

- Q & A -

## The Malcolm Arnold Centenary

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Independent

*Piers Burton-Page, a former BBC music producer, wrote the first biography of Sir Malcolm Arnold, published in 1994 under the title Philharmonic Concerto and long out of print.<sup>1</sup> Now, on the centenary of the composer's birth on 21 October 1921, he uses the occasion to look back over subsequent developments in the knowledge and appreciation of Arnold's music, and asks himself whether the offered assessments of over 25 years ago stand up to present-day scrutiny.*

*Remind us, first of all, how you came to write Philharmonic Concerto.*

I was one of several producers working on the long-running BBC series *This Week's Composer*. In those days (the late 1980s) it was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 just after 9am. The received wisdom was that the listener should not be presented with anything too challenging at that early hour, and thus living composers were scarcely represented, if at all. We had just done a week devoted to someone then deemed reasonably acceptable – I am not sure who, but I think it might have been William Walton: certainly not Michael Tippett or Harrison Birtwistle. At a subsequent departmental meeting, various options were canvassed for a follow-up. Arnold's name eventually emerged, and I was charged with compiling five programmes of his music, of which I am embarrassed to admit that I then knew almost nothing.

*What sort of sources were available to you at the time?*

Much less than I had expected. My first action was to assemble as much music as I could, in the shape of commercial gramophone records and of recorded

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<sup>1</sup> Piers Burton-Page, *Philharmonic Concerto: The Life and Music of Sir Malcolm Arnold* (London: Methuen, 1994).

performances from the BBC archives. Representation was patchy to say the least; his shorter orchestral pieces such as the *English* or *Cornish Dances* were freely available, but there were just a couple of the symphonies; not much chamber music apart from the ubiquitous *Three Shanties* for wind quintet. There was neither the time nor the budget to make new recordings, desirable as that would have been.

Given that each piece of music had to be accompanied by some introductory script, my second action was to try to assemble as much documentation as possible: in the shape of sleeve and programme notes, newspaper articles and reviews by and about the composer, and so on. It turned out that the BBC also had quite a few tapes of interviews and talks given by Arnold himself over the years, and so I listened to all of these. But again, there were many gaps. I also remember, at one stage, going to the usually well-stocked BBC Reference Library and asking for his biography – only to be told that there was no such volume. Perhaps that is where the seed of *Philharmonic Concerto* was first sown. The title, incidentally, came from a work of his, written specially for the orchestra of which he had once been principal trumpet: the London Philharmonic. It was a concerto for orchestra, for the LPO to take to the USA on a tour celebrating the American bicentennial of 1776.

*Since your biography, how much further material has become available, and in what form?*

Arnold was actually still alive when I was writing. He was not in a good place, even in hospital for some of the time; interviewing him, as I did occasionally, could turn into something of a trial – for both of us. His personal life had been chaotic, and still was; and there were many sensitivities to be taken into account; not least, for a start, his family, who declined to be involved, a decision with which I certainly felt some sympathy, even if it meant that there were going to be omissions and errors, which there inevitably were. Since then, and particularly since Arnold's death in 2006, things have been much more open, with the family, friends and acquaintances, and fellow musicians prepared to talk; and with the publication of two excellent biographies that have gone into much more detail: one by Paul

Jackson,<sup>2</sup> and the other by Paul Harris and Anthony Meredith.<sup>3</sup> I recommend both wholeheartedly.

There is also a wealth of biographical material in the shape of a film made originally for television by Tony Palmer, *Toward the Unknown Region*.<sup>4</sup> The title might suggest Vaughan Williams – but the film spares one nothing of Arnold confronting his personal demons head on. Another recent invaluable source which I should mention has been the publications of the Malcolm Arnold Society, where dedicated observers of this composer have shared their in-depth findings: the quarterly issues of *Beckus*, and the annual journal *Maestro* which finds room for sometimes more extended coverage, should not be overlooked.

Perhaps it should also be said that when I was working on the biography, Arnold was by no means at the end of his career as a composer. A clutch of late works were still to emerge such as the *Robert Kett Overture* or the recorder pieces written for Michala Petri. In the end, though, he effectively gave up composition about a decade before his death. The muse just abandoned him, or *vice versa*. Perhaps both.

