

MALCOLM WILLIAMSON

A 70th Birthday Tribute by Paul Conway

Malcolm Benjamin Graham Christopher Williamson was born in Sydney on November 21st 1931. He studied piano, violin and french horn at the Sydney Conservatorium. Later, his composition teachers were Sir Eugene Goossens, Erwin Stein (an ex-pupil of Schoenberg) and Elizabeth Lutyens. Since the age of 18 he has lived in Britain, though frequently visited other European countries (encountering the music of Boulez in Paris) and America. In his early years in Britain he worked in a publishing house and as an organist and choirmaster before concentrating on composition. As a young aspiring composer he experimented with the 12-tone serial technique, became interested in medieval music and discovered an affinity with the compositions and philosophy of Olivier Messiaen not long after his conversion to Catholicism in 1952. Thus, when his own music began to be recognised as a powerful individual voice in the mid-1950s, he had already immersed himself in various trends and influences. From 1958 he began to earn a living as a night club pianist and this had a major impact on his attitude to popular music which he has always produced, sometimes simultaneously with intensely serious religious works, a juxtaposition which has occasionally baffled his critics. Malcolm Williamson's many compositions range from full scale operas, symphonies, choral, vocal, chamber and keyboard works to church music, film music and music for children. In the 1950s, it was the help of Sir Adrian Boult and Benjamin Britten that enabled his first works to be published. A steady flow of commissions followed. In 1975 he was appointed 19th Master of the Queen's Music, succeeding Sir Arthur Bliss and in 1976 he was created CBE. Latterly, due to ill health, his output has become less prolific yet 1995 saw a beautiful song cycle for soprano and orchestra premiered at the Proms: "A Year of Birds" is an evocative song cycle to poems by Iris Murdoch. Though his interest in writing occasional pieces for the Royal family has clearly waned over the last two decades, he was moved to write a work in memory of his friend Sir Harold Wilson which received its first performance in 1995. With such a rich and diverse body of work to choose from, it is difficult to single out individual works. The following selection is a mixture of significant compositions in Malcolm Williamson's development as a composer and examples of his best work in all genres.

Malcolm Williamson's First Symphony is entitled 'Elavimini' (the Latin for 'be ye lifted up' taken from Psalm 24). It was written between 1956 and 1957 and is scored for 2 flutes (piccolo), 2 oboes (cor anglais), 2 clarinets (bass clarinet), 2 bassoons (contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. 'Elevamini' is an astonishing achievement for a composer in his early twenties: apart from the technical skills evident in the scoring and architecture of the symphony, the emotional depth and spiritual maturity apparent in the personality behind the work is remarkable. Created in response to the death of the composer's maternal grandmother (the score is inscribed 'in memoriam M.E.W.'), the piece takes the form of a requiem with a light, lively middle section encased by two probing Lentos (a structure he would repeat in his equally profound Violin Concerto of 1964). The symphony lasts about 25 minutes.

The Lento first movement is divided into four parts. The opening section begins with imposing dissonant tutti chords representing the passage in Psalm 24 where the gates of brass of the New Jerusalem are raised to receive a new soul. These chords make an arresting opening to the symphony, resembling the 'Fire' chords which recur in the Ritual Dances from Michael Tippett's 'A Midsummer Marriage'. The Dances were first performed in 1953 and the opera in 1955 and the 'Fire' chords may possibly have found their way into Malcolm Williamson's imagination. The first section of the Lento continues with the progress of the soul depicted by the string section in hushed interweaving counterpoint. An important falling motif in the first violins emerges five bars after fig 1. It bears a striking resemblance to a haunting descending motif on cor anglais in the final movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony just before the start of the closing Adagissimo section and the valedictory nature of such an association is poignantly appropriate. Stomping lower string chords and semitonal clashes in the violin parts create a mounting feeling of restless anguish. The 'Mahler' motif is repeated ever higher in the first and

second violins until they ascend to the very edge of inaudibility. The second section contains memorable vaulting, arch-like arpeggiated woodwind figures over scrunched semitonal conflicts on violin chords. The third section (*largo marziale*) is a solemn funeral march which rises in fugal complexity and increases in intensity as instruments are added to the texture. At the climax of this section, the 'gates of brass' chords reappear (quadruple forte, sounding like the Last Trump). The fourth and final section of the first movement, *Andante lento*, provides serene and hushed repose. The 'gates of brass' chords are transfigured into a rhythmic motif which appears on violins and bassoons both in their highest registers. The 'Mahler' motif returns as a flute solo, *espressivo*. The movement ends with muted strings sounding the 'gates of brass' from afar.

If the *Allegretto* central movement is meant to depict the joy of the Angels and the Saints at the arrival of a new soul, they also resemble latter-day Saints as there is a distinctly Coplandesque quality about this movement with its dancing arpeggios. These arpeggios are a transformation of the arch-like woodwind figures from the start of the previous *Lento* movement's second section, whilst the 'gates of brass' chords are transmuted into punchy, accented tutti chords that momentarily stem the flow of the undulating texture. The complexity of the interweaving lines of the preceding movement is replaced by a more straightforward tonality and the time signature is an unchanging 3/8, though cross rhythms lend a syncopated feel to the movement. The Trio section takes the form of a long-breathed benediction for the violins and divided cellos over which the flutes continue the scherzo theme. The scherzo reprise is varied, the textures thinning out until three final, emphatic tutti strokes.

