

Scott and Arnold Is the Symphony out-dated?

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While reading *Malcolm Arnold: Rogue Genius* by Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris, published last year by Thames/Elkin, I acquired a new Chandos recording of symphonic music by Cyril Scott [CHAN 10211], which is also a first timer, having been recorded in 2004, although most of the music was written more than half a century ago and then neglected. Cyril Scott, born near Liverpool in 1879, died at the ripe old age of 91. Malcolm Arnold was born in Northampton in 1921, so they do overlap.

Both the book and the CD engendered in me a sense of unease, not just because they were about such utterly different personalities, the one full of spiritual thoughts, the other completely down to earth, but because there is one really striking musical similarity. Both were constantly striving for recognition by a fickle and unconcerned musical public seemingly quite unable to judge their real worth.

A rather interesting feature arises here before we even start to consider the musically illiterate *cognoscenti* who presume to pontificate on the value of any composition. It is this: they were both turning to 'symphonic' works to give them stature. Schumann had made the same mistake a hundred years earlier. At the time of the *Eroica* (1804), Beethoven extended development and recapitulation out of sonata form into something vital and growing, but when Schumann went through the motions forty years later, it was frequently a tedious exercise with his heart not in it.

Scott's best works are short piano pieces and some songs — not unlike the similar output of Schumann — but he was not in his time very anxious to have them promoted. His *Lotus Land* [1905] achieved enormous popularity. Its exoticism was shown in London alongside Debussy's equally new *Pagodes* played by Percy Grainger, before Holst achieved startling newness in *Savitri* [1908].¹¹

Nor had Arnold wished for extra promotion, though he had produced a great deal of 'popular' music like the *Three Shanties* [1942] and take-off occasions such as the Hoffnung Festivals from 1956. Instead he has thought of symphonies as being more important for giving him standing.

But where do we stand today in regard to performing the symphonies of either? How many executants are willing and able, let alone knowledgeable enough, to do them justice? My point now is that they *may* not be intrinsically as important within their respective canons as perhaps their creators imagined!

Another striking difference is that Cyril Scott, a gentle man, had filled his mind with the "air of another world", which came from the German poet Stefan George in 1907. His music at that time may not have been as revolutionary as that of Schönberg, who had also read and used the same 'spiritualist' poem in his second String Quartet, but nevertheless Scott had already developed a most original fluid rhythm and new harmony, which was *not* a pale reflection of that of either Debussy or Delius, as some commentators would have us believe.

Arnold, on the other hand, anything but 'spiritual' in his outlook, has been brazenly materialist and often violent, presented in this new book, if it is to be believed, as someone who thought like a Marxist but lived like a lord and described as Britain's most misunderstood composer — surely an exaggeration, though time will undoubtedly tell.

Scott's *Poems* for piano of 1912 are evocations of his own verbal poems which deal with the "infinite Beyond". Not only do they run parallel to some exotic 'fire-bird' music of Stravinsky but, in particular with *Paradise-Birds*, they anticipate some of the ideas of Messiaen — both paradise and birds. Beyond that, Scott became a

deep-thinking philosopher, even if many still fight shy of reading him. I notice that Lewis Foreman, in the sleeve-note for the new recording, writes that Scott's interests included occultism and alternative medicine.^[2] Possibly, says Foreman, these have resulted in his music not being taken quite so seriously as he would have wished, which is very nearly a *non sequitur*, is it not?

Ex.1a (Scott: *Paradise-Birds*)

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The score for Ex.1a consists of three systems of piano and vocal staves. The first system shows a vocal line with triplets and a piano accompaniment. The second system is marked "poco string." and "cresc." and features a piano accompaniment with triplets. The third system is marked "poco largamente" and "sosten." and features a piano accompaniment with a slower tempo and sustained notes.

Ex.1b (Scott: *Paradise-Birds*)

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The score for Ex.1b consists of two systems of piano staves. The first system is marked "poco inquieto" and features a piano accompaniment with a 3/4 time signature and a key signature of one flat. The second system is marked "espr." and "dim." and features a piano accompaniment with a 3/4 time signature and a key signature of one flat.

Looking through a welter of salon pieces and pot boilers, we may find that Scott's occult leanings infiltrate into the music, even if sometimes hidden away.

There is no doubt that *Lotus Land* has something compelling about it which elevates it above the commonplace pseudo-oriental fashionable at the time. Even more, the *Poems* of seven years later contain some of the most characteristic music of which Scott was capable. A remarkable feature of the powerful *Bells*, which must surely appeal to the critic looking for something 'intellectual', is the constantly changing time-lengths. These would have been most acceptable to the young Grainger before he became popular with the jog-trot symmetry of *Country Gardens* [1908] and *Mock Morris* [1910], etc. The time signatures in *Bells* fluctuate through 5/8 and 7/8 until the music reaches a clanging climax in 10/8 time. The remarkable thing is that, unlike the irregular metres in the huge Sonata of 1908 (which Scott reduced in a later version), the music does *not* sound forced. It sounds absolutely natural, the descending scales in consecutive fourths as well as in sixths being strikingly 'modern'.^[3]

