

HOWELLS REVISITED

The chance discovery of a manuscript led Barnaby Robson to rediscover Herbert Howells' Clarinet Sonata in an unknown, original version. He tells the fascinating story of bringing it to the recording studio

While a student at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama I was fortunate to have studied the Herbert Howells Clarinet Sonata with Dame Thea King. Thea had been married to the distinguished clarinettist Frederick Thurston – the dedicatee of Howells' Clarinet Sonata.

During clarinet lessons I distinctly remember Thea rummaging through the sprawling bookshelves of her teaching room, at her home in West London, to find a relevant correspondence from the composer or even pages of the manuscript itself. She recorded the work in 1989 for Hyperion and produced an edition of the piece in 1983 for Boosey & Hawkes with the clarinet written for the A clarinet – which she assured me had always been Howells' clarinet of choice for the work.

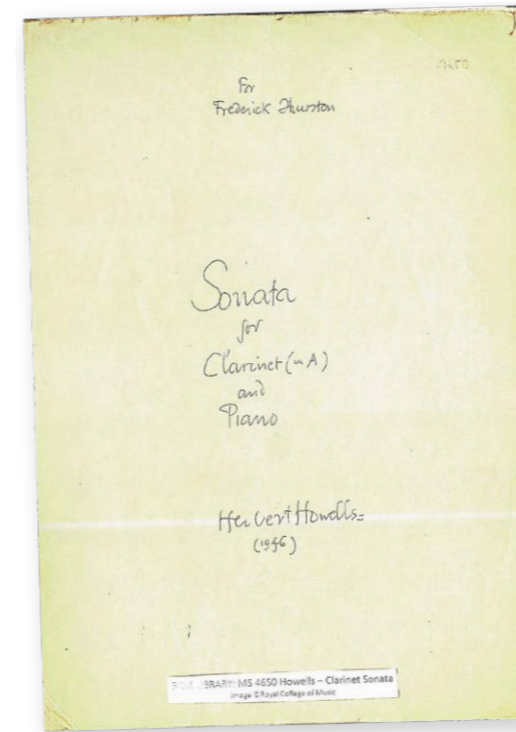
The Howells Clarinet Sonata has remained a cherished piece throughout my career, and I believe it to be one of the finest works for clarinet and piano. But it is often overlooked perhaps in part due to the rather troubled history of its second and final movement.

Herbert Howells was born in Gloucestershire in 1892. He showed great musicality as a child studying organ and singing as a local choirboy. In 1912 he began his studies at the Royal College of Music where he blossomed until a serious illness followed by prolonged treatment broke his youthful composing stride – although it also saved him from the horrors of the fighting in the First World War.

The notation of this shorter second movement was clearly in Howells' hand – written in ink with phrasing and dynamics

Herbert Howells working on a score in July 1947.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LEBRECHT MUSIC & ARTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Cover of the RCM manuscript

In 1920 Howells joined the teaching staff of the Royal College of Music, remaining there for almost 60 years. Although busy as a pedagogue and adjudicator he continued to compose. The beautiful Rhapsodic Quintet of 1919 and the Piano Concerto No 2 of 1925 are both notable works from this period. The second Piano Concerto inspired much criticism and caused Howells to withdraw it. This was perhaps an early sign of things to come; Howells was notoriously insecure as a composer and often oversensitive to both professional and personal criticism.

Tragedy struck in 1935 when Howells lost his nine-year-old son Michael to polio. He never fully recovered from this event, and he continued to commemorate Michael's death until the end of his own life. Over the next three years he composed much of the material that was later to become perhaps his best-known work, *Hymnus Paradisi*. However, the material remained in his own words 'a personal, almost secret document' until September 1950 when it was first performed in Gloucester Cathedral at the Three Choirs Festival – 15 years and one day after Michael's death.

It was during my time as principal clarinet of the Philharmonia Orchestra that I performed *Hymnus Paradisi* in Gloucester Cathedral at the Three Choirs Festival. I had not encountered the piece before, but I was immediately struck by its similarity to the Clarinet Sonata not only in texture and harmony but most distinctly by its powerful emotional depth.

Howells continued to compose into his late 80s, including a number of significant choral works. He died in 1983, aged 90, in a London nursing home. Thea King, who had kept in touch with him over many

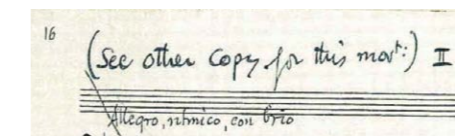
years, told me that she had visited him 'near the end' and that they had spoken of the Clarinet Sonata, but he had no memory of the piece at all. It was his last major chamber music work.

