

THE SYMPHONIES OF EDMUND RUBBRA

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The music of the British composer Edmund Rubbra (born 1901) bears a direct resonance with our times. Many composers have responded to our inhospitable century with jagged, cataclysmic and alienating music. What makes Rubbra's music vital is that it is predicated on a positive, harmonious world view. His is a powerful, yet warm-hearted style whose sturdy lyricism abstains from tough and cynical rhetoric. Rubbra's many works, especially the symphonies, offer tender compassion and, in a religious sense, nourishment to the contemporary spirit. Whether their theme is troubled or celebratory, they call upon an intense resource of affirmative perseverance.

Like some other great inventions of western civilisation, the symphony seems destined to thrive in our century. Some still belabour the fancy, rather provincially, that the symphonic tradition died with Mahler. Such an assertion overlooks the major contributions of figures such as Shostakovich, Vaughan Williams, Mennin and Rubbra. The quality and variety of their accomplishment speak for the viability of the symphonic form. If Mahler is a landmark in this legacy it is both as the closing voice of one era and the fountainhead of the next.

Along with the other composers mentioned above, Edmund Rubbra has made the symphony the skeleton of his output. He has pursued his own voice apart from the tonal and atonal thickets our century has denoted as 'mainstream'. His loftiness is characteristically British, but his music is different from the folk-orientated modality of Vaughan Williams as well as from the urbanity of Britten and Tippett. In contrast to his countrymen his attitudes towards colour and content place him within a sphere of Scandinavian influence. The difficulty in categorising Rubbra may contribute partially to his undeserved neglect.

The most salient feature of Rubbra's music is its smooth melodic flow and generous counterpoint. Its impetus does not depend on the rhythmic, textural or thematic contrasts which have become practice since the origin of the sonata. These would be too disruptive for his intentions. Rather, Rubbra seeks a purely lyric and polyphonic realisation of musical form; one which is shaped by the sheer growth of melody. The mainspring for such a style is a powerful sense of spontaneous melodic expansion, harnessed by disciplined formal organisation. It seems natural that the continuous dialectic of a Palestrina and Bach-like counterpoint occupies the foundation of his musical thinking.

Rubbra's movements are typically "arch" structures, logically motivated at every point. "When I begin, my only concern is with finding a starting point that I can be sure of." His melodies, which too often have been likened to those of Sibelius, show his connection with both Elizabethan and neo-Romantic attitudes. Their small intervallic motion gives them an ingratiating vocal quality, a feature not unrelated to his many works for voice and chorus. Although his triadically resolving harmonies and tonal centres are allowed to move with expressive freedom, his music is founded on the unwritten doctrine of co-operation - in both the aesthetic and formal senses of the word. Even when sonata strategy is executed, the tonal centres and thematic groups become allied rather than opposing participants. The dichot-

omy of conflict and resolution, then, is absorbed into a fabric of graduated harmonic and textural stress within the musical discourse. The first movements of his symphonies are the primary representatives of Rubbra's potent and contemporary idiom, which reflects a unique fusion of sixteenth and twentieth century tonal resources.

Rubbra's works almost exclusively fall into two categories: vocal settings and abstract forms, both of which share the same lyrical essence. The avoidance of theatre music, even the declamatory manner of oratorio and cantata, is consistent with the kind of internal experience his music usually compels. His active interests in literature and religion, both eastern and western, have constantly broadened his creative perspective. As a student of Holst he acquired a fascination for the East and at times has incorporated its colours into his non-symphonic work. Rubbra seems to have been concerned with the meditative aspects of these elements and thus the occasional exotic indulgence is not totally divorced from his symphonic attitudes. His study of Buddhism and Taoism led to many vocal settings of Oriental texts. Yet one is just as likely to find settings of Elizabethan poets and medieval Christian theologians. His four masses and other liturgical works reflect his intimacy with Catholicism.

A portrait emerges of a composer for whom musical exposition is a vital extension of a broad commitment to philosophical, religious and aesthetic matters. In this regard the symphonies of Rubbra and Bruckner share common ground. Their canvasses are both drawn from co-operative rather than antagonistic musical material, toward climaxes which are expressions of ecstasy rather than confrontation. Through his musical forms Rubbra has always shown a concern for wholeness; for mending man's disunity, both individually and collectively. Even in works written during the Second World War his dialectics have been sternly restorative, never bitter or violent (as we find in so many great "war works" of other composers). His canon of eleven symphonies is sophisticated and attractive and, at the same time, offers challenge and reward to the enterprising listener.

