



PETER ZAKOVIC/REX FEATURES

Still on the keys: Jon Lord is working on a concerto for the Hammond organ

The rock star and the knight

Jon Lord, ex-Deep Purple, has written a classical tribute to Sir John Mortimer. By Adam Sweeting

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Although Deep Purple's former keyboard ace Jon Lord featured in BBC Four's recent documentary *Heavy Metal Britannia*, he didn't quite fit. While members of Black Sabbath and Saxon discussed steel mills and Satanism, Lord offered scholarly aperçus about vocal technique and instrumental arrangements. A musical score lay open on the grand piano behind him, next to a bust of Beethoven.

That's because Lord, 68, is now in the middle of a flourishing second career as a classical composer, even if some will always associate him with Deep Purple epics like *Smoke on the Water*.

His *Durham Concerto* has been a smash hit in Classic FM's Hall of Fame, hotly pursued by his piano concerto *Boom of the Tinkling Strings*. His latest composition, *To Notice Such Things*, is a six-part suite in memory of Sir John Mortimer, the barrister, playwright and raconteur who died in January last year.

"He was a huge pal of mine, and I wanted to extol him and paint a positive picture of him in the music," Lord explains. "My wife adored him, my daughters adored him, and he certainly had an aura about him. John could be cantankerous, of course, but he had the ability to take people's legs from under them with wit rather than with a cudgel."

Lord and Mortimer first met in 1987, when they were both protesting against the demolition of the old Regal cinema in Henley-on-Thames. "John told me at the time that the only real reason for saving it was that it *always* had an interval in the film, in which they opened the bar for 20 minutes," Lord recalls. "We both took part in a fund-raising revue at the Kenton Theatre in Henley a few weeks later. We said hello to each other on various occasions after that, including a memorable encounter in the frozen food aisle at Waitrose – built over the demolished remains of the Regal cinema."

Their friendship blossomed when Mortimer invited Lord to play piano in his *Mortimer's Miscellany* performances, theatrical evenings which afforded Mortimer scope to expatiate upon "life, love and the law". The juxtaposition of the creator of *Rumpole of the Bailey* with that bloke out of Deep Purple must have been disorientating for audiences, surely?

"People usually didn't realise," chortles Lord. "I was just some guy with a ponytail playing piano. But every now and again, someone would come up and say 'You're... aren't you? What on earth are you doing here?' I'd say, 'Well I love the man, I love the show, and I wasn't doing anything tonight'."

Three of the six pieces in *To Notice Such Things* were originally written for the *Miscellany*

Days of rock: Jon Lord, centre, in Deep Purple in the Seventies

shows, though they've been expanded and orchestrated. Lord studied classical music from the age of five and taught himself orchestration from Cecil Forsyth's book on the topic, and his composing style leans towards a melodic, wistful pastoralism.

"I had four or five minutes of music written, and I added an extra 23 minutes to complete the suite as it now is," he explains. "If I hadn't had those three little pieces I would have been far too daunted by the short time frame, because I was asked in February 2009 for a piece to be played at the beginning of July."

The piece was commissioned by the Shipley Arts Festival, where it premiered last July with Mortimer's widow Penelope and daughter Rosie in the audience.

The original plan called for a flute concerto, but Lord settled on "a suite of music based on chapters in John's life as I saw them. The flute would be his voice, because John had quite a light tenor voice, he wasn't a great booming baritone. Having only just lost him, he felt very close by while I was composing, and the music came very quickly."

The pieces loosely cover Mortimer's life, from the aspiring young lawyer depicted in *As I Walked Out One Evening*, through his professional heyday at the Old Bailey, his home life in the Chilterns, and his decline into old age. The elegiac concluding section, *Afterwards*, takes its title from Thomas Hardy's poem (which is also the source of the line "to notice such things").

Lord found the trickiest segment to write was *The Winter of a Dormouse*, an evocation of Mortimer's final illness. "I was able to visit him a few times during that period, and I didn't want to come over as some sort of musical voyeur. I'm happy with the result, I don't think it's too overwrought. I was tremendously moved by being part of his passing."

Looking forward, Lord has a pile of composing projects on his plate, including a cello concerto for Matthew Barley and a concerto for Hammond organ for the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. He's even contemplating another concerto for rock group and orchestra, like the one he wrote for Deep Purple in 1969.

"It would be fascinating, but that's a little way down the list of priorities at the moment," he admits. "There just aren't enough hours in the day." *To Notice Such Things* is released on Avie on Monday.

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