

ARTHUR BLISS (1891 - 1975)

Clarinet Quintet (1932)

Moderato Allegro molto Adagietto espressivo Allegro energico

"I have always found it easier to write 'dramatic' music than 'pure' music", says Arthur Bliss in his autobiography. "I need what Henry James termed a *trouvaille* or a *donnée*."

This is revealing. He was referring specifically to his *Colour Symphony*; but what he says has a much wider application, namely that his music should have some aesthetic necessity for existing, other than the mere fact that it does. He meant more than merely external stimuli, such as the artistry of an exceptional soloist, or some fine work of poetry, both of which have been sources of inspiration to him; he meant something altogether deeper, that creative volition, that spiritual aspiration underlying a composition, which can not only motivate the composer in the first place but can also decide how his work is to be received by the listener. The creative impulse underlying Bliss's *Clarinet Quintet* lies in the deep trauma and poignant loss of the First World War. The nightmare of

the trenches was both a collective horror, from which no one was immune, and a personal tragedy, since Bliss's younger brother Kennard was killed at the Somme in 1916. This loss of his brother, who was a gifted clarinettist, affected the composer most deeply for many years afterwards. It found immediate expression in some small pieces (*Pastoral* for clarinet and piano, 1916, and *Elegy* for piano, 1925); but it was with two large-scale works, in which he tried to give the fullest expression to such a timeless theme as human suffering and war, that Bliss sought by his art to sublimate and externalise something of this universal tragedy. Both were written more than ten years after the war was over. One was public, *Morning Heroes*, 1930; the other was more private, the *Clarinet Quintet*, 1932.

Writing so long after the event, Bliss could view its true nature with objectivity and serenity. The centre of gravity of the *Clarinet Quintet* lies in the slow movement,

which is a tranquil elegy (*Adagietto*). The sorrow of death is real and intense, but it is gradually transformed into another sort of quietness, that of acceptance of the mystery beyond death. The downward movement of the intervals of the main theme become the upward movement of the quicker, more assertive middle section. By the recapitulation a poise is reached; both ideas coexist; the slow-moving theme contains within it the rhythmic movement and variety already present from the earlier movements. The music ends on the major tonality of B, which leads directly into the E major dance of the finale. Indeed the spirit of the dance is never far below the

surface of the music throughout the work. Each movement uses a triple metre, in various guises. The first movement opens with a solo cantilena for the clarinet into which the strings steal one at a time, forming a web of melodic counterpoint, and within which are contained the motifs round which the movement is developed. The dramatic rhythms, dissonances and fanfare figurations which open and close the scherzo have a distinctly martial feel to them, heightened by the poignant violin melody of the middle section. Following the lament of the slow movement, and resolving it, the brilliant finale completes the emotional transformation.

ALAN RAWSTHORNE (1905 - 1971)

Clarinet Quartet (1946)

Moderato Poco lento Allegro risoluto - Andante teneramente

The immediate post-war years were productive for Rawsthorne. The essential direction towards which his style was tending had already been established in the late 30s with such works as *Theme and Variations* (1937), *Symphonic Studies* (1938),

and the *Piano Concerto No.1* (1939). Moreover his years in the army, though frustrating, were not entirely cut off from music: he wrote incidental music for some films (*Kubla Khan*, *Radio News Reel*, *Burma Victory*), he conducted his music

occasionally, he had commissions for two overtures (*Street Corner*, 1944, *Cortège*, 1945); so after 1945 he was able to pick up the thread of his composition again without delay. He lost no time in reasserting his previous style, with such achievements as the *Clarinet Quartet*, 1946, the *Oboe Concerto*, 1947, and the *Cello Sonata*, 1948.

Certain facts are clear. First, all the works are instrumental. Although his total output does contain some songs and vocal music - including the exquisite little carol *The Oxen*, to words by Thomas Hardy - words acted as a limitation to his melodic and textural invention. It is in the instrumental music that his style reaches the fullest and most characteristic fulfilment. Moreover his idiom of melodic counterpoint, and extended tonality, seems to find fuller scope in chamber music, where it is concentrated, than in the orchestral works, where it is more diffuse. The ideas are instrumentally derived, and the structures in which he clothes them (symphony, concerto, sonata) are conventional, neoclassical.

Several 20th century trends and fashions were eschewed by Rawsthorne. By identifying and eliminating those factors

which do not apply we can perhaps begin to detect those which do, and to perceive more clearly where his uniqueness lies. Viennese serialism was one; folk song was another - so, surprisingly, was jazz. He was unaffected by the "athematic" and "atonal" trends of the 1950s; he had no place among the aleatoric, static or experimental schools; electronic technology appealed to him not at all.