Rubbra's symphonies trace a continuous growth and, in some way, each represents a reaction to the previous one. One may group the first four as a strict contrapuntal revamping of the symphony, each from a different vantage point. A softened lyricism in the third and fourth replaces an earlier severity. Subsequent to that, an increasing tonal poise and use of homophonic texture leads his development in the direction of harmonic and structural variety.

At thirty-five, Rubbra brought a spiritual and intellectual maturity to his first works in the form. The first two symphonies were composed within a year of each other and share a zealous contrapuntal fervour. The principal material is sundered into phrases which are meshed, transmogrified and re-assembled in an environment of bustling contrapuntal activity. Their thick orchestration is appropriate to the intended effects. A wide range of devices is explored which would become permanent to his style: fluctuations of texture, sequencing, cross rhythms, climactic use of ostinati and pedal points, etc.

In the first movement of Symphony no. 1 (1936) Rubbra tends to thread short motifs into longer periods with a congested abandon some listeners find thrilling (ex. 1). The "Perigourdine" movement establishes what would become a generic component to future symphonies, the "Rubbra scherzo": a polyphonic tour-de-force built round a chipper tune (ex. 2). The long last movement has its impressive passages, yet it makes overly exhaustive use of its sparse motivic material.

Ex. 1 (Symphony no. 1: Opening; Allegro moderato e tempestuoso ♩ = 92

Ex. 1 is a musical score for the opening of Symphony no. 1. It is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked "Allegro moderato e tempestuoso" with a quarter note equal to 92 beats per minute. The score is written for woodwinds (flutes, oboes, and bassoons) and brass. The woodwinds play a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the brass provides harmonic support with chords and sustained notes. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *sf* (sforzando). The tempo is marked "Allegro moderato e tempestuoso" with a quarter note equal to 92 beats per minute.

Ex. 2 (Symphony no. 1: "Perigourdine"; Allegro bucolico e giocoso ♩ = 144

Ex. 2 is a musical score for the "Perigourdine" movement of Symphony no. 1. It is in 6/8 time and has a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The tempo is marked "Allegro bucolico e giocoso" with a quarter note equal to 144 beats per minute. The score is written for a French Horn (F. Horn) and woodwinds. The French Horn plays a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the woodwinds provide harmonic support. Dynamics include *mp* (mezzo-piano).

Almost as a gesture of compensation, in each of the four movements of the next symphony the composer elaborates long initial material, which is then used in piecemeal fashion (ex. 3). A particular austerity and breadth of expression belongs to this symphony, whose grandeur is distributed throughout. In the Adagio tranquillo one finds that monastic transport and climactic epiphany special to his slow movements.

The symphonies are works both of considerable moment and ambition. Yet Rubbra was soon to strive for a different kind of melodic impact, which would require a moderation of texture.

In the next symphony, no. 3 (1939) we find the composer's intellect less in competition with his lyrical gift. With a less crowded canvas Rubbra relaxed the tenor of his symphonic writing by endowing it with a mellifluous vocal quality, as well as interspersions of homophony. His prolific music for voice and recent orchestration of the Brahms-Handel variations were apparent influences. The first movement's songful allure, antiphonal exchanges, and development through contrasting episodes are evidence of this, as in the

Ex. 3 Symphony no. 2: Opening; Lento-rubato

Vns. Vlas. Cs.

f *meno mosso* *f*

mf

f

mf

dim

finale, a set of variations and fugue. The slow movement is particularly touching for its delicate cross-rhythms and unbroken melos. Rubbra seems to have been guided by a straightforwardness and a poetic-religious valour in which the quest for stylistic and spiritual purity seem to be at one. It is worth repeating the remark of the composer Herbert Howells, who wrote, "Now and again there comes a work with the power to make one fall in love with music all over again. In such a mood I found myself when listening to your 3rd Symphony." With a lyrical quality both innocent and, in the British sense, noble, Rubbra shaped the melodic character of his successive symphonies.

