

Ernest Charles Empson 1880 - 1970

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Pianist, piano teacher

Ernest Charles Empson was born on 9 March 1880 in Ashburton New Zealand, to Yorkshire-born parents John Edwin Empson, an engine-fitter, and his wife, Ann Johnson. He was brought up in the household of Charles and Sophia Thompson, parents of the painter Sydney Lough Thompson, where his precocious musical gifts were recognised early and encouraged by Sophia. He was educated at Christchurch East School (New Zealand).

Empson's first major teacher was the Christchurch pianist and critic Hermann Lund, one of the influential German musicians who shaped musical developments in late nineteenth century New Zealand. Lund remained an abiding influence, and in old age Empson described his playing as being of rare loveliness. Empson quickly became an admired solo and chamber music pianist, and in 1899 also started to teach. On 30 June 1905, at Christchurch, he married Florence (Flora) Elizabeth, the Thompsons's 19-year-old daughter. They were to have three sons.

After taking part in concerts at the New Zealand International Exhibition in Christchurch in 1906–7, Empson went to Frankfurt am Main to study at the Hoch Conservatory. He gave a series of successful concerto concerts and recitals before moving to Berlin. There he became friends with the great violinist Joseph Joachim, the composer–pianist Ferruccio Busoni, and the pianist Artur Schnabel. However, with a young family and Flora ill with tuberculosis, he could not afford to study with Busoni, who took his select group of pupils with him on his long concert tours. Instead, on Schnabel's advice, he studied with Leopold Godowsky, whose influence on European pianists was already profound. Through Empson that influence was to be transmitted to generations of New Zealand pianists.

Empson's career in Germany ended prematurely when Flora became so seriously ill that in 1908 they had to return to Christchurch, where she died in 1912. On 19 June 1913, at Christchurch, Empson married Grace Anne Prettejohns, a promising young singer and musician, with whom he had two sons and two daughters. Professionally, he marked his return with a series of acclaimed recitals and his reputation quickly spread abroad. In 1917 he toured the South East Asian concert circuit with the French-Canadian tenor Paul Dufault; a privately published memoir, *My experiences in the east*, describes this tour. He later toured Australia.

In 1922 Empson abruptly left Christchurch for Australia, taking with him a married pupil, Ivey Violet King (née Manchester). His abandonment of Grace and their children created some scandal and generated long-lasting family bitterness. His career, however, flourished in Australia where, for most of the next decade, he not only continued to give highly praised concerts, but became one of the busiest of pioneer radio recitalists and accompanied such distinguished visitors as the operatic tenor Joseph Hislop. He also examined piano and chamber music for the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music and the Australian Music Examinations Board.

Ernest and Ivey married at Christchurch on 30 August 1932, the same day as his divorce from Grace. They lived in Australia from 1936 to 1941. Following their return, Ernest became not only the most influential piano teacher of his time in New Zealand, but a dominant and sometimes formidable personality in Christchurch's musical life; as Frederick Page put it, he demanded – and won – ‘disciples’ rather than mere pupils. At some time almost every young New Zealand pianist of note studied with him. Douglas Lilburn, Margaret Nielsen and Maurice Till were to be among the best known. The regular recitals sponsored by his Eroica Club were features of Christchurch's musical life for many years and proved valuable testing grounds for young pianists and a few young singers. He was an early member and president of the Music Teachers' Association of New Zealand and was made an OBE in 1959 for services to music. He retired in 1968 at the age of 88 and died on 23 June 1970, survived by his third wife, and by four sons and two daughters.

Of commanding and leonine appearance, Ernest Empson was immensely courteous and possessed a refinement, artistic perception and musical knowledge that set him apart from most of his fellow teachers. He possessed, in every sense, the grand manner and could be formidable indeed with what he perceived to be artistic shallowness and with rival teachers. He remained a superb pianist into old age, although he performed infrequently in public during the last 30 years of his life. He was unique among contemporary New Zealand piano teachers in possessing an international reputation.

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