The Finale, *Lento assai*, is conceived in terms of blocks of slow and fast sections though the rhythm remains unvaried. The slower section consists of an evermore insistent muted trumpet call cutting through multi-layers of Messiaen-like woodwind lines. The faster sections echo the first *Danse Sacral* from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, an apt reference as the ritual and dance elements of the Stravinsky ballet score complement Elevamini's ecstatic dances of the angels and saints as the soul is accepted into their celestial number. The 'gates of brass' chords return, leading to an extended dance section which has something of the cosmic explosiveness of a symphonic movement by Robert Simpson. The side drum beats out the predominating dance rhythm of the Finale and the work ends with the divided string section playing a seemingly endless chord stretching out into Infinity.

The importance of *Elevamini* in the Williamson oeuvre cannot be overstated. It was the first large-scale orchestral composition of his maturity as a composer and the piece reveals the Williamson style burgeoning out of his early influences - the Second Viennese School, Stravinsky and Messiaen, with a dash of Britten and Tippett. The idea of a first symphony based on such solemn inspiration and its unusual slow-fast-slow sequence of movements may have militated against the success of *Elevamini*, though John McCabe adopted a similar structural layout of movements for his elegiac *First Symphony* in 1965 without harm. Perhaps in mid-1950s Britain, conservative elements in the Musical Establishment were not prepared to accept Williamson's vision. In any event, the work was not taken up until Sir Charles Groves and the RLPO nearly 20 years after its composition when they recorded it on an EMI LP (SLS 5085), a performance which deserves an immediate CD release. Ironically the work enjoyed critical acclaim on the release of the LP not accorded to the Williamson works of the late 1970s. Today, the symphony stands up as an astonishingly original first example in the genre, serving notice that Malcolm Williamson was not going to be a traditional symphonist!

One of the composer's most approachable orchestral works, the Overture 'Santiago de Espada' of 1957 is a delight and would make the perfect curtain raiser to any concert. Its format adheres closely to the traditional Overture with a martial introduction given to timpani and percussion leading to the *Allegro* first subject, a rousing, emphatic rallying cry for trumpets, as chevalric in tone as the *Agincourt Overture* by Walter Leigh or the music for *Henry V* by Walton. This first subject theme, suggesting St James inspiring the Spaniards to victory in battle is elaborated in a syncopated, jazzy style: typical Williamson. A *ritardando* leads to the regal second subject, a noble theme depicting St James lying in a marble ship. This melody, first heard on second violins and joined by first violin with a solo horn

descant, is a greatly deconstructed, serene version of the first subject. The first oboe continues the theme, followed by trumpet supported by first oboe and clarinet with piccolos, flutes and violas giving out a celebratory peal of bells. The Allegro first subject bursts in along with the percussion from the introduction. Soon the horns intone the second subject on top in dazzling counterpoint, reaching a triple forte climax before the percussion powers the overture to a spectacular conclusion. Perfectly paced and thrillingly scored, the Santiago de Espada Overture is sorely neglected by concert promoters and record producers alike - an oversight for which the music loving public is all the poorer. It too was included on the deleted EMI LP SLS 5085 with the RPLO conducted by Sir Charles Groves.

The Piano Concerto no 2 (1960) represents the composer at his most brilliantly playful. It is scored for piano and strings only and is dedicated to Elaine Goldberg. The first subject of the opening Allegro con brio has a 'cat and mouse' quality about it with the piano as scuttling mouse and the strings as the pouncing cat. The second subject (in fourths) is a witty amalgamation of the oriental and the tango. It recurs near the end of this brief movement, fortissimo and tenuto, ironic and magnificent, before the piano and second violins shoot up (via some dominant sevenths) to a dead halt. The following Andante lento begins with muted strings ushering in an extended canon of solemn beauty. The piano joins in. There is a brief pause and a series of ethereal broken chords introduce the second subject, characterised by rippling piano arpeggios and tutti upper strings in a chant-like melody. The piano takes up the chant, building a crescendo of considerable intensity which leads to a brief but brilliant cadenza. The first subject, now bathed in a half-light provided by tremolo upper strings, returns in the lower strings. The piano takes it up and the textures become increasingly delicate until...the Allegro con spirito Finale bursts in with all the brilliance of A major. If the first movement was 'Tom and Jerry', this is outright slapstick comedy with a Keystone Kops first subject and an 'off-key' waltz for a second subject. The first subject gains a Rachmaninov-like string theme which is taken up by the piano and gains some triplets. After a reprise of the opening material, the 'Rachmaninov' theme is given the full Romantic treatment where it rises above the level of its cliché status as surely as the ending of Malcolm Arnold's Fifth Symphony transfigures its own 'cliché theme. There is a mad dash for the finishing line.