In contrast to the idealism of the third, the grim probing of the fourth Symphony (1941) was more of a direct response to the war-torn world. The composer, who was stationed with the Army in Wales at the time, must have physically enhanced this impression as he conducted the premiere in battle dress. The work is a masterpiece of his amassed disciplines. The opening *Con moto* is the most singularly focused, monothematic movement of the Rubbra canon. It develops by a layered succession of broad, nearly regular breath-long phrases which elaborate on an initial three-note motif (ex. 4). Its searching lyricism, as well as the composer's own use of harmony, is underscored with rhythmic throbbings of unresolved seventh chords. Thus the sombre atmosphere of accumulation is supported by two layers of activity - one contrapuntal and the other homophonic - each with its own obsessive behaviour. The climax is one of his finest contrapuntal passages. The slow movement is incorporated into the finale, a stirring and weighty tract of contrapuntal shaping. Throughout the symphony



Ex. 4

Rubbra exhibits his uncanny ability to transmit intense psychological and meditative states. In this context the tragically beautiful 'Soliloquy' for cello and strings, begun a year later, should be mentioned.

Rubbra's next symphony, the fifth (1947-48), was a resounding success which brought him much attention. In it he achieves a triumphant synthesis of his contrapuntal foundation and classical procedures. Rubbra's performing involvement with his own Trio, which he formed during the war years, had a pronounced influence on the new symphony. The strategy of contrasting tonal centres, the crisp rhythms and lucid instrumentation manifest his concertising exposure to the repertoire of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. This new tonal stability resulted in his organising the first movement, as well as those of the next two symphonies, around sonata form. The Fifth is Rubbra's celebration of lyrical abundance. The opening four-note motif undergoes a remarkable transformation of identities (ex. 5), complying with the music's rhythmic variety and charismatic reflexes. The scherzo is the most charming representative of its kind; the slow movement a monumental benediction. Wilfrid Mellers, who has written much about Rubbra, praises the fifth as having " . . . a positive power and serenity which implies religious assent, however painfully it may have been won." It was the first Rubbra symphony to have been recorded.

Between the 5th and 6th symphonies Rubbra, who was raised as a Non-conformist (Congregational), converted to Roman Catholicism. This immediately led to the celebrated St. Dominic Mass as well as a quantity of sacred Latin vocal cycles of successive years. Such behaviour again shows evidence of the continuity and conviction of his spiritual-musical world.

Harmonic texture becomes more prominent in the next symphonies and as a result, Rubbra's style converges on a new contrapuntal-homophonic synthesis (in the third and fourth they were used as distinct textures). This indicated a greater focus on harmonic thinking and a shift to longer basic materials as opposed to terse motifs. Also, all successive symphonies have technical and/or dramatic relationships which unify their movements beyond the usual consistency of style and attitude. In the Sixth (1953-54) this happened on both a conscious and a subconscious level. Not only do its four movements share deliberate intervallic derivations, but after they were written Rubbra decided to arrange them in the exact reverse order of their



Ex. 5. Symphony no. 5: Opening; Adagio ♩ = 84

composition. This is particularly unusual for a Rubbra symphony, whose disposition is so dependent on that of the first movement. Yet, there is a pastoral and vigorous benevolence that the movements share so that none presides over the artistic tenor. It is probably this temper of spiritual equilibrium which disposed the magic 'Canto' movement, one of his most blessed and metaphysical visions.

The Seventh (1957) is the symphony probably best known in America for its one time appearance on the MHS label. More than any other, its use of harmony is the most stirring and varied, inducing ethereal effects in one passage and emotionally charged tension the next. Diametric to the homogeneity of the Sixth, its three movements are built around the dynamics of conflict. The first is one of exceptional concentration and economy. Its sonata subjects are unusually antithetic for a Rubbra work. Yearning, scale-wise material (ex. 6) is plotted against a rising chromatic figure which, as it drops by fourths, increases in urgency (ex. 7). Its spellbinding power derives from a double axis of motivic tension in which the antagonism of harmonic severity is harnessed by a gripping melodic logic. The Scherzo inherits this agitation (as well as motivic similarities) and culminates in an electrifying collision of extremes. In the final Lento this crescendo of opposites is neutralised in the oneness of a transcendent Passacaglia and Fugue. The radiant harmonies within and the transfer of tension across each movement makes a profound impression laden with philosophical overtones. Whatever dark forces the Seventh reconciled in Rubbra's soul, a full decade would pass before the next symphony appeared.

