

17 The symphony in Britain: guardianship and renewal

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The story of the symphony in Britain, as the reception and embodiment of musical ideology, as a culture of performance and performance institutions, and as a compositional genre cultivated by native composers, can be read as one of the most stirring narratives in music history. A nation widely regarded in the nineteenth century as ‘Das Land ohne Musik’¹ (and by logical extension ‘Das Land ohne Symphonien’, given the centrality of that genre to the dominant Germanic musical culture of the day) in the first half of the twentieth century went from the lowly status of poor dependent of a rich German symphonic tradition, to becoming arguably the most important guardian of that inheritance. It preserved and polished the canonic family heirlooms in performance (including broadcasting and recording), acted as a gatekeeper for which new composers and works should join that canon (for example Sibelius) and contributed treasures to the collection with its own original works.² Indeed, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, Britain maintained an almost unique fidelity to the symphony as a living genre, to the extent that, more than in any other leading musical nation, a significant number of its composers of international stature continued to make important contributions to the genre. The conversion – there seems hardly any other word for it – to the cause of former modernist *enfant terrible* Peter Maxwell Davies, the composer of eight symphonies to date, is only the most obvious sign of this phenomenon; the enormous popular success of Anthony Payne’s speculative completion of Elgar’s Third Symphony (1997) is another.³ And reviewing the twentieth century, the sheer number of symphonies written in Britain during this period, most notably (for quality, quantity, or both) those by Elgar (two), Vaughan Williams (nine), Bax (seven), Bantock (three), Havergal Brian (an astonishing thirty-two), Walton (two), Rubbra (eleven), Britten (four), Tippett (four), Rawsthorne (three), Alwyn (five), Arnold (nine), Simpson (eleven), George Lloyd (twelve) – the list could go on – is extremely impressive.⁴

Of course, the British fascination with the symphony can be seen to tell a less stirring story: one in which such fidelity reflects in fact precisely the inability of British music to emancipate itself from foreign dominance and nineteenth-century musical values. In this account the symphony represents a continued dependence on Germanic tradition and the cult of

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absolute music, and an inherent conservatism and resistance to modernism, which in the later 1950s and the 1960s, as the generation of Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle embraced the *avant-garde*, became a continuing rearguard action against the new.⁵ There is certainly some truth to this alternative reading – despite the caution with which we should now approach such potentially simplistic dualities as conservative versus modernist. But the British twentieth-century symphony encompassed an extraordinarily wide range of styles and approaches. The period after 1945 was especially rich, yielding the neo-romanticism of George Lloyd's symphonies, the orchestra and tape collage of Roberto Gerhard's *Second* (1960), the Caribbean steel-band sounds of Malcolm Arnold's *Fourth* (1960) and the postmodernist juxtaposition of Beethoven and the blues in Tippett's *Third* (1972), to take just a few examples. Indeed, the question of genre – of what, beyond a title, really constitutes a symphony in the twentieth century – became as acute in Britain as anywhere else; like their contemporaries elsewhere, some British composers played fast and loose with the term, or hedged their bets with compound titles, or less portentous terms such as 'sinfonietta'. Nevertheless, as we shall see, an influential strand in composition and criticism attempted to define and maintain a more rigorous and in many respects more conservative standard.⁶

Whatever the debate over the actual degree of native distinctiveness in the British symphonic achievement, or its ultimate value, certain questions must be posed. Why and how did Britain maintain this enduring fascination with the symphony? In the compositional realm, what did British composers take from the tradition they inherited, and what new contributions did they bring to it? What impact, if any, did they have outside their own country? Rather than attempting a survey that could only be superficial in a chapter of this length, I will focus here on a few major themes, composers and critical historical junctures: other choices could be made, and different stories told, no doubt. Although reception through performance and criticism will certainly play an important role in this account, my primary focus will be on composition; in a genre which relatively early on established intertextual reference as part of its tradition, composition is at one level the most important and most enduring kind of reception. An emphasis on composition will inevitably place most weight on the period since *c.* 1880, but of course one must begin at the beginning.

International clearing-house

The commercial wealth, relative social openness and cosmopolitanism of eighteenth-century Britain ensured that the emerging genre of the

symphony would find a ready market there, at least in London. Indigenous symphonic composition, however, got off to a slow start, and the few native pioneers, such as Thomas Erskine, Earl of Kelly (1732–81), J. A. Fisher (1744–1806) and John Marsh (1752–1828), were overshadowed by émigré colleagues, most notably C. F. Abel and J. C. Bach, and, of course, Haydn, whose twelve symphonies for the impresario Salomon constitute Britain's most enduring, albeit indirect, contribution to the early history of the genre.⁷ To this may be added the Royal Philharmonic Society's commission in 1822 of what eventually turned out to be Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven, of course, loomed large across the nineteenth century (and the twentieth, as we shall see), but in many ways more as moral exemplar – gratification-deferring narratives of growth and disciplined triumph over adversity resonated throughout bourgeois Europe and America – than direct musical model. For the latter, British composers were more likely to turn to Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, and later Mendelssohn and Schumann. Although Jurgen Schaarwächter has argued that the leading figures of mid century, Cipriani Potter (1792–1871) and William Sterndale Bennett (1816–75), demonstrated more individuality and independence from German models than has generally been assumed, the nineteenth-century British symphony for the most part rarely strays from continental mores, and relatively conservative ones at that.⁸