The Shostakovich-like wit on display in the outer movements would make this concerto one of the most enjoyable in the repertoire. Sadly, of course, it isn't in the repertoire, at least in Britain, which is unaccountable and a great shame. Displaying the same raucous good-humoured fun as that of most of the Malcolm Arnold concerti, the Williamson Second Piano Concerto needs to be rescued from its undeserved obscurity and brought before a public who will be amazed to find that so much fun can be had from a late-20th Century concerto. The beautiful central Andante provides a perfect contrast and ensures the frolics do not become tiresome - a moment of deeply felt calm between two circus acts of infectiously cheerful vulgarity. The Piano Concerto no 2 was released on a long-deleted EMI LP EMD 5520 with Gwenneth Prior as soloist with the English Chamber Orchestra under Yuval Zaliouk. The LP also included the Concerto for Two Pianos and Strings of 1972 and the string orchestra version of the Epitaphs for Edith Sitwell (1966).

In 1960, the composer wrote his first film score for Hammer Productions: *The Brides of Dracula*, the company's first sequel to the international successful 'Dracula' of 1958. The composer showed himself to be adept at creating a powerfully atmospheric soundtrack without drawing attention away from the film's action. The opening title sequence is available on a GDI CD (GDICD002). The composer returned to Hammer for two more films, *Crescendo* (1969) and *The Horror of Frankenstein*, though neither of these productions had the style and prestige of the initial project. The title sequence of *Crescendo* is available on GDICD005 and the music for *The Horror of Frankenstein's* opening credits appears on GDICD011. The latter film is also available on Video (Warner Home Video Horror Classics S039135). Twenty four years after *The Brides of Dracula*, Williamson found himself supplying the music for another Peter Cushing film, *The Masks of Death*. Cushing and John Mills make a somewhat ancient Holmes and Watson in this Tyburn production, but the score is first rate. The final march as Holmes drives up to Buckingham Palace in a coach and horses to receive the "signal honour" of his knighthood is splendidly Elgarian with a dash of Walton thrown in. It was used again for the title

theme of Peter Cushing's life story 'A One-Way Ticket to Hollywood' and is proof that Malcolm Williamson's melodic gifts have never deserted him. The Masks of Death is available on an Art House Production video (AHF 2027) and One-Way Ticket to Hollywood is released by Encore Entertainment (encore@enc.co.uk).

Malcolm Williamson originally designated his Sinfonia Concertante as Symphony no 2, but owing to the concertante nature of the solo instruments of three trumpets and piano as distinct from the string orchestra, he changed the title. Begun in 1958 and finished in 1961, this piece is dedicated to the composer's wife. Each of the three movements bears a religious superscription. The first movement, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', begins with a chanting motif played by the piano over held three-part trumpet chords. After their imposing opening statement, the strings initiate a driving pulse. This pulse continues throughout the movement which is in sonata form. The central Andante lento remains in 3/8 throughout and is constructed in one long-breathed arc, building up in complexity and richness only to fall away to a restful conclusion. The Presto Finale harps on F sharp, exploiting the bright colours of trumpet, piano and strings. A Rondo with variations to its recurring material, the Presto contains a piano cadenza with trumpet interjections. A slow epilogue almost achieves the status of another slow movement, reviewing the harmonic, rhythmic and colouristic elements of the work and bringing the piece to a satisfying close. The Sinfonia Concertante featured on the EMI LP SLS 5085 with Martin Jones as pianist with the RLPO under Sir Charles Groves.

Commissioned by William Glock for the Proms, the Organ Concerto of 1961 is dedicated to Sir Adrian Boult who conducted the first performance. A celebration of the dedicatee, the work's unchanging time signature in each of the three movements was allegedly a response to a plea from Lady Boult to refrain from a surfeit of metric variety. To compensate for this, Malcolm Williamson concentrates on rhythmic diversity with the use of cross rhythms in particular characterising the piece. It emerges as one of the most life-affirming and idiosyncratic of the Williamson orchestral works. The first performance of the concerto took place at the Royal Albert Hall on 8th September 1961 with the London Philharmonic under Adrian Boult and the composer himself as soloist.

The opening movement begins with a cadenza (Andante quasi recitativo) on the notes ACB (the thematic germ for the whole concerto) for timpani over bass drum pointed up by harp and organ chordal eruptions from the brass. The character of the movement is that of a ritual dance or even a Dance of Death with the soloist as a gleeful Satan. Throughout the movement, the majority of the strings play pizzicato, only four violas and two double basses being permitted to use their bows. The woodwind section is silent throughout.

The central Largo sostenuto is scored for strings alone. It provides a necessary core of repose in an otherwise highly exuberant and extrovert work. The Largo is characterised by an extended unison melody for strings as well as divisi string writing. An extended and challenging organ cadenza follows, adding necessary structural balance in that it lends weight to the Allegro Finale to match that of the first movement.

The Finale marks a return to the volatility of the opening movement, accumulating motifs and effects from earlier sections of the concerto. It is scored for full orchestra and the woodwind are finally allowed full reign. A climax is reached in which the main motif of the work (ACB) reaches its apotheosis in a broad and noble melody, capping the concerto with an affirmative and jubilant conclusion. The Organ Concerto was recorded in 1975 by Lyrita with the composer as soloist with Sir Adrian Boult and the LPO (SRCS 79). Sadly this recording, along with so many other riches in the Lyrita vaults, is currently unavailable.

