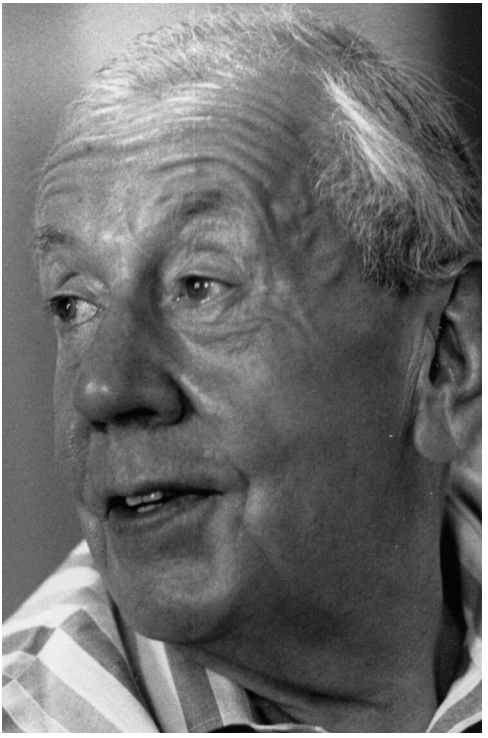

THE WORLD OF MALCOLM ARNOLD

"Malcolm Arnold swept into my life like a genial tornado… Music was born in him, and is as irrepressible as his nature."

Thus the late William Alwyn, like Arnold, a) born in Northampton; b) one of England's most distinguished postwar composers for films; and c) distinguished also as professional composer of non-film music. His "genial tornado" is surely right on target: witness almost any of the music recorded here. ("Genial" also carries overtones of the French *génial,* meaning touched with genius. That too applies.)

In fact I often think of Malcolm Arnold as the Festival-of Britain composer *par excellence*. By the early 1950s, when he was fully into his stride, war-time austerity was coming to an end, and works like the *English Dances*, the *Sussex Overture*, the two *Little Suites*, the ballet *Homage to the Queen*, the Organ Concerto, the *Sound Barrier* film score, the *Commonwealth Christmas Overture* and the Second Symphony seem born of a tremendous sense of relief, buoyed upon a great wave of Waltonian optimism for the future. Their excited, effervescent, ecstatic character suggests faith—faith that a Brave New World really might be about to rise from the ashes of the old. 1953 was Coronation Year and there were hopes in the air that the crowning of a radiant young queen might usher in a new Elizabethan era in all its manifestations. But even two years before, 1951 had witnessed the Festival of Britain on the South Bank, post-war Britain's first great exercise in cultural paternalism. Sir Hugh Casson's architectural style for that—variously described as "fun," "light," and "tiptoe" (cf. Arnold's music) was later to be discredited not by the people but by critics, *i.e.* Conservative governmental pundits (cf. Arnold again!). The Festival launched the decade of Marilyn Monroe, the Goons, Ealing comedies, James Dean, television, *West Side Story*, rock 'n' roll; in fact, estab-

lished conventions of mass entertainment that have survived to this day. Yet it was also the era of McCarthy and Maxwell Fyfe, of Beckett and Stockhausen. Arnold was aware of these nihilisms and negatives but chose not to dwell on them.

His music has always had its erratic and unpredictable side. Not for nothing does he count Berlioz and Sibelius among his major influences, both known for their formal and orchestrational eccentricities; and even early works like *Beckus the Dandipratt* (now nearly 50 years old) and the First Symphony contain disruptive, even sinister elements which, gathering momentum through complex and enigmatic pieces like the *Fantasy on a Theme of John Field* for piano and orchestra and the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, have so come to invade and pervade much of Arnold's more recent work that many find it difficult to come to terms with. There are passages in the Seventh Symphony which remind me of Simon Rattle's recent *obiter dicta* on Schoenberg. Now you wouldn't think that Schoenberg and Arnold have much, if anything, in common; yet when Rattle describes the Schoenberg *Variations for Orchestra* as "music that's very uncomfortable to be alone with for a long time: that's part of its power, a type of *claustrophobic* power"—that could be Arnold as soon as Schoenberg, the "alternative" Arnold, if you like.

