

# TONIC

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## EDITORIAL

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It is time to celebrate. Bob Simpson would have been 100 years old now, still one of the most important composers of symphonies and string quartets in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of course with a considerable array of further compositions to his credit. But he was also an important writer on music, an important broadcaster (some samples of his broadcasting are available on <https://robertsimpson.org.uk/media/video/>), as well as an ardent advocate of whatever he believed in – pacifism, high culture in the radio, and the importance of tradition and sincerity in all doings. You may be unaware of the fact, but the Facebook community maintains a special ‘Robert Simpson: Composer’ group, with more than 200 members as of 15 March 2021; this is considerably more than the number of members of the Robert Simpson Society, and it is encouraging.

This volume of *Tonic* is to celebrate Robert Simpson – and how better do this than leave the word to those who knew him and wrote about him from a personal perspective, frequently from the perspective of a friend.

It is time to celebrate. Is it, in these worrying pandemic times? So many events in honour of Robert Simpson have had to be postponed or reduced in scope, and the remaining events may be hampered by a reduction of the number of listeners permitted or by travelling restrictions. Musical life should essentially be live, not just preserved on tape or digitally, ‘canned’ so to say, or ‘tinned’. Yet the number of live performances of music of Robert Simpson has decreased over the past twenty years anyway, and we can be grateful for any performance, even any ‘canned’ performance that comes to us. And while the Tippett Quartet continues their series of Simpson String Quartets performances in 2021 in Bromsgrove, this time ‘televised’ and available online for anybody all over the world, other events, such as those mounted by Leamington Music, have had to be reconceived more than once.

For this reason we might also have a look into the archival vaults and try and find out whether there might be any forgotten treasures. The internet, not least our own website <https://robertsimpson.org.uk/media/video/>, offers performances of the past – originally broadcast by the BBC, but since forgotten. You may find the 1967 Proms performance of Symphony No. 3 under Sir Charles Groves, or the 1998 Proms performance of the Piano Concerto with Piers Lane and the BBC Concert Orchestra under Barry Wordsworth – a particularly sprightly performance – but you may also find the premiere performance of Symphony No. 8 with the Statsradiofonien Symfoniorkestret of Copenhagen under Jerzy Semkow (1982) or the Flute Concerto with Susan Milan and the City of London Sinfonia conducted by Richard Hickox from the 1992 Malvern Festival. You will find much less chamber music online, somewhat surprisingly.

The lack of releases of new recordings of music of Robert Simpson – the most recent ones having been the *Allegro Deciso* for strings with the Orchestra of St. Paul's conducted by Ben Palmer (Somm) and the Cello Concerto with the dedicatee Raphael Wallfisch and the English Symphony Orchestra under William Boughton (Lyrita) – has led us to promote a CD of archival recordings from the Richard Itter Collection. Richard Itter (1928–2014) was the proprietor of the famous and somewhat spurious Lyrita Recorded Edition, which eventually turned to producing CDs. Since having been taken into licence by the Wyastone Estate (Nimbus Records), many important broadcasts taped off-air by Richard Itter have, under licence from the BBC, been made available on CD, and we are proud that now the premiere performances of Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6, of 1973 and 1980 respectively, are also published under this scheme. The number of Simpson broadcasts available in the Itter collection was not so large, and some of them (for example the first performance of the Piano Concerto with John Ogdon and the City of Birmingham Symphony under Hugo Rignold) suffer from poor sound quality. So the choice of these two performances was decided by consideration of (a) the best way to fill one CD, and (b) have the best possible sound. Many readers of *Tonic* may remember the performances in the Royal Festival Hall; there have already been some recollections online. Paul Ingram writes: 'That time in '73 when Radio 3 was excited that the Fourth and Fifth were being premiered close together, quite a bit of input from Hans Keller too, I recall his calling the Fifth a masterpiece that week. Wish the Beeb were still that good. The Fifth stayed in mind for decades after the broadcast, though I didn't tape it from radio, didn't hear it again till the Handley CD. The Fourth stands up too.'

I was very sorry having to do without the Fourth Symphony, premiered in April 1973 only seven days before the Fifth; it wasn't in the Itter collection, and it would have been too long for any easy coupling with another work (the original version of the Symphony takes more than 52 minutes as compared to the 46 minutes in the revised version recorded by Vernon Handley for Hyperion). All three works, the Symphonies Nos. 4, 5, and 6, were re-worked after these premiere performances, some of them considerably, so these first performances of Symphonies No. 5 and 6, more than forty years ago now, are important historical events which bring alive the impact the works had then.

The first two recollections in this issue of *Tonic* are more or less directly connected to this CD. Daphne Dorrell was the wife of Tony Dorrell, whose painting of Robert Simpson is printed on the CD front cover, recalls more private aspects, while Ian Craft, the renowned gynaecologist and deeply respected friend, recalls the gestation of the Sixth Symphony, which was to some considerable extent inspired by his research and which was eventually dedicated to him. Several members of the Robert Simpson Society, myself included, may recall the AGMs that took place in Ian Craft's premises in Harley Street.

We have Robert Simpson the composer. We have Robert Simpson the writer on music and the broadcaster (his own introductions into Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6 have been incorporated into the CD liner notes) – and we have, by chance, a paper on the writings of Robert Simpson by Florian Norbert Schuck which he gave, in advance of his prepara-

ROBERT SIMPSON

Lyrira

SYMPHONY NO. 5 LSO ANDREW DAVIS  
SYMPHONY NO. 6 LPO CHARLES GROVES



tion of his PhD thesis, in 2016 at an international musicological conference at the University of Mainz, which I attended. We fell into lively conversation, and he subsequently became a member of the Robert Simpson Society. His paper was previously published online, but I am rather certain none of our members will have come across it before now.

What else? You may have been asking yourselves why you didn't have an issue *Tonic* in 2020. The problem of lack of material for our journal has been evident for several

decades, and this was likewise the case last year. In spite of --? Did we miss something?

Yes, we did. We didn't celebrate 40 years of Robert Simpson Society in 2020. Of course it is difficult to celebrate socially distanced, especially anniversaries, when one wants to have a nice dinner and a good glass of something with people who have similar interests and likes. Our 2020 Annual General Meeting was indeed very well attended – albeit online only. Online meetings have the advantage that even people from abroad can attend – from very far abroad, such as the US or Australia or South Africa – or even Germany.