The Third Piano Concerto (1962) was commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Commission and is dedicated to John Ogdon who gave the first performance of the work with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Joseph Post. The Allegro first movement begins with the chordal main theme on solo

piano over accompanying horns and strings. The song-like second subject is a reconstructed version of the first subject. It is heard on clarinet, then piano and finally divided amongst the orchestra. This opening movement is entitled 'Toccata' owing to the diversity of touch required of the pianist and also because of the driving rhythms which permeate it. The following Scherzo falls into four parts: the first is a fluent and ascending melody; the second an oppressive dance in 10/6; the third a return to the first section and the fourth section the culmination of the movement where all the previous material collides and reaches a violent apotheosis. The slow movement, marked *Molto largo e cantando* resides within a flowing 3/2 time signature. Inward-looking, this weighty movement is the emotional core of the Concerto, its opening cantillena for piano establishing the mood of restrained lamentation whilst the shattering brass motifs introduce a more agonised form of grief, close to raging despair. In the cadenza, calm is restored before the daylight breaks in with the *Ben Allegro Finale*. The orchestration and metres of the first movement are recalled and the soloist goads the orchestra with its ebullience restored towards ever-greater feats of rhythmical dexterity. Metrically inventive and melodically attractive, the concerto finds the composer at his most uninhibited. It was coupled with the Organ Concerto on the Lyrita release SRCS 79 when the composer played the solo part with the LPO under Leonard Dommett.

Malcolm Williamson was asked to write an organ piece for the new cathedral at Coventry in 1962. The resulting work, *Vision of Christ-Phoenix* was inspired by the sight of the rebuilt cathedral constructed upon the ashes of bombed-out remains. The Coventry carol beginning "Lullay, Lulla, thou little child" is used as the basis for a passacaglia and a set of variations. The three sections portray the destroying flame, the second section peace and hope whilst the third and final section reflects the triumphant Resurrection with Christ as a phoenix rising from the ashes. The piece has been recorded in a splendid performance by Kevin Bowyer on *Nimbus* (NI 5509) along with the original version for organ of Williamson's *Epitaphs for Edith Sitwell* (1966).

The Display (1963) is a narrative ballet devised by Robert Helpmann and commissioned by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre for the 1964 Adelaide Festival of Arts. The story centres on a male bird's wooing of its mate. At the ballet's conclusion, the girl, desolated by the violent events in the forest, gives herself up to the bird's advances. A Concert Suite from the complete ballet was included in the EMI release SLS 5085. The Sydney SO was conducted by John Hopkins.

Malcolm Williamson's *Violin Concerto* was commissioned by Yehudi Menuhin for the Bath Festival in 1964. Dedicated to the memory of Edith Sitwell, who died during the composition of the work, the concerto consists of two grieving slow encasing a central scherzo whose satirical bite suggests a portrait of the dedicatee. The concerto was first performed by Yehudi Menuhin and the Bath Festival Orchestra in the Assembly Rooms, Bath on 15th June 1965.

The opening movement, *Adagio e sostenuto*, begins with the imposing and tragic first subject (a descending scale over an undulating accompaniment). The solo violin rises out of the violin section to perform an extended solo passage. This is the concerto's sole cadenza and it leads directly to the second subject, an uneasy lament in 10/4 time. If the first subject is a public declaration of mourning, the second subject has the intimacy of private grieving. It is a haunting, nostalgic theme, slightly sentimental - like a Victorian ballad such as Edith Sitwell would have heard in her youth. The development section pits the sorrowing solo violin against the full-throated sobbing of the tutti orchestra whilst the recapitulation of the much transformed first subject features severe technical tests for the soloist with its double and treble stopping passages over harp and string accompaniment. The second subject returns *largo tranquillo*, transformed into a gentle requiem for a bygone era. It brings the movement to a hushed close with the musical argument unresolved.

The central *Vivace* is an acerbic scherzo - music of the night and second cousin to the central spectral Scherzo of Mahler's Seventh Symphony. Fleeting as a nightmare, its gawky, martial main theme is occasionally interrupted by a rich, soaring melody which again seems parodic in intent. A direct

tribute to the irony and brilliance of Edith Sitwell's verse, the world of *Façade* is not far away (Walton himself is said to have admired this concerto). The Presto coda brings the movement to a spiky, spirited conclusion.

The Adagio molto Finale is a slow threnody, elegiac in character. A tender and poignant melody for solo violin ascends to celestial heights over a throbbing, kaleidoscopic orchestral accompaniment. Three tutti hammer blows of Fate divest the work of its remaining energy and the concerto ends in dignified resignation, accepting the loss it has previously railed against. As the soloist soars away, fading to a triple piano conclusion, the inevitability of the passing of life is memorably and unsentimentally caught in these final bars. The Violin Concerto is currently available on CD (coupled with the Panufnik and Lennox Berkeley violin concertos with Yehudi Menuhin and the LPO conducted by Sir Adrian Boult (EMI 7243 5 66121 2 9).

The three-movement *Sinfonietta* for orchestra was commissioned by the BBC for performance at the inaugural concert of the introduction of Radio 3. It was first performed on March 21st 1965 by the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. Ten years later, Sir Frederick Ashton created a ballet from the score for the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and for this production, the composer added a Prelude and reduced the brass scoring. The absence of any timpani in the score is compensated for by an array of percussion as well as harp. The short Prelude of the 1975 ballet version features a mystical and creeping dialogue between woodwind and brass. In the very last bar of the Prelude, a dramatic and drastic crescendo heralds the arrival of the first movement proper - a lively and motoric Toccata in modified sonata form. The first subject is the opening string motif with short replies from the brass section. The extended second subject begins in the bass but becomes a memorable theme for violins derived from the first subject. An elliptical recapitulation leads to a short coda which ends with a leap into the stratosphere.

