

## Arnold the symphonist

### An appreciation by Edward Gregson

One of the historical truisms about classical music is that composers tend to go in and out of fashion. That is no less true today than in the past. If we look at the twentieth century alone there are numerous examples. Witness the dark clouds (albeit short lived) that descended on the music of both Sibelius and Vaughan Williams, to name but two, after their deaths (which happened to be within a year of each other). Gratifyingly, both have re-emerged with perhaps even greater reputations than when they were alive. In the case of Sibelius in particular, his cycle of seven symphonies is now recognised as one of the most important in the history of the genre. Whereas in the case of say Schoenberg, the revolutionary *par excellence*, whilst his compositional theories remain important, his music is performed less now than ever before. Why? Well, perhaps he just wasn't a great composer; or perhaps his theories chained him up too much. In any case, the comparison with his pupil Alban Berg is fascinating – his star has risen increasingly over the years, maybe because he composed some of the most memorable scores of the last century, where theory was not allowed to suppress natural inspiration. The world would certainly be a poorer place without his violin concerto, or his opera *Wozzeck*, to name but two of his masterpieces.

When we consider Malcolm Arnold's contribution to English musical life we realise that whilst his more serious works (ie his symphony cycle) might well have suffered from the same fate as others, certain works in his output are alive and well, and probably always will be. As I write this article his set of English Dances is receiving yet another outing on BBC Radio 3; and that is surely one of Arnold's problems, or perhaps not his problem but ours! As a melodist and orchestrator he is up there among the greatest (Tchaikovsky eat your heart out – well almost!), mainly because he had a natural gift for melodic invention which others might strive for, but never quite manage. One of the best examples of this gift can be seen in his film music and ballets where melodic invention is of the essence, illuminating the visual landscape, often without us knowing it. Once again Tchaikovsky immediately springs to mind. Indeed, it could also be said that in the case of Tchaikovsky, his symphonies have always courted divided critical comment: for example, that his thematic material is too self-contained, not ripe for development, and so on.

The British symphony, almost a genre type in its own right, had a notable presence in twentieth century British music before its decline in recent years. After Stanford, Parry, and Elgar, the genre was expanded by Vaughan Williams, Rubbra, Walton and Tippett, before Arnold's generation, via the 'Cheltenham symphony' years, explored new pathways, with the influence of Sibelius, Nielsen, and Shostakovich, as well as Schoenberg in a few cases, perhaps portraying a more cosmopolitan outlook. Malcolm Arnold was one of the first of these 'new generation' composers to commence his symphonic cycle with his first symphony, completed in 1949 but not premiered until 1951; this was around the same time as Lennox Berkeley, Alan Rawsthorne, Humphrey Searle, Peter Racine Fricker, Benjamin Frankel, Robert Simpson and Alun Hoddinott, as well as others, started theirs. For me, however, there is none better than the Arnold cycle of nine symphonies, and it is regrettable that they seem to have gone out of fashion, at least for the time being. Having said that, most of Arnold's generation of symphonists have suffered the same fate. It seems that we no longer want to hear them (the 'we' here meaning the musical establishment, whether that means the BBC, orchestral managers, conductors, critics et al). However, there are many of us who do still want to hear these symphonies performed, and often!

What are the reasons for the demise of the Arnold cycle in particular? Well, the musical establishment has always been deeply suspicious of popularity – somehow ‘easy’ gratification, in their terms, seems distasteful. But Arnold’s music is not like that at all – rather it is beautifully crafted from a compositional point of view, exquisitely orchestrated, with a melodic gift to die for! This can be heard most readily I suppose in his sets of English, Irish, Scottish, and Cornish dances. They are beautiful miniatures in the same way as Dvorak’s Slavonic Dances, and just as good. No, if you want ‘easy’ gratification go to Lloyd Webber (and even then you’d be searching for it!). For many people the music of his Dances is Malcolm Arnold, for they may have never heard a single symphony of his. However, those of us who know and love his symphonies see another side of Arnold, one that is intense, complex, dark; one that is searching for the truth about the human dilemma. He has sometimes been referred to ‘the English Shostakovich’ and there is certainly some truth in that, particularly as Shostakovich, for different reasons, was also a troubled soul, grappling with the complexities of life and a totalitarian state, but in so doing produced fifteen symphonies that arguably are the true successors to Mahler’s ten; but that particular description of Arnold does not give him the credit he deserves. He is his own man, so to speak, with a strong compositional personality, and a style that is immediately recognisable. True enough, he admired Shostakovich, but his answers to life’s problems through music produced different results.

