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EDMUND RUBBRA (1901 - 1986)

Symphony No. 6 Op.80 (1953-4)

- | | | |
|---|---|----------|
| 1 | 1st Movement: Lento-allegretto | (32'40") |
| 2 | 2nd Movement: Canto (Largo e sereno) | (9'13") |
| 3 | 3rd Movement: Vivace impetuoso | (8'11") |
| 4 | 4th Movement: Poco andante-Allegro moderato | (5'41") |
| | | (9'35") |

Symphony No.8 Op. 132 (1966-8)

(Hommage à Teilhard de Chardin)

- | | | |
|---|---|----------|
| 5 | 1st Movement: Moderato | (24'55") |
| 6 | 2nd Movement: Allegretto con brio | (9'25") |
| 7 | 3rd Movement: Poco lento | (6'12") |
| 8 | Soliloquy for Cello and Orchestra Op.57 (1947)* | (9'18") |
| | | (15'01") |
| | | (72'38") |

Philharmonia Orchestra

Norman Del Mar

*Rohan de Saram

*London Symphony Orchestra

*Vernon Handley

The above individual timings will normally each include two pauses. One before the beginning of each movement or work, and one after the end.

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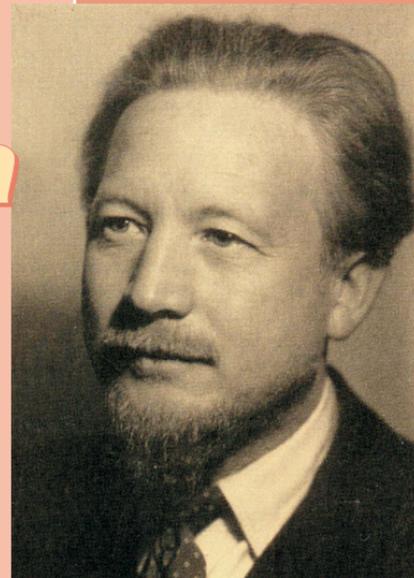
Lyrta

Edmund Rubbra

Symphony No.6
Symphony No.8
Soliloquy

Philharmonia Orchestra
Norman Del Mar

Rohan de Saram
London Symphony Orchestra
Vernon Handley



played on the celesta, looking back to the opening of the symphony and bringing it to a luminous close.

The SOLILOQUY for cello, string orchestra, two horns and tympani was completed in 1944. It was written for the cellist William Pleeth who gave its first performance in December of that year. Rubbra and Pleeth became friends in the army during the war, and played together for many years in the Rubbra-Gruenberg-Pleeth Piano Trio.

It is Rubbra's only concertante piece for cello and, although short, is in many ways a cello concerto in miniature. The gently rising and falling figure at the beginning of the piece provides the growth point for the whole composition. The work begins *lento e calmo* and after a second section marked *Adagio* an *Allegretto Grazioso* provides a "fast movement". A return of the *Adagio* brings the work full circle and it ends as it began. The two horns are used sparingly, mainly to give extra colour to the dark string textures. Only occasionally are they given freer rein.

This work is unique in the cello repertoire and it is a matter of regret that Rubbra wrote no larger scale cello concerto to join those for violin and viola. Its elegiac quality is at times reminiscent of the Elgar concerto and it is curious to consider that Jacqueline Du Pre played the work in the same year as her famous recording of the Elgar, 1965.

ADRIAN YARDLEY

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The original recordings of the Symphonies 6 & 8 were made with financial assistance from THE ARTS COUNCIL. The original recording of Soliloquy was made in association with THE RVW TRUST.

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Charles Groves on 5th January 1971. Ten years separate it from the Seventh Symphony of 1957 and although many large-scale works had been written in the intervening years, notably the superb Violin Concerto of 1959, the 8th Symphony marked a new stage in Rubbra's symphonic thought. In a BBC broadcast of 3rd January 1971 Rubbra commented that the long gap between numbers 7 and 8 "has possibly contributed more than anything else to the difference in the way this latest symphony is organised. In this ten year gap I gradually became aware of the dramatic and expressive values inherent in intervals as such, and in the new symphony the play of interval against interval, rather than key against key, provides the motivating force behind the argument."

Rubbra also, for the first time, composed straight into full score without the preliminary short score, a sure sign of his mature mastery of orchestral timbre. "So the ideas rose spontaneously clothed in an appropriate colour, and the balancing of these colours was an important element in the overall formal scheme of the symphony." In this one is reminded of Rubbra's interest in Messiaen whose use of colour was so important in expressing religious themes.

And this symphony, along with Number 9, is the most overtly religious of all his symphonic works. It bears the sub-title "Hommage à Teilhard de Chardin". Teilhard (1881-1955) was a Jesuit priest and Paleontologist. His scientific studies led him to a re-examination of evolutionary theory in the light of Christianity, and his synthesis of the two led him into trouble with the Catholic hierarchy. His vision of the co-evolution of "spirit" and "matter" with Christ as the Omega point was a potent one, however, and had a profound effect on Rubbra's thought. It is this optimistic view which pervades the symphony rather than any specifically programmatic scheme.

All three movements have their origins in the chord played at the outset of the work, and this chord contains the germ from which the symphony develops. In contrast to Symphony Number 6, however, these are now intervals. In the first movement it is the tension between the perfect 4th and the 3rd which provide the argument, the 3rd only winning through in the final bars and in fact holding the field throughout the second movement. The latter is one of Rubbra's most dance-like creations, and the celesta, harp and xylophone are used with telling effect.