This remains largely true even as we approach the twentieth century and the first phase of the so-called English Musical Renaissance. Though the concept requires the careful interrogation that it has recently begun to receive, there was certainly a tremendous upsurge of musical activity during this period, and this affected the symphony as much as any other domain. Most importantly for the symphony, there was a sharp improvement in opportunities for orchestral performance. This was especially marked in London; the capital had for some time lagged well behind the provinces, notably in failing to sustain a stable orchestra to rival an ensemble such as the Hallé in Manchester, and thus failing to fulfil its early promise as a major centre for the nurturing of the genre. The introduction of the Henry Wood Promenade concerts at the Queen's Hall in 1895 confirmed the emergence of orchestral music as a legitimate and established genre in modern British concert life, a status which it had struggled to attain during the course of the nineteenth century, not least against the enduring grip of the oratorio tradition founded by Handel.⁹ Although orchestral conditions in London still lagged behind those of most continental centres, it is no doubt hardly coincidental that there was an upsurge in symphonic composition in Britain during this period, at a time when the symphony, as opposed to the symphonic poem and other

orchestral genres, was already beginning to wane in its central European heartland. Yet despite this profusion of new works, the symphonies of Charles Stanford (1852–1924) and Hubert Parry (1848–1918), and now lesser-known contemporaries such as Frederic Cowen (1852–1935) and Alexander Mackenzie (1847–1935), remain firmly in the mould of Schumann, Brahms and at times Dvořák. The last of these offered some guidance in the incorporation of nationalistic and folkloristic elements, as featured in Cowen's justly admired 'Scandinavian' Symphony of 1880, or Stanford's 'Irish' Symphony of 1887; as in other countries, such locally or exotically inflected interpretations of an essentially German genre became common during this period. Yet Tchaikovsky and Wagner, who were popular with audiences and became mainstays of the Wood Promenade programmes, had little impact on British orchestral music until Elgar around the turn of the century.¹⁰ It is striking, too, that the most recent German symphonists outside the Brahms camp, Bruckner and Mahler, were largely dismissed in Britain (certainly by critics, who were extremely conservative for the most part), effectively choking off the German symphonic tradition in the mid-1880s with Brahms's last symphonies.¹¹ Richard Strauss was harder to ignore, but as the acknowledged specialist of the 'inferior' genre of the programmatic symphonic poem, he was treated with considerable suspicion.

Resistance to the more 'progressive' stream of German music was of course part of broader debates about the future of music in general, and in particular the future of absolute music, which nineteenth-century concert life had come so to venerate. This involved, in turn, profound and culturally resonant issues of the proper relationships of intellect, emotion, and sensation and sensuality in music (the colouristic possibilities of the late Romantic orchestra made the latter element especially contentious), and the question of whether the classical symphonic legacy should become primarily a museum of masterworks or a living tradition (evincing a split between custodial performance and creative innovation). As their preferred models suggest, British composers and critics in the last two decades of the nineteenth century favoured a conception of the symphony that emphasised clarity of form, thematic integration, a sense of expressive restraint and control, and a robust diatonicism – all in the service of an idealistic goal of moral improvement.

Not surprisingly, in this great age of empire, racial theorising and growing Anglo-Saxon pre-eminence on the world stage, some saw issues of national and racial character at stake in the history and future of music and the symphony. Hubert Parry, writing on the growth of the symphony in the first edition of Grove's great dictionary, opined that 'the development of pure abstract instrumental music seems almost to have been the

monopoly of the German race', and while the programme symphony 'might perhaps be fairly regarded as the Celtic counterpart of the essentially Teutonic form of art', in reality it was 'scarcely even an offshoot of the old symphonic stem'.¹² Given the sense of close Anglo-German racial kinship that still obtained during this period, the inference could be drawn that Anglo-Saxon composers, unlike their French or Italian counterparts, were likewise well-suited to take on the challenges of the genre. The American composer Horatio Parker, professor at Yale and teacher of Charles Ives, whose own works enjoyed considerable success in Britain around the turn of the century, went further, and also saw transnational implications:

I have great hopes for English music . . . The Germans and French have made enormous strides in recent years, but I am not sure that they are in a direction in which [the] Anglo-Saxon need strive to follow. I hope for a powerful school of Anglo-Saxon music in time – less subjective and nerve-racking than that of Continental races, more broad, reserved and self-contained, with a larger respect for that economy of resource which characterizes all true artistry, and I hope that Americans may bear their part in the development of this school.¹³

Though Parker does not mention the symphony specifically (and wrote only one of his own), his extolling of an abstract, reserved and economical musical aesthetic aligns closely with the symphonic approach of most of his British contemporaries. As we shall see, these transatlantic Anglo-Saxon affinities would have implications for mid-twentieth-century symphonic developments.

Not all were so sure, however, that a manly musical Anglo-Saxonism (notions of self-possessed masculinity were central to this racial discourse), based on the more sober strands of German composition, was the right direction for British music. As a new century dawned, more experimental traits began to develop, and a split opened up between the conservatively Teutonic Royal College of Music and the relatively cosmopolitan Royal Academy of Music. The latter was more open to Russian, French, and other non-German music, and to the symphonic poem and programme symphony; RAM products such as Josef Holbrooke and Granville Bantock produced innovative programme symphonies in the first decade of the century, breaking sharply with the prevailing mould. Indeed, questions were beginning to be raised about the creative fruits of the largely RCM-led Renaissance, and in a time of increasing geopolitical competition with Germany, it was disappointing that the works of Parry, Stanford and other luminaries of the movement had failed to make a lasting impact on the continent. When in 1905 Sir Edward Elgar declared that 'English music is white, and *evades everything*', he hit a nerve.¹⁴

