



## John Gardner:

a portrait of a  
composer as a  
young man

*Emily Gardner*

---

I am very grateful to John Gibbons for requesting an article on John Gardner (JLG) in his centenary year. When John first made the request, I did not have any clear idea of what could be written about my father that had not already been said. At the start of this year, I met with my brother to browse through the archive of correspondence, clippings and other ephemera that my father had collected throughout his life. We quickly decided upon the years that my father spent at Oxford: these being formative, finite and largely undocumented. No sooner had I started researching and writing, than I realised how much more there was to discover, and how many directions even this short period (1935-1939) could take me in. I have, of necessity, had to curb my scientific instincts to chase down every detail, and follow every lead. In some places, there was conflicting information which I have been unable to resolve in the time available. What follows is, without doubt, a sample of John Gardner's rich musical, cultural and educational experience as an Oxford undergraduate.

When JLG came up to Oxford as the Hubert Parry Organ Scholar in October 1935, he was already something of a known quantity, musically. As a fifteen year old, through well-connected family friends, he secured an introduction to Hubert Foss, founder of the music department of Oxford University Press (OUP), and at that time, in JLG's own words 'possibly the most active protagonist of modern English composers amongst the whole publishing fraternity.' JLG went to see Foss at OUP's Music Department at Amen House in the City of London and played a number of immature works to him in which he took a most encouraging interest.



Not much later, at the age of sixteen, Foss asked JLG to Amen House to play his first piano sonata through to William Walton, then a sophisticated 31-year old: already famous but still something of an *enfant terrible*. Writing of the occasion, JLG said 'I remember his comments as if I'd heard them yesterday. "You write fluently," he drawled through his pipe. "In fact too fluently. The whole thing needs to be tightened up. You also show no awareness of modern composers like Stravinsky (which he pronounced Strahwinsky), Schoenberg and Hindemith. You should study their music; you'll learn a lot from it." Then, he added with a chuckle, *Portsmouth Point* could show you a thing or two."

Upon arrival at Exeter College, JLG was taken up with the usual student ritual of personalising institutional accommodation. In his first letter home to his mother, JLG reports 'Am gradually getting things settled. These are a few particulars about my room: my table is very big and shabby.....so it will need a big cover. The walls are very high and I need a biggish picture over the fireplace to prevent its looking like an operating theatre. ....They have given me two big easy chairs and a large sofa as well, numerous chairs and a writing table. I have had a piano bought in (quite a decent upright) and it is beginning to look lived in.....I shall have to get one or two cushions. This morning I had a busy time shopping. There are endless small things to be got, such as waste paper baskets, stationery. I hope to buy my bedroom utensils off the scouts. You can't get them cheaper elsewhere. ....The bedroom defies description and planning. It is a cross between a cloakroom and junk shop!'

JLG's involvement in Oxford music was immediate. As organ scholar, he was responsible for rehearsing the choir every night, except Wednesdays, as well as participating in Sunday choral services. JLG did not confine himself to College musical activities; in the first term he joined the University Music Society and the Opera Club.

One of the first projects JLG was involved with was an ambitious plan to give the first performance, and a fortnight run, of *The Tailor*, an opera by the Dutch composer Bernard van Dieren, with Hyam Greenbaum conducting. There was much initial enthusiasm, with talk of a London performance at Sadlers' Wells. JLG was rehearsal pianist, in his rooms at Exeter, and also took the part of a bearded conspirator. The Opera Club was also privileged to host a lecture on van Dieren by the composer's close friend, William Walton. Despite such illustrious beginnings, the production was dogged by difficulty. Rehearsals for *The Tailor* began using a piano reduction, played by JLG, but when the full score arrived it was realised that more competent string players were needed, and, to JLG's relief, the



production was first postponed until the end of Hilary term, and then to December 1936. During the rehearsal period the composer died, aged just 48. JLG told his mother, 'The death of Van Dieren has saddened things but has removed no difficulties, though it makes any task of performance more as an act of of reverence than jubilation. A sort of Requiem Buffa!' Rehearsals resumed in June, but ultimately the work was too challenging for the Oxford players, and the production was abandoned; indeed it has not been performed to this day.



Exeter College Choir in summer of 1939

JLG made the most of opportunities to compose and perform his own music. One of the first of these was for a one act satire written and produced by fellow Exonian and literary scholar Nevill Coghill, entitled *The Masque of Satan*. Coghill asked JLG for accompanying music, and JLG obliged with a musical comedy parody of the masque form. The play, written in rhymed verse, was described by JLG as 'extremely pungent and witty'. The plot was of six newspaper magnates who discover, to their horror, that their boss, Lord Gorgon, is Satan in disguise. Part of JLG's music was a foxtrot to the words 'Down with the Strumpet! Christian Trumpet!' (this latter being one of the six newspaper titles). There were plans to produce the play for television, but this was cancelled 'owing to technical complications and expense' - or more likely that the subject matter was too provocative for the time (1937).