I've often heard the uniform criticism of the Sonata; that the second movement is too long and not as compositionally strong as the first. Clarinet students can be reluctant to programme the piece in a final recital because, at over 20 minutes, it absorbs much of their precious recital time. A few years ago a student of mine at the Royal College of Music burst excitedly into my teaching room to announce that she had come across the original manuscript of the Howells Clarinet Sonata, located 'at the bottom of a cardboard box in the library, with some different notes in it!' On further investigation the Royal College of Music librarian assured me that the actual Howells

manuscript was carefully preserved and what my student had seen was a photocopy. I was intrigued and asked if I could look at the actual manuscript.

The bundle of documents presented to me by the librarian were clearly all from the same paper stock and in the same musical handwriting. Some written editorial comments were occasionally overlaid. Following a cover page, there were three movements in total, the last two both marked with the Roman numeral 'II' and on one of these was handwritten 'see other copy for this movement' (it was difficult to tell if this instruction was in the composers' hand and it was undated).

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2nd movement of the RCM manuscript

In comparing the manuscript to the modern printed edition (Boosey & Hawkes/King 1983) I could immediately see differences throughout. Most strikingly one of the second movements was considerably shorter and, after the first 20 bars or so, contained entirely

different musical material. I noticed that the handwritten page numbers of the manuscript continued sequentially from the last page of the first movement to the first page of this shorter second movement, indicating that Howells had carried on directly from the first movement. The notation of this shorter second movement was clearly in Howells' hand – written in ink with phrasing and dynamics, and it appeared to be in essence a finished piece of music. I realised that what was in front of me was an unpublished and potentially unheard yet complete piece of clarinet and piano music written by one of the great British composers.

Further comparison revealed more differences. There were no metronome marks in any of the movements, only written tempo indications. The first movement seemed to have remained largely unchanged structurally, but it did have different dynamic and articulation markings. The piano pedal markings indicated that Howells was thinking of a clearer, more defined texture. There was one obvious pitch change in the clarinet part. The longer version of the second movement had an entirely different final section to the 1983 edition. This made a total of three different endings to the Sonata – the shorter second movement, the longer second movement (both contained in the RCM manuscript) and the 1983 printed edition. I found this quite amazing as the manuscript of the first movement and extended second movement had always been regarded by Howells scholars as the 'stichvorlage' used by the publisher. I wondered why and when the changes had been made and by whom?

It's worth mentioning Howells' experience of writing his Sonata for oboe and piano of 1942. The piece was composed for the star oboist of the day Leon Goossens who had some serious reservations about its structure and said as much to Howells. One of the main criticisms was that it was too long and the oboe writing was too technically difficult. The composer took the manuscript back saying he would 'have another go at it'. This was the last Goossens heard of the piece. In fact it is only by chance that the work exists today. The Howells

expert Christopher Palmer borrowed the manuscript from the composer and happened to photocopy it before the manuscript was then lost. It was first performed in 1984, 42 years after its composition, and is now considered to be one of the great works for the instrument. Howells composed the Clarinet Sonata between August and December 1946, and many Howells scholars view the Clarinet Sonata as Howells' attempt 'to have another go'. Perhaps having been shaken by his recent miscalculation over the Oboe Sonata Howells didn't want to repeat his apparent error and so wrote a substantial first movement with a much shorter, punchier second movement, which worked as a real contrast to the huge musical spans of the first movement and the 'con tenerezza' melodic writing.

Thurston gave the first performance of the Clarinet Sonata during a BBC Third Programme broadcast early in 1948 with pianist Eric Harrison. As far as I know there is no surviving record of this. But is there a chance this broadcast was of the original version with the shorter second movement and that it was subsequently revised in discussions between Howells and Thurston? Perhaps after wanting to avoid the 'mistakes' of the Oboe Sonata Howells felt that he'd gone too far in the other direction and decided to extend the second movement with a return to the lyrical themes of the first movement? There are certainly more technical challenges for the clarinet in the shorter version of the second movement, including some bars that would have been particularly tricky to

execute on instruments of the day. With the rejection from Goossens still smarting could Thurston, with his star billing, have coerced Howells into disregarding his original ideas for the second movement?

Howells' diary states he was copying the Clarinet Sonata on 2 January 1947 and that the piece was rehearsed by Thurston at the clarinetists' home on 15 March that same year. I started to think again about Thea's music room bookshelves – filled with original manuscripts of great British clarinet music from that period much of which had been written for Thurston. Undoubtedly it was discussed and rehearsed in the presence of the composers. Where had those important documents gone after Thea's death in 2007? She and Thurston had not had children to inherit them. Professor Colin Lawson, Director of the RCM and a clarinet pupil of Thea's himself, told me that he remembered Thea was very close to her niece.

