



Alan Bush in his eighties

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The 'Lascaux': Alan Bush's Final Symphony

Edward Gregson

One of the most gratifying aspects of the recent renewed interest in the music of Alan Bush has been the release of several CDs of his music. Besides the release and re-issues of some of his most important instrumental, chamber and vocal repertoire, the most important have undoubtedly been the various orchestral works previously missing from his discography.

The recent release of one such disc (Dutton Epoch CDLX 7294) provides us with important new recordings of his fourth and final symphony, *Symphony No 4 (Lascaux), Op. 9 (1982-1983)*, the early and ebullient *Dance Overture, Op. 12 (1935)* and his impressive and 'serious' *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 52 (1959)*, all performed with great commitment and panache by the **Royal Scottish National Orchestra** conducted by **Martin Yates**. Make no mistake about it, these are not easy works to perform or record - there are many pitfalls, not least in the constantly changing time patterns and irregular phrasing so typical of much of Bush's music, and the exposed nature of much of his orchestration. Therefore, it should be said that, with the limited rehearsal time available for recordings these days, it is to their great credit that both conductor and orchestra have given us such telling performances of these works. Credit must also be given to the excellent and informative programme notes written by the ever enthusiastic and knowledgeable **Lewis Foreman** (British music would be much the poorer without his contributions in so many ways!).

Although I am concentrating on the '*Lascaux*' *Symphony* in this review article, I must first say a little more about

the other works on the disc. *The Dance Overture*, originally written in 1930 for wind (or military) band, and orchestrated for a Proms performance in 1935, is a most attractive work, and it is difficult to understand why it hasn't entered the regular repertoire since then. It is full of wit, charm, and memorable ideas, whilst the orchestration is full of subtlety and colour. At only 12 minutes duration it would make an ideal concert opener - orchestral managers please note!

The *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* is a work of more serious intent but typical of Bush's masterly control of counterpoint and linear progression. Today's younger generation of composers, some of whom are sadly lacking in such skills, would learn a great deal from studying this work in some detail. It is a veritable tour de force! Lasting for some 20 minutes, it combines a Passacaglia with 16 variations with a Fugue of elongated structure - in fact, a quadruple fugue in six voices. As Bush further tells us in his note for the Cheltenham Festival performance in 1961, there are four expositions, each with its own subject and with episodes intervening, which lead to the final peroration, when all four subjects sound simultaneously. However, it would be a mistake to think that this work is somehow a dry piece of 'academic' manipulation - far from it! It is brimming with strong musical ideas. More a symphonic study than the title might suggest, it remains one of Bush's finest orchestral works. To my ears he takes on here the mantle of an English Hindemith - that is, in combining angular contrapuntal mastery with the gentle but sometimes acerbic lyricism of a Vaughan Williams. It is a most impressive piece of writing!

Counterpoint and Orchestration

Time for some personal reflection before launching into the symphony: I studied with Alan (or should I say 'Dr Bush', for that is what we all called him!) at the Royal Academy of Music for three years, from 1964-67. Most of my grounding in counterpoint and orchestration came from his careful and expert tutelage, but he also tried to persuade me to explore his then recently articulated theory of a method of composition based on English modal counterpoint, adapted for the contemporary composer - a system that he believed every English composer should invest in (Lewis Foreman refers to it as Bush's development of a national style). In the *Dorian Passacaglia and Fugue* he turns theory into practice, and he shows us why his 'Englishness' is so apparent in this particular work. Although its thematic, harmonic and tonal structure is based on the English 'white note' modes and their transpositions, it is the invention of the linear process above the sub-structure that is so memorable. For example, the long final variation of the *Passacaglia* highlights a solo violin in a cantilena of haunting beauty, recalling perhaps a wistful memory of an England lost forever.

Bush's National Style

However, it is in the symphony that we experience the full flow of his 'national style'. The symphony has an interesting history: written in 1982-83, it was largely inspired by a visit to the Paleolithic cave paintings at Lascaux in South West France, when he was privileged to be taken on a special tour before the caves were closed to the public for good because of the damage being caused to them. However, as

Lewis Foreman points out in his CD notes, it is much more than a programmatic work, even though each of its four movements have sub-titles which refer to specific paintings in the caves.

Readers accustomed to the music of Alan Bush will note that I have not yet mentioned his politics or philosophical stance, even though many of the articles on him and his music cannot escape talking about them. I prefer to think of Alan as a humanist rather than a communist. He was deeply drawn towards different civilisations and cultures, and to the individual human beings within them. I remember the beautiful portrait of an African warrior that he kept in his music room - typical of someone who valued and respected every individual human being, regardless of their colour or creed. These strongly held views come across in his music - there is a means of universality in his musical expression, yet a finely tuned sensibility and respect in every small detail of his compositional craft. Such ideas are highly relevant in the *Lascaux Symphony*, for it is not, as the sub-title suggests, a purely abstract symphony. He thus continues his fondness for 'extra musical' ideas in his symphonic output, as in his earlier 'Nottingham' and 'Byron' Symphonies.