At the core of his technique lay control of the *materia musica*; at the core of that lay melodic invention. In the case of many works, including the *Clarinet Quartet*, an identifying chord, or matrix, is used from which the melodic ideas and motifs are derived. In this case it is a Stravinskian combination of tonic and dominant, and a juxtaposition of tonal centres a semitone apart, A and B flat - a typical Rawsthorne characteristic. Melodic motifs from this cell make up the work. It appears after an introductory 6-bar clarinet melody, which it abruptly cuts short, and gives rise immediately to a sharply defined dotted rhythm, energetic and pointed, providing the contrasted material for the opening movement.

The melodic material gives prominence to the interval of the minor third; indeed the minor mode prevails throughout the work. This has to do with the 'axis' system of tonal centres whereby each of the three axes - tonic, subdominant, dominant - operates four distinct tonal centres in the circle of perfect fifths. Each of these tonal centres is a minor third apart. Thus arises the somewhat Bartókian flavour of many of Rawsthorne's melodic ideas; it also explains the structural importance of the minor third. Scalic ideas which begin with one tonal inflection finish with another as the centre shifts by a minor third. Thus Rawsthorne discovers new possibilities in the tonal language. The ideas are capable of widely contrasted treatments - sustained lyricism, rhythmic incisiveness, an energetic scherzando - all of which are demonstrated in this work. They are governed by the composer's joy in inventing textures for a

small group of solo instruments.

Whereas in the first movement the matrix is stated in the form of a chord, accented then dying away, in the second movement it is spelt out note by note, and forms a kaleidoscopic accompaniment to the slow lyrical intensity of the clarinet melody - one of Rawsthorne's most successful structures. A short middle section for the string trio, a shade quicker, separates the repetition of the clarinet theme, much shortened on its reappearance. In the third movement the notes of the matrix are hammered out in two 2-bar phrases with the rhythmic urgency of a Bohemian folk dance, or furiant. This is brought to a close with a coda, which is a reprise of the clarinet melody of the opening movement, but with the note-values augmented, and terminated by the spelt out version of the matrix, this time cadential.

FRANCIS ROUTH (1927 -)

Clarinet Quintet (1994)

Vivace Slow Vivace, con moto Allegro Presto

The 1990s began auspiciously for Routh, with the *Concerto for Ensemble III*. In that piece for the first time the wealth and possibilities of the scale of extended tonality (the whole tone scale with the addition of the perfect fourth) were applied to a concerted work, in five short movements, for an ensemble of solo players. It left the composer wanting to continue in similar vein. The *Concerto* had used a group of six instruments, divided into two groups of three: a string trio, and a trio consisting of piano-clarinet-horn. The character of the clarinet was such as to hold the attention equally effectively, if not more, in a work where it was on its own as a solo instrument. The strings were increased from a trio to a quartet. Nothing was to impede or blanket the freedom of the clarinet's wide range of expression and virtuosity. So the *Clarinet Quintet* focuses attention onto the solo writing, and the clarinet throughout is prominent, like a concerto. As a whole, the five movements are a positive affirmation, in

characteristically *energico* style, of the composer's belief in the power of music to express and to celebrate many moods and aspects of human life, optimistic and the reverse, in the late twentieth century. If the chief attention is given to the lyrical slow movement, which is longer than the rest, and more fully developed, the music nevertheless begins and ends on an optimistic note.

The first movement is made up of short expressive motifs; soon a contrasting phrase is heard, derived from the opening motif, and homogeneous with it, though in augmentation. Both ideas are heard twice before the short movement ends abruptly. The rhythmic pulse running through the movement is maintained throughout the work; it sustains even the long lyrical slow movement, which follows next. This movement alone admits of development of the material, largely by means of melodic sequence and repetition. The subdued mood of grief soon resolves. The *Vivace*

which follows reverts to the short phrases of the opening movement, but staccato this time for the clarinet, which is one of the most characteristic features of the instrument; moreover the phrases build up in different metrical lengths (3+ 4 + 5) to a brilliant climax. A more subdued middle section for the strings, *legato, meno f dolce*, with the clarinet phrases interjected, but with the note-order reversed, leads to a repetition of the *Vivace*.

After these rhythmic irregularities, the Minuet and its attendant Trio is self

explanatory. It leads to the final movement of the suite, a headlong *Presto*, with the strings in unison, *f*, and with contrasted chords, *p*. There is a suggestion of darker forces beneath the surface, in the subsidiary clarinet melody which peeps out briefly; but this is not allowed to develop before the *Presto* material reasserts itself to close the work on an optimistic note.

The Quintet was written for Nicholas Cox, the principal clarinet of the Redcliffe Ensemble.

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