

# *Remembering* William Alwyn

Despite leaving behind a swath of admired works and film scores, the flutist and composer William Alwyn never enjoyed the public recognition he sought during his lifetime. Yet nearly three decades after his death, Alwyn continues to command high esteem, inspiring ongoing concerts, lectures, and even a week-long William Alwyn festival held in the fall of 2011.

by **Francesca Arnone**

When considering writing an autobiography in 1970, composer William Alwyn (1905–1985) noted, “I was born an Englishman of good English stock—and that was my first disastrous mistake.”<sup>1</sup> An extraordinarily successful teacher and film composer, Alwyn spent most of his life seeking what he considered to be ever elusive: true public regard as an art music composer. As a restless Renaissance man, he painted, wrote poetry and prose, and learned German and French to study literary works in their original language.

He was also a very accomplished flutist, his foundation as a musician.

## An Art-Loving Family

William Alwyn Smith was one of five children born to Ada and William Smith, comprising a family of modest means. The Smiths owned Northampton’s grocery shop, “The Shakspeare [sic] Stores—The People’s Provider,”<sup>2</sup> a name that reflected William Smith’s fondness for the Bard. An industrial town known for its shoe and boot industries, Northampton provided a thriving business for the grocery shop and an endless parade of working-class clientele. Although each of the Smith children developed an interest in literature and an appreciation for art, young William was unique in his fascination with music:

I developed an early passion for music, roused by the Sunday afternoon military band performances in the park, and my ambition was to become one of these uniformed bandmen. I was still a child when my parents decided to indulge my strange passion by providing me with a piccolo<sup>3</sup>—the only instrument they thought suitable for my small hands. A teacher was found: a local boot-operative who used to come on Saturday afternoons to give me lessons, still grimy-handed and smelling of leather from the factory where he worked.<sup>4</sup>

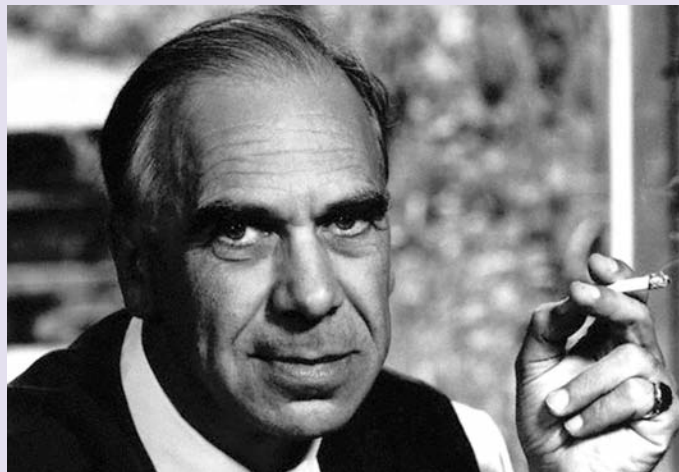
That private teacher was Mr. Law, a factory worker by day but movie house pit orchestra flutist by night. Their lessons largely focused on theme and variations pieces such as the *Carnival of Venice*, *The Ashe Grove*, and *The Keel Row*.<sup>5</sup>

Although in his autobiography, *Winged Chariot*, Alwyn notes that his first compositional attempt was *Sparkling Cascades* for piccolo solo (written at age 9), *Woodland Voices* was most likely the piece he composed at this time, as recorded in his composition notebook documenting the early opus numbers of W.A. Smith.

## Life Turns

In 1913, the death of the oldest Smith son, Tony, was life-changing for 7-year old Alwyn. Although incomprehensible at the time for the young boy, his brother’s death left Alwyn as the heir to the family business. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he was taken out of school at age 14 to work at the store full-time.

