came through with flying colours. He was to give a fifteen minute piano recital.

Next year he became church organist and choirmaster for his local church and then, at 23, took over the position at one of the largest churches in Northern Ireland, St. Enoch’s.

Then followed more broadcasts. recitals and concerts. He continued studying under private tutors and himself began to teach pupils.

In July 1940 Mr. Rea joined the RAF as a Radar operator. For the next two years whenever there was a piano to be found Bill practised and when, whilst stationed in Colombo, he was asked to do a series of Beethoven piano recitals over Radio Ceylon, he jumped at the offer.

After the war, he became music master of the Grosvenor High School, Belfast, and during the time he was there produced several Gilbert and Sullivan operas, training the singers and conducting the orchestra. The Belfast Philharmonic Society claimed a lot of his spare time as he became their organist and accompanist.

During this time Mr. Rea had been busy composing settings to such famous poets as Shelley, Burns and Byron. Other works were an Introduction, Fugue and Pastoral for two pianos, three

improvisations for piano, and a fairy tale for piano. These were so good that they were broadcast straight away by the B.B.C. He became very interested in the Twelve-Tone Technique, a system of composition originated by Schonberg and used by such well-known composers as Anton Von Webern, Ernst Krenek and Alban Berg.

So when he read that there was to be a Festival of Britain Competition for the best sonata submitted, it was only natural that he should set to work to compose a sonata using the Twelve Tone Technique.

He didn't take long in writing his prize-winning work, for he read about the competition in September 1950 and it was completed in November. He then submitted it to the Festival Authorities.

"But then," says modest Mr. Rea, "I proceeded to do my best to forget about it. I knew there would be a lot of entries and I didn't think my composition had the smallest possible chance."

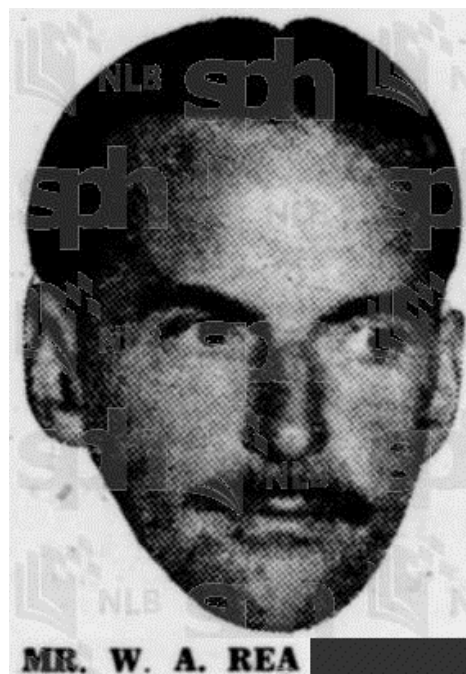
However he proved to be very wrong, for when he attended the Northern Ireland Festival of Britain Inauguration Ceremony, he was presented with the first prize of £50. The first public performance of the Sonata — correct title "Sonata for Piano (1950) — was on February 2.

It will be broadcast by the B.B.C. next Friday, February 22. The soloist will be Doctor Ivor Keyes, Professor of Music, Queen's University, Belfast.

I asked Mr. Rea when Malayan listeners will be able to hear his Sonata.

"We have cabled the B B.C.," he said, "to send us a copy of the recording. So it will depend on how soon they send it, and on how quickly we receive it."

Mr. Rea has just finished a String Quartet (1951) and is in the throes of a composition for a String Orchestra.



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