So why is it that Arnold was such a fine symphonist? And what makes his best symphonies so effective in their execution? Well, first and foremost it is the quality of the ideas themselves - the invention of material that is both ripe for developmental processes but also, when required, self contained enough to satisfy his need for emotional expression. This can be heard in many of his slow movements, where the shadow of Mahler is omnipresent. Long expressive lines of melody are woven through a telling harmonic palette, with a contrapuntal control of which Mahler would have approved. The similarities with Mahler do not end there. No one could possibly call Mahler a purist – and neither was Arnold. The idea of the symphony needing to embrace and express the whole world, in both its physical (ie the natural world) and personal/intellectual manifestations, with all the resulting contradictions and complexities, was of course Mahler’s mantra, and is something that Arnold certainly inherited (as indeed did Shostakovich). Thus, we do not get ‘pure’, ‘intellectually sealed’ symphonies in the way that perhaps Rubbra, Searle, or Simpson sought; rather, we get a whole range of musical landscapes within the symphonic structure – one minute a tightly organised symphonic allegro, the next a military march, here a sardonic scherzo, there a deeply felt, emotionally-charged adagio, and for good measure a fugal finale (eg the 1st and 4th symphonies).

The 1st Symphony sets out Arnold’s view of the genre very effectively. The first movement is developed from the opening three note motif, with fragmented gestures seemingly fighting one another for dominance. There are some similarities with Nielsen’s 5th Symphony in this regard, not least in the repetitive minor 3rd ostinati and pedals which permeate the movement. The second movement starts off rather like a Mahler middle movement *ländler*, seemingly there to release some of the tension from the first movement; but it soon develops a darker tone, as Arnold’s slow movements mostly do. There is no resolution here, despite the tranquil C major ending. The final movement delights in contrapuntal bravura, with the composer showing his prowess not only in the process of note manipulation (note the Bachian device of the inversion of the fugue subject at the halfway point), but also in the way he exercises total control of the orchestra. His years spent in the trumpet section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra clearly gave him a mastery of orchestration that defines his music in a highly individual way.

The 2nd Symphony has always been one of the most frequently performed of the canon and it is not hard to see why. The themes here are more 'outward facing', more clearly defined, and with four movements which are beautifully contrasted in their closed form characterisation. Also, in this symphony the Shostakovich-inspired scherzo makes its first appearance to telling effect. Then, we descend into a world of personal introspection with a quasi-Mahlerian funeral march which surely contains the first echoes of Arnold's deepening personal problems. However, the final movement throws these worries aside with typically Arnold 'con brio' – no hint of darkness here, just general good spirits and a sense of fun!

The 3rd and 4th symphonies both make significant steps in the process of the maturing of Arnold's symphonic language. There is an expansion in the means of expressive intent, particularly in the first movement of the 4th where 'urban cool' (passages under the influence of Bernstein's 'mambo' music in *West Side Story*) enters his compositional toolbox for the first time. Although the movement starts conventionally enough, already in the first six bars we detect something different with the added textures of bongos and marimba. Add to this other 'exotic' percussion instruments, plus harp and celesta, and you have an entirely new palette of orchestral colours, which he exploits to maximum effect. Unsurprisingly for Arnold, in this first movement the 'urban cool' is contrasted with a second subject of jaw-dropping diatonic simplicity (you might call it a damn good tune), which if anything he overdoes in its repetitive sequencing.