With the Eighth Symphony (1966-68) Rubbra emerged at a new stage of development. The work is dedicated to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the controversial Christian thinker whose writings intrigued the composer. Teilhard sought within Christian dogma a rational theory of human and cosmic evolution yielding an ultimate "omega point". The musical relationship is not intuitive, but the symphony does give the impression of great expanse and structural solidity. The reason for this is the eventful yet static nature of the landscape in which, as Robert Layton points out, "... emphasis shifts from line to an increasing awareness of colour." The Eighth is virtually an

offering of sonorities as natural wonders. The orchestration takes on a new, vivid transparency. In the first movement Rubbra attaches expressive importance to the chordal progressions and intervals associated with certain motifs. As a result the expected development is inhibited and, instead, the motifs juxtapose and overlap in massive climactic summits. Similarly the enchantment of the final 'Poco lento' owes much to its varying spectral riches. There is plenty in this symphony to provoke the listener's mind and ear, such as half-buried harmonic and intervallic bonds between movements, and in particular, the cryptic appearance of the closing tune in each of the three movements. It remains a work filled with panoramic lustre and opulence, which has drawn specific attention from British critics.

In the Symphony no. 9, the 'Sinfonia Sacra', (1973) Rubbra takes another departure from symphonic tradition, combining his vocal and orchestral idioms with his sympathies for Christianity. It is conceived in the spirit of the Bach Passions and is his longest (45 min.). It presents a soundscape of the events from Christ's death to the Resurrection, scored for soloists, male and female chorus, and orchestra. All resources are pooled to create a pungent evocation of the ancient Middle-East along with the sepulchral darkness of Catholic mythology. The 'ariosos' are based on narrations from the Gospels. The undulating contralto carries much of the forward symphonic tension. In the orchestral and choral installments Rubbra's new sound palette reclaims the pathos suspended in the Eighth Symphony. The finale portrays the Resurrection itself, where latent ecstasy is absorbed in a glowing hymn conceived in the Church tradition. As in the previous symphony Rubbra shows a tendency away from cumulative and more towards episodic rhetoric.

His latest two symphonies are also his shortest, about a quarter of an hour each. In them Rubbra continues his formal innovations. Their sombre ebb and flow are digressively guided with the vivid timbres of their predecessors.

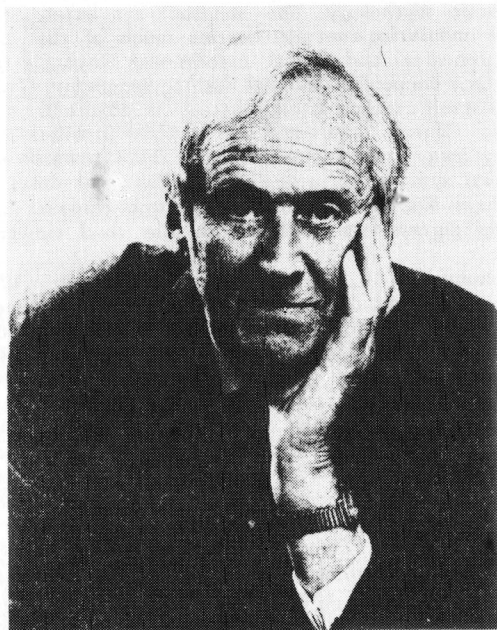
In the Symphony no. 10, the 'Sinfonia da Camera' (1974) Rubbra fulfilled a long contemplated desire to disjoin the subdivisions of the sonata into individually contained movements. Its pale motifs and occasional Sibelian phrase contribute to its searching nature. The Eleventh (1978-79), according to Rubbra, is "a culmination of all my symphonies compressed into one movement." While no explicit reference to previous symphonies is evident, it is a tighter musical drama than the Tenth, punctuated by more frequent musical events. Its melancholy is wrapped in tones more luxurious than troubled.

With the 11th the canon of Rubbra symphonies to date is complete. They chronicle a life rich in internal activity with an apparently boundless source of inquiry and innovation. They are excellent candidates for conductors looking for appealing new works to incorporate into the standard repertoire, which is so often lacking in the music of our own time. While Rubbra's conservatism may have put him temporarily out of fashion, currency of style has never been a trustworthy measure of musical quality.

Rubbra's context is a theistic one which is both lofty and humane. His values have never been inhibited by trends of the avant-garde, nor have they been compromised to a public seeking immediate apprehension. His music deserves celebration for the imposing quality of its thought and the strength and individuality of its vision. But perhaps most important, Edmund Rubbra has demonstrated with great depth and beauty that the 20th century is able to support music that conveys reverence and affection; a music which pauses to look inward from many perspectives of human experience. And one which, in its own tenacious way, espouses the harmonious co-operation out of which

it is built. Such a music must secure an esteemed position in the symphonic tradition of which Mahler represents not an end, but a crossroads.

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Photograph by Ron Oulds
Courtesy of Mrs Ella Hall