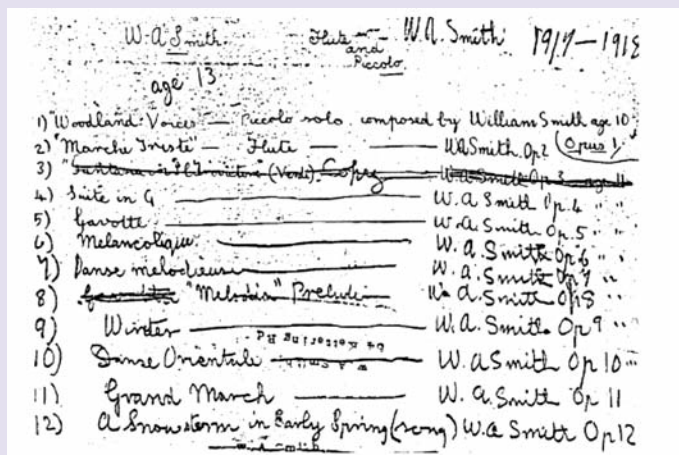
Despite his occupational shift from student to store worker, Alwyn continued to focus on music each weekend. His mother also arranged for him to take piano lessons with the local organist, R.W. Strickland, who knew his student was destined to be a professional musician. He managed to convince a reluctant Mr. Smith of the same, and he recommended Alwyn



William Alwyn



Woodland Voices.<sup>6</sup>



Early composition notebook.<sup>7</sup>

for admission to the Royal Academy of Music, far from a life as a store manager.

At age 15, Alwyn commuted twice a week to London for classes at the Academy as a scholarship student. There, his principal course of study was as a flute student of Daniel S. Wood.<sup>8</sup> Years later, Alwyn wrote, “I myself was trained very strictly by Daniel Wood, the original first flute in the L.S.O. when it was first formed, and a cool pure tone, immaculate breath control, and phrasing were the essentials of his teaching.”<sup>9</sup> He won several prizes that year, including the Silver Medal for Flute.

## Available Works for Flute by William Alwyn

*Three Easy Pieces for Flute and Piano* (1931). London: Stainer and Bell, 1931.

*Divertimento* (1939). London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1993/1943.

*Sonata for Flute and Piano* (1948). London: Legnick, 2006.

*Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano* (1951), London: William Alwyn Foundation, 1997.

*Naiades (Fantasy-Sonata)* for flute and harp (1970). London: Legnick, 2000.

*Concerto for Wind Instruments* (1980), arr. McCabe (2005). London: Legnick. Rental available through Chester Novello.



Carol Denese Hester took this photo of Alwyn's flute collection in 1988 while visiting Mary Alwyn at the Alwyn estate.

As a special 16th birthday present, his family gave him a new Rudall Carte flute, a used Böhme flute, and a new Rudall Carte piccolo.<sup>10</sup> By now Alwyn had become a formidable sight-reader and was hired as a substitute for professional orchestras. In *Winged Chariot*, he writes:

Robert Murchie, the famous 1st flute of the Queen's Hall Orchestra, or the equally famous Gordon Walker, 1st flute of the L.S.O. would ring me up and say 'Can you do the rehearsal at Queen's Hall today?' or, sometimes even, 'Can

you do the concert and not the rehearsal?' I shall be at the rehearsal.' Murchie would say to me, 'But I'm playing for the Ballet in the evening...' I remember one occasion when Murchie asked me to do the Queen's Hall concert for him—he was, of course, appearing at the morning rehearsal (incidentally no concert had more than one rehearsal). If there was a concert—I asked him what was the programme—'Oh, nothing to worry about. I forget what the symphony is, but look out for Ravel's 'Daphnis and Chloe'—that scale that begins on the piccolo, and then by way of 1st flute and 2nd flute ends with a solo scale on the 3rd flute—if you miss it, it leaves an aufu [sic] gap! But there's nothing to worry about! Don't worry, old chap, it'll be all right.'

In 1921, Alwyn more practically relocated to London to continue his studies full time at the RAM. His work in flute and secondary area of piano were progressing well, but he was not immediately permitted to pursue composition as there were no composition professors on staff at the time. After a providential conversation with his flute professor, Alwyn showed some of his compositions to Daniel S. Wood for his review. Finding them to be of very high quality, Wood successfully petitioned on his student's behalf for him to study composition with John B. McEwen.

McEwen's refreshingly un-academic manner transformed Alwyn's approach to composition, encouraging him to study scores of Debussy, Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, Scriabin, and Szymanowski in place of traditional textbooks. McEwen encouraged his student to assume the professional name of William Alwyn, which the young composer eagerly adopted to secure an identity more distinct than W.A. Smith.