The fact that this particular symphony was commissioned by William Glock and the BBC, and premiered at the Royal Festival Hall with Arnold himself conducting, may be surprising in itself, but it may also give a clue as to why this symphony came out as it did. There may have been a typical Arnold 'naughtiness' in wanting to surprise the musical establishment, for no one quite expected the work they got! It is both irreverent and surprisingly original. Who would have expected the Ivesian tri-tonal *alla marcia* episode in the final movement, after the opening fugue, itself reminiscent of Britten's from his *Young Person's Guide*? Arnold describes this moment as 'going crazy', which indeed it does! The symphony is a *tour-de-force* and for this writer anyway certainly one of his most original achievements.

In enthusing about the 4th I do not wish to side-step the 3rd, which has one of the most heart-searching (and longest) slow movements of the cycle. It is music of great intensity and sincerity, and the fact that Arnold chooses to reference Shostakovich's personal musical cypher (DSCH) within his main theme perhaps shows where the inspiration for this music lies (indeed he uses the same four-note reference, even more so, in the slow movement of the 4th). The tension inherent in the music partially derives from a much more chromatic melodic utterance than is the norm in Arnold's music. In addition, the flowering counterpoint which delivers these melodic strands adds to the emotional impact of the music. The first movement of the 3rd follows on naturally from the 2nd symphony in its orthodox use of symphonic argument, but it is more expansive than its predecessor and develops its material more comprehensively, contrasting two strongly defined themes in an impressive manner. Once again, the final movement is an Arnold *joie de vivre* and is none the worse for that. In this case it seems an entirely fitting conclusion to the tensions of the previous movements.

With the 5th and 6th symphonies we reach Arnold's full maturity as a symphonic essayist. Both are compact in form and structure (the 6th more so than the 5th), both full of glorious music, both progressing the 'glittering' textures of the 4th Symphony in their orchestration. Indeed, the first few bars of the 5th open up a new sound world, unlike anything we have experienced before in his music. This expanded palette also enables him to take the symphonic argument in a different direction, to compelling effect. The long and 'personal' slow movement is a portrait of his first wife (as he once told me), and

is intense in its gradual release of emotional intent; but it is not quite the angst-ridden music of the 2nd or 3rd symphonies despite its emotionally charged middle section climax – no, it is more the serene Mahlerian model of that composer's 5th Symphony *Adagietto* (itself a portrait of his own wife Alma) in its melodic and harmonic simplicity.

If I have a criticism of the 5th it is of its final strands, which in my opinion do not resolve the expectancy created by the first two movements. I can live with the third movement, even though it can't quite decide if it wants to inhabit the sardonic world of the Shostakovich scherzo, or the more sugary world of Arnold's Dances; but it is the final movement which I find disappointing, not in its initial musical argument (here Shostakovich's shadow is cast in relation to the contrast between a simple military penny whistle tune and the angular chromatic outbursts which attempt to destroy it), which is compelling. No, it is the 'easy' and somewhat sentimental route that Arnold takes at the conclusion of the symphony, where he brings back the 'love theme' of the slow movement in what can only be described as a 'Gone with the Wind' moment. The harmonic/tonal progression which leads to this recap can only be described as rather clumsy! He partially retrieves the situation with the final few bars, which dissolve into emptiness and despair, as opposed to the Hollywood ending that might have been (perhaps a musical premonition of the impending breakdown of his first marriage?). Nevertheless, such a miscalculation is surprising for a composer who usually makes the right calls!

In a different way to the 4th Symphony, the 6th Symphony is a masterpiece of invention and ideas. The first movement's symphonic argument takes on yet a new direction to the 5th. This is unrelenting music, compulsive in its developmental processes, completely assured in its delivery. The slow movement is a surprise given Arnold's previous slow movements, for it deals in suggestion rather than rhetorical certainty. There are constant changes of emphasis and an underlying tension that is both disturbing and convincing. If once again the finale doesn't quite live up to expectations (given the scale of the first two movements one might have expected a more 'heroic' finale), it doesn't resort to the rather hollow gesture of the 5th symphony's ending. All in all, the 6th is a symphony of real substance and durability, and deserves to be heard much more often than it is.

