

Book review

Paul Nordoff: Composer & Music Therapist (Colin Andrew Lee)

Reviewed by Jacqueline Z. Robarts



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Did you know that Nordoff was not Paul Nordoff's real name? Did you know that Nordoff wrote ballet scores for the Martha Graham Dance Company, and composed song settings of E. E. Cummings' poems? Did you know that Nordoff's life as a musician and pianist with extraordinary creative and performing gifts was dogged by struggles, financial and emotional, and lack of public recognition as a composer? Can you imagine, at the age of fifty, developing a new way of using your music to help children with special needs, and then co-writing three books, while living an international itinerant lifestyle, constantly needing to raise funds and sponsorships?

Colin Andrew Lee has written a richly documented book about the life and music of one of our best-known and most celebrated pioneers of music therapy, Paul Nordoff. It is a work of love, musicianship, dedication, inspiration, and discovery of the man, musician, music therapist. Not only essential reading for Nordoff-Robbins music therapists, but also, as Aigen writes in his Foreword: "[...] equally important for music therapists who believe in the congruence of artistic and clinical goals and who want to advance their

own skills in integrating the two within their clinical work" (p. viii). It will also be of interest to musicians, musicologists and educationists, students and teachers of composition and improvisation, theatrical works, and art songs.

Lee's nine chapters chart a prismatic journey through Nordoff's life and work, focusing on his art music and his transition to music therapist, making links, one to the other, throughout: Composer (Chapter 1), Orchestral Works (Chapter 2), Piano and Chamber Music (Chapter 3), Stage Works (Chapter 4), Art Songs (Chapter 5), E. E. Cummings Songs (Chapter 6 – by Leslie De'Ath), Music Therapist (Chapter 7), From Artistic to Clinical Composer (Chapter 8), and The Final Years (Chapter 9). Copiously illustrated with extracts from the original scores of Nordoff's art music, *'Paul Nordoff: Composer and Music Therapist'* is a book to be played as well as read. (Pianists, prepare for Nordoff's enormous hand span of eleven or twelve notes!). It includes some previously unpublished photographs of Nordoff with colleagues, family and friends. Two appendices list Nordoff's composition catalogue and discography, and there is a useful index. One surprising

omission (by the publishers) is the lack of a portrait of Nordoff on the book cover: if ever a face could launch a thousand sales, Nordoff's probably could.

Through 12 years of immersing himself in collecting and evaluating Nordoff's compositions, and selecting archive material shared by close friends and colleagues of Nordoff, Lee has evidently been driven by his love of Nordoff's art music and his desire to raise awareness and appreciation of Nordoff's art songs in particular as being among the finest of the 20th century. Lee views Nordoff as "equal in stature to (Nordoff's) contemporaries Rorem, Barber, Bernstein and Copland" (p. 71). We learn that much of Nordoff's work has remained in manuscript form, with very little being performed in his lifetime. One might surmise that this experience of his music being neglected must have heightened Nordoff's empathy in later years with special needs children who, like him, were outside of the mainstream and unrecognised as having something to contribute to the world at that time. Nordoff's neo-Romantic, often jazz-influenced lyrical style was unfashionable and out of step with the contemporary musical trends of his time such as avant-garde experimentalists and serialists in the 1920s and ensuing decades. While Nordoff embraced the atonality, bi-tonality, and dissonance of modern music, Lee reveals that Nordoff always believed that his music should be accessible. He celebrates Nordoff's feeling for words and music, for natural, spontaneous human expression, movement, and spirit at the heart of his musical inspiration. To his analyses of Nordoff's music, Lee brings his own considerable skills and musical creativity as pianist, composer, and music therapist.



Photo 1: Paul Nordoff – pianist, composer, teacher, music therapist (from the cover of CD 'Paul Nordoff: Playing and singing his settings of poetry by E.E. Cummings, An Unknown Canadian Poet, & Walter de la Mare')

In writing this review I should disclose that for nearly two decades I had the privilege of teaching the Nordoff and Robbins 'Core Studies' on the London Nordoff-Robbins Masters training programme, teaching clinical improvisation and musical resources. In studying Nordoff's therapy music in detail, with new revelations every year I came to know his work in great detail: his artistry and feeling in melodic lines, chord progressions, shapes and shells sometimes leading, sometimes following musical intent and imagination. It is therefore a delight to have the opportunity to read and play so many substantial extracts from the scores of Nordoff's pre-music-therapy music: E. E. Cummings songs, stage works, ballet scores for Martha Graham, piano and chamber music. Nordoff's range of styles – Romantic, jazz, blues – and his feeling for dance (his wife Sabine was a eurythmist), his harmonic textures and progressions, and love of the added 6th, 9th and 11th are echoed clearly, developed and simplified in his later clinical improvisations [viz. *Child Studies* (Nordoff & Robbins 2007) and *Play Songs* (Nordoff & Robbins 1968)] – which were refined or reduced versions of songs that arose out of improvisation), and musical plays, such as *'The Three Bears'*, *'Artaban'*, *'Pif Paf Poltrie'*, and *'A Message for the King'* (all Theodore Presser Co. publications). One wonders what major works Nordoff might have composed, had his music been more appreciated and performed in his lifetime, and possibly drawn him away from music therapy? In Nordoff's beautiful piano score setting of a novel by Sylvia Townsend Warner as an opera in two acts, *'The Sea Change'* (pp. 53-54), and in a one-act opera *'The Masterpiece'* (extract of the Overture, pp. 55-56), as in so many other works throughout this text, Lee has selected some of their central themes to help the reader savour the distinctive features and character of each work as a whole.