### Professional Musician and Composer

His father's unexpected death forced Alwyn, at age 18, to leave the shelter of being a student to become a professional musician. He continued to compose in between music teaching assignments, sending the scores to McEwen for feedback. At age 21, Alwyn was appointed to join the composition faculty at the Academy and was contracted to join the London Symphony Orchestra as third flute/piccolo for an important upcoming festival.

This experience afforded Alwyn the opportunity to play many works by British composers such as Holst, Walford Davies, Vaughan Williams, Delius, and Elgar, who himself conducted several of his own compositions. Later in the same month, the LSO performed Alwyn's *Five Preludes for Orchestra* at the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts.

These experiences led to even greater performing opportunities, as Alwyn discussed in *Winged Chariot*:

I was in increasing demand, not only as an orchestral player but also as a soloist. I introduced to Britain the Roussel *Joueurs de Flûte* ... and major new works by European and American composers—I well remember a fiendishly difficult sonata by the American composer Wallingford Riegger. As a chamber music player I also took part in the first London performance of Ravel's *Chansons Madécasses*.<sup>11</sup>

Although “Alwyn the flautist is forgotten today,”<sup>12</sup> this expertise landed him in the right place at the right time. Hired to play a recording session for a documentary film directed by Alexander Shaw, Alwyn played a score by Raymond Bennell, who, believing his work completed, left England at the conclusion of the sessions. The following day, Shaw contacted Alwyn to write a new film score: the playback had proved to be blank. Alwyn completed the final product swiftly and with great expertise, tipping the balance he had maintained between professional flutist and composer to that of a full-time composer.

Since his arrival as a film composer coincided with dramatic audio developments in Britain’s Golden Age of Cinema, Alwyn ably explored an orchestral palette broader than that of his predecessors. With 86 film scores and 107 documentary film scores in his body of work, Alwyn’s compositional skills sharpened dramatically. Few composers have the opportunity to hear their works performed so close to their date of completion, let alone by the caliber of the orchestras that recorded Alwyn’s scores. Although he was reluctant to be known primarily as a film composer, Alwyn’s successes also gave him the means to produce concerts of his art music.

### Compositional “Beginnings”

In 1938, Alwyn “took the extreme step of disowning all my previous works...and mentally I made a new beginning.”<sup>13</sup> Resolved to develop a sharper technique, he turned to neoclassic forms for new compositions. Among the first of these was his *Divertimento for Solo Flute* (1939), a highly contrapuntal work for a solo instrument: “...by exploiting my intimate knowledge of the instrument I contrived a suite which contained a Prelude and Fugue (!), Variations on a Ground, a Gavotte and Jig, often written on several staves but all performable by the single soloist.”<sup>14</sup> Premiered at the 1940 International Festival of Contemporary Music in New York by René Le Roy, the piece remains a standard repertoire piece in the U.K.

Throughout his career, Alwyn continually evaluated and refined his creative process of composing. His five symphonies (1949–1973) outline his major compositional styles after 1938. From highly romantic material in the traditional four-movement form, he progressed through a new harmonic system using small scale patterns as limited units and 12-tone systems divided into two groups of modes, and concluded with a highly compact and seamless four-movement work within one 16-minute movement. Alwyn’s *Sonata for Flute and Piano* (1948)<sup>15</sup> shares the neoclassical fugue with the *Divertimento*, yet it is similar in scope to the *Fifth Symphony* (1973) in that it is a compact, three-movement work within a one-movement frame. “It is a virtuoso work and the piano writing is complex and an integral part of the work’s construction...this sonata challenges both performers.”<sup>16</sup>

*Naiades (Fantasy-Sonata)* for flute and harp was composed in 1970 for flutist Christopher Hyde-Smith and harpist Marisa Robles. A full-blown, one-movement virtuosic work, *Naiades* showcases and challenges both instruments equally. “Naiades” are defined as the mythological nymphs living in rivers, fountains, and springs.<sup>17</sup> Alwyn’s program notes written for the Aldeburgh Festival in June of 1973 provide keen insights to the piece’s inspiration:



Alwyn conducting; he also painted and wrote poetry and prose.