The central Elegy is tripartite in structure. Firstly, a highly evocative passage for divided solo strings in harmonics with harp sounds against flutes. Under this, a broad theme rises from a solo double bass. A counter-statement on strings with oboe assuming the double bass theme leads to the second main section - brass and woodwind intone a funeral march which builds to a powerful climax in the aftermath of which the third and final section flickers into life. This passage juxtaposes aspects of both previous sections. The brass and woodwind rhythm is transfigured into a convulsive pulse with the woodwind assuming the flute's melody above the double bass theme now given out by solo trombone.

The concluding Tarantella is a whirligig of almost frenetically high spirits. A whirling dervish of a movement, the contrasting section of its Rondo structure provide fleeting contrasts but the sheer energy of the main dance motif overrides all and powers the *Sinfonietta* on to a bravissimo conclusion, crowning one of its composer's most immediately enjoyable works. It was recorded by the Melbourne SO under Yuval Zaliouk for RCA (GL 40542) on a deleted LP.

The Five Preludes for piano (1966), premièred at the 1966 Cheltenham Festival, were the product of a commission for a set of piano pieces by Antonietta Notariello. The titles for the preludes are taken from William Wordsworth's sonnet 'Upon Westminster Bridge' - Ships, Towers, Domes, Theatres and Temples. Each prelude evokes a different aspect of London (the London of 1966 rather than that of Wordsworth's day) and explores a different pianistic technique. In the opening 'Ships', an undulating figure for the left hand suggests the sea whilst the wide melodic range of the piece (it is scored for treble and two bass clefs!) and the hushed dynamics (mostly ranging from piano to triple piano) suggests a ship in full sail on clam waters. In 'Towers', powerful chords for the left hand depict the firm base of tower blocks, whilst the flowing right hand phrases point in more intricate details. The central prelude, 'Domes' includes right hand grace notes which paint a picture of vaulting domes. Something of the bravura performances of the stage are recalled in 'Theatre' in the heavily accented chordal passages for right hand, marked brillante which recur throughout the prelude. The main theme is slightly jazzy, suggesting the smell of greasepaint and a touch of the Music Halls. The final prelude, 'Temples' makes a grand, imposing

conclusion, paying tribute to the architectural splendour of such sacred buildings. The Preludes were recorded by the composer on a deleted Argo LP ZRG 682.

Also in 1966 came the great opera in three Acts *The Violins of Saint Jacques* with a libretto by William Chappell based on the novel by Patrick Leigh Fermor. It was premiered at Sadler's Wells Theatre on 29th November 1966. The cast included April Cantelo as Berthe, Jennifer Vyvyan as the Countess de Serindan and Owen Brannigan as the Count de Serindan. The Sadlers Wells Orchestra was conducted by Vilem Tausky. The opera tells the story of the Island of Saint Jacques in the Carribean which was destroyed with all its inhabitants by a volcanic eruption at the start of the 20th century. The score is one of its composer's most enjoyably eclectic, ranging from Brittenesque seascapes and Bergian Expressionism to Sullivan-like melodies. There is also a presage of Andrew Lloyd Webber in the arias "I have another world to show you" and "Each afternoon when the cooling breezes swoon and die". Coincidentally, more than twenty five years after the opera was first performed, Malcolm Williamson would sing the praises of Lloyd Webber's "Sunset Boulevard" - perhaps the songs in that musical triggered memories of his own operatic melodies. The opera encompasses many changes of mood from the tropical suppressed passion of the first Act to the *Candide*-like wit and charm of the second Act with its lilting rhythms. The atmosphere a Savoy operetta at this point is highlighted by the character of Captain Henri Joubert, an over-dressed foppish dandy. One can imagine John Reed playing such a character with little difficulty. Of the composer's many operas, none deserves revival more than this one. Its abundance of drama and good tunes should endear it to a wide audience.

The *Pas de Quatre* of 1967 was commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera for their summer festival at Newport, Rhode Island. The piece is scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and piano and adheres to the structure of a classical *Pas de Quatre*. The opening sonata is scored for full ensemble. There follows a variation for flute and piano, a slow, intense *Pas de Trio* for bassoon and piano, a variation for flute and oboe and a seduction *Pas de Deux* for clarinet and piano. The concluding coda is virtuosic and culminatory, referring fleetingly to previous themes. The Argo LP ZRG 682 includes a performance of the *Pas de Quatre* by the Nash Ensemble and the composer at the piano.