Then for someone, moreover, looking for 'structure', this movement 'poem' is very well and strongly made. But to me it is more significant that it is a compelling emotional statement in music and, being about the 'other world', it paints in sound some of Scott's own poetry of 1896:

*"Bells across the lone lassitude, rising, rolling, endlessly swelling
Over the wasteland-solitude, lost into the clear chaotic skies."*

Cyril Scott defined occultism, on which he had written extensively, as "the synthesis of Science, Philosophy and the esoteric aspects of Religion" — and he was always clear and reasonable even in the face of early opposition. After writing *An Outline of Modern Occultism* [1935], he gave a lecture on the subject in London on June 13th 1956, as an 'Alternative to Scientific Humanism'. I myself wrote a book on the forward-looking piano music [Thames, 1992] and an article, 'The Reputation of Cyril Scott' in *The Music Review* of October 1996.

Malcolm Arnold, on the other hand, has been thought of as a jolly chap without a serious thought in his head, resulting in the general impression that you did not take him seriously.^[4] This, I am sure,

irked him more and more, as he went on to write a Symphony No.4 in 1960, No.5 in 1961, No.6 in 1967, No.7 in 1973, No.8 in 1978 and No.9 in 1986.

A final thought: why should two such prolific and, in their time, successful composers feel *misunderstood*? There is something else which contributes: the drastically changing cultural and educational scene.

When I was a student I was mildly shocked by the anachronistic juxtaposition of harpsichord, piano and harp in Frank Martin's *Petite Symphonie Concertante* of 1945. I was also shocked when, in the old Queens Hall, I heard a terrific clout on the cymbals in Elgar's orchestration of Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in C minor*. As I was sitting behind the orchestra, a green young musician, the impact was quite considerable! Since then, of course, everyone has been striving to be more outlandish in combining different cultures, including Malcolm Arnold who, after the vacuum cleaners of *A Grand, Grand Overture* [1956], toyed with combining orchestra and rock group in 1970 by conducting a piece by Jon Lord. Scott, in his time, had also tried to be different, often pushed by a publisher.

So what has been happening?

After several years of increasingly sophisticated European music, we are now expected to make do with crude root position chords, thumping drums and the bawling or moaning voices of 'pop'. The irritating result of this deterioration in values has been that serious composers are expected to titillate the audience, who, accustomed to sitting like dummies through endless television trivia, no longer take in any meaningful details anyway. There has grown up, moreover, a new brand of 'expert' who is happy to expound what someone else does in a recording but cannot himself tell one note or one interval from another. In the 1930s *Radio Times* might contain some 'learned' articles. Now it is filled, like so many other magazines, with sexy pictures and eye-catching captions.

In the present facile, trivialized, pop-dominated musical world, is it still reasonable to think of 'symphonic' music at all? Even though Elgar, in one of his Birmingham lectures, had expressed the view that "*the symphony is the highest development of art*", attitudes

changed considerably after his time.

So, were Scott, Arnold and many other 'serious' composers realistic to imagine that there was still some magic in the word 'symphonic'? Or should we take heed of Peter Warlock's warning that he would rather produce a few songs with a lasting fragrance than pile up tome upon tome on the shelves of the British Museum? Admittedly, Warlock could not easily manage the orchestration for a full 'symphony orchestra', but he would have despised the repetitious 'working-out' in a possibly heavy-going, lumbering construction — what Frederic Austin perceptively described in 1913 as a "cumbersome and tautological structure"¹⁵ — to which TV-indoctrinated audiences now pay only casual attention. Said Malcolm Arnold in 1971 [*The Listener*, October 14th]: "It is a symptom of the times that we tend to take a vast and complicated machinery in order to crack a nut."¹⁶

Notes

- [1] See my article 'Holst's *Savitri* and Bitonality' [*Music Review*, Vol. 28, No.4, November 1967]
- [2] When I met him in Eastbourne in 1968, he was smoking a hookah — as healthier than ordinary smoking!
- [3] When Charles Clements played this original piece to Sir Walford Davies in the 1920s, the response was that it was as incomprehensible as the new Debussy and Ravel, Charlie being called an "odd fellow" and a "funny boy" (he was in fact one of the finest musicians to come out of Aberystwyth).
- [4] I met him in the 1950s when he courteously turned down my Welsh folksong settings for a Hoffnung event as being "not broad enough" (I do not hold this against him at all, as he did it in such a charming way).
- [5] Martin Lee-Browne: *Frederic Austin - "a most versatile musician"* [*British Music*, Volume 26, 2004]
- [6] *Malcolm Arnold: Rogue Genius*, p.273

This article is developed from a feature originally published in the *ISM Journal* in April 2005.

Malcolm Arnold: Rogue Genius - The Life and Music of Britain's most misunderstood composer by Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris with a forward by David Mellor (2004) is published by Thames/Elkin [ISBN 0 903413 54 X].

Cyril Scott and His Piano Music by Ian Parrott (1992) is also published by Thames/Elkin [ISBN 0905 210808].

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