Passing the torch

It was Elgar, in fact, who three years earlier had finally stormed the German citadel, as it were, with the triumphant Düsseldorf performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*, and Richard Strauss's famous encomium to the British composer, hailing him as the 'first English progressivist'¹⁵ – Elgar's remarks therefore carried particular weight. Yet the work in question was an oratorio, by then an English speciality, and there remained a sense that for British music truly to come of age, it had to beat the Germans at their own game, as it were, the symphony (even if most modern German composers, Strauss included, had turned away from it). Elgar duly obliged, with the premiere in Manchester in December 1908 of his Symphony No. 1, which became an extraordinary worldwide success and the first really decisive landmark in the history of the British symphony. A London premiere followed within a few days, and tumultuous public acclaim led to hastily-arranged additional performances; the Symphony was even included in a free concert at the Harrod's department store.¹⁶ It was quickly taken up across the United States; the conductor of the New York premiere, Walter Damrosch, who a few years earlier had urged Elgar to write a symphony (Elgar was 'the only man living who could do it' – a telling indication of how pessimistically some viewed the state of the genre), described the slow movement as the greatest orchestral Adagio since Beethoven.¹⁷ Artur Nikisch, who conducted the Symphony in Leipzig, ranked it with the best of Beethoven and Brahms, and even dubbed it 'the fifth of Brahms';¹⁸ it was warmly received also in Vienna and St Petersburg. Yet Nikisch's remark, though it would have fitted symphonies by Parry or Stanford well enough, seems to miss the mark with Elgar by a wide margin, not least in the dazzling orchestral rhetoric of the work, indebted as much to Wagner, Berlioz and Strauss (and even lighter French composers) as to Brahms. Samuel Langford, reviewing the premiere in the *Manchester Guardian*, surely came closer, in saying that '[Elgar] has refertilised the symphonic form by infusing into it the best ideas that could be gathered from the practice of the writers of symphonic poems' (a genre to which Elgar himself had contributed).¹⁹ Despite its outwardly conservative four-movement plan, recent commentators have viewed the work as an extraordinarily original response to symphonic tradition (not least in the unusual tonal and formal scheme of the first movement, where there is even some disagreement over the key of the main portion of the movement),²⁰ and as a piece riven by the contradictions of incipient musical modernism. Edwardian audiences were nevertheless struck primarily by a sense of power and mastery, and responded enthusiastically, and with national pride, to the message of 'a massive hope for the future' which was as far as Elgar would go in identifying any programmatic content. In terms of rivalry

with Germany, it was surely appropriate, if arrived at largely circumstantially, that the satirical magazine *Punch* should tie the success of the Symphony in with a current scare over British naval vulnerability to a growing German navy.²¹

Yet in the same way that Elgar's climaxes seem to be disintegrating even as they attain their summit (James Hepokoski's astute observation),²² Elgar's triumph, and with it an established place for British symphonic composition on the international stage, was short-lived (at least for now), as the whole symphonic tradition that he so brilliantly embraced, and the institutional performance culture that sustained it, came under increasing strain.²³ Just a few weeks into 1909 the first performance of Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2 announced his momentous break with tonality. Elgar's Second Symphony was premiered less than a week after the death of Mahler (who had conducted the First Symphony in New York) in 1911, but failed to capture the public imagination in the same way as its predecessor. The last major landmark of the British symphony to appear before the First World War was a work that seemed more in tune with the swiftly changing social and artistic ethos. Vaughan Williams's *A London Symphony*, premiered in London on 27 March 1914, was immediately acclaimed, although wider success would be delayed until after the War. His first work in the genre, the Whitman-based choral *A Sea Symphony*, had been premiered in 1910; moving beyond its predecessor's generalised spiritual quest, *A London Symphony* offered a more obviously modernist engagement (indebted to another dimension of Whitman) with the metropolis, the nation, and by implication the largest empire in the world. It attempted ambitiously to forge a sense of historical and spatial totality in a vision largely untouched by Elgar's nostalgic autobiography, in the process drawing on popular and folk music, modern French models and even Stravinsky. Vaughan Williams's voice is more obviously communal than personal, in a unique work, which although not as fully realised as Elgar's symphonies, was ultimately more original, and more nationalistically distinctive; indeed, the quiet Epilogue would turn out to be something of an English symphonic trademark.²⁴ Yet the Epilogue, in taking the doubt and disintegration confronted (more explicitly than in Elgar) throughout the work and dissolving it into mystical oblivion, seems now darkly prophetic of the events that would shortly rock the fundamental assumptions both of Western civilisation and the symphonic tradition itself.

Ashes to ashes

The First World War called into question, and to some decisively repudiated, all optimistic narratives of human progress, and to the more

extreme pessimists, notions of traditionally coherent and authentic personal expression across the arts. Given the symphony's close association with such narratives of individual and communal selfhood, it came under particular pressure. Added to that was the growing impact, or at least wider dissemination, of pre-war modernist challenges to tonality and formal continuity – the foundations of the symphony – particularly in the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In continental Europe, through a variety of factors addressed by David Fanning in Chapter 5, the symphony would prove to be to all intents and purposes moribund as a continuous living tradition: only in the Anglo-Saxon world, in Scandinavia and in the Soviet Union, would it find significant new life. In social and political terms, Britain, though certainly plagued by economic problems, was the least affected of any major musical nation by the kind of radical upheavals experienced elsewhere during the inter-war 'long weekend' of the 1920s and 1930s, and so it is perhaps no surprise that symphonic narrative continued to make more sense than in most other places.

Yet even in Britain a clear sense of direction was slow to emerge in the 1920s and even beyond. Numerous symphonies were written, adding new voices and styles to the already significant diversity of the pre-war period, but few seemed more than ad hoc solutions: with some notable exceptions, the symphonies of the inter-war years were a mixed bag, and offered many false dawns. Matters were complicated by broader questions over the cultivation of a distinctively British (or at least English) national musical style: was this a good thing, and if so, what should it, or did it, comprise? For many people the emerging leader of British music was Vaughan Williams; but the contemplative and folksong-inflected pastoral ethos that was the most prominent and influential strand of his music in the early 1920s seemed ill-suited to traditional symphonic dialectic. Indeed, when his third work in the genre, *A Pastoral Symphony*, appeared, it constituted for some almost an anti-symphony.²⁵ This work also raised a central question for the symphony anywhere in the post-war era (one which had begun to rear its head even in the decade before 1914): to what degree could the genre be separated from the tonal system, and the attendant phrase structures, thematic rhetoric and developmental protocols that had underpinned its evolution? In Vaughan Williams's case this question turned not only on his folksong-derived melodic materials, but also the attenuated cadential drives of his modal harmonic materials, influenced by Debussy and Ravel. In retrospect it has been possible to discern in this work cogent and original musical argument rather than the rambling rumination emphasised in contemporary responses; yet the inconclusive ending, with a wordless soprano suspended in space, as it were, was in certain respects more subversive of established generic

precepts than any ending in Mahler or Sibelius: it certainly did not offer an obvious model for symphonic progeny. Vaughan Williams himself would not start sketching another symphony until the end of the decade – the longest symphonic hiatus in his career. The refusal of the other leading composer of the early 1920s, Gustav Holst, to engage in any traditional way with the symphony contributed to the uncertainty.

