Obituaries

David Fanshawe

Composer and explorer who wrote the bestselling African Sanctus, a setting of the Mass based on his recordings of native song

David Fanshawe's business card declared him a "composer and explorer," and his life and music sprang out of this unconventional job description. He achieved international fame in the 1970s with his first major work, the remarkable African Sanctus. This substantial setting of the Mass brings together Western choral tradition with recordings of African traditional music in a thrilling cross-cultural collision. It also incorporates the rhythms and instruments of pop music, and was many years ahead of its time in bridging sacred and profane, Western and non-Western, music as equivalent and interchangeable.

While African Sanctus is avant-garde musically, it gave few hints as to the risks taken in its creation. The work is substantially based on recordings Fanshawe made himself in the field, in some of the most inaccessible and dangerous regions of Africa. Although he did not consider himself an ethnographic or etnomusicalologist, he discovered and understood it; on those and later travels he had amassed a huge range of local music traditions, many of which have since died out.

David Arthur Fanshawe was born in Pakistan, Devon, in 1942. His father was a successful artillery officer who played a crucial role in the planning of D-Day, and whose tales of service abroad, particularly in India, gave Fanshawe an early taste for adventure. His first ambition was to be an explorer, just like the choir school of St George's, Windsor, where he also discovered a love of music. Severe eczema caused him much difficulty, however, and his inability to read a score prevented him from progressing as a choirboy.

At Stowe School he devoted much of his spare time to playing the piano, and, at 12, he was spotted by a music director who hired him as a French hornist, who realised that he was talented but woefully untrained. She took him to his musical education herself, continuing to teach him the piano after he left school in 1959 and went to work as a film editor for a small production company in Wesham, northwest London. In 1965 Fanshawe won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with John Lambert — this despite learning his harmony paper entirely by ear, apart from a note apologising for his inability to answer a single question. He decided to go abroad to enhance his skills, travelling in the Middle East and Europe, spending one summer backpacking to Afghanistan. During this journey he heard Islamic music for the first time, and was immediately struck by its beauty and novelty to Western ears. On subsequent travels through Iran and Bahrain he recorded the traditional music the people he encountered; the chants of the pearl divers of Bahrain provided the basis for a later work, Salama.

When Fanshawe completed his studies in 1969 he set off on a hugely ambitious journey up the River Nile, through Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya. Starting on the Mediterranean coast, he took three years to reach his destination, Lake Victoria, where he traveled up the river to Lake Albert and Lake Edward. He sought out local musicians and persuaded them, whenever possible, to perform for him. Among his few possessions was a small stereo tape recorder, with which he recorded whatever he could. Fanshawe's progress was fraught with difficulties. Some of the countries he travelled through were in the throes of bloody unrest. He passed through Uganda as Idi Amin came to power, and recorded the traditional Bantu dance of the Acholi tribe just before Amin's genocide nearly wiped them out. In other countries Fanshawe was attacked or imprisoned, and on one occasion he was nearly killed by a black rhinoceros. He later took great delight in explaining how his life had been saved by a quick-witted chimp aged 9 who decontaminated it with a spear as it prepared to strike.

Returning from Africa in 1972 with several hundred hours of recordings, Fanshawe set about composing a work which would, in his words, "commemorate a message of love, peace and faith in the Poor Child." A key reason for the conception of African Sanctus came at the beginning of his journey, in Egypt. Sitting in a Christian church, he heard the music of a modern group calling the faithful to prayer, and suddenly imagined this modal sound in counterpoint with Western choral harmony. The resulting work — originally called African Requiem — was first performed at St John's, Smith Square in 1992. Fanshawe also managed to persuade Philips to record it, but it was not until three years later that it reached much wider attention. The composer and documentarian Herbert Chappell heard an excerpt from the work and set out on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific islands.

He set out on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific islands

work on the radio and within an hour had arrived on Fanshawe's doorstep proposing to make a television programme about him. The two men retraced Fanshawe's original journey, trying (largely unsuccessfully) to track down the musicians he had recorded on his original trip. The documentary was nominated for the Prix Italia, and within a few weeks of its broadcast on Easter Day 1975, the LP of African Sanctus had become a bestseller.

Over the next 30 years African Sanctus was taken up by artists including the eminent choral conductor Sir David Willcocks, and received well over a thousand performances, from North America to the Far East. Fanshawe often supervised these, sometimes accompanying the work with a slide show of his superb photographs of the musicians he had recorded. In 1994, when the work was recorded for a second time, Fanshawe added an additional movement, the Dona Nobis Pacem.

During the 1970s Fanshawe became a prolific and successful composer of film and television music, his work including the score for the 1974 adaptation of Fireplace in the Sun. But he kept revisited his obsession, and in 1979 he embarked on a ten-year project to collect music from the Islands of the Pacific. He spent some time living in Fiji and Australia, and — although often thwarted by local bureaucracy — made several thousand recordings of local musicians. These form the basis of an enormous archive of World music, the Fanshawe Collection, which at almost 2,000 hours of audio is one of the largest ever assembled.

