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BOOK REVIEWS

Malcolm Arnold: A Composer of Real Music: Symphonic Writing, Style and Aesthetics by Raphael D. Thöne. Edition Wissenschaft, £13.95.

It must be the frequently 'no holds barred' nature of Malcolm Arnold's life and music that so often generates hyperbolic statements. Paul Harris and Anthony Meredith's well-researched and eminently readable biography *Rogue Genius*, published in 2004, is subtitled *The Life and Music of Britain's Most Misunderstood Composer* (a presumptuous designation that admirers of, for example, Havergal Brian, George Lloyd or indeed Elgar and Vaughan Williams could, with at least equal justification, appropriate for the subject of their esteem). Likewise in the concluding paragraph of Raphael D. Thöne's gratifyingly inexpensive new book, the author observes that: 'Perhaps Arnold's life is portrayed in his works like no other British composer's', a reckless pronouncement as contentious as it unverifiable. Luckily, Thöne avoids making too many other incautious claims, concentrating instead on his central task of demonstrating convincingly the symphonic strengths of Arnold's writing by means of an analytical consideration of selected pieces.

As the first substantial published academic study of Arnold's symphonic works, *Malcolm Arnold: A Composer of Real Music* is to be warmly welcomed. There are cogent discussions of Arnold's orchestration technique, composition process and evolving style, all backed up by carefully chosen musical examples. It is especially satisfying to find whole chapters devoted to the Sixth and Ninth Symphonies (1967, 1986 respectively) as both of these very fine, spare and elusive pieces merit and justify detailed examination. The Second Symphony (1953) and *A Grand, Grand Festival Overture* (1956) are also considered in some detail as, more surprisingly, are two late works, the Four Irish Dances (1986) and the *Robert Kett Overture* (1988). Though the copious sketches of the latter work furnish valuable insights into Arnold's compositional practices, I remain unconvinced by the author's assertion that it is 'a very interesting piece'. Its broad strokes and over-reliance on conventional gestures sound to me like the uninspired scourings from an exhausted creative mind, as distinct from the brilliant, ironic twists of earlier overtures such as *Beckus the Dandipratt* and *Tam O'Shanter* (1955) or the poignant, emotionally engaged *Peterloo* (1967).

I would have welcomed greater consideration of Arnold's symphonism in the wider context of other 20th-century British (and non-British) symphonists. Parallels could have been drawn (and illuminating contrasts made) with William Alwyn, Alan Rawsthorne, Benjamin Frankel, Humphrey Searle and other contemporaries of Arnold who produced substantial symphonic cycles as well as classic film scores (in particular, the output of William Alwyn, a fellow 'Cheltenham symphonist', with its success in both 'light' and serious' musical fields, suggests strong affinities with that of Arnold); yet none of these names appear.

Two caveats must be made: it is to be hoped the copy I received is not typical of all those printed off on demand: the layout and spacing of paragraphs is erratic and on a number of pages the font size varies from paragraph to paragraph. Also, there are sporadically baffling turns of phrase – such as '…we should *not* come to the conclusion that Arnold composed thoughtlessly or boringly, acting as a "geek"…' and 'Arnold's 2nd Symphony, opus 40 (1953) has remained in his contemporary adaptation …' – which momentarily threaten credibility.

Thöne wrote a PhD on the subject of Arnold's symphonic music and there are hints in the author's occasionally dry tone and highly theoretical approach that the present volume derives very closely from it. However, the copious well-chosen musical examples are a definite bonus and there is a very comprehensive and pleasingly wide-ranging bibliography, reflecting the broad scope of this ambitious, largely persuasive and worthwhile study.

Paul Conway

Imogen Holst: a Life in Music edited by Christopher Grogan with contributions from Rosamund Strode, Christopher Grogan and Christopher Tinker. The Boydell Press, £25.00.

