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ALAN RAWSTHORNE (1905-1971)

Symphonic Studies (1938) \*\*\* (20'11")

1	Theme	(0'49")	2	1 <i>Allegro di bravura</i>	(3'09")
3	2 <i>Allegretto</i>	(4'31")	4	3 <i>Allegro di bravura</i>	(1'56")
5	4 <i>Lento</i>	(3'36")	6	5 <i>Allegro piacevole</i>	(6'10")

7 Overture 'Street Corner' (1944) \* (5'32")

Piano Concerto no.1 (1939 rev. 1942) \*\* (20'10")

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(77'26")

\* \*\*\*London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir John Pritchard

\*\* Malcolm Binns, piano

London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Braithwaite

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# Rawsthorne

Lyrta

Rawsthorne

Overture Street Corner  
Piano Concertos 1 & 2  
Symphonic Studies

Malcolm Binns

Nicholas Braithwaite

Sir John Pritchard

London Philharmonic Orchestra • London Symphony Orchestra

Alan Rawsthorne was born in 1905, the same year as Michael Tippett and Constant Lambert – in retrospect, one might say, a remarkable year for British music. His fellow Lancastrian, William Walton, who was, with Lambert, his closest professional friend, was three years his senior. But unlike them Rawsthorne was a late starter in music. He flirted with dentistry and architecture before becoming a student at the Royal Manchester College of Music and not until he was thirty did he settle in London and seriously attempt to make a living out of composition (and there were less enticements and encouragements in the way of commissions in those days than exist now). With two pre-war works in particular Rawsthorne did, however, make a considerable impact, the *Theme and Variations* for two violins and *Symphonic Studies* (also, in a sense, a theme and variations). Both works were first performed at festivals of the International Society for Contemporary Music, in London 1938 and Warsaw 1939 respectively. But then came the dislocation of the war: Rawsthorne moved to Bristol where an air raid destroyed most of his manuscripts; shortly after, he joined the Army. As he laconically said at the time, he was blown up and called up in quick succession.

It is characteristic that these two pre-war successes of his, both still in reasonable circulation, should have been a chamber work and an orchestral work. In his subsequent output he showed himself as essentially an instrumental rather than a vocal composer, making a particularly notable contribution to these two categories of chamber and symphonic repertory. After the war he was to have a working life of only twenty-five years, which were productive though not prolific. He died in 1971.

Rawsthorne is often referred to as a “composer’s composer” and it is perhaps for this reason that his music is still rather undervalued. His art was a fastidious one, often quiet; certainly he was never a one for flamboyant rhetoric. Yet his gifts were of the highest musical order, ranging widely through a sharp wit to a depth of

The finale is perhaps the most boisterous and extrovert movement in his entire output, and it is this that must especially have been responsible for the work’s great popularity. After a fanfare-like orchestral gesture, the piano quietly states, in dead-pan fashion, the main theme of this rondo-like piece, a tune of distinctly Latin-American cast and a good deal of cheeky wit in its rhythmic quirkiness. The music pursues a wide range of episodes, from forceful virtuosity through grandiosity to bitter-sweet lyricism and the most delicious wit, building splendidly to the close with an increase in tempo and a final brilliant flourish.

JOHN McCABE

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*Digital Remastering Engineer: Simon Gibson*

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*Symphonies 1, 2 & 3*

*London Philharmonic Orchestra | BBC Symphony Orchestra*

*Sir John Pritchard | Nicholas Braithwaite | Norman Del Mar.....SRCD.291*

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with a few deft, sketched-in phrases and snatches of rhythm – a daring but thoroughly engaging conclusion for a concerto!

With his **Second Concerto**, commissioned for the 1951 Festival of Britain, Rawsthorne had perhaps the greatest instant success of his career, for the work caught on immediately. It is built on a grander scale than its predecessor, with four movements instead of three and a richer, more elaborate orchestral and pianistic sound, but here too one senses Rawsthorne's enjoyment of the instrumental resources, and the melodic invention is equally varied and spontaneous. The first movement begins, typically, with no preamble – just a bar of piano setting up an accompaniment figure and then above this a long-phrased, elegantly turned flute tune which once again moves from one tonality to another with the most exquisite judgement. It is this constant fluctuation of tonality, involving as it does an ambivalence between major and minor keys, that so often gives Rawsthorne's music a subtle undercurrent of tension beneath an apparently bland surface, and in this movement the occasional outbursts of intensity express this latent tension bursting to the top – in contrast with the delicacy of much of the writing, including the lilting, skipping second subject. As in the First Concerto's *Capriccio*, the recapitulation is prefaced by a moment of almost complete calm and is extremely condensed – just a brief reference to the main theme before the peaceful close in an unequivocal F sharp.

The Scherzo, in rondo form, burst violently out of this mood, and though there are contrasted interludes (including one of exceptional joviality) it is power and energy that dominates until this movement too closes with a deliberate slowing-down of tempo and a quietening of mood to prepare us for the third movement. Of this piece, Rawsthorne said that it “has about it that nostalgic character so much disliked by the immobile intelligentsia of today, who confuse this quality with the emotional mess of the last century.” The prevalent feeling of the music is tranquil and contemplative, with a few moments of emotional excitement – even the central *scherzando* part is light and airy until a dramatic turn of character to lead us to the closing *Adagio* section.

intensity, controlled but often turbulent. He was not a typical English composer – who in the post-war period was? – and his idiosyncratic style owes more to Hindemith and perhaps Roussel than to any native models. The quality of thought and meticulously polished execution shown in the best of his music – and that comprises a good deal of it – are more than ever welcome when “disposable art” is as much and as tiresomely in evidence as all the other disposables – the paper clothes, the cardboard crockery, the plastic container – with which our age is littered.

