

## ALAN RAWSTHORNE

### as I knew him

by Dr David C F Wright



WARNING Strict copyright applies to this article and all of DR Wright's articles

I had the privilege of knowing Alan Rawsthorne rather well. In fact, I am one of the few people who can say that I had music lessons with him.

I first met him at the home of fellow composer, Humphrey Searle, in St John's Wood in 1962. Alan was a most congenial man and very amusing. He was a great friend of Humphrey but then Humphrey had a wonderful capacity for friendship. In fact, they had many things in common. Sadly, they were sometimes indiscreet as to their alcohol intake... Alan far more so than Humphrey ; and they both disliked pompous music and, consequently, one British composer in particular who was of that ilk.

I remember being at a concert with both of them in which Alan's impressive Symphonic Studies were to be performed but to be preceded by this aforesaid famous British composer's cello concerto played by Jacqueline DuPre. Three minutes into the concerto, Alan walked out. We thought he was ill and followed him to the bar. He had not yet been served with a drink but he looked ghastly. He explained that this particular piece, from which we had all just escaped, always made him physically ill, and, as a consequence, we then had an interesting three way discussion on the power of music, its power to elevate and unite and, as in this case, its power to greatly distress and deter..

Humphrey wrote his Prelude on a theme of Alan Rawsthorne for piano, Op 45, as a tribute to Alan

It is always difficult to write about a composer one knew well and not to offend anyone, but it is true to say that some of Alan's music is simply awful. The Symphony no. 2 and the string quartets may well be cases in point. But one can probably say this about many composers. It is my view that he was not adept at writing for the voice and he often makes the unfortunate mistake of writing a difficult vocal line regularly employing the area where the voice's change of register is involved and the transition from chest to throat or throat to head can be perilous. His orchestral music has often been called passive or brown. Comparatively seldom is sparkle to be found in his music although the Piano Concertos have a certain scintillation. His music is generally very serious which, strangely, was at odds with his personality.

Some of his work is lazy. He once said to me that he often wrote music as a farmer would scatter seed for his chickens to eat.

He was also a poseur. He loved to have his picture taken and had a penchant for hats. He was a normal red blooded male who certainly loved female company and it often got him into trouble. He was more than friendly with Isobel, the sculptress wife of Constant Lambert, and at the time when Constant was still alive and riddled with illness and alcoholism. But Alan could also be a terrible grouch particularly when inebriated. Once at a party at Elizabeth Lutyens's house, when he was the worse for wear, we could not find him. When we did, he was asleep in the bath snoring in an irregular time signature.

Yet, despite all of this, we liked him.

He was not an arrogant or conceited man who thrived on causing trouble as, for example, did Britten. Unlike Ben, Alan could take criticism and did so with grace.

But it is the unknown Rawsthorne that impressed me. It may come as a surprise to some, but he was very clever at counterpoint and an authority on the various species of counterpoint. Although it is not always shown in his music he approved of order and clarity. Most surprising of all perhaps is that he was a good teacher. It is a great pity that teaching did not appeal to him. My friend, the late Gerard Victory, showed some of his work to Alan and Rawsthorne said that changes had to be made because some of it could be mistaken for Elgar and that 'no composer worth their salt wanted to be found guilty of that madness.'

I spent a lot of time with Alan in which he explained, among other things, and demonstrated baroque ornaments with an amazing simplicity and, believe me, that is amazing. He could solve problems of counterpoint with an uncanny ease so that when some of my pieces would have instrumental lines that clashed harmonically Alan could immediately rectify it and it always worked. He was very gifted in this way.

But he was something of a rogue, it would appear. The slow movement of his Piano Concerto no.1 is almost identical with a student piece of Denis ApIvor's written and performed some six years earlier. At the time Denis was having lessons with Alan and, while I do not want to become involved in any controversy,

there is some evidence to show that Denis has a just cause to be aggrieved.

It is my view that Alan's best pieces were written for the violin. There are two concertos and a splendid sonata. I have to admit that my admiration for the Violin Concerto no. 2 (1956) is probably due to my intimate association with it but the Sonata (1959) is a compelling piece and reveals Rawsthorne at his best.

