



Roaring Success

COMPOSER AND AUTHOR NED ROREM
TELLS CLAIRE JACKSON WHY HIS STYLE
CAN'T BE DEFINED

1923

Ned Rorem is born in Indiana, US

1940

Enters music school at Northwestern University

1944

Moves to New York City and acts as Virgil Thomson's copyist in exchange for orchestration lessons. Starts at Juilliard

1946

Studies with Aaron Copland as a fellow at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood

1949

Moves to Paris

1951

Awarded a Fulbright Fellowship

1979

Air Music wins the Pulitzer Prize

1989

The Atlanta Symphony's recording of his String Symphony, *Sunday Morning* and *Eagles* claims a Grammy

2003

Rorem turns 80 – and composes concertos for cello, flute and mallet

2006

Facing the Night: A Diary (1999-2005) and Musical Writings is published

2008-09

Rorem celebrates his 85th birthday season

New Yorker critic Alex Ross once described composer Ned Rorem as an 'elegant anomaly' among American composers. Preferring delicate chromatic dissonance and sweeping orchestration, Rorem remains poles apart from many of his contemporaries. Today, his music retains a sumptuous feel of the great 20th-century French works with enough freshness to sound modern.

'I don't define myself ever – it's for other people to do that,' says Rorem on his chosen compositional style. 'I write the music but other people can make the definition.'

During the heady formative years of modernism, Rorem's work was regularly dismissed as old-fashioned – a claim that wasn't entirely inaccurate. The Indiana-born composer shunned avant-garde trends, instead harking back to an earlier age of tonality and lyricism. Although his unapologetically tonal works have led him to be classed a neo-Romantic, Rorem is reluctant to accept any label and is keen to defy categorisation. He maintains that his allegiance lies with 'French music in general and no German music', explaining: 'It could be argued that the whole world is divided by the French aesthetic and the German aesthetic. I fall largely into the French.'

This Franco-American style was honed between 1949 and 1958. 'I lived in France for several years,' says Rorem, who is fighting a bad case of toothache when I call him at home in New York City. 'I was already influenced by French music so I went to France,' he explains. 'I was on tour – I think it was around 1954 – and I visited Germany and England, but France is by far the country I feel closest to.'

Rorem's criticism of contemporary music has been steadfast (he once referred to serial composers as 'serial killers'). Today, he continues his quest to cast fantastical music theorems aside in favour of rich, lush melodies, citing 'Ravel and the early 20th-century composers' as his top influences, adding 'and I knew Poulenc personally'.

Perhaps best known for his 500-plus art songs ('art' implying the use of lyric poetry, to suggest formality and to distinguish from songs used in staged works), Rorem has a knack for producing eloquent music that still allows the text to have its own message. This is undoubtedly due to his own writing experience, having first made a name for himself in 1966 when he described his bohemian life as a gay man in *Paris Diary*.

**'I HAVE TWO
PROFESSIONS:
LITERARY
AND MUSIC'**

'I'm European in the sense that I don't want to confine myself to one part of the arts,' he explains. 'I have 12 or 13 books published – and I'm known for my diaries. So I have two professions: literary and music.'

Rorem's diary-writing has continued throughout much of his life, his writing style as pensive and melancholic in places as his music. In his journal *Lies* he observes: 'My music is a diary no less compromising than my prose.'

'The writing and the composing came at the same time,' says Rorem when I enquire about his joint talents. 'I was composing when I was really young and I've always written. I'm essentially a vocal composer, using the English language – I don't quite know why, as I was never attracted to singing when I was a kid.'

As well as his prolific vocal output, Rorem has an equally impressive instrumental CV – including three symphonies, concertos for violin, organ, flute, English horn and mallet, and numerous orchestral works such as *Air Music*, which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1976. Despite his varied achievements, when asked to pick a career highlight Rorem cites his recent compositions as his magnum opus: 'If I had to choose something it would be a vocal work, probably my song cycle for four voices, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*.'

Content with his reputation as primarily a vocal composer, Rorem is still adding to his bulging portfolio – *Four Sonnets of Shakespeare*, his new vocal work for tenor and piano, premieres at Wigmore Hall this September. Despite his lyrical presence, I tell him how much I admire his recent concertos ('Really? Oh I'm glad') and that his Flute Concerto is among the most played tracks on my iPod.

'I don't even know what an iPod is,' he replies. 'I don't have any of those new things.'

'I don't listen much to music for leisure any more. During my former years I used to keep up with what my friends were writing though.'

At 85, Rorem deserves to be taking things a little easier, but his music continues to be performed worldwide. As well as the *Four Sonnets* premiere, this year also sees mezzo-soprano Susan Graham and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra showcasing *11 Songs for Susan* for the first time in May, and a new production of *Anna la Bonne*, his seven-minute opera, will open in Switzerland this October.

Amid the racy diaries and a body of compositional work encompassing chamber, orchestral and choral genres, it seems a creative being like Rorem will remain elegant and anomalous for some time to come. ■