Our own anniversary has now been the occasion of David Jones's most worthwhile chronicle of the Robert Simpson Society – something that tends to be avoided by most authors as it requires an extensive amount of research and hard work, and quite an amount of tact and courage, in order to state facts without omitting the obvious inconveniences that once or twice might have occurred. You will see that the Robert Simpson Society has had its ups and downs, and it has achieved quite many things. First and foremost one may think of the ageless edition of recordings of works by Robert Simpson by the Hyperion label, from the smallest piano piece to all eleven symphonies and nearly all the chamber music. Without Lionel Pike, the most eminent Simpson scholar to date, both as a writer and a teacher, we would be far from where we are now in our knowledge of the composer Robert Simpson. We look with gratitude to Donald Macauley's biography, *The Power of Robert Simpson*, which was published in 2013, as was the 'symposium' *Robert Simpson: Composer. Essays, Interviews, Recollections*, with a foreword by Angela Simpson. And it is with great pleasure that we are looking forward to two books on Robert Simpson by Lionel to come out in 2021 – one on the Symphonies (*A Passion for Symphonies:*

*Robert Simpson (1921–1997)*) and another on Robert Simpson's 'Rasumovsky' Quartets Nos. 4 to 6. Also in preparation is the first volume of the writings of Robert Simpson on music: Beethoven, a project that Martin Anderson has been wanting to do for a long time.

I must not lose myself in giving credit to some, for I will always forget crediting others. In order to celebrate both Bob Simpson and the Robert Simpson Society, I have come back to a publication which has never been re-issued and never was available to the larger public – the so-called 'Black Book' containing recollections and obituaries, which was edited and compiled by Matthew Taylor and Douglas Gordon in February 1998. The persons whose recollections you here are able to re-read have nearly all been important figures in the operative business of the Robert Simpson Society, in the capacity of President or Vice President, or in any capacity as an officer in the society. Only one contribution, which arrived just in time for inclusion in this volume of *Tonic*, is new. These recollections offer very personal, frequently most lively accounts of Bob Simpson, bringing the man and the musician to life more immediately.

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FLORIAN SCHUCK  
*TRADITIONALIST THOUGHT IN BRITISH MUSIC:  
ROBERT SIMPSON'S PROMOTION OF NIELSEN AND SIBELIUS\**

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There are few musicians whose life and work reveal the cultural connections between British and Northern European music as clearly as Robert Simpson. A composer and writer of distinctive views and uncompromising opinions on art, Simpson not only left his stamp on twentieth-century musical life in the United Kingdom as the most important advocate for the work of Carl Nielsen and as an authority on Jean Sibelius, but also as the composer who strove most intensively to follow the paths of his two great Nordic colleagues, with unique results. Simpson's creative work parallels his aesthetic and analytical writings, in which he aimed to establish Nielsen and Sibelius as the classic exemplars of an evolutionary, anti-avant-gardist musical history, in the succession of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Bruckner. This constellation of figures and aesthetic assumptions gives rise to some valuable questions, which demand more detailed attention. Why are two Northern European composers of such great importance for a British one? What concept of music history underpins this model? And what more general views on music did Simpson seek to disseminate?

To illuminate Simpson's opinions and the historical context in which they emerged, we have to look at some characteristics of the development that British music underwent during the decades prior to his birth in 1921. It is not by accident that German musicology didn't pay much attention to the history and contemporary state of twentieth-century British music until a relatively late stage. The reasons for this lack of interest could be located in the historical relationship between German and British musical life as well as in the very different ways in which musical aesthetics and composing styles had developed in the two nations. By the time Robert Simpson was born it was already obvious that the musical tastes and practices of the German-speaking world had ceased to be a model for many British composers, and that an epoch of German stylistic domination had ended. For much of the nineteenth century, composition in the United Kingdom, viewed from German perspective, must have appeared little more than a provincial outpost of the Leipzig or Berlin conservatories, shaped by the fashionable classicist tradition of the time that took first Mendelssohn and later Brahms as its models. That Britain produced composers like William Sterndale Bennett or C. Hubert Parry, who could be characterized as true masters of the classicist idiom and whose music stands comparison with German contemporaries of similar thought, was no argument for the assertion of British musical

\* Paper presented at the XVIth international conference of the Gesellschaft für Musikforschung in Mainz in 2016, and published in 2018 as <https://schott-campus.com/robert-simpsons-promotion-of-nielsen-and-sibelius/> (part of <https://schott-campus.com/gfm-jahrestagung-2016-mainz/>). Reprinted with kind permission.

independence from the aesthetically conservative parts of German music life. When a new generation of composers appeared on the stage in the early years of the twentieth century, the influence of academic classicism began to fade, as it did in Germany, but in Britain, where anti-classicist tendencies, as they were represented in Germany by Wagner, Liszt and their followers, had come to influence much later, it left a weightier legacy: since these days traditionalist thoughts are a dominating factor of British music. The decline of German academism gave place to explore new concepts of musical traditionalism. This shift coincided with composers' growing national consciousness, and the search for more ostentatious national styles of composition increasingly began to occupy British minds around 1900. They explored the creative possibilities of folk songs and dances, and took greater interest in the music of Tudor and Stuart composers as they sought to revitalize their techniques. One of the principal ideas in twentieth-century German music history was the linear and organic progression from late nineteenth-century chromatic tonality to atonality, dodecaphony and serialism. The development of British music, however, didn't fit into this model of historical progress. Instead, it was the tendency to reconcile traditionalist and modernist aesthetics that remained a characteristic feature of British composition. All in all, the situation wasn't suitable for developing a radical British modernist wave, comparable to Schoenberg and his followers.

When Robert Simpson began his creative career after the Second World War, only a few British composers had adopted serialist techniques, and the neoclassical idiom of Hindemith, though it was important for the development of many composers, like Michael Tippett, never became such a dominant style as in Germany. Most composers had no interest in a radical break with nineteenth-century traditions and genres: different trends and schools existed, but they were less radically separated from each other than in Germany, and built their music on tonal principles. There was widespread interest in new methods of using tonality, and Robert Simpson was clearly a product of this cultural environment. Tonality for him, in the second half of the twentieth century, was still the fundamental condition for creating great music. And all great music, he believed, was rooted deeply in tradition. This traditionalism is shown in the genres in which he composed: between the mid-1940s and his death in 1997, he created a body of work dominated by 11 symphonies and 15 string quartets.