My studio overlooks the river Blyth—tidal waters flanked by a broad expanse of reedy marshes, haunt of shrill seabirds. To wander there on a summer evening, when the reeds are a rustling sheet of gold and the water the colour of the ‘winedark’ sea, is to believe again in Pan and Syrinx, sense the presence of Undine, and hear the Naiads sporting in the shallows, hidden from mortal sight by the shrouding reeds.<sup>18</sup>

*The Concerto for Flute and Orchestra* (1980) was written for members of the English Chamber Orchestra. Intensely lyrical, it was arranged as a wind nonet by John McCabe in 2005, and its exuberant in no way belies the struggle Alwyn experienced in returning to composition after a two-year hiatus.<sup>19</sup> As one of Alwyn’s latest compositions, the concerto presents a final, exuberant work featuring the flute.

### Instrument of Choice

Despite his giving up playing the flute for fear he would not be taken as a serious composer,<sup>20</sup> Alwyn continued to regard it as his instrument of choice, from the beginning of his compositional career to the end.

The flute world has greatly benefited from Alwyn’s versatility and need to express himself through composition. As author Ian Camalt noted, “Alwyn believed that it is a creative artist’s duty to express completely in such a way as to communicate to others all the ideas which are genuinely in him.”<sup>21</sup> ✱

*The author thanks Carol Denese Hester for her generosity and assistance in sifting through boxes of research to find photos that she had taken, and then having them digitized.*

*Francesca Arnone teaches at Baylor University and Italy’s Grumo and InterHarmony festivals. A member of the Brazos Ensemble, she is an active chamber music advocate, recitalist, orchestral musician, and soloist.*

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Wright, *The Innumerable Dance: The Life and Work of William Alwyn* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> A six-keyed piccolo with an extraordinarily stiff key, permanently distorting one of Alwyn's fingers (*Ibid.*, 6)

<sup>4</sup> William Alwyn, "Winged Chariot" (1983), in *Composing in Words: William Alwyn on his Art*, ed. Andrew Palmer (Chippenham: Toccata Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, 14.

<sup>6</sup> C. Hester, "A Structural and Stylistic Study of the Works for Flute by William Alwyn" (DM diss., Florida State University, 1990), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Hester, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel S. Wood is the author of the famous *Studies for Facilitating the Upper Notes of the Flute*.

<sup>9</sup> William Alwyn to Christopher Hyde-Smith, March 12, 1971, quoted in Hester, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Hester, 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Winged Chariot*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Winged Chariot*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> A new edition edited by Smith and Rhodes is due to be published, reflecting the errors determined to exist in the 2006 Legnick edition.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Smith and Paul Rhodes, "William Alwyn's *Sonata for Flute and Piano*," *Pan, The Flute Magazine* (June 2009): 35.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/naiades>

<sup>18</sup> William Alwyn, "Composer's Choice: William Alwyn," program notes for a recital given at Aldeburgh Festival, June 22, 1973; quoted in Hester, 76.

<sup>19</sup> William Alwyn to de Moret, October 2, 1980, quoted in Wright, 256.

<sup>20</sup> William Alwyn: *Ariel to Miranda* in Palmer, 155.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Camalt, "William Alwyn—A Romantic Composer of His Time." From the British Music Society, reprinted. <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2000/mar00/carmalt.htm>

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

### Lea Arsenault 2006 Young Artist Competition (and 2002 High School Soloist Competition)



"I was very fortunate to have Jim Walker on my panel of judges. That was my first experience playing for him. Two years later, I was accepted to the Colburn School, where I got to study with him before winning my first orchestral job in Louisville."

Leah Arsenault, acting second flute with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, has also won first prize in the Myrna Brown Young Artist Competition and the Frank Bowen Young Artist Competition. She was second flute with the Louisville Orchestra, a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, and a member of the Spoleto Festival (USA) orchestra, and was piccoloist with the Star Wars in Concert national tour. Arsenault has performed as a soloist with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra and has been a guest artist at NFA and Texas Flute Society conventions. She has collaborated with eighth blackbird, Lucy Shelton, and Paul Neubauer.

Arsenault earned her BM and MM degrees from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and professional studies certificate from the Colburn School Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles. Principal teachers include Bradley Garner, Jim Walker, Tadeu Coelho, and Philip Dunigan.

"Winning the 2006 Young Artist Competition had a huge effect on my career," says Arsenault. "Having my name associated with the competition has given me valuable 'street cred.'"

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