Gina Fullerlove is that niece. She is a great music appreciator and practitioner and indeed, as I discovered, the keeper

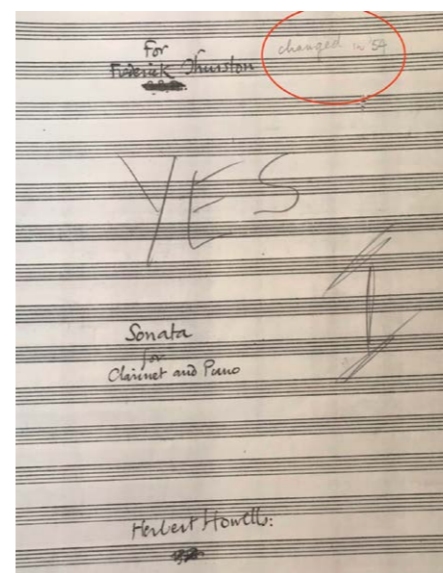
of the majority of Thea's precious manuscripts. Due to the Covid pandemic Gina and I were unable to look through the collection together, but she kindly spent a weekend going through Thea's manuscripts taking photos of relevant pages. When these arrived in my inbox I was particularly intrigued by one image. It showed a manuscript title page to the Howells Sonata and clearly written on it was 'changed in 54'. Gina confirmed this was Thea's handwriting. But did this mean the manuscript had been changed 'to' the one in Gina's possession or 'from' this manuscript to another copy? I asked Gina if she could send the complete document.

Meanwhile, I was able to obtain a copy of the first printed edition from the Boosey & Hawkes archive. This first edition appeared in 1954, shortly after Frederick Thurston's death in late 1953, but some eight years after Howells composed the piece. I felt sure it would answer many of my questions, but it proved to be a red herring. The first edition is almost identical to the 1983 Thea King edition (which as already

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Fiona Harris and Barnaby Robson recording at Menuhin Hall



Cover page of Thea King's manuscript marked 'changed in 54'

described has substantial changes to the RCM manuscript) except with the clarinet part written for the B flat instrument – not as Howells had intended but in keeping with the editorial fashion of the day. Certainly the 1954 edition is neither a printed version of the 'stichvorlage' first and second movement manuscript, nor of the shorter second movement (although I had anticipated the latter).

However, the subsequent pages of Gina's 'changed in 54' manuscript were helpful. They are a direct copy of the complete RCM manuscript with no changes marked, the implication being that Thea's cover page note meant the RCM manuscript had indeed been altered prior to publication. Because there are no significant changes between the first edition in 1954 and Thea's edition of 1983 it seems clear that it was sometime in the eight-year period between composition and first publication that substantial changes were made – potentially as late as 1954. My hunch is that there is a missing manuscript somewhere with the changes marked up perhaps even with Howells' signature to approve them.

When Howells finished his 1971 Piano Sonatina he gave the manuscript to its dedicatee but then published a revised version soon after. John Birch, organist at Chichester Cathedral, actually refused to let Howells take the Organ Partita back when he wanted to revise it. And we already know of Howells' sensitivity to criticism from his experience with the 1925 Piano Concerto No 2 and 1942 Oboe Sonata. It has been noted by Howells scholars, and indeed other composers, that Howells' revisions were almost always a mistake. Written comments by Gerald Finzi in the 1930s that said as much were known to have troubled Howells.

In light of all these facts I decided to ask the Howells Trust for permission to

transcribe and record the complete 1946 version of the Clarinet Sonata – including the original shorter second movement. I felt it was vitally important this significant piece of clarinet and piano repertoire should be heard in its original form with the original second movement reinstated. The Trust kindly granted permission and the arduous but equally fascinating task of moving Howells handwritten score into more readable, computer-based notation began – taking about eight weeks in the early part of 2021. I must give huge credit and thanks to pianist Fiona Harris for her constant checking and re-checking of the manuscript against the emerging printed notation and also to fellow clarinetist Scott Lygate for his painstaking transcription skills.

Recording sessions took place with myself and pianist Fiona Harris at Henry Wood Hall, London, and The Menuhin Hall, Surrey, in the summer of 2021, and I was delighted that Andrew Keener was able to produce for us. Aside from being a wonderful producer Andrew also produced Thea King's 1989 Hyperion recording of the Sonata. Andrew's involvement seemed a particularly

appropriate way to bring my history with the piece full circle.

Please may I thank the following for their goodwill, support and expertise in bringing this project to fruition and allowing Howells' 'lost' clarinet music to be heard again: Professor Colin Lawson CBE, Herbert Howells Trust, Herbert Howells Society, Dr Jonathan Clinch, Gina Fullerlove, Janet Hilton, Joy Farrall, Angela Malsbury, Richard Chesser, Boosey & Hawkes, Peter Linnitt, Paul Andrews, Kristina Arakelyan and Shelley Twitchin. ■

A recording of the complete 1946 version of Howells' Clarinet Sonata, performed by Barnaby Robson and Fiona Harris, will be released on Orchid Classics in November 2021.

Barnaby Robson is principal clarinet of the English National Opera Orchestra and professor of clarinet at the Royal College of Music, London.

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Fiona Harris, Barnaby Robson and Andrew Keener at Henry Wood Hall