The finale is again concerned with intervallic tensions principally between thirds and seconds and sixths. Rubbra regarded this movement as the emotional core of the work. The ending is peaceful, with a G major chord coloured by overlapping fourths

Edmund Rubbra wrote eleven symphonies and their quality marks him out as a major contributor to a form which he regarded as one of the peaks of compositional achievement. It is not surprising, therefore, that he did not write his first symphony, op. 44 (1935-1937) until he felt ready for the task and was already an established composer. His last symphony, op. 153 (1979) was written near the very end of his life, the composition of which probably led to the stroke which tarnished his last years. The opening of a twelfth symphony also survives in sketch form, began during his final year.

The conductor and writer Hans-Hubert Schönzeler likens Rubbra to Bruckner in his approach to the spiritual in music. Rubbra was a religious man and all his compositions were in some way informed by this sensibility. He was brought up a Congregationalist but soon found the attractions first of gnosticism, as espoused by his first teacher Cyril Scott, and subsequently much Hindu and Buddhist thought, more in sympathy with his own spiritual feelings. In fact he retained a strong life-long interest in Buddhism and his intense setting of a Chinese Buddhist text in the song cycle "The Jade Mountain" of 1963 reflects this.

However, from the Five Motets, op. 37 of 1934 he began to set poems by the great Christian religious poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notably Henry Vaughan, and in 1942 he completed his setting of words by St John of the Cross "The dark night of the soul". His growing awareness of the specifically Christian tradition had now become intense and he was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1948. His beautiful "Missa in honorem Sancti Dominici" appeared in the same year.

With hindsight, Rubbra's long line of symphonies divide themselves neatly into three groups. The first group, written between 1935-1942, are characterised by an exploration of symphonic thought and an increased mastery of the orchestra. The second group, numbers 5 to 7, dating from 1947-1957, show a new found lyricism which Rubbra now felt fully confident to handle. This period also coincides with his greatest critical acclaim. The use of three movement form in number 7, however, points the way to Rubbra's last group, numbers 8 to 11, dating from 1966 to 1979. In this group Rubbra concentrates his style and the last symphony of all is in one movement only and is of less than 15 minutes duration. The apparent exception is, of course, number 9, the Sinfonia Sacra, which is an extraordinary synthesis of Lutheran passion and symphony. The simplicity of the passion form appealed to Rubbra and his music is stripped bare of all inessentials.

Throughout all these works the unifying technique is one of organic growth from “germ” ideas. In a lecture given in Birmingham in April 1949 Rubbra said: “Many believe that classical music is a nicely tabulated affair of first and second subjects, bridge passages, developments, recapitulations and codas and that formal perfection is achieved when all these ingredients are easily recognisable. But the point I would like to insist upon is that these features, whether obviously present or not, are in reality very secondary: that their importance is far below the importance of making contrasts between different facets of a pervading idea. The stressing of the importance of contrasts in subject-matter has led to the writing of much inorganic music, that is, that follows the law laid down by the analytical chemists of music, but which never achieves a real unity because the composer’s imagination has not lit up various facets of one idea, but has instead placed side by side mechanically contrasted elements.”

SYMPHONY No. 6 was written between 1953 and 1954 in response to a commission from the Royal Philharmonic Society, and was first performed at a concert in the Royal Festival Hall by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Malcolm Sargent on 17th November 1954.

In a characteristically no-nonsense programme note, redolent of Vaughan-Williams’ attitude to the genre, the composer remarks:

“A unity, different in kind from that of the preceding symphonies, is given to the work by the fact that all four movements started simultaneously from a basic group of four notes, E-F-A-B. These notes are not interpreted as having a fixed tonal basis: they merely offer a fluid starting point for each movement.”

The finale, in fact, was the first to be written and was originally intended to be the first movement. It was only when Rubbra had finished writing this that he realised its true position in the scheme of things. (It also has a rather exposed cor anglais part, an instrument difficult to keep in tune without being well warmed up!) Rubbra, whose compositional method was always to work forward intuitively, then in his own words “had to wait patiently for the origins of the other movements to assert themselves, for I am a fatalist where music is concerned.”

The first movement as it emerged is based on three of the four note group (E-F-A) and is very classical in the way that the seventeen bar introduction concerns itself, like Haydn’s introductions, as a preparation for the Allegretto that follows. The whole movement in fact is in very well defined sonata form, but has such a feeling for organic

growth and melodic inevitability that structural content takes second place in the listener’s mind.

The second movement must be one of the most beautiful single movements in any Rubbra symphony. In the score, it is preceded by some lines by the Italian poet Leopardi (1798-1837):

Sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle,
E questa siepe, che da tante parte
Dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
(Always was this lonely hill dear to me
And this hedge which shuts out
So much of the distant horizon)

Although not included in the score quotation, the poet goes on:

But as I sit and gaze, my thought conceives
Interminable vastnesses of space
Beyond it, and unearthly silences,
And profoundest calm.

Rubbra likens the scene to the view from his studio on the hillside above his cottage in the then very rural Chilterns. It also touches his own inner spiritual experience. This is a wonderful movement, a deeply personal reflection of an inner and outer landscape.

In contrast the composer describes the third movement as “unbuttoned in its energy and the four-note pattern is ubiquitous, turning up elongated, upside-down, embedded in melody or accompaniment and rhythmically transformed”. Also, for the first time in a symphony Rubbra introduces the celesta and xylophone (used again brilliantly in the 8th) a sign that his orchestration was becoming increasingly assured. Indeed, in both the symphonies on this disc, Rubbra’s orchestration is always appropriate to the content and at some points quite inspired. Several passages in the beautiful final movement illustrate this. In particular, note the use of the bass clarinet in contrast to the cor anglais in the opening bars, and the excellent brass writing that concludes this wonderful work.

SYMPHONY No. 8 dates from 1966-1968 and was first performed at the Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir

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