Lee's musical analyses include concise, dynamic descriptions of each work conveying the spirit, mood, texture or defining character of the piece or extract in manuscript, while making useful observations and links between Nordoff's art music and music therapy composition and improvisation. For example, in describing an extract from Nordoff's most successful stage work, *'Every Soul is a Circus'*, one of three ballet scores composed for the Martha Graham Dance Company and performed in 1939, Lee introduces it with a typically imaginative synopsis, bringing the music to life from the page, while setting it in context:

“Later a jazz duet accompanies dancers on a see saw. Written on 12/8, the music has a lilting quality with a simple I, V chord accompaniment (strings and piano) and syncopated theme (woodwinds), balanced with a chromatic melody in sixths (flute and strings). This charming and simple movement highlights Nordoff’s compositional clarity when setting music to dance. It was this sophisticated style of composing that would have such a noticeable influence on Nordoff’s dance music as a music therapist with children” (p. 64).

Lee draws particular attention to Nordoff’s affinity with voice, dance, poetry, and theatre. He shows how Nordoff’s art works and “clinical compositions and improvisation” are not separate entities, but part of a glorious continuum of musical creativity inspired by human feeling and human stories. Leslie De’Ath’s chapter (Chapter 6) on the E. E. Cummings song shows Nordoff’s gift of setting words to music, capturing every nuance in ingenious harmonies, sometimes sparse, sometimes full, on the move or as poised as an arabesque. For any musician or music therapist wanting to develop their improvisation, there are myriad musical examples to explore here and discover the conversational or prosodic contours of Nordoff’s melodic lines, which bring such directness, immediacy, authenticity, and emotional depth to his music therapy improvisation.

At the outset Lee suggests that in order to become a therapist, Nordoff had to let the composer in him die, that he could not be both composer and therapist. Lee’s view shifts later (Chapter 7, p. 154) where he describes Nordoff’s clinical improvisation and compositions for therapy as an extension (or even expansion) of his previous work and life as an art music composer. In the penultimate two chapters Lee describes the creative partnership of Nordoff and Robbins in their therapy work, teaching and writing, and in Nordoff’s compositions of musical plays and play songs. The original improvised versions of many of the play songs were musically much richer and freer in harmonic texture and creative invention, arising in the moment. Some of these can be heard in recordings published in Aigen’s *Paths of Development in Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy* (Aigen 1998), an ideal companion text to Lee’s, on Nordoff and Robbins’ music therapy clinical work. Lee’s final chapter, *The Final Years*, describes beginnings and endings in a fateful sequence of events: the first Nordoff-Robbins music therapy training course in London in 1974, the ending of Paul Nordoff’s and Clive Robbins’ collaboration, the last years of Nordoff’s life and his return to art

composition in a sombre, severe mood that reflected his state of mind. It is an extraordinarily moving experience to have this opportunity to play extracts from Nordoff’s very personal final works, and to be somehow in communion with his creative spirit through his music as we are when we play and perform the great composers’ works. This is due to Lee’s great endeavour in bringing Nordoff’s art music at last into the public domain. Surely, there will be recordings of some of these works available in the near future.

In researching and writing this work Lee has enjoyed access to many close friends and colleagues of Paul Nordoff and their archive of correspondence. From Nordoff’s letters to one of his closest musician friends, Romeo Cascarino, we learn about Nordoff and Robbins’ early explorations of music “as a specific therapy” and how Nordoff misses his family and children (p. 127). We learn of the sacrifices both Nordoff and Robbins made to pioneer this work and their growing realisation of how important it was. Nordoff’s deepening sense of identity and purpose in his work with Clive Robbins in helping children with special needs may raise in more psychologically oriented readers’ minds questions about Nordoff and his childhood prior to the age of 14 (where Lee’s account begins). We are told little about Nordoff’s early childhood, his parents, his inheritance from them and their past. Musically, socially, historically, it would have been interesting to know more of Nordoff’s background and cultural inheritance. Nordoff’s family is thought by some who studied with him to have come from Poland. For instance, could it be that Nordoff’s family came to Philadelphia from Eastern Europe? Did they emigrate to the USA in the early 1900’s during the Polish Revolution, part of the Russian Revolution of 1905? What hardships did they (and later their young son) have to deal with? In Nordoff’s and the poet Cummings’ correspondence during the 1930s and 1940s Cummings refers to Nordoff’s “great depressions” comparing them with his own – touching evidence of creative artists supporting each other in their common psychological illness.

With musical sensitivity, assiduous research, deep respect and passion for his subject, Lee has shed new light on the life and music of Paul Norman Bookmeyer who became Paul Nordoff: a story of creativity and dedication, depression and despair, and the awakening of a resolve to use his music to help children who did not have a voice, could not express themselves or even have a sense of themselves, and thereby enhance their lives. In so doing Nordoff made an invaluable and lasting contribution as one of the founders of music

therapy. This is a story, beautifully told, that takes the reader to a profound place through the music of a creative genius.

“Nordoff composed music in dialogue with life, and life often involves movement, words and story. Our lives carve out narratives. That’s how we understand it” (Aigen, Foreword, p.viii).

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