Picture of Stone Age men creating cave art, Lascaux II, Montignac, France.

The Lascaux Symphony

This is a substantial work, lasting over 40 minutes. Its four movements traverse the usual landscape of symphonic argument, but there is one important difference - musical and philosophical ideas merge into one. Whereas say, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* takes us on both a musical and philosophical journey, with the final choral movement espousing a brave new world of universal brotherhood where mankind is liberated from tyranny and suffering, that work has the advantage of a having a musical setting of Schiller's famous text, through which the composer is able to articulate his sentiments in both a philosophical and musically coherent way; but the *Lascaux Symphony* is purely orchestral, it has no setting of texts. We

would have to return to Bush's much earlier large-scale piano concerto to find a similar device to Beethoven's being used. So how does Bush portray his philosophical aims through the abstraction of symphonic form? Well, they invade the musical fabric through instrumental representation, with the piano taking on an important role in portraying the progress of 'man' through the chaos of the 'wild', as Bush calls it. Only in the last movement, 'Man Emergent' does he resolve both the philosophical and musical arguments, where there is a sense of 'arrival' at the end of a difficult journey - *Dialectic* (his early string quartet) all over again you might say.

The symphony opens with hushed added note chords on strings, a memorable idea, with the alto flute 'questioning' this earth bound assurance with little three note rhythmic utterances, after which the piano enters with a similarly simple phrase in two part counterpoint. Initial development of these ideas lead us from the darkness of the opening C minor tonality to a triumphant blaze of a C major chord on brass. Bush then takes off on his symphonic journey, developing these ideas, adding others, as the music becomes more intense and complex and the piano ever-increasingly important. The movement ends with a triumphant brass chorale, itself a peroration of the piano's opening monologues.

The second movement, a beautifully conceived scurrying scherzo lasting less than five minutes, is sub-titled 'The Children' and seems to suggest the innocence and joy of childhood, with no worries to disturb their dance. But towards the end, the outbursts on brass suggest a darker force that dissipates the energy and leaves the music hanging in the air.

The atmospheric slow movement, 'Ice Age Remembered', has a haunting quality that serves to remind us that nature will in the end survive us all, and that its inherent power, beauty and magnitude, will always keep humanity in check. Musically speaking, this is Bush at his most expressive, with string and woodwind cantilenas providing the main melodic development over a backdrop of widely spread string chords and muted brass interjections, painting a musical picture of a vast and timeless frozen vista, and in the process demonstrating that alongside Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*, Bush has a similar means of imaginative musical expression.

The final movement, 'Man Emergent', is cast in variation form (six variations and a fugal finale) and has a restless quality through its constantly changing and irregular time

signatures. The opening string lines, literally unfolding or emerging through textural means, provide the initial thematic idea, from which a series of musically contrasting variations develop. The tour de force finale is typical of the composer, where his masterly control of counterpoint pulls all the strands of his symphonic argument together. The piano returns in triumph to introduce this final utterance, confident as it were that mankind has emerged from the dangers of the natural world to impose its will on the future (although no doubt conservationists would say that mankind is gradually destroying the very planet which gave it its birth).

Finally, we should consider Bush's final symphony as the end of a musical journey, a journey that for him, as with many other composers, was a constant search for the 'truth', as all artistic means of expression should be. To some extent, and despite what I have said above, we can, and perhaps should, regard the symphony as a purely abstract work, for if a work of art does not make sense within its own terms of reference, then it becomes meaningless. As Hans Keller writes in his thought-provoking tribute to Alan Bush ('Bush's Creative Character' in *Time Remembered*, published by Bravura Publications in 1981):

'Amongst 'committed' artists, then, I know none whose art is less dependent upon his commitment, or more dependent on art's own commitment, which is the commitment to its theme, not a communist or capitalist theme, but one that cannot be expressed in extra-artistic terms, which is why it has to be invented in the first place - or rather, discovered; for what it expresses is a truth whose discovery is only artistically possible.'

With this recent recording of Bush's final symphony, and the other works on the disc, we have a powerful reminder of the craft and memorability of Bush's compositional creations. I hope that it will be played often, and present his music to a wider audience, for his creative output deserves to have an important place in the canon of English music of the twentieth century.

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Edward Gregson is a composer of international standing who studied with Alan Bush for three years (1964-67) at the Royal Academy of Music. He is a former Principal, and Emeritus Professor, of the Royal Northern College of Music (1996-2008); during his time there he enabled a commercial recording to be made of Alan Bush's first two symphonies with the RNCM Symphony Orchestra under Douglas Bostock. A fourth volume of his own orchestral works and concertos has just been released on the Chandos label.