

Parallel Passions: Barbara Hepworth and Priaulx Rainier

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Barbara Hepworth sustained a deep, life-long passion for music. It was not just a question of listening for pleasure, as she explained in her 1952 monograph, for music was key to the ways in which she thought about ‘the life of forms’ and therefore a crucial aspect of her daily working life.¹ Hepworth had been a talented musician herself and, as a schoolgirl, won a music scholarship. When sculpture came to dominate her creativity, she played less and eventually stopped altogether. Nevertheless, music remained an important presence in her work. Hepworth’s early expertise enabled her to recognise the structural and abstract qualities of music which, alongside an appreciation of poetry, movement, dance and rhythm, intersected with and enhanced her developing sculptural language. Hepworth’s relationship with contemporary music reached a peak during the 1950s, when she enjoyed musical friendships and fruitful collaborations with the composers Priaulx Rainier, Michael Tippett and Benjamin Britten and the tenor Peter Pears. When Hepworth designed the costumes and sets for the first production of Tippett’s opera *The Midsummer Marriage* in 1955, for example, Tippett wrote to Hepworth that the results of their association were a rare instance of the ‘unity of eye & ear’.² For Hepworth, their collaboration was a particularly satisfying blend of ‘movement, and gesture, light and darkness, colour and form’.³

It was in the thirties that Hepworth first began to express thoughts about the affinities she found between music and sculpture. In a letter from 1932, Hepworth wrote to Ben Nicholson explaining her experience of a Promenade concert of Bach’s music.⁴ She described the visual impact of the orchestra playing and moving in unison, and noted that there was a likeness in the structure of Bach’s musical compositions – their ‘perfect construction’ – to that utilised by Picasso: there is ‘no difference at all’ she contended. Hepworth elaborated upon her ideas on sculpture and music for a text published in 1933 in the journal *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif*, in which she wrote that ‘music is abstract by definition’. She continued to state that ‘true art’ across the disciplines resulted from ““perfect” realisations of rhythm’ and of ‘order, composition, harmony, and above all of “definitive” lines.’⁵

¹ Barbara Hepworth, ‘Artist in Society 1949-1952’ reproduced in Sophie Bowness (ed.), *Barbara Hepworth: Writings and Conversations* (London: Tate, 2015) p. 72.

² Letter from Tippett to Hepworth December 1954, quoted in Sophie Bowness, ‘Rhythms of the Stones: Hepworth and Music’, in Chris Stephens (ed.), *Barbara Hepworth: A Centenary* (London: Tate, 2003) p. 27.

³ Barbara Hepworth, ‘Tribute to Michael Tippett’, Ian Kemp (ed.), *Michael Tippett: A Symposium on his 60th Birthday* (1965), reproduced in Bowness, op. cit. (2015) p. 181.

⁴ Letter from Hepworth to Nicholson, undated (September 1932). Tate Archive, TGA 8717/1/1/97. The guitar and violin were depicted in Nicholson’s paintings around 1932-33. While Nicholson collected a number of musical instruments, he played none.

⁵ Barbara Hepworth, *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif* (1933), reproduced in Bowness, op. cit. (2015) p.18.

Rhythm is a musical term important for understanding Hepworth's work. One finds the word and its synonyms repeated in the titles of works in both two and three dimensions, along with other specific musical references such as 'antiphon', 'motet', 'pavan' and 'galliard'. Hepworth discusses 'rhythm' frequently in her writings, which seems to have encapsulated the essence and physicality of carving combined with the psychical processes necessary to the shaping of sculptural form. Rhythm was also the vitality, the animating inner life and voracity, which a completed work also conveyed. Hepworth liked to time the act of carving to her pulse, which meant, as she frequently had to explain, that making sculpture was not the result of brutish, masculine strength but required a steadily continuous and repetitive rhythm. In her narrative for John Read's 1961 film about her work (made by Herbert Read's son for the BBC and available to watch on the iPlayer), Hepworth described how her senses were so attuned to her favoured materials, that she could *hear* hidden weaknesses and potential flaws inside the block.⁶ It was through listening rather than looking that she learned how matter was being worked correctly. The importance of acoustics becomes apparent eleven minutes into Read's film. In rare footage of Hepworth at work, she is shown in the yard of her Trewyn studio in St Ives with the early stages of a substantial stone sculpture called *Curved Reclining Form (Rosewall)*. Hepworth is entirely absorbed in the act of carving and the air is filled with a resounding clangour as her tools strike rock. The lithic beat is measured and controlled, reverberating through solid matter like the earliest form of primal music. In her *Pictorial Autobiography* (1970) Hepworth called this noise of the hammer or mallet 'music to my ears', when either were used 'rhythmically',⁷ and these percussive sounds of carving had earlier inspired Priaulx Rainier's *Rhythm of the Stones*, composed during a stay at Trewyn in the summer of 1950.

Films such as that by Read provide a soundtrack to Hepworth's working life and, arguably, it is only through the extant films that one is able to fully appreciate aurally and visually the sympathetic relationship between music and Hepworth's art. Music for the BBC documentary was written and performed by Freddie Phillips, a composer known for television programmes such as *Trumpton* and who also contributed, rather improbably, to Michael Powell's film *Peeping Tom* (1960). A later film produced by Westward Television in 1967 included a selection of music chosen by Britten with the musicologist Donald Mitchell in order to draw out particular aspects of Hepworth's sculpture.⁸ In one sequence, stringed brass sculptures rotate to John Williams' performance of *Nocturnal for Guitar*, including a version of Hepworth's lyre-like *Orpheus* maquette. The sound of played strings represented by the sculpture, and which one might imagine as lying latent within it, one is able to hear through Williams' musical accompaniment. As the sculptures turn, in her voiceover Hepworth relays how she has been interested in very early music 'all her life', as well as the contemporary music of the then century by 'Stravinsky and Britten'. She is not, she insists, interested in 'romantic music', which she likened to dramatic and pessimistic

⁶ 'Barbara Hepworth, dir. John Read, 1961', *BBC iPlayer* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p013h27r/barbara-hepworth>> [accessed 25 Apr 2025]. See also a transcript in Bowness, op. cit. (2015) pp. 142-43.