The maverick is not an uncommon figure in twentieth-century British music, and Simpson certainly belongs within this category. Alongside his compatriots, he appears a somewhat isolated figure: not only did he never write anything on a British national subject or for an official occasion, but nearly all of the elements which have formed the popular image of British music since the late nineteenth century are missing from his work. There are no references to the style cultivated by Parry and Edward Elgar in their ceremonial pieces, and there are no hints of folk songs, dances and marches, as they emerge in the work of Vaughan Williams. His conception of form suggests some relationship with the English Fantasy (or 'Phantasy') style, but this is never as apparent as, for example, in the music of Edmund Rubbra, Bernard Stevens, and some works by Benjamin Brit-

ten. Such resistance to the dominant trends of his native country's musical life leads to the conclusion that Simpson didn't assign any importance to the idea of being regarded as a British composer in an emphatic sense.<sup>1</sup>

Simpson's artistic aims led in another direction. His views on music were heavily influenced by the writings of Donald Francis Tovey, who was one of the last British composers who followed the Brahmsian path directly and rejected both modernist and folklorist tendencies. Tovey wasn't a model for Simpson in terms of compositional style, but rather as a theorist and aesthete. Like Tovey, Simpson was deeply attracted to the Viennese Classics, especially to Beethoven, and he learned to understand their art of composing through the essays that Tovey wrote on their works. In this way Simpson adapted Tovey's claims, namely that the fundamental character of a classical masterwork lies in its perfect handling of tonality, momentum and proportion. All of these factors are technical terms for describing the classical idea of 'unity in diversity' at different compositional levels: unity in diversity through the contrast between a principal tonality and its subordinate functions and other tonal centres; unity in diversity via the rhythmical arrangement of the work's individual sections; and unity in the diversity of the different parts of the work themselves, being geared to each other in terms of length. This makes Simpson, in succession to Tovey, an advocate of the idea of music as an art of movement in time, duration, and its articulation through harmony and rhythm.

Simpson thought of music as a manifestation of life, and he found Carl Nielsen's statement that 'music is life and like it inextinguishable' to be the precise summary of his own opinion. Simpson's idea of life was more biological than psychological. A perfect composition for him resembled an organism, in which all the elements worked together to keep the whole alive. It is not surprising, in this context, that Simpson was sceptical about the popular conception of music as a medium for subjective personal expression. Music, he believed, did not represent the concrete feelings or thoughts of the subject who had created it, but rather rendered the listener awestruck, and prompted an emotional response in this way.<sup>2</sup> The personal beliefs of a composer didn't matter, what was important was rather what they had achieved in practice. Simpson criticized nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers and their preoccupation with cultivating personal stylistic trademarks, which he believed resulted in mannerism rather than the creation of more classically beautiful works.<sup>3</sup> Personality was revealed not by what one wrote about oneself, but through one's deeds. So Simpson sought to be what he called an 'objective' or 'life-sized' artist;<sup>4</sup> that is, a composer, who attempted to be convincing not through the use of rhetorical devices but by creating a 'living' music, consistent with the ideals and assumptions described above.

<sup>1</sup> His biographer, Donald Macauley, points out that Simpson's socialist and pacifist views were the reason for his resistance to English musical nationalism, too: Donald Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson. A Biography*, Milton Keynes 2013, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Simpson, 'Composing' (1959), in: *Tonic* 14 (Autumn 2004), pp. 29-34.

<sup>3</sup> Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson*, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> Simpson describes his image of an ideal artist in *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, revised edition, London 1979, pp. 17-22.



Unlike Tovey, Simpson's traditionalist views didn't lead him into being a conservative composer in an academic sense. For him, progression and change were an inevitable part of historical development, and a composer was a product of his time and a successor to those who had preceded him. He should learn from them, but not try to imitate their style. While history progressed, new discoveries and designs changed the nature and shape of art: a great artist in this way is always an explorer. Simpson's idea of tradition aimed not to elevate a particular 'classical' style of composition, but to produce works of classical perfection out of the materials that the historical evolution of music had generated.

Simpson strongly disliked the atonality, dodecaphony and avant-gardist trends of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, because he saw them as a diversion from the classical ideal, a mannerist sequel to nineteenth-century romanticism.<sup>5</sup> That doesn't mean, however, that he disliked dissonance itself. Rather, his own music cultivated dissonance to a high degree, and chords that contain all twelve notes frequently find their place in his harmonic repertory, while traditional major-minor-tonality is found only in his earlier works, and mostly modified; the forms of his works are also often far from nineteenth-century conventions. Nothing in his work could have been written during an earlier epoch. And there were few countries except Britain where such a compositional style could have developed – apart from Denmark and Finland.<sup>6</sup>

Here we reach Sibelius and Nielsen, who, Simpson was convinced, acted both as the most important explorers of new musical paths and as the most perfect masters of classical composition in the first half of the century. In a comparative essay, written in their centenary year (1965), he described the two composers in the following way:

'Almost every aspect we examine reveals them as diametrical opposites, yet they are brothers and their differences in some deep way complete each other. This does not mean that either is in any sense an incomplete artist (two more comprehensively masterly musicians have not lived in this century) but that the two of them sum up the positive side of the human condition in northern Europe in their own time. What they have to say, moreover, is powerful and relevant now.'<sup>7</sup>

Both interested Simpson through their handling of tonality. He described Nielsen as the first significant developer of what he initially called 'progressive tonality' and which he later preferred to name 'emergent tonality', meaning the progression from one tonal centre at the beginning of a work to another, where it ends. Sibelius, Simpson points out, was a conservative in terms of the overall tonal layout of his symphonies, all of which end in the same key as that in which they began. There are nevertheless tensions between tonal centres within his works, but he resolves them in favour of a governing

<sup>5</sup> 'Musicians Talking. Symphonic thinking, avant-garde and romanticism', in: *Tonic* 11 (Summer 2001), pp. 7–24, especially p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> As it is revealed, for example, in Vagn Holmboe's and Joonas Kokkonen's music.

<sup>7</sup> Later worked into *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, this passage on p. 190.

tonality.<sup>8</sup> Both composers in their later works show a tendency toward non-classicist forms and athematism, which also became a characteristic of Simpson's own creative development. Nielsen's technique of generating harmony from interval constellations left its mark on him, as did Sibelius's art of assembling forms through the transformation of tempi. In the art of both he found alternatives to 'thematicism',<sup>9</sup> as he called the way of composing without notes unrelated to a main theme or motive as well as the tendency for music analysts to look at compositions only for motivic relations. Simpson's idea of musical organicism wasn't based on themes or motives. They were important as waymarkers in the course of a work, but couldn't form the work's basis, because motives and themes were themselves a product of the music's fundamental elements: harmony, interval, and rhythm. The more important factor for achieving musical coherence was the momentum of the music. Simpson hence challenged the dodecaphonist concept of organicism, which had developed principally from thematicist ideas.

In 1951, Simpson had joined the music department of the BBC, where he worked until 1980 as recording producer and broadcaster. He was very concerned with enlarging the audience's knowledge and their musical repertoire, so he took the opportunity to support composers whose works weren't often played in Britain. For example, he became the leading British advocate of Bruckner, promoted the unconventional symphonist Havergal Brian, and introduced some works by Vagn Holmboe to British listeners. Of course, he also used his office to work intensively for Sibelius and Nielsen, and engaged musicians, organized performances and planned broadcasts. In addition, he gave lectures about the composers and their music for both radio and television. It could be argued that Simpson championed Nielsen and Sibelius's work intensively, because he wasn't very satisfied with the music of many celebrated British composers. He disliked Elgar, 'the dreamy, religious romantic',<sup>10</sup> was no admirer of Britten, who 'always seems to me to take the easy way out',<sup>11</sup> and though he called Vaughan Williams a composer of 'sufficient stature', he used him in his Nielsen book as a contrasting figure to present the Dane as the greater master.<sup>12</sup> Considering the context for Simpson's commitment to the two Nordic symphonists, his advocacy not only aimed to install them as classics in the British musical world, but also acted as an aesthetic bulwark against avant-gardist tendencies, which were prominent in Germany and France and which became an object of interest for other British musicians in the 1950s. Because Sibelius had been established in Britain around three decades earlier, as writer and broadcaster he paid more attention to the lesser-known Nielsen.