In 2000 a movement based on this material, Pacific Song, was given its premiere in Miami. It was the first completed section of Pacific Odyssey, a choral work Fanshawe conceived over a period greater than that of African Sanctus, but which remains incomplete at his death.

A gentle and charming eccentric with infectious enthusiasm for all he did, Fanshawe was a popular figure with a close circle of devoted friends. He was keenly interested in the lives of the musicians he had recorded. Deeply affected by the realisation that many of the Africans he had met between 1969 and 1972 had died long afterwards through civil unrest or disease, he donated a proportion of his royalties to local charities and hospitals.

Fanshawe was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the West of England in 2007, and he was also the recipient of a Churchill Fellowship, and received a nomination for an Ivor Novello award for the recording of African Sanctus.

He is survived by his wife, Jane, whom he married in 1966, and by their daughter, and by two children from an earlier marriage.

David Fanshawe, composer, was born on April 12, 1942. He died after a stroke on July 5, 2010, aged 68.
OBITUARY

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Composer and explorer who wrote the bestselling African Sanctus, a setting of the Mass based on his recordings of native song

David Fanshawe’s business card declared him a “composer and explorer”, and his life and music seem to have borne out this unconventional job description. He achieved international fame in the 1970s with his first major work, the remarkable African Sanctus. This substantial setting of the Mass brings together the Western choral tradition with recordings of African traditional music in a thrilling cross-cultural collision. It also incorporates the rhythms and instruments of pop music, and was many years ahead of its time in blending sacred and profane, Western and non-Western, musics at equivalent and explicit rates.

While African Sanctus is adventurous musically, it gave few hints as to the risks taken in its creation. The work is substantially based on recordings Fanshawe made himself in the field, in some of the most inexcusable and dangerous regions of Africa. Although he did not consider himself an ethnomusicologist, he compiled some of the most surprising and informative fieldwork of musicology and music traditions, many of which have since been documented.

David Arthur Fanshawe was born in Paisley, Renfrewshire, in 1942. His father was a successful artillery officer who played a crucial role in the planning of D-Day, and whose tales of service abroad, particularly in India, gave Fanshawe an early taste for adventure. His first exhibition was to be an exploratory plane. In his childhood, he was shy and isolated from the other children of St George’s, Windermere, but he also discovered a love of music. He would sometimes compose music and see it as a form of relief.

At Stowe School he devoted much of his time to playing the piano and, at 17, he was spotted by a music teacher who had listened to a French recital, who realised that he was talented but nevertheless uncertain. She took him to his mass education herself, continuing to teach him the piano after he left school in 1961 and went to work as a film editor for a small production company in Westminster, London. In 1963 Fanshawe won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with John Lambert — that despite learning his harmony paper entirely blank, apart from a note apologising for his inability to answer a question single-handedly. He described the highlight of his studies as being able to compose a piece of music for the French horn, which he immediately sold to a local pool hall.

At Stowe School, he was given the opportunity to stay in the piano and, at 17, he was spotted by a music teacher who had listened to a French recital, who realised that he was talented but nevertheless uncertain. She took him to his mass education herself, continuing to teach him the piano after he left school in 1961 and went to work as a film editor for a small production company in Westminster, London. In 1963 Fanshawe won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with John Lambert — that despite learning his harmony paper entirely blank, apart from a note apologising for his inability to answer a question single-handedly. He described the highlight of his studies as being able to compose a piece of music for the French horn, which he immediately sold to a local pool hall.

Returning from Africa in 1972 with several hundred hours of recordings, Fanshawe set about composing a work which would be his life’s work, conveying a message of love, peace and hope in the “African Choral”. A key feature of the work was its African Sanctus, a setting of the Mass based on his recordings of African traditional music. The composition was nominated for the Prix Italia, and within a few weeks of its broadcast on Easter Day 1973, the LP of African Sanctus had become a bestseller.

He set out on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific islands, work on the radio, and within a year he had arrived on Fanshawe’s doorstep,2000: a move made by the eminent choral conductor Sir David Willcocks, and received well over a thousand performances, from North America to the Far East. Fanshawe’s work was well received, especially accompanying the work, a slide show of the fantastic photographs of the musicians he had recorded. In 1994, when the work was recorded for a second time, Fanshawe added an additional movement, the Dona Nobis Pacem.

During the 1970s Fanshawe became a prolific and successful composer of film and television music. His work included the score for the 1991 adaptation of Zola’s The Desert. In 1972, he embarked on a ten-year project to collect music from the Pacific Islands. He spent some time living in Fiji and Australia, and — although often thwarted by local bureaucracy — managed to collect thousands of recordings from local musicians. This form the basis of an extensive archive of world music, the Fanshawe Collection, one of which is the largest ever assembled.

In 2000 the project was funded by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which arranged for a live recording of the piece. The resulting CD, titled "African Choral", was released in 2001, and sold over a thousand copies worldwide.

David Fanshawe, composer, was born on April 30, 1942. He died after a stroke on July 9, 2010, aged 68.