In the meantime others were trying different paths. For most British composers the major issues of the period were the (very slow) absorption of elements of continental modernism and, given a broad rejection of atonality, how to revivify tonality in the modern age; also at issue was the rise of popular music, especially jazz, and whether this had its place in a symphonic context (the genre had, after all, always included dance elements, and jazz was still viewed primarily in terms of dance). That said, contemporary popular music had little impact on Arnold Bax, who was in many respects the leading British symphonist of the period up to the mid 1930s; he was certainly the most prolific mainstream figure, producing all seven of his symphonies during the inter-war years (Vaughan Williams completed only two between 1918 and 1939). Yet despite in some ways offering an antithesis to Vaughan Williams, favouring a more traditional orchestral rhetoric and lush chromaticism, based in part on pre-1914 Russian models, Bax was seen by many – and continues to be seen, despite efforts at reclamation – to be too prone to rhapsodic construction for a place in the symphonic pantheon.²⁶ At least in his symphonies of the 1920s; by the 1930s, however, Bax, like many of his contemporaries, was attempting to emulate a more rigorous model – Sibelius, to whom we shall need to turn in more detail shortly.

By this time a number of enormously important developments had taken place in the infrastructure of musical dissemination and appreciation, and while these were enjoyed virtually worldwide and thus are not uniquely British, Britain played a leading role in several key areas. Most important were recording and broadcasting, which opened up vast new audiences for classical music, and new ways of listening – repeatedly, in the case of records, something perhaps of special relevance for the demanding genre of the symphony. Vaughan Williams's *A London Symphony* was the first British symphony to be recorded in its entirety, in 1925, and both the Elgar symphonies would follow several years later, conducted by the composer, as part of his extraordinary and to that point unparalleled investment in the new medium. Of even wider impact was the swift expansion in classical music coverage, including contemporary music, by the young BBC, which received a tremendous boost in 1927 when the Corporation took over the Proms series, with the latter's commitment to providing in most years a complete Beethoven cycle, as

well as a good deal of other core symphonic repertory.²⁷ The kind of broader musical culture yearned for by Elgar in his Peyton lectures was becoming a reality.²⁸

It was still rare to hear Mahler or Bruckner in London, despite the efforts of the BBC with more recent music from Central Europe. Sibelius was a quite different matter, however: around 1930 he was coming to be seen not only as the most desirable model for the British symphony, a position he would hold until the 1950s, but also more broadly as the authentic face of musical modernism.²⁹ It was largely under this influence that a number of British composers would begin to converge and engage with the symphony in a more coherent fashion; or at least in a way that engaged directly with the Beethovenian tradition, rather than more diffuse late-Romantic conceptions of the genre. One of the most influential (if idiosyncratic) books of the period, Constant Lambert's 1934 *Music Ho!*, having extolled the virtues of jazz, and questioned the genuine originality and importance of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, proceeded to enthrone Sibelius as the true musical god of the first quarter of the twentieth century – the heir to Beethoven, and a more genuinely radical and modernist figure than any of his contemporaries.³⁰ The British Sibelius cult actually had a long history, going back at least to Bantock (to whom the Finn dedicated his Third Symphony), but now became unusually widespread and intense. At a time when Sibelius was generally out of favour in Germany and the rest of continental Europe, such adulation was rivalled (outside Finland) only in the United States.³¹ Sibelius seemed to offer a way to reclaim the symphony from Romantic excess, offering formal discipline and clarity without the perceived artificiality and emotional detachment of Franco-Russian neo-classicism. On both sides of the Atlantic it can be argued that as with Parry and Parker at the turn of the century, loose conceptions of race once again played a role, in this case drawing on a perceived kinship between certain Anglo-Saxon traits of temperament and a broader Nordic identity (an affinity commonly identified in contemporary racial theorising). Peter Franklin notes that Sibelius was frequently treated as an honorary Briton in terms of character, not least in a sense of emotional restraint and control.³² Such affinities became all the more suggestive as Sibelius's long-mooted Eighth Symphony failed to materialise, and it began to appear that the Seventh, premiered in the mid 1920s, might have been his last (as it indeed turned out to be):³³ with no obvious Scandinavian successor in sight, and the symphony apparently dormant in Germany, the idea that the baton of the mainstream symphonic tradition might pass to a British composer or composers, as it had for a fleeting moment with Elgar, seemed increasingly plausible.

Almost right on cue, December 1934 saw the premiere of a symphony that to many appeared to deliver on this promise, and in decidedly Sibelian terms: Walton's First Symphony was received almost as enthusiastically as Elgar's First. Yet it was a year of mixed portents and omens for the British symphony, open to differing oracular interpretations. By coincidence, Elgar's Third was originally scheduled for inclusion in the same BBC Symphony Orchestra season that unveiled the Walton, but the composer died in February, leaving the work only incompletely sketched; Holst, who died a few months later, had also been at work on a symphony, his first attempt at what seems to have been intended as a relatively traditional approach to the genre; Delius also passed away that year, though without ever having shown any inclination towards the symphony. All of this did nothing to dampen the intense anticipation of the Walton, though heightened expectations seem to have affected the composer, who was unable to complete the Finale in time for the premiere. Yet the performance, of the first three movements only, went ahead anyway, a sign of the importance placed on the creation of a work in this exalted genre by Britain's leading composer of the post-war generation. Walton did produce a finale in time for a performance the following November, and the work went from strength to strength, receiving more performances in its first few years than any British symphony since Elgar's First; a recording was rushed out within less than two months of the first performance of the complete version, underlining the importance both of this Symphony and of the relatively new technological medium.³⁴