⁷ Barbara Hepworth, *Barbara Hepworth: A Pictorial Autobiography* (1970), republished London: Tate, 1985, p. 49.

⁸ Available from Plymouth Archives, The Box (Image & Film Service).

sculpture, and which she did not like at all. In an earlier film entitled *Figures in a Landscape: Cornwall and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth*, music combines completely with the exploration of Hepworth, her work and her connection to landscape. Made in 1953 by Dudley Shaw Ashton for an experimental division of the British Film Institute – and readily available on the BFI website – the film combined the talents of the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes, who wrote the script that was spoken by the poet Cecil Day Lewis, Brain's Wind Ensemble, established by the renowned young horn-player Dennis Brain, and the percussionist James Blades.⁹ It was Priaulx Rainier who composed the score, at Hepworth's request. In contrast to the later films, Rainier's music for *Figures in a Landscape* is not an easily straightforward listen. Indeed, as a contemporary reviewer noted, Rainier's admirable 'boldness and power' was the result of '5 per cent harmony, 10 per cent counterpoint, 10 per cent melody, 75 per cent rhythm and 0 per cent conventional form', a combination which he conceded could initially exacerbate the nerves.¹⁰ Viewing *Figures in a Landscape*, this assessment of Rainier would seem to be fair but it means her music emphatically enhances the experience of seeing Hepworth's sculpture to great advantage. The narration in Shaw Ashton's film may have situated Hepworth within a mythic continuity between past and present, but the combination of sound and image conveys a less than harmonious relationship between the sculptor, her work and the countryside. The piercing sounds of clarinet and oboe strike discordant notes, as sharp and penetrating to the ear as Hepworth's chisel. The deliberate effect emphasises the strangeness – surreal in the widest possible sense – of some of Hepworth's abstract, defiantly modern imagery, sited directly in and around the St Ives locale in juxtapositions which seek to jar rather than meld. As such, the film is a close collaboration which represents Hepworth and Rainier as equally radical and innovative.

Hepworth and Rainier had met in 1949 and became particularly close friends in the early fifties. Presumably both women recognised the shared experience of being successful but largely misunderstood practitioners within male-dominated idioms, but they also bonded over parallel passions (for Rilke, Stravinsky and Brâncuși) and they developed a mutual regard for each other's respective practices.¹¹ For Hepworth, Rainier was liberated from the physical constraints of matter, which meant there was nothing she could not achieve in sound. Rainier learned about spatial relationships from Hepworth, who she felt created the essence of abstraction in three dimensions, which was so much harder to do in music. Through each other's work they discovered, as Dr Sophie Bowness has described, that a distinctive rhythm was essential.¹² Indeed, creating calculated silences between words and notes was certainly of special interest to Rainier. The presence of such pauses in her compositions one might then interpret as equivalent to Hepworth's use of physical holes and voids in her sculpture.¹³

⁹ 'Figures in a Landscape, dir. Dudley Shaw Ashton, 1953', *BBC iPlayer* <<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-figures-in-a-landscape-1953-online>> [accessed 25 Apr 2025].

¹⁰ John Amis, 'Priaulx Rainier', *The Musical Times*, vol. 96, no. 1349, July 1955, p. 354.

¹¹ See the account in June Opie, *Come and Listen to the Stars Singing – Priaulx Rainier: A Pictorial Biography* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 1988).

¹² Bowness, op. cit. (2003) p. 23.

¹³ Opie, op. cit., p. 40.

Rainier dedicated two compositions to Hepworth and helped advise her on the redesign of the studio garden at Trewyn. Together, along with Tippett, they also devised the ambitious programme of music, drama and visual arts for the St Ives Festival in 1953. In turn, Hepworth gave Rainier a number of works that formed the core of a collection (also including works by Ben Nicholson and Alfred Wallis) that was later bequeathed to Kettle's Yard. Amongst these, the 1947 drawing *Group for Sculpture (Contrapuntal Forms)* seems particularly resonant for a consideration of the nature of their friendship. The inclusion of 'contrapuntal forms' in the subtitle may refer to Hepworth's monumental stone sculpture of the same name which she made for the Festival Britain (1951), and which Rainier would have seen (and heard) in progress during her stay in 1950. And as a musical term, contrapuntal, meaning a distinct but imitative counterpoint, also echoes the reciprocal influence between the practices of Hepworth and Rainier, and rather neatly summarises the extent of the "close collaboration", 'creative solidarity', and perfect understanding that existed between them'.¹⁴

About the author

Dr Stephen Feeke is a curator and writer who recently researched Barbara Hepworth's early bronzes for a Ph.D. at the Courtauld Institute alongside projects as an independent writer and curator. Recent articles have appeared in the *Burlington Magazine* and the *Sculpture Journal*. Feeke contributed to the catalogue accompanying the Hepworth exhibition at the Rijksmuseum (Summer 2022). He was previously a Director at the New Art Centre, Roche Court, and was a curator at the Henry Moore Institute.

¹⁴ Letters from Hepworth to Rainier quoted in Bowness, op. cit. (2003) p. 23.