*Symphonic Studies* has always been one of Rawsthorne's more widely performed orchestral works, understandably. For it is concise, unproblematical, clearly structured, and well varied in its moods. It was first recorded (on 78s) immediately after the war, conducted by Constant Lambert.

It consists of five variations on or around thematic material propounded in a broad, somewhat Beethovenian *maestoso* introduction. The five ensuing studies, which are continuous, run: 1. *Allegro di bravura* – three bars of the *maestoso* opening – 2. *Allegretto*, of a chaconne-like character – 3. *Allegro di bravura* and thus linked with 1 but by no means a repeat – 4. *Lento*, opening with cadenza passages for solo wind and developing into a highly characteristic mood of restrained melancholy – 5. *Allegro piacevole* leading into a fugato, which is initiated by solo trombone, and concludes in music of great brilliance, only interrupted just before the final page by, again, a three-bar reference to the *maestoso* opening.

ALAN FRANK

*Street Corner*, commissioned in 1944 by the army entertainment organisation ENSA is light-hearted, tuneful, and at the same time entirely characteristic of the mature Rawsthorne. ‘Tuneful’ rather than full of tunes – for no-one ever whistled at streetcorners the main theme which emerges almost directly after the first lively flourish for full orchestra. Its phrases crowd in on one another, slipping in and out of loosely related keys, inverted or part-inverted (developments in Rawsthorne are rarely systematic or predictable). For once, the annotator's catchphrase: ‘all

material derives from the opening theme' could be demonstrated almost bar by bar – though note one late arrival; a brisk Habanera rhythm which plays an increasingly important part in later developments. From the third and fourth limbs of the original theme, a more regular sequential tune does emerge, to be treated grandly in the full tutti; ingeniously, in imitation or augmentation; expressively and smoothly, in the lyrical central episode (led by cellos). In *Street Corner*, as in the music of Rawsthorne's beloved Haydn, one thing leads to another with so much apparent ease and spontaneity that we are hardly aware how much ingenuity and contrivance lie beneath the music's conversational surface.

HUGO COLE

It is not widely known that Rawsthorne was, in his student days and for some time afterwards, a fine pianist – Michael Kennedy, in his *The history of the Royal Manchester College of Music*, records Rawsthorne as winning the Chappell Gold Medal for pianists in 1928 and as performing a wide variety of works including Falla's *Night in the Gardens of Spain* and (with Harry Blech) Beethoven's C minor Violin Sonata. So it is not surprising that he produced throughout his career a steady flow of works demonstrating his deep understanding of the piano, from chamber works and a regrettably small group of solo pieces to these two fine concerti.

The **First Concerto** exists in two versions: the 1939 original, scored for strings and percussion, and the later, full orchestral revision first performed in 1942 at a Promenade concert. It is entirely characteristic of the young Rawsthorne in its clarity and athletic energy, with less intensity perhaps than the *Symphonic Studies* but a touch more elegance and wit. In its three movements, scored with the utmost point, it shows clearly his allegiance to baroque styles, an important element in his musical make-up. The first movement *Capriccio*, opens with a vigorous call to attention on the timpani, upon which the piano plunges into brilliant toccata-like figuration. This entertaining chatter, with rhythmical interruptions from the orchestra, comes to dominate the movement, not abrasively but rather cheerfully

and flecked with delightful touches of wit (one notes the resourceful use of the xylophone among the orchestral devices). Though there are subtle hints in the direction of lyricism, the only real contrast is provided about half-way through by a bassoon, built up into a full orchestral statement, and then thundered out by the piano. This tune, typically Rawsthornian in its constant changes of key (or key implication), gives place to a brief moment of suspense and then a return of the opening chatter, with a final change to a faster tempo to whirl the movement away to its exhilarating close.

In the succeeding *Chaconne* (the choice of form once again suggesting a baroque influence), the prevalent mood is subtle melancholy, typically understated in its fastidiousness but deeply touching. The theme of the Chaconne is a series of eight brass chords heard at the start, modulating so that the next variation starts a semitone higher (F sharp instead of F) – the idea of changing the tonality for each variation runs throughout the movement, though handled differently as the music progresses. In the first variation, a simple, hauntingly beautiful cello theme is superimposed on the chaconne chords, and these two elements dominate the movement, the piano often deriving its expressive material from the cello tune and decorating it in various ways. There is one powerful climax shortly before the end, and the movement closes most imaginatively, the music seeming to disintegrate but coming together for one final, almost tragic cadence.

After this, one of the loveliest movements in Rawsthorne's output, his achievement in producing a finale so satisfying and entertaining is remarkable. It has the feeling of a rondo (the title, *Tarantella*, aptly suggests its character) and its headlong dash, a virtuoso display of instrumental delight, proceeds almost until the closing pages. Then the ebullience is chastened with a lyrical piano theme, taken up by the orchestra. The latter resumes the movement's main rhythm, but now with a darker undertone, and as it reaches a climax the brass powerfully state a phrase from the Italian leftist song *Bandiera Rossa*, associated with the Republican side in the Spanish civil war and an indication of Rawsthorne's early political involvement. The music dies down once more, and the concerto closes

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