

RICHARD ARNELL

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If there were to be a debate on who was the greatest British symphonist, Richard Arnell would arguably be among the leading contenders.

Many years ago, when I was steeped in atonal, serial and experimental music, I unintentionally heard the finale of Arnell's Symphony no 5, op. 77, which he had composed in memory of his father. It was big, romantic, lush, tuneful, colourfully orchestrated and full of life. It possessed a transcendent power to transport the listener to a 'better world'. In fact, a friend, having heard the work several times drifted into sleep in the finale on a later occasion, and when I woke her she remonstrated with me, saying, "I thought I was in heaven, listening to the music of angels!" This symphony bowled me over and destroyed any prejudices that I may have had previously had about tonal music. It is a symphony that has the rarest of qualities in that it is a work of which one can never tire ... but then, as I was to discover later, that could be said of all Arnell's symphonies, and many other of his works as well.



The distinguished conductor, the late Bryden Thomson told me that it was 'a work to fall in love with'. Another musician said, "Arnell is the English Rachmaninov!" My friend was not referring to anything pianistic but to the sheer beauty of Arnell's melodic gift and orchestration. If you like Rachmaninov's orchestral scores, you will equally value Arnell's, yet it must be emphasised that his music is his own, clearly unique and personal. The eminent Irish composer, Gerard Victory, said of Arnell's Symphony no 3, Op. 40, and the gorgeous Fifth Symphony, "I wish I had written them!"

Richard Anthony Sayer Arnell was born in Hampstead, North London on 15 September 1917, to Richard Sayer, a builder and H el ene Marie (nee Sherf). Tony was an only child and had his first piano lessons with his governess, Marjorie Calder. He attended Hall School, a preparatory school in Hampstead (1924-7), and University College School, also in Hampstead (1927-35) where, in his spare time, he formed a dance band and made 16mm films. He attended the Royal College of Music from 1935 to 1939, studying the piano with John Dykes, and composition with John Ireland, having been recommended to the RCM by Dr Richard Chanter, the music master at his last school.

In 1938 the students at the college performed his now forgotten Violin Concerto. His first professional broadcast was that of his Classical Variations, Op. 1, for strings, relayed on WQXR, New York on 31 December 1941. But it was probably his Overture: New Age, Op. 2, that established him as a composer. It was first performed in Carnegie Hall, under Leon Barzin in 1941.

Tony, as he is known to his friends, had visited the New York World Fair in 1939. Then war broke out and he had become a father. The British Consulate advised him to stay in America. He was drafted into the US Army in 1943 but later rejected on medical grounds.

Arnell always hated war and revolution. He had been born during the First World War and his mother died in the blitz in 1942. This loathing of war, and the emotional involvement with it, led him to set Sir Stephen Spender's *The War God*, Op. 36 in 1945, premiered in New York under Bernard Herrmann that year, having been commissioned by CBS. It was originally scored for soprano, chorus and orchestra

but, in the mid 1980s, it was revised as his opus 155 and scored for narrator, soprano, brass, percussion, synthesisers, chorus and tape. The revised version was premiered at St Johns, Smith Square on 14 March 1987 with the composer as narrator and Miriam Bowen, the soprano soloist.

Olivia Blackburn is the excellent soprano soloist in the performance I have of *Ode to the West Wind*, Op. 59, which displays the mercurial purity of her voice in the compelling vocal line of this work. It is a work to treasure having been written for Emily Hooke who never performed it. It was premiered by Jennifer Vyvian and Sir Thomas Beecham. Tony writes well for the voice and it is a pity he has not written more vocal works.

In his first years in America, Arnell wrote his *Sinfonia quasi variazione*, op. 13, which is his first symphony but he did not allocate it a number 'wondering whether it was really a symphony!' He composed a splendid orchestral score for Robert Flaherty's documentary film, *The Land*.

Arnell enjoyed America and from 1943 to 1945 he was a consultant for the BBC North America Service. He lived a Bohemian existence with his first wife and daughter in rented bedsits and even had to rent a piano.

While in the States, Arnell met Sir Thomas Beecham who was to give Tony eight premieres, both in England and America, including Arnell's first commercial recording, the *Ballet Suite: Punch and the Child*, Op. 49, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Arnell was friendly with John Barnelt, the associate conductor of the New York City Orchestra who liked the overture: *New Age*, but a proposed performance was rejected by the orchestra's committee. One of America's most aggressive critics (he was later to 'savagely' Arnell's *Symphony no. 1*, Op. 31, sometimes known as the *Chamber Symphony*) had Sir Thomas's ear and told him about Tony who was summoned to the Ritz in 1941. On the telephone, Arnell told the conductor that he had several orchestral works, which brought the response, "Bring a suitcase full, my boy!"