The final three symphonies are something of an enigma. By the time Arnold had completed his 7th Symphony in 1973 he was already starting to suffer from the mental torment that would eventually consume him. If the previous six symphonies presented an external world of conflicting emotions, then these last three symphonies are internal creations. Just as Shostakovich towards the end of his life became more and more introspective – witness the stark subject matter and dark musical sonorities of the 14th Symphony, and the enigmatic 15th, with its strange 'other-worldly' musical references to Rossini and Wagner – so did Arnold. The music in these symphonies exist in a strange hinterland between dreams and nightmares. Some of the music in the 7th Symphony is truly extraordinary. In particular, the musical landscape of the slow movement has an imagery unlike anything else in Arnold's music. It creates a mood of intense sadness, at least for the present writer. The musical syntax of the final movement has a disconnection which is disturbing. The Celtic music episode exists in a dream-like world, suspended from reality, and the final three climactic F major chords have a hollowness which again seems unrelated to what has come before. All in all it is an enigma, but is it great music? I can't decide!

Whereas the 8th Symphony is not great music, that's for sure! By now Arnold's mental health was deteriorating. Given that, it is remarkable that the music of the 8th has a viable musical narrative. However, in the opening movement, the extensive use of the Irish marching tune, taken from an earlier film score he had composed, does not make compelling material for a symphonic allegro, despite the imaginative dreamscape he

creates for its use. The slow movement employs reduced chamber-like orchestration in a harrowing musical narrative; the overwhelming mood is one of despair and regret. All the more surprising then that the finale reverts to an earlier period of Arnold's consciousness, at least at the opening – the world of his ballet music springs to mind. It is as if he is remembering his earlier musical journeys, summoning up one last joyful commentary, as if in a dream (eg the main theme's appearance on celesta and tuned percussion sounds just like that). The music takes a slightly tortured route through its musical journey before reaching its (forced?) triumphant ending, and the final unison dominant/tonic cadence could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek gesture, and if so it wouldn't surprise any of us, for that was part of Malcolm's personality.

As for the 9th Symphony, I do not agree with the final sentence of the booklet notes of the Naxos CDs for this work, which states: 'Arnold's Ninth has a message for us all'. If simplicity, even naivety, can work at a symphonic level then it has to be assured in its control. Gorecki's 3rd Symphony may be one example of this being realised, albeit within a different stylistic world. In Arnold's case I fear the mind was not in control of the material and the result is a fractured musical syntax, devoid of any real meaning or substance. When there is so much literal repetition, especially in the long final Lento (likened to Mahler 9 by at least one commentator, but for me far removed from that masterpiece) it is difficult to make coherent sense of the music. A sad note to end on perhaps? Well no, not for me, for a great artist is often flawed in some way, and Arnold's sad demise at the end of his life takes nothing away from the achievements of a lifetime of outstanding creative energy.

In summary, my admiration for Malcolm Arnold's music is immense. He holds a special place in my affections, for as a young composer the first work of mine to make it onto a commercial LP record (that ages me!) was my Brass Quintet, written when I was student at the Royal Academy of Music. One of the other works on that disc (the Hallé Brass Consort on Pye 'Collector's Label') was Malcolm Arnold's 1st Brass Quintet (the famous one!). That was a work I knew well, and probably tried to emulate in my own quintet. A little later, in 1973, I interviewed him for a music magazine (the interview lasting for well over two hours, and with more than two bottles of wine!). We discussed many aspects of his musical life, including his opinion of music critics ('they have to earn a living!'). He had a tough time with critics as we know, but he didn't seem to care much about their opinions of his music. He suffered particularly from the negativity of Hans Keller and Peter Heyworth (he rather sarcastically said that he would be happy to pay Peter Heyworth's overdraft any day!), but he was also respected and admired by many others and we should not forget that. Most composers I know respect his music, whatever their own musical personality might be, for the one thing which draws a composer's admiration is compositional craft, and Arnold had that in abundance. Many composers would be jealous of a compositional technique such as his, let alone his remarkable fluency and apparent ease with the creative process.

As for his cycle of nine symphonies – well, it stands out as being one of the most distinguished by any British composer after the Second World War. We should clamour to bring his symphonies to the concert platform more often. They are enduring and memorable works by a great creative mind, and we should rejoice in their existence.

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