Probably as recompense for the loss of work, JLG received two commissions from Dallas Bower, of the BBC's experimental television unit. The first was for two songs, as part of a revue entitled *Pasquinade*, which also featured music by William Walton. In March 1937, JLG travelled from Oxford to Alexandra Palace for the recording, and reported back to his mother, 'The television went fairly okay. *The Crooner's Blues* was very badly sung and they were going to cut it out of the programme because of that, but they decided at the last moment not to.' The programme was broadcast on 20th March, and featured Hermione Baddeley. The second commission was shortly after in May 1937, for a 25-minute film *Paddlesteamer: Down River in 1850*. This event went entirely unremarked upon in JLG's letters home, possibly due to his involvement with the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) at the same time.

There was plenty more serious work for the ambitious young undergraduate. The *Intermezzo for Organ* (published by OUP) was premiered at New College, Oxford in June 1936, possibly by Sydney Watson, who was organist there. The 'Serenade for Oboe, Piano and String Orchestra' was written for the Exeter College 'Eights Week' concert in 1937, with George Malcolm and Elizabeth Kitson as the soloists. This piece received a further, somewhat dramatic performance at Balliol College, in November 1938. JLG recounted that the cellist's C-string broke in the first movement, and the oboe went astray at one point, with JLG bringing him 'to his senses by whistling the right notes shrilly'. JLG also composed a number vocal and choral works. His letters do not provide too much detail of performances of these, but in a manner well-known to his family, JLG provided the following brief, yet forthright commentary on one soprano: 'Miss X gave her song recital last Saturday and included my two songs. She is a dreadful singer.'

Away from Oxford, his Rhapsody for Oboe and String Quartet received its first performance at the Wigmore Hall in February 1936, with the Leonard Hirsch quartet joined (possibly) by oboist Alec Whittaker [JLG's programme has the name 'John Whittaker' written in by hand, which may be an error. Alec Whittaker and Leonard Hirsch both played with the Hallé Orchestra and later the Philharmonia].

Through 1938 and into 1939 JLG makes frequent references to writing his first string quartet. Whilst the original impetus for this piece is not clear, by May 1938 JLG was working to a deadline with the Blech quartet, and although he declared it finished on 6th May, he admitted 'I'm not pleased with it, or happy over its chances. It will need to be altered somewhat for the Blechs.' Thus from the beginning of 1939, JLG was working on the quartet again. At the end of April 1939, he wrote 'I have



been frightfully busy with the quartet and everything else that I've hardly had any spare moments. I find that there is so many fresh improvements to be made to the work, that I have not yet sent it them [the Blech quartet].’ The quartet was performed by the Blechs and broadcast by French radio on 20/5/39. JLG did not attend, but was treated to an after-broadcast party. In JLG’s own words: ‘I’m looking forward to this evening alright I can tell you. Denys Sutton (fellow undergraduate at Exeter and later art critic for the Financial Times) is having a sherry and vodka party, not champagne (ostensibly owing to the earliness of the hour; actually to save money I think).’ The composer Geoffrey Bush, then Nettleship Scholar at Balliol and a close friend, remembered the hangover that followed the party for the rest of his life.

Although always unbelievably modest about his ability on the keyboard, JLG was, of course, a player of much talent. There is little exact detail, but a letter to his mother refers to a recital for the Italian Society, where he included a piece by Scarlatti ‘to excuse myself for being at the Italian Club, because all the other items are by non-Italians’. In the same letter, he also refers to intensive practice of organ voluntaries for the Sunday Chapel services. In May 1936, his letters reported that he gave an organ recital at Hertford College (this despite assertions to his family as well as many interviewers that he didn’t play the organ once he was at Oxford). An article in the undergraduate journal *Isis* asked the question: ‘...who has not heard his delicate pastichios (*sic*) in styles ranging from the Corner House to the Pierhead Pavilion, played on his piano when he has nothing better to do?’