The *Symphony no. 1* is a very attractive work full of melodic invention, an enviable clarity of texture and a welcome contrast of energy and tenderness. It is eminently likeable but never trite or banal. It has a freshness to commend it as well. The *Symphony no. 2*, Op. 33, was written in New York in 1942 and, while Beecham wanted to perform it, it had to wait until 1988 for its premiere in a broadcast by the BBC Philharmonic under Sir Edward Downes. Again, it is a work of translucent texture and clarity. One may detect some minor influences of Hindemith and, perhaps, a few Sibelian chord progressions. The music has a brightness, a cheerfulness that one might not have expected from the dark days of the war. It is engaging music conveying the promise of something held in reserve. The slow movement reveals telling insights as orchestral solos comment on the themes. While the music is deeply felt, it is not oppressive or intrusive but retains its simplicity, which, in itself, and, perhaps, paradoxically, enhances its profundity; there is a glowing warmth, not a burning heat, there is sentiment but no sentimentality. The orchestral solos seem to conjure up human voices making the symphony intimate as well as intriguing. Even when the music becomes agitated, the composer is always in control. A soaring violin theme towards the end of the second movement is all too brief to do justice to its beauty. Nostalgia is also here but not of the wallowing kind. The finale makes melodic statements which are initially reserved in their presentation, thus heightening our expectation that the music will eventually explode, and it does indeed build up through the natural process of the musical arguments, achieving a commendable grandeur. As with all his music, there are no pompous or empty gestures. Arnell is out to write music, not to swank. As in the *Symphony no. 1*, and indeed much of his orchestral works, Arnell treats the orchestra as intimate groups of people and not as a machine, thus displaying his musical humanity.

The *Symphony no. 3* is a massive work in five movements lasting about sixty five minutes and is dedicated to the 'political courage of the British people'. This also dates from the war years and in this symphony Arnell identifies with Britain and his own suffering people, including his mother, murdered

at the hands of the Blitzkrieg. It is Arnell's 'eroica', a heroic and noble work but not exaggerated in any way by stuffy pomp and pageantry. Arnell does not regard this as a war symphony, and it certainly does not portray the Nazi war machine or machine-gun fire as in Shostakovich's war symphonies. Rather, it is music of the invincible human spirit as opposed to Shostakovich's militarism or Mahler's exhausting and overwhelming music especially his Symphony no. 6, which, incidentally, uses an anvil as does Arnell's Sixth.

Space will not permit a detailed analysis of the Symphony no. 3 but in the opening prelude and first movement the message is clear. There is a quasi-march and a sort of fate motif. The music is strong, with a controlled patriotism, semi-brooding, thoughtful, introspective, self-examining and extolling the courage of the British people. Yet, thankfully, the music is not self-indulgent. The themes are memorable; one slightly hints at Country Gardens but what this opening movement embodies is the sensibility of the mature British people as well as their ability for harmless fun and their common spirit and bond. One clearly hears 'music of courage' and, while it is music of its time, it is music for all times and all peoples. Within its pages one can visualise children playing as well as people in the 'services', the devoted housewife, the loyal friend, the qualities of community spirit in adversity; all are paradoxically 'aurally visible' in this impressive music which is never exaggerated. We do not have extended passages of noise; the climaxes are natural progressions of music thought. I had the privilege to edit this symphony for a comparatively recent performance. The score contained written comments by Barbirolli which were in appropriate.

The symphony was first broadcast by the BBC Northern Symphony under Norman Del Mar on 16 April 1952 and the first concert performance was at the Cheltenham Festival on 9 June 1953 with the Hallé Orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli who insisted it be cut by some twenty minutes, a mistake if there ever was one. Barbirolli was not a good conductor; he refused to conduct music which was difficult and therefore beyond him. The passages in Arnell's Symphony no 3 presented problems that Barbirolli was unable to understand and so was cut. Leave this score as it is; it is a masterpiece.

It might be thought that the next work in this genre would fail to reach the same heights, yet the Symphony no. 4, Op. 52 does not disappoint. It appeared in 1948 shortly after Arnell's return from America and was first performed by the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra under Charles Groves. It is in three movements and the timpanist is given an important role and, indeed, introduces the opening melodic line, both gently warm and beautiful. Sinister elements appear but the melodic line, which is of considerable beauty, is never far away. The main allegro follows, always full of interest and vitality and the cheerful ebullience inherent in so much of Arnell's work takes centre stage. It is rugged 'outdoor' music of great strength and determination. As with all his music that I know, there is a satisfying continuity, a resilience and compellingly memorable material. This could be interpreted as a victory symphony, a portrayal of triumph over the tyrant and of good over evil.

