

Book Review

Raphael D Thöne,

Malcolm Arnold – A Composer of Real Music: Symphonic Writing, Style and Aesthetics

Milton Keynes: Edition Wissenschaft/Entercom Saurus Records, 2007, 202pp. ISBN 3-937748-06-7 and ISBN 978-3-937748-06-1.

Malcolm Arnold (1921-2006) was among the most successful composers in Britain during the period from 1948 through to the early 1970s. Like Australian-born Malcolm Williamson, also successful during much of the same period, he was not afraid to write music that appealed to audiences. Arnold mastered a wide ranging style from accessible tonal idioms to more consistently dissonant writing that includes serial elements (especially Symphony No.7). He also included popular elements derived from jazz and 'light' music, and was the orchestrator of John Lord's *Concerto for Rock Group and Orchestra*. He was amongst the most successful British composers of film music, including an Oscar for best score in 1957 (*Bridge on the River Kwai*). Although Arnold's early works like the Symphony No.2 (1953) were reviewed positively by many critics, from 1960 onwards his works were often pilloried as irrelevant to the most recent continental trends¹. The admission by Arnold of popular elements that appear in unexpected places within the First, Second, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth symphonies came up for much critical scrutiny - but why can't they be seen as an integral part of Arnold's idiom and be accepted as such in the same way that Mahler's adaptations of Viennese popular music are? Like Williamson, too, Arnold suffered extended periods of mental illness and struggled with alcohol abuse.

Critical respect for his output was reawakened during the 1990s. Several recorded cycles of Arnold's nine symphonies are current, including three excellent sets by Chandos, Conifer and Naxos respectively and several assessments of his life and works have been published. In preparing for this review, I made my initial acquaintance with all nine symphonies and came away a fervent admirer. Arnold's music is ripe for re-evaluation in the light of current musical fashion and as critics and musicologists review and categorise the concert music of the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps Arnold's place in that picture is more significant than the absence or scant references to his work in period surveys by Griffith, Morgan, Salzman, Whittall² and others make out. Raphael Thöne's recent book on Arnold's music certainly makes that case.

¹ Chronicled by Paul Jackson in *The Life and Music of Sir Malcolm Arnold. The Brilliant and the Dark* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), for example in pp.115-6, 140.

² Arnold is not mentioned in Griffiths [*Modern Music and After*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) Salzman [*Twentieth Century Music: An Introduction*, 4th edition (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002)], or in Morgan [*Twentieth-Century Music* (New York, W.W.Norton, 1991)]. He appears twice in lists of composers in Whittall [*Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)], and gets half a page in Peter Evans's chapter on Instrumental music in Banfield, S.(ed) *Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Here is an excerpt of Evans's perspective on Arnold:

After the Second World War, most of the new composers, such as Fricker and Hamilton, found their point of departure in a stylistic synthesis indebted to the Continental pioneers...But that of

This book is also published as *Malcolm Arnold: Symphonisches Schaffen, Stil und Ästhetik*, 2008 (the same publisher) and, judging from the German terms left untranslated on some of the musical examples, suggests strongly that the German edition of the book was the original. It, in turn, is an adaptation of the author's PhD thesis³, which he completed at the University of Music and Performing Arts and the University of Vienna in 2007. Perspectives on British music from German sources are becoming increasingly common, judging from Thöne's extensive bibliography⁴, but it is intriguing to find such a positive critical evaluation of Arnold. Thöne asserts that Arnold should be taken seriously and that his music, covering as it does a period of 45 years from roughly 1943 to the late 1980s, is as worthy of analysis as is any other musical product of its time.

If Arnold's music is analysed in a manner that is free of aesthetic prejudices, its great compositional value can be seen and Arnold's position can be defined.
(p.127)

Thöne's book is not a biography or a comprehensive musical survey. Rather, it focuses entirely on a consideration of a number of symphonic and orchestral works of Arnold. It seems to presuppose a general knowledge about Arnold's output and, for instance, there is no chronological listing of works. In my opinion this book would hold little interest for the general reader about music seeking information about Arnold's life and works.

The book begins with a brief chapter defending and outlining Thöne's topic and approach – the tone of this chapter belongs to the discourse of thesis rather than a book as he justifies his topic with reference to Umberto Eco's four premises on scientific method within a paper. Thöne's main argument is that Arnold's reputation has been underestimated by both British and German writers on music because of his ability to compose film music and 'light' music. Accordingly, Arnold's level of compositional mastery and the technical skill evident in his music has not been properly appreciated. This he wants to correct.

Arnold is much more than simply another representative of British "light classical music" ...His music combines progressiveness and lightness in a very special way: without being arbitrary (p.19) .