Many were led to hail Walton as the new leader of British music, and the conversion of a former *enfant terrible* to the symphony, and in its ideal guise as the pinnacle of seriousness and 'pure' music, added further weight to the epiphany. Walton's Symphony was widely compared to those of Sibelius (and to some degree Beethoven), yet in retrospect the connections, though obvious, seem mostly superficial, for example the long oboe note with concluding flourish which opens the first movement, or the extensive use of pedal notes in the same (although even these do not function in the same way as Sibelius's). One can argue for some sense of gradual revelation of a long-deferred telos in the first movement, confirmed by almost overwhelmingly massive brass writing, but the course of the Symphony as a whole seems less inevitable, and the Finale has disappointed many; it is notable more for its incorporation of popular music elements, in the jazzy fugue that dominates the movement, than for the rather forced Sibelian grandeur of the closing pages, with their apotheosis of first-movement material. In any case, the Symphony (again echoing Elgar's First), proved to be something of a magnificent dead end. Walton himself would not return to the genre for over twenty-five years,

producing in 1960 the fascinating but poorly received Second Symphony (his last, as it turned out).

By the time the complete version of Walton's First appeared, however, another remarkable British work (which Walton thought the greatest symphony since Beethoven)³⁵ had presented a much more disturbing modern response to the Beethovenian symphonic tradition – one which risked making the Walton, and particularly its triumphal conclusion, sound hollow. Vaughan Williams's explosive Fourth Symphony, premiered in April 1935, challenged audiences and critics not just on account of its violent dissonance and rhythmic disjunctions – which though in such stark contrast to his *A Pastoral Symphony* had in fact been brewing for some time in his more recent scores – but for its full-scale engagement with a Beethovenian legacy of orchestral rhetoric and thematic development that he had avoided in most of his mature music. Most troubling of all, it presents a bleakly parodistic and disturbing encounter with that legacy, twisting formal and gestural elements of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth symphonies in a way that seems to repudiate the *per aspera ad astra* plot archetype of these works (an archetype audaciously reinvented in Walton's First): rather than contemplatively withdraw from such aspirations, as in his previous symphony, Vaughan Williams now confronted them head on, with a ferocious irony in places that rivals that of Shostakovich. The work has always been something of an enigma, apparently even to its own composer, and attempts to explain its towering anger in terms of the First World War, the state of contemporary Europe or frustrations in Vaughan Williams's personal life, are inevitably and damagingly reductive (though all probably played a part, the war in particular).³⁶ They have also distracted attention from the work's more purely musical achievement, which represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt of the period in any country to integrate atonal (or at least anti-tonal) elements into the traditional thematic and formal procedures of the symphony, partly through the manipulation of tightly constructed melodic cells. The composer's widow claimed that the work sprang from reading a review of a modernist orchestral piece by another composer, and at one level it may be viewed as a barbed commentary on developments in contemporary music.³⁷

Vaughan Williams's Fourth owed little, if anything, to Sibelius, but his serene Fifth, begun in 1938 but not completed until 1943, is dedicated to the Finn and bears definite traces of his influence; it joins the later symphonies of Bax, Walton's First and E. J. Moeran's G minor symphony of 1939 as one of the most important monuments to the Sibelius cult in England. Across the Atlantic, too, Sibelius left his mark on a number of notable symphonies, including Samuel Barber's First, already considered

in Chapter 11, and Roy Harris's Third; both are in one movement, echoing Sibelius's Seventh, a formal model less obviously influential in Britain. But American composers were also attentive to developments in British music. Vaughan Williams's symphonies, beginning with *A London Symphony* in the 1920s, established a strong presence in America, as did those of Bax, a number of which were premiered there. Vaughan Williams's Fourth was particularly successful in the United States, where its accommodation of certain modernist elements into a symphonic context – though not its explicit violence and parody – would prove influential on American symphonists of the 1940s, including figures such as David Diamond and Peter Mennin, now largely neglected. More broadly, the Second World War cemented the sense of Anglo-Saxon affinity, especially in the idea of fighting an heroic battle for freedom and democracy over totalitarianism; it also brought in as ally, albeit relatively briefly, the other great symphonic nation of the era, Russia (brutal totalitarianism in that country notwithstanding).

Yet the most successful British symphony to emerge from the war years and their immediate aftermath, an international success rivalling that of Elgar's First, was not one of triumphant heroism, but a work widely interpreted as portraying, after glimmers of hope in its first movement, only devastation: Vaughan Williams's Sixth Symphony, begun in 1944 and premiered in 1948, ends in a movement of frozen near-paralysis, apparently drained of all life, that many interpreted as representing a post-nuclear abyss (though resisting all explicit programmatic interpretation, the composer himself referred to it privately as 'the Big Three').³⁸ His remaining three symphonies, with the partial exception of the Eighth (1956), are broadly pessimistic; heroism is engaged directly in the seventh of the cycle, *Sinfonia Antartica* (1953), based on his music for the 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*, but in terms only of endurance and stoicism, while the Ninth (1958) is a profoundly ambivalent work involving a programme centred on Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Thus concludes what is still surely the most impressive and wide-ranging symphonic cycle to have been composed by a British composer to date.

Wider still and wider

This is to run ahead a little, however. By the late 1940s a new generation of composers, most notably Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett, had come to the fore.³⁹ Britten was at this time establishing opera as the core of his life's work, and, always wary of anything redolent of the British musical establishment as represented by Vaughan Williams and his