Simpson, who became acquainted with Nielsen's music through records and scores shortly after the war, was not the first person to introduce the Danish composer to a

<sup>8</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 194, pp. 203–05.

<sup>9</sup> Some remarkable passages criticizing thematicism can be found in *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 216, and in his writings on Beethoven (for example in *Robert Simpson on Beethoven. Essays, Lectures, and Talks*, ed. Lionel Pike, Hull 1986, p. 38).

<sup>10</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Macauley, *The Power of Robert Simpson*, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 85.

British audience. Nielsen himself had made an impression when he conducted his music in London in 1923, but a more lasting interest in his work only came after the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra visited the Edinburgh Festival in 1950, where they played the Fifth Symphony. This concert was such a success that they were invited to London the following year to perform the Fourth. Simpson had not had any influence over these events, but he became the main driving force for much of the activity that followed.

Using the interest generated by the Radio Symphony concerts, Simpson tried to arrange a Carl Nielsen Festival, for which he undertook the task of writing an introduction to Nielsen's entire works. The festival never materialized, but Simpson's book, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, published in 1952, became a standard study of its subject.<sup>13</sup> In an extended second edition, which appeared in 1979, Simpson integrated the material on Sibelius from his 1965 Nielsen-Sibelius centenary essay, and so the volume became a study of both composers.

Viewing the present state of British musical life, Simpson may not have succeeded in achieving a complete paradigm shift in favour of his aesthetics of classical composition. But he surely helped Sibelius and Nielsen to become part of the regular repertory of British orchestras, and among the most popular and frequently performed composers of their generation. Simpson secured the rank of the one, and did decisive work to establish the rank of the other. Traditionalism in the Simpsonian sense is still strong in British music, and there are composers working today heavily influenced by Simpson's views and works, such as John Pickard and Matthew Taylor. In summary, then, Simpson's life-long campaign for his classical ideals, of which his propagation of Nielsen and Sibelius formed an important part, was not without success.

<sup>13</sup> Simpson, *Carl Nielsen. Symphonist*, p. 12.

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REMEMBERING ROBERT SIMPSON  
TWENTY CONTRIBUTIONS

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IAN CRAFT

What a tremendous character Bob Simpson was! Someone I always admired and respected.

Even now, as I quickly pen my thoughts to fax to the UK from Dubai, where I presently am, Bob's music surrounds me in the flat I rent from the Department of Health of the Government of Dubai. I spend six weeks a year here directing a fertility programme which was the first in the Gulf area.

However, even I, a dedicated follower, was surprised to find his CDs a few years ago in the modern Burjuman Shopping Centre in this eclectic city. Almost everything is here including his String Quartets, Symphonies, and other discs. This is surprising, since it's not that long ago that one had difficulty in finding his particular pure brand of music in established outlets in the UK. To find such a range here actually took me aback since the population receptive to his kind of modern European music is so small. My renewal with Bob every time I come here is something I value.

If my Father had lived another six months he would surely have recollected how Bob and I first came to meet, since it was he who first brought Bob to my attention.

I do remember being told that our families were very tenuously related – was it Bob's grandfather who married the sister of my Father's aunt!? There were references to medicine with Bob being a medical student (? in Liverpool) and a descendant of the famous obstetrician James Y. Simpson of Edinburgh.

I became aware of the fact that Bob was a composer and worked for Radio 3 at a time in my life when my own untutored musical interests were developing and because of these, and our indirect association, I telephoned to make contact and visited him at work. Thereby started a friendship which lasted till the end despite infrequent contact because of the demands of our respective careers and our different locations. I now regret that my intended visit to Eire never became a reality.

In my early teens I became interested in traditional jazz and later in the classics and in particular in the symphonic music of romantic composers. Bruckner appealed to me even before I knew Bob, but it was he who introduced me to Nielsen and I am glad that he did (was his haircut in any way influenced by Nielsen's?). It seemed quite natural that I would then come to appreciate Bob's very own individual and special brand of music and I have been hooked ever since.

It is difficult to pinpoint, as a non-musician, what it is about Bob's music which fires one up so positively. I simply appreciate what my ears hear and how the music moves my spirit. Identifying with the evolving and varied tensions within Bob's music seems so natural to an enquiring and scientific mind since this is the essence of life itself. Perhaps it is his matter of factness that I really identify with. To me, his music makes such a direct statement, it is not 'wishy washy' and that represents the man for me. Bob was a very impassioned man, who was prepared to stand up for principles without concern for his own self or image. He felt passionate about the perverse effects of honours and privilege which is something I easily identify with.

However, I sometimes wondered whether he saw things in too one-sided a way on the political front, especially during the Cold War with his support of Russia, since I reasoned that the rockets in Red Square were hardly likely to be filled with smarties. However, as I have grown older, I have increasingly appreciated his abhorrence of the destruction of war and of greed, and his pacifism. I particularly respect his allegiance with the common man.

It was our friendship and Bob's creative talent that led me to ask him to write a symphony around the theme of developing human life at the time that I was researching invitro fertilisation (IVF). Symphony No. 6 was the consequence and I value owning the score written with Nielsen's pencil. After this was written Bob asked if the LPO could commission the symphony in order to get a public performance and hence it received its World Premiere at the Festival Hall in 1980. I went with Bob to hear the only rehearsal with Charles Groves conducting. Subsequent performances with Vernon Handley conducting the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra prior to recording with Hyperion and, subsequently by Matthew Taylor, had his strong support. Whilst Symphony No. 6 remains special to me for personal reasons, I consider Symphony No. 9 to be a modern masterpiece of extraordinary proportions.

If I am in any way surprised by Bob's repertoire, it is his exclusion of the human voice, since I believe he could have filled this void so well. Perhaps he did not feel the need to enter this domain being such a purist, i.e. an academic's academic. He had no time for false pretensions or superficiality, so was his exclusion of the voice due to a distaste for presumed elitist pursuits?

Although Bob was naturally modest in public about his own achievements, I believe he was passionately proud of his work and had every reason to be. He was, in short, a fabulous character – his very own man and totally true to his ideals. He also had a wonderful sense of humour and some of the stories he could tell you about composers, conductors and events were so funny they would crease you up. On a personal level every word he uttered was loaded, so much so that one wanted to write them down for posterity, but it is his music which is his posterity. It speaks for itself and for those that loved him and it was a privilege to be in his presence and know him.