IMOGEN HOLST: String Chamber Music. Première recordings of *Phantasy Quartet*; Sonata for Violin and Cello; String Trio No.1; *The Fall of the Leaf*[1]; Duo for Viola and Piano; String Quintet[1]. Simon Hewitt Jones, David

Worswick (vlns), Tom Hankey (vla), Oliver Coates, [1]Thomas Hewitt Jones (cellos), Daniel Swain (pno). Court Lane Music CLM 37601.

2007 was the centenary of the birth of Imogen Holst, the daughter of Gustav and Isobel Holst. To celebrate the occasion The Boydell Press have published a fine, exhaustive tome about her life and work edited by Christopher Grogan and written by Rosamund Strode, Christopher Grogan and Christopher Tinker. The book has three sections: a biographical narrative, a detailed diary kept by Imo during two of the ten years that she was worked for Britten at Aldeburgh, and a fine and detailed catalogue of all her works. There are very good indexes too.

From her birth in 1907 there was never much doubt that she would become a musician, although there were times when she thought that she ought to be a dancer. At the Royal College of Music she studied piano with Kathleen Long, composition with Gordon Jacob and Herbert Howells. A travelling scholarship allowed her to roam around Europe investigating all kinds of music and dance. It was at this point in the late 1920s that she envied her friends Grace Williams and Elizabeth Maconchy, whose focus was entirely on composition. This made their choices easier. In contrast Imogen seemed to be everywhere, doing everything: teaching, playing the piano and dancing for the English Folksong and Dance Society, stimulating amateur choirs and musicians in the Devon and Cornwall. Her intense activity left this reader feeling like a laggard, and it left her parents worried about exhaustion. Like Gustav she felt that if people wanted to play and sing they should be given every opportunity and much encouragement. Later, in the 1950s, this attitude would bring her into conflict with Britten and the Aldebugh Festival Chorus, when he wanted to make it more professional. By the late 1940s her inspiring teaching and professional skills attracted the attention of Peter Pears and Britten, who invited her to Aldeburgh to help with the embryonic festival.

The book's outstanding contribution to music scholarship is the diary Imo kept for the years 1952–54 and which is here published in full for the first time. It shows how much influence she had over Britten, who respected her musical judgement and skills. Her input into the opera *Gloriana* was considerable, not least in the courtly dance sequence, where Britten constantly sought her help with the dance-rhythms and its general musical atmosphere. In Britten, she found a father figure who needed her amanuensis skills at a crucial time in his life, and at last she could assuage her guilt for not helping her father more in his last years. On some of Britten's comments she would remark in her diary 'just like G (Gustav)'. In his turn Britten had immense admiration and understanding of Gustav Holst's music – thinking *The Planets* a finer work than Imogen ever admitted; understanding why Holst would become interested in polytonality in the late choral canons; finding the *Choral Symphony* more interesting than the work of Sibelius; appreciating the sincerity and simplicity of *Savitri* and *Egdon Heath,* and was inspired by Holst's example to write chamber operas for the English Opera Group.

Throughout the 1950s Imogen worked hard as a confidante, and as an amanuensis for Britten in all the major works from the time of *Gloriana*, *The Turn of the Screw* through to the *War Requiem* and Cello Symphony, but also as a festival organizer and conductor in her own right whose dance-like movements on the podium were so distinctive. She still made time to arrange works for schools and amateurs, research renaissance and baroque music in foreign libraries and play the recorder with Britten and Pears. The amount of work she undertook at this time was prodigious.

There was a price to pay for all this activity: her own musical creativity and her personal life. She often felt lonely and depressed, commenting in her diary that there is nothing worse than a 'stimulating spinster'. A fine and beautifully played recent CD shows just what a distinctive voice she had as a composer, a kind of English Bartók, rather gritty, taut and expressive – not at all like the somewhat fey character she often appeared to be, and her music nothing like the 'pretty little tone poems' produced by so many promising British composers in the 1920s and 30s which apparently depressed Gustav so much. Her writing for strings was superb, and the harmony always interesting, never commonplace. This, I feel, was the 'real' Imogen, which was allowed to bloom only when she ceased working for Britten, and which flourished until her death in 1984.