*What about the availability of Arnold's music, in terms of publication and other forms of dissemination?*

Arnold was always fortunate with the publication of his music, first in having the backing of Alfred Lengnick & Co., then from the 1950s he was supported by Paterson's Publications; finally, thanks to his friendship with the critic Donald Mitchell came an association with Faber Music, in parallel with timely support from Novello's. The publication of a detailed catalogue of Arnold's music by Alan Poulton was a milestone,<sup>5</sup> in that it revealed almost for the first time not just the full extent and diversity of Arnold's concert music, but also the depth and quantity of music he had composed for documentary and feature films; the two careers seemingly ran in parallel for over twenty years.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul R. W. Jackson, *The Life and Music of Sir Malcolm Arnold: The Brilliant and the Dark* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris, *Malcolm Arnold: Rogue Genius* (London: Thames / Elkin, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *Toward the Unknown Region*, a film by Tony Palmer (Isolde Films ISO 001, 2004), DVD.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Poulton, *The Music of Malcolm Arnold: A Catalogue* (London: Faber Music, 1986).

The Poulton catalogue was revised and reissued in 2021<sup>6</sup> in time for the centenary, as was a historical discography.<sup>7</sup> From these, at least two points emerge: first, that the great majority of pieces by Malcolm Arnold (other than film scores) have been or still are happily available in recorded form. But second, by contrast, and more poignantly, the situation with regard to the manuscripts of a substantial quantity of the music is far from happy, thanks to the composer's seemingly indifferent attitude to his handwritten autographs once completed and in print. Painstaking efforts to retrieve them have not always proved successful. One notable exception was the autograph manuscript of the Seventh Symphony, which was spotted as up for auction on eBay, prompting a timely intervention before it disappeared from view, possibly for ever. Thanks to the Malcolm Arnold Trust, a number of Arnold manuscripts now reside in the custodianship of Eton College library, while several short, early – but by no means inconsiderable – pieces have been printed over recent years by Queen's Temple Publications, run by Paul Harris, a devoted advocate of Arnold's music over many years.

*Are there any particular works of his, or spheres of activity, which have emerged from critical obscurity as a consequence?*

The success of his Coronation ballet *Homage to the Queen* led to an ongoing involvement with dance, and although stagings of such pieces as *Sweeney Todd* or *Rinaldo and Armida* or *Elektra* have been few and far between, Arnold's music for these and other ballets looks to be capable of standing the test of time. The 120-plus film scores – features and documentaries – lead a life of their own on dedicated television film channels, even though, by their very nature, the scores often do not constitute a coherent whole, away from their original incarnation. A very recent rediscovery has been Arnold's involvement in opera: *The Dancing Master*, on the unlikely basis of a Restoration comedy by Wycherley, proves on a new recording to have been seriously undervalued, and turns out to be a witty, energetic, and resourceful early score. This may lead to renewed interest in two

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Poulton, *Malcolm Arnold: Catalogue of Works* (Dorchester: Malcolm Arnold Society, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Terry Cushion, ed., *Malcolm Arnold Discography 2020*. (Dorchester: Malcolm Arnold Society, 2020).

other short exercises, *The Open Window* based on a Saki short story, and *The Turtle Drum*, written originally for school performance. Few people know that Arnold wrote the music for a musical, *Parasol*, but those who saw its one amateur revival know that here is another masterpiece waiting to be rediscovered. The same cannot really be said of the piano or solo vocal music: this was not really Arnold's field. A small but essential collection of Malcolm Arnold's writings about music,<sup>8</sup> with some intriguing interviews also included, revealed on publication that Arnold was also adept at verbal expression. All who knew him attest that he was extremely well-read as well as highly articulate.

*In the past you have complained of a disparity between Malcolm Arnold's less evident presence on the concert platform as against his representation on recorded media. Is that still the case, or have things changed?*

It is something of a critical commonplace to say that composers usually suffer a trough in appreciation in the period after their demise. In Arnold's case this is probably not the case: that trough happened to some extent in his own lifetime, although it is also true that he was long neglected by the BBC Proms. In fact, there is still something of a gulf between the amateur and professional aspects of public performance of his works, with professional concert promoters, despite the popularity of the music on disc or streaming services, still apparently reluctant to risk live concert performances of the larger Arnold symphonic works – which, starting with the nine symphonies, are the core of his achievement, in my view. Yet he has been 'Composer of the Week' at least twice more on the BBC since my early attempt, and the BBC continues to play his music regularly elsewhere. The often-inexplicable movements of musical fashion have something to answer for in this regard, of course. And the annual Malcolm Arnold Festival in his native city of Northampton sets a shining example in terms of the exploration of live performances drawn from all corners of the Arnold catalogue.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Harris, ed., *Malcolm Arnold in Words: A Compilation of his Writings and Interviews* (Buckingham: Queen's Temple Publications, 2011).