I met Bob in the late 1960s when Tony and I and our two children were living in Berkshire, but I already knew a great deal about him from Tony, from recordings of his music and from his book on Nielsen. They had met at one of Bob's lectures, and out of that meeting a great friendship developed which ended only with Tony's death in 1987. They had in common music and an intense interest in people, and consequently in what was happening in the world. Though my work took me away from home for long periods during the sixties and seventies, I have many memories of his vivid presence: Bob sitting quietly in a chair while Tony painted his portrait, Bob walking at an incredible pace along the then peaceful Berkshire lanes where you could still spot deer grazing and occasionally, in a copse not far from the house, hear a nightingale. Sometimes, as dusk fell, he would stop in his tracks and point out the various constellations in the evening sky. It was then I discovered that one of his passions was astronomy. He had a small observatory in his garden in Aylesbury and it went with him when he and Angela later moved to Ireland.

Then there were evenings when music was played at a volume only Bob and Tony could easily tolerate, followed by long discussions over the odd bottle of whisky – usually into the small hours – during which the talk ranged from – music to nuclear energy and vivisection, and the two would swap reminiscences and frequently hilarious stories. Bob often told me, then and later, that Tony was the most musically intelligent non-musician he had ever met. In the 1970s, no doubt on Bob's recommendation, the music department of the BBC commissioned a series of talks from Tony that were repeated later.

Our daughters loved Bob's visits and he enjoyed their company. At our elder daughter's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party he firmly ensconced himself behind the makeshift bar, saying he had always wanted to know what it felt like to be a barman ... But it was our animals that fascinated him, and once, when during an evening meal I was scolding our Labrador mongrel for anxiously watching each morsel as it disappeared from our plates, he remarked: 'If concentration could do it, Sootie could have written all Beethoven's symphonies'.

Small, wiry, energetic and uncompromising in every way, with a wonderful sense of humour and an infectious laugh, he was exciting and stimulating company and I shall always be grateful for his extraordinary ability to explain, or should I say open my mind to music that I found difficult or inaccessible, including some of his own.

When later we moved to London and then to Cambridge and Tony's health continued to deteriorate, we did not see so much of Bob. But we still met at concerts, at Bob's remarkable Fiftieth Birthday party to which so many of his fellow musicians and friends came to show their admiration and regard, and at first performances of his work, notably the Eighth Symphony dedicated to Tony and me, and the wonderful one-movement Ninth dedicated to his wife Angela.

We only really got to know Angela after our move to Cambridge in the eighties, and to know her was to love her. She and Bob complemented each other so well that after

their marriage Bob seemed to take on a new lease of life. Nearly every time we met it seemed he had either completed or was in process of writing a new work. When they told us they were planning to move to Ireland, we were both devastated. The physical distance this would put between us was daunting, particularly for Tony who was beginning to lose the battle against emphysema.

When Tony died in early 1997, Bob and Angela continued to be wonderful friends to me. When, shortly after, I went to Ireland with my younger daughter, Bob talked to me about Tony and how much he missed him. Siochain was a place with a magic all its own and I never cease to wish that Tony could have known it.

Frequently Bob and Angela took me for long drives, so that I got to know and love the part of Ireland where they lived – the Ring of Kerry, the Skellegs, the Valley of the Giants. And in the evenings there was always music. The house was a magnet for music lovers and musicians and I met many of their friends there.

When the stroke Bob suffered in 1991 left him partially paralysed, he was so determined to view his condition as temporary, it seemed at first as though with Angela's constant care and expert nursing he might recover. His mind seemed unaffected by the stroke, but the constant pain due to malfunction of the thalamus was such that after a while he was unable to disguise the fact that it almost blotted out his ability to think. In the end even Angela's constant care and continuous search for new treatments could not prevail against that agonising and stultifying pain. The memory I shall always treasure is of sitting with both of them listening to music or talking, in their room that looked out onto the ever-changing sea.

## JOHN MCCABE

The death of Robert Simpson, after many years of grievous pain, takes from amongst us a man who was integrity personified – his steadfast commitment to his own ideals (in life as in music) was unwavering, and an example to us all. So too was his courage in adversity – never one to suffer fools gladly, he refused just as firmly to allow illness and incapacity to rob him of his sense of humour, which remained pithy and rooted in practicality for as long as was possible.

These remarks also give as clear a thumbnail sketch of his music as I can muster – the music reflected the man. There was no compromise – nobody could have been clearer in his rejection of modes of composition to which he was antipathetic, though you always knew that his decisions of this kind were based on a deep knowledge of the music he was rejecting, and a profound consideration of its technical and philosophical character. Similarly, you always knew that whatever he did accept, and incorporate into his own music, was derived from an abiding love of it, stemming from an equally profound consideration of its significance.

His own work encompasses two immense creative journeys, through the symphonies and the quartets – there are many fine works outside these genres, but his most consistent endeavour and achievement lies within them. Though the techniques he employed have much in common across these genres, it has always seemed to me that there is something different about the music he wrote in them. It is as if the instruments used gave rise to the invention (which therefore does not arise merely from abstract musical considerations alone), leading to a commonality of feeling in the symphonies and a different but similarly consistent familial relationship among the quartets.

This is not a question of public (orchestral) versus private (chamber music) – on the contrary, some of his most intimate thoughts occur in the wide open spaces of his orchestral slow music, while some of his most fervent and compelling public utterances occur in the quartets (think of the massive Ninth Quartet, for instance). Within this important repertoire, in both genres, there is much in common between the works (there is no mistaking the Simpson voice anywhere, even when some of his strongest influences are most directly to be perceived), yet each is entirely distinctive within the canon. Every symphony, and every quartet, has its own world within the Simpson world – there is no sense of going over old ground once again.

Every Simpsonian will have particular favourites among the works, and I don't propose to court controversy by revealing mine. But just a few pieces demand mention, to show the range of his musical world. The scherzo of the Eighth Quartet, for instance, the three-minute 'mosquito' scherzo, a delightful, entertaining example of the kind of serious wit Bob enjoyed so much in Haydn and Beethoven. The sustained invention and intellectual power of the Ninth Quartet, the lyricism of so many of the others, the vigour and charm of the Second Symphony and the awesome control of space and tempo in the Third – these cover immensely varied aspects of his work. The Ninth Symphony in particular is an amazing achievement, with its great machines set in motion and insisting on our accompanying them faithfully through their complete revolution. The richness with which he explored these apparently simple formal, tonal, and structural devices was extraordinary.

He made for himself a unique position in music, by maintaining throughout his career a style that, conservative on the surface, became increasingly complex, sometimes even highly dissonant, without ever losing the directness of communication that, one suspects, was the wellspring of his inspiration. This is music that will last, and will be celebrated, long beyond the memories of those for whom Bob was a mentor, a friend, and above all an inspiration.