generation, engaged only obliquely with the mainstream symphonic tradition (even when British perception of that mainstream later came to include his beloved Mahler).⁴⁰ Although Tippett was also critical of some trends in British inter-war music, he was not as hostile as Britten to the prevailing climate, and the centrality of Beethoven and the sonata archetype – never congenial for Britten – to his aesthetic seemed to demand involvement with the symphony. He would eventually produce four published works that mark important stylistic junctures in his varied career, and which to some degree epitomise broader concerns of the time.⁴¹ His Symphony No. 1 (1945) attempts with tremendous energy (though not complete success) the difficult task, first tackled by Beethoven in his last period, of combining dualistic sonata conflict with the more monistic, continuous structures of pre-classical music, as in the variations on a ground bass that form the work's slow movement. Over a decade later in his Second Symphony (1957), Tippett tackled a new challenge, that of incorporating in a symphonic context the dramatic ruptures and discontinuities pioneered by Stravinsky, and which from this point on were to shape a broader style-shift in Tippett's music. The Third Symphony (1972) takes this one step further, engaging with directions in post-war continental music: in the first movement the composer conceptualises a dualism between musical archetypes that he characterises as 'arrest' and 'movement', a reaction in part to what he saw as the 'motionless' quality typical of the music of Boulez and other leading figures of the 1950s and 1960s.⁴² But in the Finale of the work he also dramatically confronted the humanistic significance of the symphonic legacy in a post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima world. His own text asks, 'They sang that when she waved her wings / The Goddess Joy would make us one / And did my brother die of frost-bite in the camp / And was my sister charred to cinders in the oven?', and Tippett juxtaposes quotations of the so-called 'horror fanfare' that launches the Finale of Beethoven's Ninth with powerful evocations of the blues genre, and with material from earlier in the Symphony. The Fourth Symphony, which followed six years later, returns to a familiar archetype of symphonic narrative, in the form of a one-movement birth-to-death scenario, beginning and ending with the evocation of human breathing.

Tippett's ambitious and humanistic view of the symphony established him as the natural successor to Vaughan Williams. While most British symphonists of the post-war era did not on the whole attempt to reach so far, Tippett's symphonies do reflect certain broader trends, above all the impetus to bring within the bounds of the genre a wider and wider range of contrasting materials and styles: to build on its history as a metaphor for the exploration, even resolution, of psychological and social contrast or

conflict, as a vehicle for trying to make coherent the increasing fragmentation of post-Enlightenment modernity, which was being pushed to new limits after 1945, in Britain as elsewhere. Though this expansion of symphonic range was paralleled to some degree in other countries, most notably the United States, the extent of Britain's commitment to the genre at this time was essentially unique. Indeed, the 1950s and 1960s constituted the most fertile period of any for the British symphony, in terms of the sheer number of new works produced, and the number of talented younger figures entering the scene: Malcolm Arnold, Alan Rawsthorne, Peter Racine Fricker, Richard Rodney Bennett, Robert Simpson, to name only some of the most prominent. Some of the new names, notably Benjamin Frankel, Egon Wellesz, Franz Reizenstein, Roberto Gerhard, and later Andrzej Panufnik, were émigrés escaping from fascist or communist continental regimes, giving a newly literal dimension to the idea of Britain as a refuge for a central European symphonic tradition neglected by, or driven from, its birthplace.

Of course the commitment to the symphony reflected to some degree the relative conservatism of British music, and the full reach of continental modernism as it was developing at this time, especially electronic music, would not really take hold in Britain until the mid 1960s. Not surprisingly, the two leading young British composers who were receptive to continental trends in the 1950s, Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, did not turn to the symphony at this point (Birtwistle has never done so). Nevertheless, the range of new materials assimilated into the symphony during this period remains impressive. Although a Hindemithian neo-classicism (already evident in Tippett's *First*) was the prevailing style for many, there were a number of attempts to assimilate twelve-tone procedures into a symphonic context (and in a more traditional way than Webern), as in the symphonies of Humphrey Searle, and even, idiosyncratically, in Walton's *Second*; although this at one level challenged the tonal foundations of the genre, twelve-tone techniques lent themselves well to thematic development and transformation, and could even assimilate tonal elements, as Berg had demonstrated soon after the invention of the method. Other currents were also in the air, however, which had to do more with genres and styles than raw musical materials. Mahler had finally started to make a significant impact in Britain,⁴³ along with Shostakovich (both already important to Britten, of course, despite his own ambivalence towards the symphony); Malcolm Arnold's inclusion of popular and light musical styles, including brass-band music, in a number of his symphonies, suggests the influence of both composers, and a continuing expansion of social and political terms of reference. Like a number of his contemporaries, including William Alwyn, Arnold was heavily

involved in writing film music, and several works from this period, most notably Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*, have strong connections to the cinema.

The fact that Vaughan Williams was still composing symphonies in the 1950s helped maintain a sense of continuity with the pre-war scene, even as Britten rose to take the older man's place as the leading figure in British music. But the early 1960s saw genuine upheaval, precipitated in part by the appointment in 1959 of William Glock as BBC Controller of Music. Glock set out to give more prominent coverage to continental (and American) musical modernism, especially music since 1945, than it had received under the previous regime, and a rift developed between the new modernism and an older conservative British consensus, with contemporary tonal music (which by extension still included most recent symphonies) becoming a polemical issue. Many tonal composers felt marginalised by the new regime; though the real extent to which they were deliberately frozen out remains a matter of debate, the perception was real enough, and caused profound distress in a number of cases. Yet in the case of the symphony even the more modernist, primarily atonal, composers, such as Alexander Goehr and Jonathan Harvey, were still contributing to the genre; as noted already in the case of Tippett's Third, a more conceptual, abstract understanding of symphonic principles could allow for use of materials well beyond the bounds of tonal or even twelve-tone procedures. And at the end of the decade, the extraordinary young prodigy Oliver Knussen made a personal approach to the symphony, complete with complex (though hardly old-fashioned) unification, the centre of his early output, which included three symphonies.