The three-movement *Piano Quintet* (1968) for piano and strings was commissioned by the Birmingham Chamber Music Society. It is cast in three movements of unequal proportion: an extended *Allegro molto* is topped and tailed by brief *Adagio* movements which anticipate and reflect on, respectively, the material of the central movement. The first *Adagio* is chilling, on the edge of audibility, inhabiting the same unearthly soundworld as the *Finale* of Vaughan Williams' *Sixth Symphony*. Acerbic and joyous by turn, its brevity only serves to heighten its capacity to disconcert. The central *Allegro molto* is the substantial heart of the work. It displays some of the characteristics of both *scherzo* and *rondo* in that each passage spawns succeeding variants of itself. Successive writhing chromatic lines in the strings are broken up by wide-ranging figurations in the piano. The tonal gamut is traversed throughout the movement. The concluding *Adagio* returns to the slow-moving progress of the first movement, though here the atmosphere is one of serenity rather than unease. The *Quintet* ends in peace, drained of energy, though the unsettling mood established by the start of the piece is not entirely vanquished. The Nash Ensemble and the composer recorded the work for Argo (ZRG 682).

The song cycle 'From a Child's Garden' for high voice and piano to words by Robert Louis Stevenson was commissioned by the Cardiff Festival of 20th Century Music and first performed by Robert Tear and John Ogdon on 24th April 1968. The onomatopoeic sound of the 'birdie with a yellow bill' dominates the opening song 'Time to Rise' and this fleeting figure recurs as a leitmotif in the fifth song 'While Duty of Children' and the final 'Happy Thought'. Four of the songs are written in a melodic, tonal idiom, 'The Flowers', 'My Bed is a Boat', 'A Good Boy' and 'The Lamplighter'. Some of the songs have onomatopoeic piano parts: as well as the bird-like phrases of 'Time to Rise', other examples include 'Marching Song' with its stomping piano line, 'Where go the Boats?' with flowing piano phrases suggesting an idyllic sunlit river. 'Rain' is suggested by staccato droplets in contrasting speeds in the piano part and 'From a Railway Carriage' (*Allegro molto*) has quick alternating chords suggesting

the regular movement of the train with the scenery flashing by. A prime example of Malcolm Williamson's gifts as a sympathetic setter of words, 'From a Child's Garden' is a charming song cycle. As I well remember, it was a set work in the 1980 'O' Level Joint Matriculation Board syllabus. Soprano April Cantelo recorded the work with Malcolm Williamson as piano accompanist (ARGO ZRG 682).

The Second Symphony of 1969 was commissioned by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of their 75th anniversary and first performed at the Colston Hall, Bristol on 29th October 1969, conducted by George Hurst. The symphony is scored for 3 flutes (piccolo), 3 oboes (cor anglais), 3 clarinets (bass clarinet), 3 bassoons, 4 horns, trumpet in D, 2 trumpets in B flat, 3 trombones, tuba, harp, timpani, percussion (3 players: side drum, tenor drum, suspended cymbal, tam tam, anvil, 2 pairs of bongos, tubular bells, glockenspiel, vibraphone, celesta) and strings. Apart from brief minor fluctuations and a couple of short allargando passages, the initial tempo of *lento moderato con rubato* is maintained throughout this concise 20-minute one movement symphony. The long breathed first subject begins the work, falling like droplets from the piccolos and flute, harp and divided first violins over the bubbling stream of the nonuplets in the strings. This 'droplet' theme is answered by an equally important motto theme for brass incorporating a dotted rhythm. At letter C of the score, the second subject begins. A theme for brass with an accompanying descending figure in the woodwind initiates an arc-like figure for tutti strings. If the first subject is like water droplets in the calm before the storm, then this is the storm itself. It is cut short at figure D when the first subject returns, then breaks out again, this time in the woodwind section. The first subject is speeded up. All these elements are developed in the second half of the symphony. A climax is reached at figure HH and in its aftermath the initial figure returns. The work ends abruptly, the last droplet having landed. Compact and closely argued, the Symphony no 2 is unquestionably as individual as its predecessor yet as unlike that work as one could possibly imagine.

The Icy Mirror is the title of Malcolm Williamson's Third Symphony of 1972. It is scored for soprano, mezzo soprano, 2 baritones, SATB chorus and orchestra (2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, double bassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion (glockenspiel, xylophone, temple block, suspended cymbal, tenor drum and side drum), harp, piano and strings). A setting of a dramatic poem by Ursula Vaughan Williams, the symphony was commissioned by Sir Arthur Bliss for the Cheltenham Festival, where it was premiered on the 9th July 1972. The opening Adagio movement makes effective use of a descending figure for harp which eerily depicts the Icy Mirror of the title: "All history shows an icy mirror to man's intellect". The central Presto movement is literally a Dance of Death with swirling upper woodwinds sounding like teeming maggots. The Adagio Finale is a moving threnody in a post-nuclear age which builds to a powerful climax before the work closes with ominous taps from the temple block. As an example of the composer's gift for word setting this could hardly be bettered: at the words "trumpets in the sky" in the Finale, for example, the composer avoids the obvious and uses a staccato figure in the woodwinds creating the appropriate effect of celestial distance. The forces taking part in the world premiere included Jennifer Vyvyan (soprano), the Cheltenham Bach Choir, the Cheltenham Festival Chorus and the BBC Northern SO with conductor John Hopkins.

The Fourth Symphony was written in 1977. It was commissioned by the London Philharmonic Orchestra to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Unfortunately it has never been performed. The symphony is a substantial twenty-eight minute work for large orchestra: three flutes, piccolo, three oboes, cor anglais, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, double bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three percussion players, harp and strings. There are three movements: The Birth of the World (Largo); Eagle (Allegro vivo) and The Prayer of the Waters (Lento). The score is dedicated to Her Majesty the Queen. Along with this year's fellow 70th birthday celebrant Anthony Hedges' second symphony of 1997, this work desperately warrants performance and recording.