In his 1986 65th birthday tribute to Arnold, Donald Mitchell, in a fascinating insight, invoked Dickens in this connection. "It is not that I am confusing music with literature, but that I find myself thinking about the two of them in the same sort of way: both of them unequivocally direct communicators; both of them with a healthy respect for and responsibility to the public; and both of them, unashamedly such *great entertainer*s. And yet to say that, which is a lot, is by no meant to say enough, neither about Dickens, nor about Arnold. For entertain us they may, but at the same time, amid the hilarity, the sentiment, the rollicking exuberance, the side-splitting parodies, there is a profound awareness of man's precarious condition… Arnold's music often sets about qualifying its own happiness, which is why I'm fascinated by it."

This "qualified" happiness was very much one of the themes in Kris Rusmanis' recent illuminating and moving BBC television documentary in celebration of Arnold's seventieth birthday. Another was the cold-shouldering of Arnold by the BBC Establismentarians during the late 1960s and 1970s. (One hastens to add that they are now making handsome amends.) However unworthy this episode may have been, it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that, if the "downs" in Arnold's career (both personal and professional) were indeed deep-down, the "ups" were stratospherically high! Arnold is, in fact, one of the most-played, most respected, most *enjoyed* composers of post-war Britain. His music has given pleasure to thousands, probably millions (when we remember his film scores), and for the best reason of all: for the quality of his music. At his best Arnold has star-quality. What is remarkable is that, for all his links with the entertainment world, for all the overtly seductive properties of his music, he's never gone in for showbiz-style hype or self-aggrandizement of any kind; he's never created a myth about himself. He's never needed to: he has achieved everything solely on the basis of ability and integrity. He's never needed make-up. Right from the first there were discerning musicians who recognized his gifts.

Take, for instance, the following observations:

1) "The peculiarly bright, clear, ringing, chiseled sound of his scores, in every medium, is part of both his professional virtuosity and his singular artistic personality . . . this "pure" sound is, to a degree, an expression of his exceptional musical practicality—practicality, that is, raised to a very high level of virtuosity."

2) "There is no doubt that Arnold *enjoys* writing music."

3) "How else, except in a state of innocent grace, could a composer so versatile and so experienced utter music so forthright, so direct, so diatonic… there are plenty of diatonic composers about, but few possess the gift for melodic invention that distinguishes Arnold's best pieces... Arnold pours out tunes as if he were unaware that much music in our century has had to get along without them… it is in these tunes and the glowing, lambent movements to which they give rise that Arnold demonstrates most perfectly—and now and again most poignantly—what might be called his *unique recovery of innocent lyricism*."

Now these marvelously perceptive—because so down-to-earth and commonsensical—observations might easily have been penned yesterday, so pertinent are they to the whole vast corpus of Arnold's composing achievement. In fact they go back to 1955 when Arnold was 34; their author, again was Donald Mitchell, he who 30 years later invited us to compare Arnold with Dickens. And now here is the late Arthur Hutchings, sometime Professor of Music in the University of Durham, writing in 1968:

"I fear our too-ready acceptance of stodgy muddlers who aspire to be tragedians and oracles from Op. 1 onwards… Arnold seems to be light-hearted. If all his work had also been light-weighted I should not be its champion… I do not think a British composer would be sought abroad unless he were recognized as serious in the best sense of the word. We turn the pages of a book from curiosity; we stay listening when we are engaged by musical thought... without musical thought no man could keep us interested in a single melodic line, lasting several minutes [as in the case of the fantasies for unaccompanied instruments]… how would programme planners of British music fare if they could not turn to Arnold for something the players like and the audience likes, which challenges both, yet is understandable?"

This, as I say, was in 1968, around the time of the Sixth Symphony—and around the time when the Establishment's Cold War was at its coldest. Men like Mitchell and Hutchings did not need to shout, and their reason, their clarity and logic, has prevailed. So has Malcolm Arnold himself. "You get to the last D major chord," he said of the finale of his Ninth Symphony, "and you know that's the end… and you've won through." Arnold has not, we hope reached anything approaching the end, but we know he's won through."

—Christopher Palmer

Sir Malcolm Arnold died on 23 September 2006.

www.malcolmarnold.co.uk

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