One particular concert featuring JLG as a pianist was written about by composer Humphrey Searle in his memoirs *Quadrille with a Raven*. To mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Liszt, Searle organised a sell-out concert in Oxford, at the Carfax Assembly Rooms, in November 1936. JLG’s name features as performer in several items. In one, he accompanied the actor David King-Wood (briefly a male model and ‘Marlboro Man’) in the Recitation for voice and piano *Der Traurige Monch*. Also on the programme was the *Grand Galop Chromatique*, arranged for two pianos (in this case one grand, one upright), eight hands by János Véghe (Liszt’s successor as Director of the Budapest Music Academy). JLG’s fellow pianists were Searle, Sydney Watson (later RCM Professor of Organ) and Philip Cranmer (musicologist, and well-known by those of a certain age as signatory of Associated Board Music Exam certificates.) Their applause was tumultuous, and the piece was encored, with the pairs of pianists swapping pianos, like football teams at half-time. Amongst the luminary audience (Searle names Sacheverell and Georgia Sitwell, the great Liszt interpreter



Louis Kentner and his pianist wife Ilona Kabos, Lord Berners, and musicologist Cecil Gray) was philosopher and sociologist T.W. Adorno. After the performance he rushed up to JLG to proclaim 'I liked it. If only Liszt had gone on like that, he'd have been a very good bad composer instead of a very bad good composer.' This was the start of a lasting friendship between the pair.

At the same concert, the 31-year-old composer/conductor Constant Lambert had conducted the first UK performance of Liszt's *Malediction* for piano and strings. JLG had a long talk with him after the concert, which he recounted thus: 'He just misses being a bore. When he talks he thrusts his face, which is big and oblong, right up against yours. After ten minutes you see nothing but a face, and most of that is a mouth. He also stifles one with his cigarette smoke.' They would later work as colleagues at the Royal Opera House on *The Fairy Queen* by Purcell, which ran 1-11th August 1951, days before Lambert's premature death at the end of that month.

In the course of his studies, musical and other pursuits, JLG encountered many notable figures of the time. On 10th March 1937, the LPO, conducted by Felix Weingartner gave a concert at the New Theatre, Oxford. Afterwards, Sir Hugh Allen buttonholed JLG and invited him to tea with, in JLG's words, 'the maestrissimo'. Tea was served in Sir Hugh's rooms in New College. JLG recounts thus: 'I had a few words with the old boy. He had a huge personality; I'd never felt so unimportant in all my life. I asked him about the English School. He knew Elgar and Holst's music, though he didn't appear to be interested in either composer. As for his conducting, a large one-armed beat allowed for everything that happened in between: a trait I especially remember in the slow intro to the Freischütz Overture.'

JLG also met Sir Donald Tovey, in May 1939 in Norham Gardens, Oxford, at a rehearsal of the Abingdon Ladies Choir. The Choir was singing Tovey's setting of Herrick's *Mad Maid's Song*, during which Tovey sobbed noisily. The Choir also ran through one of JLG's canons, which Tovey mistook for a sixteenth-century piece, until they were introduced. JLG did not take this as flattering praise; his explanation was that canon contained an overt pair of parallel fifths between outside voices which no mandarin sixteenth-century composer would have written, and which JLG felt so great a panjandrum should have spotted. Tovey continued to chat to JLG, and told him that his favourite pastime was despoofing conductors; especially the Dutch conductor Mengelberg, whom he heard once address the first oboe for twenty minutes on how a passage should be played. When he'd finished, the player asked him 'Do you want it loud or soft, maestro?'



JLG's friendship with Nevill Coghill led to meetings with W.H. Auden and John Masefield (then poet laureate). JLG found Auden to be easy to get on with, light-hearted and cheerful. Masefield and Coghill collaborated together, staging 'Summer Diversions' at the Oxford Playhouse. JLG played Parnassus in Coghill's *Troilus and Cressida* in August 1938. In a quiet moment, selling tickets in the Box Office, JLG wrote to his mother: 'The poet laureate is a very charming man and congratulates me on my acting whenever he sees me in a rich and pompous voice. Each item in the 'Diversions' has been preceded and succeeded by a poem by him; usually quite ineffectively and facetiously recited by two ladies, one in the 30s, the other in the 60s, both, I should think Court followers of Masefield, who have been rewarded for their services as sycophancy by being allowed to recite his poetry. They almost get jeered now, as soon as they appear on the stage!'

JLG did not confine himself to writing music whilst at Oxford. He was for a time part of the editorial team for the Varsity journal *Fords and Bridges*. In January 1937, JLG, his close friend Patrick Terry and others decided to split from the Cambridge founder/editor due to his excessive demands and launch a rival paper. A week of intense work led to the production of the first edition of *Light and Dark*, using all the material that had been intended for *Fords and Bridges*. In the initial euphoria of the achievement, JLG gloated to his mother 'Light and Dark is selling magnificently and Cambridge is already sold out of copies. We are in fact in our second thousand. *Fords and Bridges* came out today but all of Oxford is against it.'