Although I had met Bob and admired his music for some years, it was not until I joined the BBC that our real friendship began and remained so precious to me to the end of his life.

Calling in to see him in his office in the Music Division at Yalding House soon after my arrival in London from Edinburgh, I found him ever busy but in far less cluttered surroundings than most of his producer colleagues, efficiently ministered unto by a quiet figure in the corner, totally involved in all that he was doing. That was Angela Musgrave, half of one of the most successful and certainly the most loved of production teams that BBC music has been fortunate to know. A few days later my telephone rang and Bob's unique voice growled: 'How about lunch?' In a restaurant near Great Portland Street we sat long and soon found our similar interests in music, views on artists and opinions on BBC policy, establishing a rapport which, to this day, I find astonishing, given that I shared so few of Bob's more deeply held views outside the field of music. Where others might have found an intolerance, this 'most lovable old cuss' later would discuss such non-musical matters with me in a reasoned way. Perhaps because he knew that I understood and respected his views, we never argued and certainly I always felt enriched after such exchanges. Of course, there was always cricket and he even tolerated my Royal Naval past – probably because he discovered that one of my favourite aspects of naval life at sea had been astro-navigation, and he was an astronomer!

One incident in particular from our BBC days can now be told. It concerned *The Proms and Natural Justice*.<sup>1</sup> To be sure of his facts in publishing such a document, Bob needed access to data not held by the Music Producers but for which there was no good reason why they should not be aware. Most of this was held in the department for which I was responsible. While Bob discussed with me his concerns and criticisms, later aired in the book, my provision of the necessary details was always within the bounds of justifiable discussions between BBC colleagues, there being nothing secret or confidential about any of it. However, Bob took every care to ensure that the responsibility for the use he made of such information could not be laid at my door nor that of any of my staff, many of whom had worked with him for far longer than I had.

This loyalty and concern for his friends was another great feature of his character, shown perhaps at its most public when he took it upon his shoulders to voice the feelings of virtually all of the Music Division and many others in the BBC against the Management's attitude during the BBC orchestras strike in 1981. Most producers could not afford to lose their jobs. His personal sacrifice in resigning in protest at that time did much to ensure continuing good relations between Music Division and its orchestras when normal working resumed, without any of the bitterness which otherwise might have ensued.

Bob spoke out against declining standards on Radio 3 long before the downmarketing of the last years and the malaise of Birtism. I am only thankful that Bob, tucked away in

<sup>1</sup> Robert Simpson, *The Proms and Natural Justice. A Plan for Renewal*, London 1981.

Kerry, could not hear Radio 3 during the last few years. How could he have borne it? I was privy to only a few of the Radio 3 meetings in the time of Bob and Hans Keller. After their day they were never the same and after the time of Ian McIntyre and Robert Ponsoby, not worth attending. For those of us with long enough memories, sitting in front of our wirelesses, we can give thanks for our memories of the Third Programme and for the foresight, imagination and contribution of Bob Simpson and his enlightened colleague friends, for whom the highest standards were paramount.

After the death of Bob's first wife, many of us secretly hoped that Bob and Angela would marry. I still remember the evening when my wife and I arrived for the BBC Symphony Concert at the Royal Festival Hall, to be greeted by Bob and Angela with the words 'we wanted you and Alex to be the first to know that we have just decided to get married'. It is true to say that everyone at the BBC who knew them was so delighted and felt that it was so right. How right indeed were we proved to be. In Angela, Bob had just the love, understanding and support that he needed – and what devotion to the end, which he never failed to acknowledge publicly and privately in those last difficult years.

I know that we have his great music, which will outlive all of us. We have our own precious memories of our friend. How we shall miss the ever warm welcome on meeting, the perceptive discussions, the wide-ranging topics, the oft-told jokes, the pithy quips, the apposite quotes and the scholarship imparted with deceptive simplicity, common sense and illuminating insight. Of course we will always remember that 'it doesn't matter if you can't tell C major from a rissole' but it does matter very much if you were lucky enough to have known Bob Simpson and counted him a true friend.

## LIONEL PIKE

It was right that Bob's obituaries should concentrate on his standing as a composer, lecturer and writer; and I heartily concur with all that appeared in these tributes. But there are many things about Bob the person that I shall always treasure: energy, of course, and sharp intellect; but also noble simplicity and humanity. When I last visited him in that lovely home in Killelton where there was always such a warm welcome, he would discuss the day's doings, looking out from the lounge at the marvellous Atlantic seascape, and say (as I poured him a whiskey), 'I like my drink poured by someone with Parkinson's'. As we left, he asked the children if they would come back to visit him again – he well remembered the hours sitting in front of a fire on the hearth-rug, concentrating like mad on a game of 'Connect Four' with my younger daughter (still under school age at that time).

His humour was infectious, and he loved a joke. When he was visiting professor at Royal Holloway I asked if he would give a class on his music. He suggested various topics, of which I chose 'Palindromes': he sent me a postcard accepting in the words, 'OK, I'll walk in backwards'. He did the talk with the utmost skill and aroused great enthusiasm

among the students, immediately striking up a close rapport with them. Afterwards I drove him to Heathrow, and made a decisive *rallentando* to avoid 'undertaking' a rather slow lorry just before leaving the motorway. Bob chuckled, and said it reminded him that he'd seen a lorry in Ireland with a notice on the back lefthand side saying, 'Pass other side'.

He was kindness itself; full of encouragement and helpful advice for others. On many occasions I have felt that I could not have gone on without his support. He still had a great deal to teach us, and I am sure that there was still a great deal of music in his head that he could not commit to paper. We mourn the irreplaceable.

## DAVID MATTHEWS

In the journal I kept as a student in 1965, I attempted an estimation of contemporary composers, most of which is insufferably pompous, but I'm glad to find that I'm not embarrassed by what I wrote about Robert Simpson. After praising the few symphonies I had then heard, I ended: 'Since he doesn't seek publicity, he doesn't get it. But his music is there to testify that even in this age there are a few serious artists.' 'Serious' is still the first word I would choose to describe Bob Simpson. The gravity of his music and his opinions makes the work of most other composers today seem a little trivial. Not that he lacked humour, but it was a serious sort of humour, too – the kind one finds in Beethoven. His seriousness was shared by his friends at the BBC, Deryck Cooke and Hans Keller: they were a triumvirate of marvellous musical minds who had enormous respect for each other, and a common concern for the moral force of music.

