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five years of BASBWE*

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Kevin Thompson

# MALCOLM ARNOLD

Dr. Kevin Thompson, then editor of the **BASBWE** Journal, interviewed Malcolm Arnold for the magazine in 1984. Celebrating the life and work of one of England's finest composers, we reprint the interview with permission from Dr Thompson.

**Your scores, like those of your former teacher and mentor at the Royal College of Music, Gordon Jacob, display a mastery of orchestral technique. How influential was Gordon Jacob in respect to the compositional style you evolved.**

From my experience playing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC, I learnt more than I could have imbibed from anyone. But of course Gordon Jacob was a remarkably fine and influential teacher, so much so he ought to have been a university professor. I have a great admiration for him and it is right that the quality of his music is recognised. I recall him once saying "if you write twelve-tone music, my boy, everything will be a passacaglia or a chaconne". When I use the twelve-tone scale I do so to establish tonality, to give an establishment of key. Schoenberg would regard that as sacrilege and must be turning in his grave.

**During your college days was it your ambition to become a trumpeter, a composer or to combine the two roles?**

I took up the trumpet to emulate Louis Armstrong and to play jazz, but I became a straight player. It was as a trumpeter that I won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music though I had three first studies: trumpet with Ernest Hall, composition with Gordon Jacob and conducting with Constant Lambert, with piano as second study. I never thought I would be fortunate enough to devote myself wholly to composition. I have been very lucky.

**Patently, professional orchestral experience with the LPO and BBC has enabled you to write with a special empathy for the players; to write, as it were, from the inside.**

That is exactly what I try to do whatever the combination of instruments or medium, be it chamber or orchestral music. If I have an affinity with just one medium I suppose it is the large symphony orchestra, though I enjoy writing for small chamber ensembles. People compliment me on my writing for wind though I feel I write equally well for strings, brass and percussion. Now I have proved myself as egocentric as all composers.

**Speaking of other composers, the influence of Sibelius is apparent in your early symphonies. Are there others whom you would regard as formative?**

Hearing again *Larch Trees*, of which I recently attended the first modern performance (it was written in 1943) I realise the influence of Sibelius on my early works is especially marked. Other formative influences include Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Berlioz in my orchestration and melody and Sir William Walton, whose music I greatly admire, with whom I regularly corresponded.

**It was the recording of your overture *Beckus the Dandipratt* by the LPO in 1947, with you in the first trumpet chair, that your first break as a composer came. Was part of the decision to record the overture a vain attempt to hold you in the orchestra?**

The orchestra did try, so much so that the managing director and secretary Eric Bravington used to allow me to take time off to write documentary film scores and to return when I had completed them. That was an immensely kind attitude as the orchestra was self-governing.

**In retrospect then, how significant was that recording in your career?**

It was a tremendous step especially since the conductor was Eduard van Beinum, a man whom we admired and who subsequently became principal conductor of both the LPO and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam.

**So you were earning a living by playing and earning acclaim as a young composer. From there how were you able to break into the world of film making?**

I sent scores – as a matter of fact *Larch Trees* and some chamber music – to Muir Mathieson who simply did not bother to look at them, though John Hollingsworth, Sir Malcolm Sargent's protégé did, and it was Hollingsworth who gave me my first break in the film world.

**Along with other British composers – Bliss, Walton and Vaughan Williams – you have proved yourself equally at home in the concert hall and the cinema. How many film scores have you written?**

I think there were 115 film scores at the last count.

**For the score of *Inn of the Sixth Happiness* you were awarded the Ivor Novello Award and for the score of David Lean's film *Bridge on the River Kwai*, in which you drew on Kenneth Alford's march *Colonel Bogey*, you won an Oscar. What would you say was the special appeal of that march?**

In both World Wars the march was invariably sung to dirty words, which was one of the reasons I used it in the film, the idea of cocking a snook at the Japanese. Apparently the opening strains of the melody – in particular the descending minor third passage – came to Major F. J. Ricketts (Kenneth Alford



# IN CONVERSATION

was his pen name) whilst playing golf in Scotland. He whistled the interval to catch a fellow golfer's attention and had the idea of using it in a march. It was his companion who suggested that he used the golf term "bogey" in its title. I wrote a counter melody which became a hit in France where it was scored without any of the original Alford material and words were added. Alford's widow, who was living in South Africa at the time of the film's release, thought she had won the football pools when the Performing Right royalties began to accrue.

***I think it was Jack Warner who said that "films are fantasy and fantasy needs music", but there are times when they can be over scored?***

Yes, there are. Generally there is not enough silence in films. The Americans have far too much music in their films. They absolutely plaster them with music because they want to sell a hit tune. I gave up writing film scores ten or twelve years ago when what was wanted was a hit tune rather than a score, and although I have written jazz I regarded myself as a 'serious' composer.