It is true that Knussen and Tippett aside, many of these works tended to be one-off experiments with the symphony. But in any case, as it turned out, the perceived modernist institutional hegemony was not the permanent climate-change that it had seemed at the outset. With regard to the symphony, the single most striking sign of change came in the mid 1970s, when Peter Maxwell Davies embarked on writing a symphony, and acknowledged direct influence from none other than Sibelius. That Davies' language in the work was nevertheless uncompromisingly modernist is less important, perhaps, than the willingness to invoke Sibelius, and the fact that he then went on to write seven more works in this genre, the most recent, *Antarctic Symphony* (2001), commissioned to commemorate Vaughan Williams's own Antarctic film score and symphony of 50 years earlier;⁴⁴ indeed Davies' symphonic output as a whole now constitutes one of the most impressive British contributions to the genre. His change of heart was, of course, part of a broader re-evaluation of a narrow conception of modernism that began to gather pace around 1980, and

entailed a fracturing of avant-garde hegemony spreading well beyond British music. That said, most of his younger colleagues, including Marc-Anthony Turnage and Thomas Adés, have avoided the symphony, though they have certainly written large-scale orchestral works that can be described as symphonic. James MacMillan is an exception, having composed three symphonies to date; yet even though MacMillan is perhaps the most successful of recent British composers in cultivating a wide audience for complex modern music, his symphonies, like those of Maxwell Davies, cannot be said for the moment to have firmly established themselves in the repertoire. It is a sobering fact for modern British symphonists that none of them has been able to come even close to competing with the runaway success of Anthony Payne's speculative completion of Elgar's Third Symphony, premiered in 1997, an extraordinary phenomenon that highlights the continuing gulf between much contemporary composition and the broader musical public.⁴⁵ To this may be added the popularity of recordings of symphonies by Vaughan Williams and Bax, and by once obscure composers such as George Lloyd and William Alwyn: such composers have benefited enormously from the recording boom that began with the advent of the compact disc in the early 1980s. At a time when Scandinavian countries in particular, and Germany to a lesser extent, have been reviving their symphonic output, perhaps Britain is in compositional terms no longer the citadel of a living symphonic tradition that it once was. Yet the appointment of a British conductor, Simon Rattle, to the helm of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 2002, an event quite unthinkable a century ago, shows just how far Britain's wider relationship with the symphony and its institutions has been transformed since the days of 'Das Land ohne Musik'.

Notes

1 Though the term came to prominence with Oscar Schmitz's book *Das Land ohne Musik: Englische Gesellschaftsprobleme* (Munich, 1904), the idea it embodies was certainly widespread by the mid nineteenth century.

2 Of course the United States and Russia, especially the former, also have some claims to this title. Yet in terms of composition, despite an impressive national symphonic output, no American symphony has yet established itself firmly in the repertoire, even in its country of origin (a partial exception is Copland's Third, but even that maintains only a toehold); in Russia, totalitarian conservative musical policies, Socialist Realism in particular, can be seen to have artificially boosted the genre. Yet parallels can certainly be drawn, in that the

prominence of the symphony in all three countries has been seen to some degree as a product of 'lateness', a process of catching up in musical cultures that struggled to establish an independent profile in art music during the nineteenth century, but eventually came into their own in the twentieth.

3 Except where stated otherwise, all dates are of the first performance.

4 Somewhat surprisingly, the most comprehensive study to date of the British symphony is by a German musicologist: Jürgen Schaarwächter, *Die Britische Sinfonie 1914–1945* (Köln-Rheinkassel, 1994); despite a detailed focus on the period specified in the title, the book also ranges widely across the entire history of the genre in Britain.

Schaarwächter's account is weighted primarily towards the documentary and descriptive.

A more critical and analytical approach to the twentieth-century repertoire is offered in the chapters by Peter Evans and Jim Samson, which deal with instrumental music *c.* pre-1960 and post-1960 respectively, in Stephen Banfield, ed., *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain*, vol. VI: *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995). See also Ralph Hill, *The Symphony* (Harmondsworth, 1949), and the chapters on British composers in Robert Simpson, ed., *The Symphony*, vol. II: *Elgar to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth, 1967).

5 The most forceful – and at times controversial – recent expression of this viewpoint is found in Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840–1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2nd edn (Manchester, 2001).

6 The present discussion will for the most part restrict itself to works specifically titled 'symphony'. Perhaps the most precise definition of the rigorous strand in British writing on the symphony, an approach which though not uniquely British received unusually strong advocacy in this country, is set out in the editor's Introductions to the two volumes of the Penguin survey cited in note 4. Robert Simpson, distinguished symphonist, critic, and expert on Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen and Sibelius (from whom his values ultimately derive), sets out a number of key attributes, including most crucially 'the fusion of diverse elements into an organic whole', 'the continuous control of pace' and the idea that a 'true symphony . . . is active in all possible ways . . . the composer must never allow any prime element of the music (rhythm, melody, harmony, tonality) to seem to die, so that artificial respiration is necessary' (vol. I, 13–14 and see also Chapter 5 in the present volume). On this basis Simpson excludes works such as Stravinsky's symphonies, which he considers brilliant but essentially balletic and episodic in nature, especially in their treatment of tonality.

7 See Jan LaRue and Eugene K. Wolf, 'Symphony', Section I/12, in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2001), 825–6.

8 See Jürgen Schaarwächter, 'Cipriani Potter, Georg Alexander Macfarren and Mid-19th-Century British Symphonism', in Wolfgang Schult and Henrik Verkerk, eds., *Deutschland und England: Beiträge zur Musikforschung, Jahrbuch der Bachwoche Dillenburg* (2002) (Munich, 2002), 77–91. Notable also during this period is the emergence of a female British symphonist, Alice Smith (1839–84).

9 See Simon McVeigh and Cyril Ehrlich, 'The Modernisation of London Concert Life Around 1900', in Michael Talbot, ed., *The Business of Music* (Liverpool, 2002), 96–120; also Leanne Langley, 'Agency and Change: Berlioz in Britain (1870–1920)', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 132 (2007), 306–48.

10 It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the social composition of audiences, though the Proms were one example of a wider movement to reach a more variegated range of the population, through lower ticket prices and other aspects of the concert experience. The most famous window onto the social dimensions of Edwardian concert life is chapter 6 of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910). A colourful and more extended picture of audience taste and reactions of the time can be found in A. H. Sidgwick, *The Promenade Ticket: A Lay Record of Concert-going* (London, 1914).

11 For an introduction to the history of Mahler reception in Britain see Donald Mitchell, 'The Mahler Renaissance in England: Its Origins and Chronology', in Andrew Nicholson and Donald Mitchell, eds., *The Mahler Companion* (New York and Oxford, 1999), 548–64.