He was an uneven composer. His four overtures fall into two camps. The Halle Overture (1958) and the Overture for Farnham are very poor where Street Corner is deservedly popular if somewhat trite and the Fantasy Overture Corteges is very profound and strangely moving...but does it ever get played?

Corteges also shows us what is best in Rawsthorne having some splendid counterpoint, an unusual clarity of orchestration and his interest in musical devices of the past particularly the fugue. Strangely, perhaps, this music is decidedly British with glimpses of the stiff upper lip but without the turgid pomposity of Elgar. I could argue a strong case that this is the best example of Alan's orchestration and I do confess to loving the atmosphere and nostalgia it so beautifully evokes. It was written in 1945 and conveys the mixed feelings of war and the resultant peace. To me it evokes my boyhood when we wore short trousers until we were teenagers and those awful Fair Isle jumpers and girls always wore skirts and ribbons in their hair. Childhood mischief and scampering away in fun is in this super piece and, of course, the funeral processions for the dead, the victims of war. Of course, all of this is not what Alan intended to convey.

Alan was a sensitive man. He had very deep feelings on a number of issues and was a humanitarian which is revealed, for example, in two contrasting pieces namely A Rose for Lidice for soprano and choir of 1956 and the Lament for a Sparrow of 1962 which is not a trivial piece as suggested by the title. Many British composers were deeply affected by World War Two. Cedric Thorpe Davie and Bernard Stevens both wrote war symphonies or, to be accurate, victory symphonies and it is believed that Vaughan Williams's Symphony no. 6 in E minor written between 1944 and 1947 is a war symphony. Alan waited ten years before writing A Rose for Lidice saying that he did not want to vie with one of Martinu's orchestral masterpieces, A Memorial to Lidice, written in 1943.

An equal clarity is found in the Concerto for ten instruments of 1961 and the Elegiac Rhapsody for string orchestra of 1964, the theme of which Humphrey used for his prelude.

There is always rivalry among artists and some of it is very serious and damaging. Alan did not belong to the carping camp and he disliked intensely those arrogant composers who put other composers down with vitriol, slander and libel in order to promulgate their self-importance. Rawsthorne and Walton were very friendly and both came from the same lovely county. Alan could not stand Britten since Britten was the most conceited man you could ever meet who, in addition, loved causing arguments and trouble and on a big scale. Alan used to say that Ben's music was riddled with his own controversial life style and an attempt to influence other composers into accepting his life style and, therefore, accepting him. But Alan was no fool.

It is interesting to note how many artists loved cats. Humphrey and James Mason were two people I met who adored cats. Long before Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote his variable musical Cats, Alan wrote Practical Cats for speaker and orchestra and recorded it with the marvellous Robert Donat as narrator. Although Alan was fundamentally a serious man in his music, this work displays his sense of humour. He once said that animals were easier to live with than some people.

Rawsthorne was a paradox. As I have said, his music often very serious, brown as some called it, which was in contrast to his outgoing personality. Yet this may indicate a certain amount of laziness. Fast music takes more time and paper and much more work and so to compose comparatively brief music was less arduous. However, he did not fall into one of Elgar's besetting many sins of writing movements entitled allegro which were predominantly slow and 'suicidally tedious' as Alan called them.

It is difficult to assess Alan's music. To be perfectly honest, he is an interesting and important composer but perhaps he did not write any work that is outstanding, nothing that sets the heart aglow, nothing immediately memorable. But again, that could be said of many composers. Like Shostakovich he used a musical signature in many of his works which becomes a tired cliché. I have to be in the mood for Alan's music and there are times when I cannot take it and other times when I marvel at its cerebral integrity.

But knowing the man is probably both an advantage and disadvantage

The best accolade that I can give stems from a performance that Ngoc Le and I gave of his Cello Sonata of 1949. After the performance Humphrey Searle said, "This is the British Bach".

High praise, indeed!