*Could you isolate any individual work, or works, which you have had occasion to reassess?*

The much-missed writer and critic John Amis, with whom I worked for several years, maintains in his spirited autobiography called *Amiscellany* that the Eighth Symphony was Arnold's masterpiece.<sup>9</sup> We used to disagree vigorously, as I was inclined to dismiss it as lightweight by comparison with its predecessor. By contrast, the sheer rawness, even violence, of the Seventh Symphony, coupled with the exhilarating orchestral writing and the novelty (for Arnold) of the quasi-serial language, made it feel like a work that silenced all-comers. Nowadays I have moments when I am not so sure that Arnold was in full control of his material in that work, for example in the integration of the 'alien music' derived from The Chieftains into the rest of the fabric of the rather perfunctory finale, which feels short-winded, and something of an anti-climax after the two movements that precede it, the sheer power of the opening Allegro and the sinewy counterpoint of the following Andante. No such complaint can be made about the Eighth. I have heard it argued that the Eighth is but a remake of the Sixth Symphony, and there are certainly many points of similarity, not least in terms of the architecture; but there is more variety in the finale, where the episodes that offset the main rondo theme are lengthier, more contrasted – and full of textural daring too. There are anticipations of the austere, often simply two-part writing, that takes such a hold in the later works, particularly, but not only, in the Ninth Symphony. In the Eighth, though, the two-part writing feels as if it is for Arnold a genuine formal novelty, not yet a mannerism or a *faute de mieux* fallback.

There is always going to be room for critical disagreement in this area. Harris and Meredith in *Rogue Genius* are harshly dismissive of Arnold's *Philharmonic Concerto*; they clearly find it a noisy and rather empty work. Liking the work so much that I borrowed its title for my own book, I was taken aback to say the least. But they may be right! On safer ground, all who have written on Arnold agree that the Guitar Concerto is here for all time, from its unforgettable second subject in the first

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<sup>9</sup> John Amis, *Amiscellany: My Life, My Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).

movement, to the haunting blues of the second movement's homage to Django Reinhardt, to the surprise of the rather courtly minuet of the finale.

*Is there more of a critical consensus about Arnold's music than there used to be?*  
A proper full-length critical study of Arnold's music is now overdue. There is plenty to build on, in the likes of pioneering work by Hugo Cole,<sup>10</sup> Paul Jackson,<sup>11</sup> Timothy Bowers,<sup>12</sup> and Raphael Thöne,<sup>13</sup> to name but a handful. And with the very great availability of vast swathes of music from other sources, not just from Britain but from elsewhere, it will be easier than it once was to draw comparisons and to detect influences. Arnold himself always referred to Berlioz, Mahler, and Sibelius as his guiding lights – but I do sometimes wonder whether that represents their full extent. What about Britten? Stravinsky? Vaughan Williams? William Walton? Constant Lambert? And others of whom we are not immediately aware? But certainly, we are rather more aware than once was the case of Arnold's inheritance as a composer in the great British line of descent, from Elgar and Delius, to Vaughan Williams and Britten.

*You have occasionally in the past drawn parallels between Arnold and Shostakovich. Do you still stand by that comparison?*

It has become something of a critical cliché, hasn't it! I plead guilty to having reached for it rather too readily once or twice, though I believe it still has plenty of validity. The confessional mode is primary in both, with a common ancestry in the music of Gustav Mahler. Nowadays, though, I'd be inclined to treat Arnold's occasional claims to have known Shostakovich well with some caution – because I don't think anybody did. Nor do I think the language barrier between them was crossed quite so easily. And then, there was a fifteen-year age difference. Of course there are further obvious similarities. Neither man was particularly happy in his own

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<sup>10</sup> Hugo Cole, *Malcolm Arnold: An Introduction to his Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, see note 2.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Bowers, "Malcolm Arnold's Symphonies and their Symbols", in *Composers on the Nine*, ed. Paul Harris (Buckingham: Queen's Temple Publications, 2011), 8–103.