Performances of Simpson's music were few and far between in the 1960s, and like many of my generation I first encountered him as a writer, when as a schoolboy I borrowed his book on Nielsen from my local library. I was enthralled: Nielsen's symphonies came alive on the page; exact yet lucid analysis was combined with descriptions of wonderfully evocative power, like this passage on the great climax of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony:

'The side-drum, the very embodiment of frustrated savagery, breaks frenziedly away from all reason in a violent cadenza: the composer instructs the player to improvise "as if at all costs he wants to stop the progress of the orchestra." But the very fact that this destructive element is given full, anarchic play for its individuality is its own undoing: absolute self-licence spells disaster, and desperation is its own victim: the trumpets blare fiercely at their D with increasing urgency, and then the side-drum is swallowed up in a mighty and victorious climax in G major. Not only is it swallowed up; it is forced to contribute to the triumph. With a grandeur that may be quite soberly described as colossal, Nielsen sustains the music on this supreme level for four pages of slow time, with a great striding bass that seems to encompass the whole earth.'

In this book, and his later study of Bruckner's symphonies, Simpson set standards for writing about music which I think have not been surpassed. Musical analysis is notoriously difficult to make interesting: at one point, after a particular detailed passage in his account of Bruckner's Sixth Symphony, Simpson breaks out in exasperation: 'All this listing of keys and modulations naturally makes appallingly dull reading and gives no idea of the wonderful majesty of the music.' But it does. No-one but Simpson has been so passionately aware of the drama of tonality, or more eloquently able to express it in words. The excitement that Simpson's writing about tonality generated in me was a contributory factor to my own conviction to remain a tonal composer. Tonality was so interesting and so satisfying. Another reason was the evidence of the continuing validity of tonality in Simpson's own music.

In writing, almost exclusively, symphonies and string quartets, Simpson was deliberately placing himself in the great tradition of his heroes: Haydn, Beethoven, Bruckner, Sibelius and Nielsen; and he will ultimately be judged by their standards. He was not a composer to make things easy for himself. His Ninth Quartet is a good example. Variations and Fugue on a theme of Haydn: a congenial way to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Haydn's birth in 1982. Yes, but thirty-two variations; and because the Haydn minuet on which the variations are based is palindromic, all the variations are palindromes too, and most of them are canonic, just to add to the compositional challenge. As for the fugue, 'it is a big fugue', the composer writes, and he means it: 650 bars long, and it gets progressively faster like the first movement of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony, and like that piece it keeps changing as it accelerates until, by the end, it has completely transformed itself; but at the same time, as each line converges onto a unison G, the home tonality is confirmed with overwhelming finality. The Ninth Quartet lasts almost an hour and makes great demands on the listener, but it offers great rewards too. I can't think of a piece of contemporary music that better demonstrates a great musical mind working at full stretch.

## RONALD STEVENSON

Robert Simpson's sense of rhythm is organic, not motoric. Rhythm for him is not an infantile drumming, but the proportion of paragraphs of large harmonic thinking. This he shares with Sibelius. Simpson's melody is not ingratiating. He is no miniature lyricist; this is why he is a true symphonist. But he has the ability to write a simple tune, and said 'When I write a tune, I bloody well mean it' - a gutsy conviction lacking in most contemporary composers. His harmonic vocabulary includes the most prosaic chords, sometimes in unrelated and unexpected progressions; like a plain man uttering his own philosophy in common parlance. His harmony also contains uncompromising dissonance of a stark, rather than sumptuous nature.

He worked at counterpoint at a time when fewer and fewer composers were doing so (to music's detriment, for polyphony has been till now the continuing language of great music). It is his contrapuntal prowess that gives his music its symphonic current. His orchestration is that of a constructor, not that of a colourist. Its function is to clarifying his form. His brass writing is written 'from the inside', as he was formerly a trumpeter. Before that, as a boy, he participated in Salvation Army band music; a first bond between himself and the boy Carl Nielsen, who played bugle and trombone in the Odense military band in Denmark.

Simpson never conceived of his music as 'programmatic', though he did compose with analogies in mind: often analogies drawn from biological or astronomic processes (he was a keen amateur astronomer). The intonations of his music are certainly Nordic. Anyone who knows the common language of very different Scandinavian composers will recognise their kinship to the sound of Simpson's music.

His maternal Dutch and paternal Scottish racial background converged in his solidity of character and independence of spirit. If I were to characterise Simpson's work in one epithet it would be 'integrity'. In a fragmented age, those who still value the humanistic tradition will prize this quality and the music which expresses it. Our knowledge of the nature of genius is limited, but I am convinced that one of its essentials is energy. Simpson had this (one of his works for brass band is entitled *Energy*.) The energy basic to his industriousness, his intuitions plus the craftsmanship needed to embody them in musical forms, his aggressive anti-pessimism – all these things indicate his genius. He was congenitally incapable of experiencing or transmitting boredom. Whereas the argument of the earlier works concerns polarities of tonality, the later works explore tensions of pitch intervals. His concern with proportion in sonic structures is paramount; latterly he was concerned with the 'minute particulars' which William Blake believed to be the hallmark of genius.

Simpson's music will live and its significance will be increasingly perceived, if only mankind does not destroy itself. If the graph of modern history, from its trough of despond, can take an upward turn, his music will come into its own.

## HARRY NEWSTONE

My first meeting with Bob Simpson over a half-century ago might be called serendipitous. We were both browsing in a record shop in Shaftesbury Avenue and got talking. He told me that he was studying composition with Herbert Howells and having myself just left Dr Howells half-an-hour earlier, a bond was immediately established and I was there and then invited to Bob's home to listen to records. On arrival, I was played the Fourth Symphony of Bruckner of whose music I was then totally ignorant. He told me later that he always did this to new acquaintances – 'testing for Bruckner' he called it. My own reaction must have been satisfactory because I was invited back for another listening session a few days later – and so began a long and cherished friendship.

It was the middle of World War II and Bob was on the staff of a Civil Defence First Aid Post near his home in South London. The Post needed a driver and I needed a job; I applied and was hired. I was allocated a room in Bob's house and we were able to spend our days off duty listening to and talking about music and going together to Dr Howells for our lessons. We also kept a portable gramophone at the First Aid Post and when there were no air raids we played records of a great variety of music in one of the air-raid shelters. We each put two shillings a week into a kitty and would take turns in choosing our next purchases, and these records (78s in those days) were our most prized possessions. In the back garden of the house there was an Anderson air-raid shelter; there the record collection was kept for safety while we slept in the house.

One day, Bob suggested that I might like to listen to a rarely-played Haydn symphony to be broadcast the next day. It was No. 49 (*La Passione*) and it was unlike any other Haydn symphony I'd ever heard; in those days only a few of his more popular symphonies were regularly played, and so began my lifelong interest in this great but, at that time, shamefully neglected composer. It must have been around 1946 that Bob had the idea of forming a society to explore the considerable repertoire of music that was hardly if ever heard but deserved to be. With Bob as Artistic Director and myself as Secretary, the Exploratory Concert Society for the next few years put on performances of music by a large variety of composers (Busoni, Reger, Medtner, Nielsen, Brian among them) supported by a subscribing membership and a minuscule grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain. By the spring of 1949 we had gone as far as our limited financial resources could take us and it was decided to wrap up the society with a bang by putting on our first (and last) orchestral concert of rare Haydn symphonies; and so the Haydn Orchestra was born, giving its first concert on 19 May 1949 in Conway Hall of the Symphonies No. 28, No. 46 (played before and after the interval because of its remarkable nature) and No. 73.