The second movement is sunny and the orchestration again demonstrates that uncanny 'speaking' and 'intimate' quality. It is this undeniable gift for communication that cannot but inspire the listener. And there is something exquisitely 'English' towards the end of this remarkably beautiful movement with its unforgettable melodic lines.

The finale begins with the timpani and gradually, and logically, the material takes shape and, again, there is this suspense, this 'waiting for' the convergence of all the ideas into a climax, and when it comes, one is not let down and the high spirits of the brass are most welcome.

Following the Symphony no. 5, about which enthusiasm is widespread there is a Wind Symphony, Op. 113 and the Symphony no. 6, subtitled 'The Anvil' written between 1992-94 as his opus 179. It is in four sections and the first begins with a piano chord and a clang on the anvil; the second section quotes from Shelley - "We are many" - and, as in the setting of his Ode to the West Wind is really about freedom; the anvil of this symphony may speak of both freedom and of peace with the Old

Testament concept of converting both swords and spears into agricultural instruments. The third section uses the piano in a concertante style and the last section draws on the Ode to Joy from Beethoven's Choral Symphony. It is peace and freedom and the absence of war and all and any hostilities that alone can bring joy, faith in God and trust in all fellow men. This symphony was premiered in a broadcast by the BBC Philharmonic under Adrian Leaper in 1995. Unlike its predecessors, it displays striking dissonances and it is a compelling piece. Arnell worked on his Seventh Symphony which he called 'M' Symphony no. 7, for President Mandela.

Tony taught composition at Trinity College London from 1947 to 1987. He lived in France for a while.

Sadly, although I have all of his six string quartets. I only know two of them, the last four of which have all been premiered at the Cheltenham Festival, as was the String Quintet, which made its appearance in 1950. The Quartet no. 3, Op. 41, was written in New York in 1945 and its heart is its beautifully integrated slow movement. The Quartet no. 5, Op. 99, dates from 1962 and has been very well received at all its performances. As with the Symphony no. 6, there are some harsh dissonances and it has a novelty of form. The opening Andante maestoso is a canon on four subjects; there is a very attractive Andante, an accompanied cello solo, a duo for violin and viola, a trio and then all four players unite to conclude the work.

There are many other fine works; an exciting Piano Concerto, op. 44, dating from his American years, and a second, Op. 110, entitled Sections written for John Ogdon and to commemorate the twenty-first birthday of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and first performed by Ogdon and the RPO under the composer at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon on 16 September 1967, a day after Tony's fiftieth birthday. There is the popular Serenade, Op. 57, for ten wind instruments and double bass recorded by Karl Haas and the London Baroque Ensemble on a Pye record, and Nicholas Jackson recorded the organ music for RCA.

His tone poem Lord Byron enjoyed some success. He composed four ballets Punch and the Child, Harlequin in April, The Great Detective, The Angels, two chamber operas Moonflowers and Love in Transit and there is a puppet opera The Petrified Princess.

Since this article was first written in June 1996 for the BMS to publish in celebration of Tony's 80th birthday, Robert Simpson and Sir Michael Tippett, leading British symphonists, have both died. There is, therefore, an even stronger claim to present Richard Arnell as our greatest symphonist.

There are two piano sonatas, two organ sonatas, a piano trio, a piano quintet, an oboe quintet, a brass quintet and a horn quintet. He also wrote a curious piece Ode to Beecham.

A leading British composer recently told me that Arnell's symphonies were more substantial than those of Malcolm Arnold; more approachable than either those by Robert Simpson or Tippett; more melodic and far better structured than those by George Lloyd, and that they possess a wonderful colour not found in the symphonies of Edmund Rubbra.

Tony had a life full of romances and marriages. . He insisted and made known that all this personal information be not published or made known in any way while he was alive or after his death. Since his death in a Musicians Benevolent Home in Bromley on 10 April 2009 at least two writers on music have violated his wishes and published such details... one being Lewis Foreman and the other one is Paul Jackson of Winchester. This is utterly despicable and tells us something about these writers.

These two writers also said that the BBC had ignored Tony's music during a certain period of years and I sent them evidence of broadcasts during that time with cuttings from the Radio Times.

Tony was a personal friend and he should be remembered for his services to music and, especially, his fine symphonies.

His symphonies, Piano Concerto no 1, Violin Concerto, ballets and string quartets are all available on CD

[\(See CD review of his string quartets on this site\)](#)

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