12 'Symphony', in George Grove, ed., *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. IV (London, 1889), 38–9.

13 See Isabel Parker Semler, in collaboration with Pierson Underwood, *Horatio Parker: A Memoir for his Grandchildren, Compiled from Letters and Papers* (New York, 1975, repr. of 1942 edn), 110. The date and exact source of this passage are unclear, but from the context it seems likely that it was written in Parker's journal and refers to his 1899 trip to England. For further discussion of Parker's views see Alain Frogley, "'The Old Sweet Anglo-Saxon Spell': Racial Discourses and the American Reception of British Music, 1895–1933', in Julie Brown, ed., *Western Music and Race* (Cambridge, 2007), 244–57, at 251–2.

14 The emphasis is Elgar's. He made these remarks in one of the public lectures he delivered during his relatively brief tenure of the Peyton Chair created for him in 1905 at Birmingham University: see Edward Elgar and Percy M. Young, *A Future for English Music, and Other Lectures* (London, 1968), 49.

15 See Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford, 1984), 368–9.

16 Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 548–9. Information in this paragraph is drawn primarily from Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 544–50.

- 17 See Richard Smith, *Elgar in America: Elgar's American Connections between 1895 and 1934* (Rickmansworth, 2005), 117.
- 18 *Musical Times* (1 June 1909), quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 548.
- 19 *Manchester Guardian* (4 December 1908), quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 547.
- 20 See J. P. E. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (Cambridge, 2006), chapter 3.
- 21 Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 549–50.
- 22 See James Hepokoski, 'Elgar', in D. Kern Holoman, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony* (New York, 1997), 329.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 340.
- 24 Though refigured in the ending of Elgar's Second Symphony, which itself echoes Brahms's Third, Vaughan Williams's approach again seems more detached and distancing.
- 25 See, for instance, Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London, 1934), 150–2; for other reactions to the symphony see Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, rev. edn (Oxford, 1980), 155–7.
- 26 The most comprehensive study of Bax is Lewis Foreman, *Bax: A Composer and His Times*, 3rd rev. edn (Woodbridge, 2007). An even more prolific composer to emerge during the 1920s was Havergal Brian (1876–1972), who would go on to write thirty-two symphonies; unlike Bax, however, Brian never achieved broad recognition, and despite inspiring small numbers of devoted advocates over the years and occasional revivals of his work, he remains a marginal figure. His First Symphony, the 'Gothic', composed between 1919 and 1927, is nevertheless notorious for its sheer scale and length, involving five choirs and four offstage brass groups as well as an extremely large orchestra, thirty-seven-part writing for the voices in places, and a performing time of almost two hours.
- 27 See Jenny R. Doctor, David C. H. Wright and Nicholas Kenyon, eds., *The Proms: A New History* (London, 2007), chapter 3.
- 28 See Elgar and Young, *A Future for English Music, and Other Lectures*, 211.
- 29 See Laura Gray, 'Sibelius and England', in Glenda Dawn Goss, ed., *The Sibelius Companion* (Westport, 1996), 281–95; and Peter Franklin, 'Sibelius in Britain', in Daniel M. Grimley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius* (Cambridge, 2004), 182–95.
- 30 See Lambert, *Music Ho!*, 326–32.
- 31 See Glenda Dawn Goss, *Jean Sibelius and Olin Downes: Music, Friendship, Criticism* (Boston, 1995).
- 32 Franklin, 'Sibelius in Britain', 190–5.
- 33 Nielsen had also written his last symphony by this point, but the Dane was as yet virtually unknown in Britain, a situation that remained largely unchanged until the 1960s.
- 34 See Stephen Lloyd, *William Walton: Muse of Fire* (Woodbridge, 2001), 140.
- 35 Ursula Vaughan Williams, R. V. W.: *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London, 1964), 205.
- 36 See Kennedy, *Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 243–8 on the early reception of the symphony; the personal background is broached in director Tony Palmer's 2007 documentary film *O Thou Transcendent: The Life of Ralph Vaughan Williams*.
- 37 Ursula Vaughan Williams, R. V. W., 190.
- 38 See Oliver Neighbour, 'The Place of the Eighth among Vaughan Williams' Symphonies', in Alain Frogley, ed., *Vaughan Williams Studies* (Cambridge, 1996), 213–33, at 224; see Kennedy, *Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 300–4 on the early performance history and reception of the Symphony.
- 39 Another figure from the same generation who, although of lesser stature, was nevertheless a significant symphonist is Edmund Rubbra (1901–86). His eleven symphonies are, however, dominated by contrapuntal continuity rather than sonata dialectic: unlike Tippett, he did not for the most part attempt to combine the two, and his symphonies have generally been regarded as standing outside the mainstream.
- 40 He produced four works bearing the title, as well as the Sinfonietta Op. 1 of 1932, but all involve some qualifying twist in the title and content: *Simple Symphony* (1933–4); *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1941); *Spring Symphony* (1949); and *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* (1963). Only the latter has been viewed as coming close to invoking traditional forms and developmental techniques, although for an alternative view see Arved Ashby, 'Britten as Symphonist', in Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Britten* (Cambridge, 1999), 217–32.
- 41 His unpublished Symphony in B flat of 1933 is overtly Sibelian in inspiration, and thus very much of its time: see Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and His Music* (London, 1984), 79–80.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 43 Indeed, Britain would become a centre of the Mahler revival, a status reinforced by Deryck Cooke's widely admired completion of the Tenth Symphony (first version 1964) – yet another facet to Britain's role as curator of a now expanded symphonic tradition. Britain

also played an enormously important role in the Nielsen and Sibelius revivals of the 1960s.

44 The work was commissioned jointly by the Royal Antarctic Survey and the Philharmonia Orchestra, and Davies was required to visit Antarctica in the course of composition.

45 See Richard Witts, 'Remastering the Past: "Renewal" in Recent British Music', *Musical Times*, 142 (2001), 7–10, who interprets both the Payne–Elgar work and Davies' *Antarctic Symphony* as signs of retrenchment in British music.