The first edition contained an article penned by JLG: 'The Amateur, the Professional and the Composer'. The theme of this article strikes a surprisingly contemporary note - the 'celebratisation' of the composer, creating a culture where 'self-centred, glory-seeking exhibitionists can demand as their natural right £100 [~£3,000 today] for one concert in London, and the modest, retiring, skilled teacher without whom the frail edifice of genuine music-making would crumble, can sometimes demand no more than (if as much as) half a guinea [~£15 today] a lesson without being thought expensive'. The article caused something of a stir; as JLG wrote to his mother 'My article .... has (intentionally) made many enemies since it is especially ditched against a certain sort of musician very prevalent in Oxford'.

JLG did very little to mend this state of affairs: the second edition contained a further article 'The Failure of Modern Music'. JLG lamented the pre-eminence of harmony over melody prevalent in music of the time, to the extent that the modern composer was 'omitting singable' melody



from his music'. JLG linked this back to the birth of the music critic, whose emergence he timed with the 'third period' of Beethoven. He argued that the critic conceived the artist as an individual who must withdraw from the world to write music to express their tortured soul, whilst Beethoven's aloofness was involuntary: the product of his disability became recognised as the diet for all artists.)



John Gardner in his BMus gown—Summer 1939



At the start of his third academic year at Oxford, JLG became president of the Oxford University Opera Club. In order to gain publicity for the club and its performances, JLG produced another article for *Light and Dark*. He found himself centre-page in the 194th edition of *Isis*, as the 'Isis Idol'; this feature survives to today as the 'Icons' section. As JLG described it, 'each week a figurehead (!) is selected..... Along with the photograph it gives exceedingly stupid and flippant account of his life with homely details as to whether he likes fishing, cats, cinema, etc.' On these details, JLG's entry did not disappoint: he was listed as liking the novels of Trollope, films by the Marx brothers, swimming, tennis, cycling, and (of course) cats. This last fact is also evident from the frequent references to the family cat, Tiger, in JLG's letters home.

Also at this time, Sir Hugh Allen spoke to JLG about travelling on a Commonwealth Fund scholarship to spend a year in the USA. The scholarships would cover travelling and living expenses for the year to 'enable Englishmen to see and taste the glories of the new world'. This idea must have been short-lived, as there is no further mention of it in any correspondence, but it signaled that the young JLG would soon need to think about life after Oxford. At the same time, JLG had written to the Kitchener University Scholarship fund, of which he was a recipient, about an extension of the grant for to enable a fourth year of study for the B.Mus., a request that must have been granted, although there is no record of this. The ambitious young JLG received some setbacks to his plans: a television contract which he had hoped might lead to further film work was cancelled due to technical complications and expense, and he failed to secure a promising job as organist at Queen's College.

What impression did JLG leave on those he encountered through his Oxford journey? Geoffrey Bush described him as 'Tall, dark, rather heavily built with thick eyebrows which helped to create the illusion of a habitual frown – had "Lucky Jim" been around he would have called it his "Hammerklavier Sonata" face – and the frown miraculously vanished as he burst out laughing, which was, happily, a frequent occurrence.'

A selection of job references written by Oxford notables give us further detail. His musicianship received high praise; he had arrived from Wellington with a very high reputation, which was further enhanced during his time at Oxford. A distinguished future was confidently predicted, as a composer, but also in the general management and organisation of music.



Even more apparent was JLG's vigour of personality. He was described as possessing great strength and confidence, infectious enthusiasm and ebullient cheerfulness. His lively sense of humour and keen awareness of the ridiculous were also noted; his humour was described as 'refreshingly free from malice'. One College fellow commented that JLG could write unusually good English for a musician. Surprisingly (for those that knew him in later years), he was also reported to have a considerable capacity to suffer fools gladly.

JLG left Oxford in July 1939, as the world was on the eve of war. He had secured a teaching post at Repton School in Derbyshire, where he would complete two terms. In 1940 he enlisted in the RAF, and so began the next chapter of his life.

Emily Gardner, March 2017

*Sources and bibliography:*

Stephen Lloyd: *Walton: Muse of Fire*

Humphrey Searle: *Quadrille with a Raven* (available online on Musicweb International)

Bodleian Library website

Don Chapman: Oxford Playhouse - high and low drama in a university city

Original editions of *Light and Dark*, *Isis* and *Cherwell* from JLG's collection

Concert programmes from JLG's collection

JLG's letters to his mother (Emily Muriel Pullein Thompson)

JLG's journal

JLG's recollections