<sup>13</sup> Raphael D. Thöne, *Malcolm Arnold – A Composer of Real Music: Symphonic Writing, Style and Aesthetics* (Moers: Edition Wissenschaft, 2007).

skin. Both suffered ill health and were subject to fits of depression. Youthful idealism seems in both cases to have been undermined by cataclysmic events around them, starting but not ending with World War II. Each showed an extreme sensitivity to hostile criticism. Rejecting the pretensions of the avant-garde, the music of both is rooted in tonality and in the everyday world so to speak: accessible, not necessarily in an easy or shallow way, but always ultimately meaningful.

Where they differ is obviously, first of all, in the nature of the political oppression that dogged Shostakovich to a greater or lesser extent all his life. Malcolm Arnold was never forced to justify his work before a committee of party functionaries. To that extent, the pressures on him, extreme as they often were, came more from within his own psyche rather than from external sources. On the other hand, though, Arnold's Fourth Symphony certainly contains a reflection of external events – the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 – so maybe it's dangerous to generalise. All the same, I don't think Arnold had it in him to create anything as wildly challenging and confrontational as Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony, the '*Babi Yar*'. Again, though, I immediately hesitate – because sardonic humour, even black mischief, are present in the music of both composers: in *Tam O'Shanter*, say, or in the aforementioned Thirteenth Symphony as well as in many a Shostakovich scherzo. Shostakovich's overall range is wider, I'd say. For example, the fifteen string quartets chart an almost unparalleled creative journey; though I wish that Arnold had written more than his own two fine examples. So, if the comparison was initially a little glib and in need of refinement, on the whole I think it has some relevance. After all, Arnold expressed his admiration for Shostakovich on many occasions. One can easily see why.

*Life versus Works: could you describe the problem in writing about Arnold today.*

This may be the 'elephant in the room'. I am of the school that was firmly trained to mistrust as simplistic any attempt to marry biography and the creative act, in whatever field: literature, painting, music. These days, things are more nuanced; madness, mental illness, and creativity are not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive. All the same, there are moments when reading in Harris and Meredith's

*Rogue Genius* the often harrowing details of the composer's illnesses, depressions, psychotic episodes, suicide attempts and hospital and medical interventions, which force one almost to put the book down in sheer horror: you realise that Arnold's music came at a very high price indeed. Arnold's was undoubtedly a tragic life, which ended miserably despite the attentions of his devoted carer Anthony Day during his last years.

There are plenty of other challenges in writing about any composer nowadays: one touched on just now is the plurality of other musics that exist in the public arena, the sheer profusion of styles from minimalist to maximalist, New Age harmony to near-noise, and every shade in between. With 'discrimination' something of a dirty word, the value judgements that honest criticism requires become increasingly difficult to make.

*The epigraph to your early biography consists of a quotation from Angela Carter's novel Nights at the Circus which meditates on the tragic mask of the clown – how far did you intend to go with that comparison? How far would you go now?*

One or two people who got no further than the first sentence were upset at the idea of clowning being used in connection with Arnold. To the extent that the suggestion caused any offence, naturally I regret it. But I was trying to look further than the obvious tomfoolery of his wonderfully madcap collaborations with Gerard Hoffnung, for instance, or the riotous scores for the *Saint Trinian's* films. The underlying suggestion still stands, I think: i.e., that clowns are given licence by the rest of us to transgress – they resonate with us because they appeal to our often repressed but nevertheless innate understanding of, and even sympathy with, the absurd. They require us to be honest with ourselves at all times about our behaviour and emotions. Clown or not, Malcolm Arnold's music seems to me to make the same demand, whether he is speaking in comic vein or whether he is at his most serious, as in the Ninth Symphony.

*Does the manifest pain and anger identifiable in that work in particular (but in many other places too) necessarily correlate to the best – or worst – of Arnold’s music? Do we need to suffer with him?*

I can best answer that challenge, and round off this discussion, by referring to an answer given by the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney to a broadly similar question. Once an artistic work has been ‘totally imagined – no matter how authentically negative its reading of life may be – it will be capable of having a “strengthening” effect on a reader or audience member. Deep down, most people’s reserved position is much the same as Thomas Hardy’s: “If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst.”<sup>14</sup> Hard words; but true, not just for Hardy and for Heaney, but for Malcolm Arnold too, I think.

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<sup>14</sup> In Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 470.