Of the composer's large scale choral works, none is more impressive than his Mass of Christ the King (1978). The piece was jointly commissioned by the Three Choirs Festival and the Royal Philharmonic

Orchestra to celebrate The Queen's Silver Jubilee and to mark the 250th Three Choirs Festival. The whole work is dedicated to The Queen but as Benjamin Britten died on the day the composer began the Agnus Dei, Williamson asked if that movement could be dedicated to Britten. The work had a long gestation: sketches for a setting of the Feast of Christ the King were begun in 1953 and the composer returned to the idea from time to time until the Three Choirs Commission urged him on to complete the setting as a large scale work. The first notes were written at the end of 1975 and the full orchestral score was finished two and a half years later. The Latin text is taken from the Old and New Testaments as well as from the early years of Christianity. The composer has said that when composing it, he was less aware of the music of his own time than that of Hebrew music and that of the Middle Ages. It is this archaic quality which gives the Mass its special character. The work takes the form of a continuously evolving symphonic movement in sixteen parts with set pieces in the structure finally finding their place in the apotheosis that concludes the Mass. The piece calls for two sopranos, lyric and dramatic as well as tenor and baritone soloists. There is an echo choir interlocked with a large chorus. The Ordinary of the Mass is interspersed with the hymns, psalms and other texts proper to the Feast of Christ the King in the manner of the poems set within Britten's War Requiem. Some of the settings, such as the Introitus, are quite operatic, illustrating the composer's admirable lack of distinction between the secular and the sacred, the "highbrow" and the instantly communicative. This one of several works by Malcolm Williamson which is absurdly overdue for a CD release.

Commissioned from Malcolm Williamson by the Old Creightonians (Kilburn Grammar School Old Boys' Association) for the Brent Youth Orchestra for its tenth anniversary year, the Fifth Symphony was completed early in 1980 and first performed at a St George's Day Concert on Wednesday 23rd April of that year. The première took place at Brent Town Hall with the Brent Youth Orchestra conducted by John Michael East. The symphony was the result of a dual inspiration: the composer's association with Youth orchestras and the story of Saint Bernadette and the Apparitions in the grotto at Lourdes. In her local dialect, the uneducated Bernadette Soubirous could only describe what she saw as AQUERÒ, meaning approximately the same as 'çela' in French or 'that thing' in English. The symphony may be seen as a hymn to the importance of education: as a result of St Bernadette's account of events she was found to be highly intelligent and given a school education. The Fifth Symphony is written for young players with due regard for their varying skill but also stretching them in matters of technique and general musicianship. The twenty-four minute work is scored for 2 flutes (piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 tenor trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (4 players: side drum, tenor drum, bass drum, 2 pairs of bongos, triangle, small and medium suspended cymbals, tam tam, high, middle and low gongs, tubular bells, xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel) and strings.

The Symphony no 5 was originally cast in two movements, the first a Credo, a statement or commitment, and the second a meditation on the Apparitions. As the work progressed, Malcolm Williamson realised that the ideas of commitment and meditation were implicit, each in the other. Thus, the piece became a one-movement symphony in the fashion of his Second Symphony. The time signature of 5/8 is unwavering, but complex rhythmic patterns contradict its pulse. The time signature, therefore becomes more of a point of reference whilst encouraging a degree of flexibility from the orchestra and conductor in performance. The work begins and ends in F sharp, more the tonal centre than a traditional tonic note. The symphony is an organically developing drama of ideas. The start of the work with its soft high strings suggests a sunrise in the Pyrexes. The horns play a long chant-like melody. After these forward-looking elements is a circular figure for flutes and glockenspiel and another for clarinets and vibraphone, characterising the eternal and celestial revolving above the earthly dynamic. Two further elements constitute the main material of the symphony: a sequence of rich, slow chords suggesting the Apparition and a long wide-ranging melody which refuses to fall conveniently into a harmonic cradle. The first oboe intones a plainchant-like line suggesting the praying Bernadette: 'Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison'. The string section is frequently divided with parts of varying difficulty. Every section is highlighted at one time or another. If the symphony does not demand individual virtuosity, it does call for more than usually precise

sense of community from the players, an appropriate demand from a work which celebrates the community of shared musicianship rather than empty technical display.

1980 also saw two important works written as a result of the composer's Royal title: *Ode for Queen Elizabeth* and *Lament in Memory for Lord Mountbatten of Burma*. The *Ode* was commissioned by the Scottish Baroque Ensemble who gave the first performance at a private concert in the presence of the Royal Family on 3rd July 1980 at the Palace of Holyrood House. The public première, also given by the Scottish Baroque Ensemble, took place on 25th August 1980 at Hopetoun House, Edinburgh. The work is dedicated to Her Majesty the Queen Mother on the occasion of her 80th birthday. It is divided into five movements: Act of Homage; Alleluia; Ecosaise; Majesty in Beauty and Scottish Dance. The eleven-minute *Lament* is dedicated to Leonard Friedman and the Scottish Baroque Ensemble who gave the first performance on 5th May 1980.