He lists the earlier studies of Arnold by Burton Page (1994), Cole (1989), Harris/Merideth (2004) and Jackson (2003) and is clearly aware of their content. Thöne maintains that the lack of apparent 'progress' in British music like that of Arnold's is not antithetical to the new. He links it to political considerations as follows:

Malcolm Arnold (b1921) pointedly shrugs off any burden of responsibility to the European models it fitfully suggests. An aptitude for popularist, often unwaveringly diatonic invention has served him well in light music, and the calculated flippancy with which he has approached that sacred cow, the English symphony, can be entertaining. But it does not easily survive either developmental processes or the juxtaposition of more aspiring moods, so that an embarrassing incongruity can disturb Arnold's most ambitious structures.

³ This is made apparent in the author's preface, p.11 when he thanks his supervisors.

⁴ For example Jürgen Schaarwächter's book *Die britische Sinfonie 1914-1945* (Cologne: Verlag Dohr 1994) and Meihard Saremba's *Elgar, Britten & Co. Eine Geschichte der britischen Musik in zwölf Portraits* (Zürich/St Gallen: M & T Verlag AG 1994).

Great Britain's secure position after the Allied victory in World War II meant that it did not have to rebuild its empire, in comparison to Germany, which had been destroyed... This also meant that composers in Great Britain considered "progress" in a different context from composers in continental Europe (p.20).

He also wants to address the aesthetics of Arnold's music in tandem with technical analysis and suggests that Arnold's music is no less worthy of this attention than the musical products of the German post-world war 2 avant-garde.

In Chapter 2, Thöne attempts to debunk the perception or myth that Arnold composed directly and intuitively onto full score and that he was not a careful planner and craftsman. He shows that this can be directly proved by the short score sketches and piano score of Arnold's late works such as the *Four Irish dances* and the *Robert Kett Overture* – pieces that demonstrate the very spare textures of Arnold's late works in a period when he was composing with great difficulty. However, he does not explore some of the works written at the height of Arnold's career during the 1950s and 1960s which were much more complex. These were the works that demonstrated the speed and facility of composition that Arnold described in his interview with Schafer⁵. He likens Arnold's approach to using short scores as an intermediate stage in his composition process to the approaches used by Wagner and Berg⁶.

The influence of both Mahler and Sibelius on Arnold's style in his Symphony No.2 (1953) is traced in Chapter 3. Donald Mitchell, one of the early commentators on the 2nd symphony, cited palpable influences from Mahler's Symphonies 1, 4 and 5⁷. Arnold himself mentioned his high regard for Sibelius's Symphony No.4 as a model of symphonic composition and Thöne compares the characteristic use of the tritone interval in both the Sibelius symphony No.4 and the Arnold No.2. Some useful parallels in relation to the charge of 'banality' in both Mahler and Arnold are explored, and there are extensive quotations from the first and third movements of the Arnold Symphony No.2. He also critiques Adorno's opinion about the compositional failure of Sibelius – another ingredient that has contributed towards critical reception of British symphonies, many of which have been influenced by Sibelius.

The construction of Arnold's position and persona within the context of British music is the focus of chapter 4. Thöne is at pains to point out that British music of the post-war period cannot be judged from the same aesthetic and theoretical viewpoint as the products of Germany from the same period and that its artistic validity is equal.

Progress is always influenced by cultural space and sociological value systems. In particular, progress often reflects considerations of limited geographical space. Leading a discussion about several works composed in the same year or even in the same month without bearing in mind their special context (regional and cultural background) is an almost impossible task (p.90).

⁵ Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interviews* (London: Faber and Faber 1963), p.152.

⁶ See page 28.

⁷ See pages 66 and 67.

Rather than being an antiquated backwater, Britain was not ignorant of the major developments in continental music but its judgements of musical value were not determined principally by the features of progress and novelty⁸. Instead composers were content to instil modernist features, like a much extended tonal palette, into traditional classical styles and sense of musical continuity. Evidence of the impact of the avant-garde on British music and musical criticism was delayed until the 1960s, and it was under the impact of that movement that a negative, critical reaction to Arnold's music set in (a process that is well described by Jackson's (2003) very good attempt at a life and works). Thöne cites Chris Walton's four factors that were responsible for "this special , and, from a continental European viewpoint, extremely individual and apparently reactionary development of English contemporary music" (p.94). The fourth of these is a significant point; the idea "There is in England, at least since Vaughan Williams, the belief that a composer must be an integral member of society...an outlook which also characterised the musical aesthetics of Benjamin Britten" (p.98). Thöne mentions for example Arnold's interest in socialist ideals, trade unionism and his accommodating approach to accessibility in his film music and popular concert works, and his orchestration and conducting of John Lord's Concerto for Rock Group (Deep Purple) and Orchestra as being indications of Arnold's 'servant' approach to society. He then summarises Arnold's achievement as follows:

Let's accept that Arnold's compositional virtuosity manifests itself in a style that is initially influenced by more traditional and more conservative poles (Sibelius, Mahler, Berlioz). However, he then develops a personal style that does not measure compositional quality purely as progress in aesthetic categories, but represents a style in which the choice and means of compositional expression is truly free. He exhibits perfect, polished, clear orchestration skills that include all the achievements of the symphonic romantic tradition, as well as contemporary music techniques at the highest level of serious music as art (p.102).

This includes his drawing on musical resources from popular and jazz music styles. The principal music examples for this chapter are drawn from Arnold's *A Grand, Grand Festival Overture* (1956) and the scherzo (second movement) from the Symphony No.4.

Chapter 5 seems strangely out of sequence here as it does not focus on Arnold's symphonic music. Arnold had made sketches for a ballet *The Three Musketeers* following initial discussions in 1975, but after his death a ballet of the same title was confected from Arnold's existing, popular orchestral works with little reference to the composer's original sketches. Thöne examines the piano sketches of the ballet material as examples of the composer's method of composing, and postulates that the arrangers of the 2006 ballet did the composer a disservice by not using his remaining sketches as the basis for the 'reconstruction'. In fact the ballet is not what the composer intended at all. The chapter reads and feels like a separate paper.

⁸ See page 95. Although Thöne mentions progressive figures like Wellesz, Searle and the 'Manchester school', he omits the pioneer of British serialism, Elizabeth Lutyens

Chapter 6 is the best section in the book. Thöne puts forward Arnold's Symphony No.6 (1967) as an example of the composer's mastery and maturity. He shows that the harmonic style has been permeated with poly-tonality and that bebop jazz characteristics have been integrated into the score. The discussion is closely linked to good musical descriptions of the major events of the piece with copious musical examples. This makes the short and incomplete treatment of the Symphony No.9 in Chapter 7 the more disappointing. Only the first movement is discussed, whereas the centre of gravity with the symphony is in fact the long, slow movement, which is equal in length than the three previous movements. The main point of the discussion focuses on Arnold's very spare two and, occasionally, three part textures, the use of pairs of disparate instruments in duet and the sense that the music was written directly to the score.

Finally in Chapter 8 (pp.187-193), Thöne summarises Arnold's achievement as authentic (one is reminded of Vaughan Williams' insistence on 'sincerity') and of mastery in both the handling of compositional structures in a wide-ranging harmonic vocabulary and orchestration. His scoring highlights virtuosity but is pleasurable for orchestral musicians to play. The craft and professionalism of the writing and the very wide range of emotional ambit within the music demonstrates that Arnold is a composer of "high aesthetic value" (p.193) and one demanding a clear position within the context of contemporary music and not side-lined.

Sadly, the book is marred by poor editing, copious spelling and grammatical errors and some less than compelling writing, or perhaps translating from the German original. This is such a serious problem that it almost disables the overall value of the book. The tone suggests that there has been a third party involved in translation from the German version who is not familiar with musical discourse or nomenclature. For example the word 'concertante' is used to mean serious music for the concert room (as an opposite to light music or film music) rather than meaning music which has strong concerto-like characteristics⁹. Extensive quotes from German sources are given in the original language, followed by English translations – these latter are particularly impenetrable, like for instance the quote from Adorno on pp.185-86. Some rewriting of chapter one, the omission of chapter 5 and more information on Symphony No.9 in chapter 7, as well as a thorough revision of the language style in the book would make it much more useable and useful. I suspect that prospective authors of material for this journal, including this review, go through a more rigorous referee process than has happened with this book and its publisher.

Rhoderick McNeill

Rhoderick McNeill completed his PhD in 1982 at the University of Melbourne with a thesis entitled *A Critical Study of the Life and Works of E.J.Moeran (1894-1950)*. In 1998 his two-volume textbook in Indonesian on the history of Western music, *Sejarah Musik*, was the product of his ten years teaching at Nommensen University in Medan, Indonesia. It was published by BPK Gunung Mulia in Jakarta and is now in its fourth impression. His current research interest is in the development of the symphonic genre in Australia during the 1950s. Rhod is the syllabus writer for the AMEB Music Craft Level 1 syllabus (grades Preliminary-4). He is a Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, and holds the post of Associate Dean (Academic) in the Faculty of Arts.

⁹ See page 16.

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