***Before leaving the subject of your film scores, I have always been intrigued by the evocative instrumentation you used in Whistle Down the Wind. What was the line-up?***

Three piccolos, Sir Richard Attenborough whistling, a harmonium, a string quartet, a harp, a celesta and three percussion. I gave the autograph score to Sir John Trevelyan, formerly secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, because he was so taken with the music. It was he who said it was the finest film score he had ever heard and, coming from a man who in the course of his job had seen hundreds of films and heard as many film scores each year, that was

quite a compliment. I am sure he kept the score.

***You will hardly admit, I know, to finding writing easy but the spontaneity of your music would seem to suggest that you write quickly. Would that assumption be correct?***

I have always written quickly, mainly because I find it such a great strain. The entire 45 minute score of *Bridge on the River Kwai* was written in just ten days, and working round the clock, I scored another film over the period of single weekend.

***In Britain in the fifties the English, Scottish and later the Cornish Dances became something of a convention. It was you, was it not, who established that genre of light, original symphonic pieces?***

Yes though I have to say that to an extent they were modelled on Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, all of which are original tunes with not a single folk song amongst them.

***The ballets - in particular Homage to the Queen (1953) and Solitaire (1956) - have enjoyed enviable acclaim. Is their success due in some measure to the strong rhythmic impetus of your music?***

Indeed, the basis of British music of the last decade has been its lack of rhythm. One of the reasons Stravinsky is considered a great composer is that he served his apprenticeship writing ballet music in which rhythm is all important.

***A feature of your scoring is the 'Arnold brightness' adding to double wind an extra flute and trumpet, but to what extent does the very stuff of the composition arise out of the media for***

***which you write?***

It arises almost entirely from the sounds of the instruments either in combination with other instruments or separately. I am reminded of Constant Lambert who once remarked, "when I sit at the piano, everything sounds like Grieg," to which came the reply "then you're very lucky, Mr Lambert". I never write at the piano; I rely on my inner ear and sense of relative pitch.

***If, as you have suggested, your works are conceived in terms of particular instrumental combinations and timbre, by what criteria do you allow transcriptions?***

I do not allow people to transcribe my music unless they are first class arrangers. I have a great respect for the wind band arrangements of the American, John Paynter and for the way Gary Howarth scores for brass. He is the best brass arranger of them all and his virtuoso arrangement of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the most skilled piece of brass writing I have ever heard.

***You have written several works for brass band and yet to date only two for military band. Is then your predilection for the all-brass combination?***

You are quite right, there are only two original works for military band: *HRH The Duke of Cambridge* and another march called *Overseas* which I wrote for the Second British Exhibition in New York. In addition there is the *Trevelyan Suite* for three flutes and two each of oboes, clarinets, horns and bassoons, and the *Water Music* which was dedicated to the National Trust and written for the opening of the Stratford Canal in July 1964. However, for open air performances the brass band is more

satisfactory than the wind band, and, in my opinion, it is just as flexible. Nowadays, there are soprano cornet players capable of playing things that an Eb clarinet could not even attempt. To answer your question directly, I have to say my preference is for the brass band and qualify that statement by saying, when correctly written for. In Victorian times they used to write for it so that practically everything was doubled in case players did not turn up. As a result many of those old scores sound thick and heavy. Yet if the brass band is written for with discrimination, as it so often is these days by proper musicians, then it sounds fuller. Consequently being thinner it sounds fatter!

Of all my brass and band pieces, it is *Padstow Lifeboat* which I like best. The two *Little Suites* which are quite different from the two *Little Suites* for orchestra though people think they are arrangements – are, so I have been told, rewarding to play. The first Suite was commissioned by the National Youth Brass Band of Scotland in 1963, the second Suite written for the Cornish Youth Band in 1967.

**Your music abounds in singable tunes and repetition is also an important feature. When writing do you make a conscious attempt to ease-in the listener?**

I could not think of a better compliment than to say that “my music abounds in singable tunes”. I try to discard so-called development; instead, while not quite like Wagner, make continuous melody. I like to pare down the form to its utmost minimum. Sometimes I have succeeded. The tunes come on their own; how they come I simply do not know, but I hardly think a piece of music is worth writing unless there is something about it that strikes you emotionally or interests you intellectually within the first few moments.

**Yours is certainly an essentially diatonic, tuneful music. How then, to ask a two-part question, do you view contemporary trends, and which of present-day composers do you admire?**

I like the music of Richard Rodney Bennett though there is not a great deal of melody there. He is a relatively young man so I suppose he will come round to writing more tunes one day.

As for *avant garde* music, it was all the rage when I was a young man. Nowadays it is old hat whereas my music is considered new hat.

**So what of the future?**

I have a symphony and string quartet on the stocks. A book *The Music of Malcolm Arnold* written by Alan Poulton is to be published by Faber at the end of the year.

**And do you harbour any unfulfilled compositional ambitions?**

Hardly, writing music is a lifetime's sentence with hard labour.

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