The *Sixth Symphony* (1981-1982) is a massive one-movement work, divided into fourteen sections, written for the orchestras of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. An Australian musical journey, each section bears an inscription from the text of the Mass, making the symphony a liturgical as well as a geographical odyssey. The symphony was originally played by seven Australian orchestras to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ABC. Each of the fourteen sections was recorded separately and broadcast complete throughout Australia. Future performances could use just a single orchestra and Christopher Austin of the Brunel Ensemble has already indicated his interest in such a project. The *Symphony no 6* is scored for a massive orchestra: four flutes, piccolo, four oboes, cor anglais, four clarinets, bass clarinet, four bassoons, double bassoon, six horns, four trumpets, four trombones, two tubas, timpani, six percussion players, harp, piano, organ and strings. At nearly forty-five minutes, this is one of the composer's most substantial orchestral works from the 1980s. It reminds the listener that Stravinsky and Messiaen were formative influences on Malcolm Williamson since the soundworlds of both the *Rite of Spring* and the *Turangilila Symphony* are recalled near the end of the symphony.

The *Seventh Symphony* (1984) was commissioned by Alexandra E Cameron for the 150th Anniversary of the State of Victoria. Dedicated to Derek Goldfoot, it is written for string orchestra and, like its predecessor, takes Australian landscape and history for its inspiration. The *Symphony no 7* received its première on 12th August 1985 by the Chamber Strings of Melbourne under Christopher Martin at Irving Hall, Lauriston Girls' School, Melbourne. It is cast in four movements: a tightly argued *Andante-Allegro vivo-Andante* is followed by an *Allegro Molto*, obsessed with its woozy opening theme. An extended *Andante* juxtaposes string quartet textures with *tuttis* in the manner of the *Tallis Fantasia* (the *tuttis* sound remarkably Straussian in their amplitude) and the symphony ends with a brief but upbeat *Allegro maestoso ma non troppo*. The *Symphony* has been recorded by the Brunel Ensemble under Christopher Austin in a committed and characterful performance (Cala CACD 77005).

The beautiful five-minute *Lento for Strings* was written in 1985 and dedicated to Paul McDermott. It was first performed by The Philharmonia of Melbourne in the year of its composition and has been recorded by the Mastersingers and Alan Simmons on Carlton Classics (3036601172). This valuable disc also includes the composer's *Procession of Psalms*, *Easter Choice*, *Agnus Dei*, *Jesu, Lover of My Soul*, *Love's Redeeming Work is Done*, *Harvest Thanksgiving*, *The World at the Manger* and *Epiphany Carol*.

1988 was Australian Bicentennial Year and Malcolm Williamson wrote two big works to mark this anniversary. The *True Endeavour* for speaker, chorus and orchestra is substantially based on texts by Australian historian Manning Clark, whilst *The Dawn is at Hand* is a five-movement choral symphony derived from poems by Oodgeroo of the Aboriginal tribe Noonuccal.

Written to celebrate 50 years of the United Nations Organisation, *With Proud Thanksgiving* had its first performances in Geneva and Britain in 1995. A brief but impassioned orchestral work, it consists of two main themes, the first deeply troubled, sounding like a hymn tune half-remembered in

agitation, the second a triumphant brass fanfare. As the composer was completing the work, news reached him of the death of his old friend Lord Wilson of Rievaulx. The score is dedicated simply “for Harold Wilson”.

The sum of these diverse compositions is a considerable body of work from a strong and individual voice. Initially concentrating on piano works, mainly with himself as soloist, Malcolm Williamson has gone on to prove himself adept in every genre from light music to church music, from chamber music to opera. Such prolixity has meant the very occasional dud, but of which composer of similarly prolific output from Telemann to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies can this not also be said?

Though Malcolm Williamson has lived in England for the best part of fifty years, a glance at the titles and first performance venues of many of his works serves to confirm that he is at heart an Australian. His last two symphonies are steeped in Australian culture, to say nothing of the works for Australian Bicentennial Year, 1988. As far back as 1965, he spoke about his nationality at the Conference on Music and Education in the Commonwealth held in the University of Liverpool, “...when I think about it I am certain that my music is characteristically Australian although I have never tried to make it so. We Australians have to offer the world a persona compounded of forcefulness, brashness, a direct warmth of approach, sincerity which is not ashamed, and more of what the Americans call ‘get-up-and-go’ than the Americans themselves possess.” Certainly there is an ebullience and a directness about Malcolm Williamson’s writing which sets him apart from most British composers.

The use of melodies in most of his compositions bespeaks an artist who wants to communicate directly with his audience. How tragic then, that, apart from regular performances by Christopher Austin and the Bristol-based Brunel Ensemble, his vast catalogue of works has been so rarely encountered in this country’s concert halls over the last couple of decades. Recordings of his compositions are also pitifully few considering the wealth of material to be found in his output. It is hard to offer an explanation for this except that his champions, apart from Christopher Austin, appear to have all died out and no new ones taken their place. Nonetheless, I am convinced his time will come. Composers who write genuine melodies and convey some of the joy of living are rare and if they are not cherished today may well be so in the future. In the meantime, I trust the occasion of the composer’s seventieth birthday year will provide the necessary springboard for more performances and recordings: they will reveal a deeply humane and life affirming voice.

Williamson died on 2 March 2003. He was 71.

(8078)

© Paul Conway 1971 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.