Raymond Head

Ruth Gipps by Jill Halstead. Ashgate Press. £45.00 (£40.50 if ordered online from www.ashgate.com)

Ruth Gipps (1921–1999) deserves an evangelical champion like Jill Halstead. Apart from Malcolm Arnold, there are several British composers of largely tonal music born about the same time in similar need of evaluation: John Veale, Stanley Bate, Adrian Cruft and John Luke Rose immediately spring to mind but Gerard Schurmann, Franz Reizenstein and John Joubert lay equal claim.

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Gipps's case is singular, however. In her lifetime her personality problems got in the way of nearly everything, it would seem. The book starts off with a biographical account, laden with stories (some of these related to the author by Gipps herself, some taken from her autobiography). Quite a lot of space goes to discuss 'Wid's' (as she was universally known) clashes with authority, her spats with other musicians and conductors (almost invariably male, since music was quite astonishingly sexist as recently as the late 1960s), and her personal determination to succeed professionally, both as a child-prodigy pianist, then as an oboist, and later as the youngest female Doctor of Music in history. The book charts her student years at the Royal College of Music, her failure to fulfil her childhood destiny as a concert pianist (a combination, it seems, of a series of blows to her confidence and a hand injury), and her subsequent failure to maintain an early momentum as a composer (she had had a piece premiered by Sir Henry Wood at the Last Night of the Proms) after the end of the war. Jill Halstead puts this down, in part, to the re-raising in the 1940s and 50s of gender barriers which had been temporarily lowered to aid the war effort. We learn of Gipps's encounter with George Weldon, conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, from which she was forced to resign as oboist. We are told of her experience as a choral conductor to the CBSO (from which she was sacked when Weldon was suddenly replaced) and how this led to her forming her own London Repertory Orchestra, which became a crucible for young musicians cutting their professional teeth. Ironically, although Gipps programmed a vast range of mainly British music (including her own) on minimum rehearsal, the Orchestra's second-rank status, out of the limelight, precluded Gipps from ever becoming a national figure as a conductor. After she was compulsorily retired by the ILEA in 1986 she fell into a decline.

By far the greatest value of this book, however, is the part that is probably of least interest to historians of the post-war role of women in the professions: the detailed study in the second half of Gipps as a composer, and the critical analysis of her five symphonies and some of the chamber music. Gipps left about 80 works, most of which remain unpublished, and so far only two major works (the Horn Concerto and the Symphony No. 2) have found their way on to CD. Halstead discusses Gipps's Englishness, her predilection for the modes and her open admission that she was not seeking originality, but rather her own personal musical language, firmly based on the foundations laid by Vaughan Williams, Walton, Bliss and Bax. The Second Symphony can be seen as a young woman composer's reaction to the upheaval of war, ending on a note of hope for the future, according to a commentary disclosed by the composer to the author in 1991. This optimistic feel continues in Symphony No. 3 (1965), a well-structured piece with vigorous thematic development. The long last movement is especially memorable for its lilting melody in the flutes over harp arpeggios. Symphony no 4 (1972) is one of her deepest utterances, a complex and intense essay with an expressly dissonant tendency. These two symphonies (3 and 4) are very strong candidates for recording, as are a number of chamber works also analysed by Jill Halstead, for example the Rhapsody for clarinet and string quartet (1942). Once her music starts to be properly explored through CDs and performances we can begin to make some enduring assessment of Ruth Gipps: Composer, rather than Ruth Gipps: Controversialist. Interesting and valuable as the gender and personality issues are in portraying a human being and in putting her life in the context of its time, the real need is to get to grips with her music. Jill Halstead's book is a fantastic start.

Bret Johnson

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