Bob's advocacy of unjustly neglected music is now well known, and during his years at the BBC he produced and often personally presented works that we might otherwise never have heard, not least in the imaginative series 'The Innocent Ear' which he devised. His writings on Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen and Havergal Brian have become standard references and are models of perceptive and just as important) human commentaries on great music and the great men who created it, worthy to stand by the illuminative writings of Donald Tovey. For Beethoven, above all others, Bob had the greatest reverence and it is no surprise that his own twin series of fine symphonies and string quartets should form the core of his output. His firm belief that tonality and movement are basic and inexhaustible resources in musical structure gives his music a tensile and creative strength that will surely guarantee its longevity.

It is inevitable that all music, even by celebrated composers, did not please him. Delius he found 'spineless', the romanticism of Rachmaninov hardly moved him, technical facility made him suspicious and tended to minimize his appreciation of a composer's other qualities. Atonal and wholly aleatoric music he thought 'blind alleys' and an 'abandonment' of a composer's creative responsibilities. These strictly held views, which some

might see as blind spots, were not the result of prejudice or ignorance but the conclusions of a studied assessment of qualities in others that did not coincide with his own self-disciplined ethos.

Never the one to take an easy path if his conscience dictated otherwise, Bob will remain in our memories as a man in whom impeccable integrity, great humour and inspired creativity, to say nothing of the fortitude of the last few years, came together in a person of a wholeness all too rare in our time.

## MATTHEW TAYLOR

With the death of Robert Simpson on 21 November 1997, Britain has lost one of its leading composers and most forceful personalities. Central to his output are the cycle of eleven symphonies and fifteen string quartets whose mastery of organic growth and grandeur of design are easily worthy of comparison with Shostakovich. Simpson was blessed with the rare ability to redefine symphonic thinking from a completely modern perspective, proving that the form is just as durable, vital and crucial to our culture as it was in the era of Haydn or Beethoven.

His piano music reveals a craggy, uncompromisingly individual keyboard style stemming ultimately from the great contrapuntalists: Bach, Bach-Busoni even, the Beethoven of the 'Hammerklavier', later Nielsen and Reger. The works for brass band comprise such an impressive corpus that Simpson easily surpasses all his contemporaries in this field. His three concerti, for piano (1966), flute (1989) and cello (1991),<sup>2</sup> reveal a vivid identification with the human qualities of the instruments concerned, combined with an advanced degree of structural innovation.

Simpson's finest works have a timeless quality and monumental stature placing him in a unique, unchallenged position in terms of late 20<sup>th</sup> century music. The Ninth Symphony, for instance, radically reassesses the concept of modern symphonism. It is cast in one continuous movement, lasting nearly 50 minutes, and contains one basic pulse which remains consistent throughout. Within this vast span, Simpson demonstrates the colossal power and versatility of his mature language, opening with an austere Brucknerian nobility in the first movement, through to a central climactic scherzo of titanic energy, to a final set of variations of epic dimensions. The calm coda which constitutes the last four minutes of the symphony achieves an ethereal beauty surpassed only, perhaps, by the closing bars of Sibelius' Sixth Symphony. When listening to a work as impressive as Simpson's Ninth, the tired theory that 'the symphony is dead' seems an utter absurdity. Equally absurd is the view (less frequently encountered now) that Simpson was a 'conservative tonalist'. Simpson's natural mastery of his particularly individual moulding of tonality in the earlier works showed that it really had the power to be as passionate, communicative

<sup>2</sup> Here one must not forget Simpson's Violin Concerto of 1957-9, which Matthew Taylor, financially supported by the Robert Simpson Society, revised in 2015, after the composer had withdrawn it with the intention of rewriting it himself.

and compelling as in the works of Beethoven, Brahms or Bruckner. It was certainly no 'easy' option. Anyone who knew Bob was quick to realise that there was nothing remotely 'conservative' about him. In 1986 he and his wife Angela moved to the South West coast of Ireland, thereby escaping the moral, spiritual and cultural decline all too evident during the Thatcher era.

Robert Simpson was a profoundly original thinker and a vigorous opponent of 'received opinion', especially in relation to post-war music. 'Scepticism is important,' he once told me 'it should be taught in schools'. Scepticism, not cynicism. His music never indulged in pseudo-intellectual imagery, quirky gimmicks or colouristic doodling; rather he infused a fierce vitality into the traditional and well-loved forms such as the string quartet, the concerto and the symphony. He was dismissive of temporary fashion. Fearless integrity and honesty infused everything he did.

## JOHN PICKARD

The music of Robert Simpson breathes life in every phrase. Indeed, so intensely, passionately, pulsatingly alive are those mighty symphonies and string quartets that it is scarcely conceivable that their creator should now no longer be with us. Yet that is the reality which must be faced and Robert Simpson was nothing if not a realist. He believed that when the human body dies that really is the end: we do not live on.

And yet, in a very real sense he does live on. In a profound article written in 1980, Hans Keller (his great friend and intellectual adversary, whose protean musical energies were similarly cruelly curtailed through debilitating illness) wrote of the unusual correspondence between the man and his music. Put simply he believed that there were broadly two types of artist: the 'naive' artist, to whom the ideas happened, and the striver, who went out and made them happen. These two extremes he found exemplified in the work of Mozart and Beethoven respectively and, needless to say, Simpson fell emphatically into the latter category. Keller went on to suggest that for the naive artist any attempt to forge a link between art and life is simply irrelevant. For the striver, however, the two were utterly indivisible. In Simpson, Keller identified an artist for whose personal outlook and creative output 'the entire history of music does not show as close an integration between the two ... He treats his life with the uncompromising thematicism of a work of art, and he does not allow his art to grow without equally rigid reference to the purpose of life.'<sup>3</sup> If one accepts these observations (and I very much doubt whether anyone who knew the man and the music reasonably well would not), then Robert Simpson is very much still with us, in his writings, in his music and in the brilliant and humane insight into the world which all who knew him are privileged to have shared.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Keller, 'The man and the music', published in *Tonic* 1/2 (1981), p. 9, reprinted in *Robert Simpson: Composer. Essays, Interviews, Recollections*, ed. J. Schaarwächter, Hildesheim: Olms, 2013, p. 22, and in *Essays on Music*, ed. C. Wintle with B. Northcott and I. Samuel, Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 116.



About fifteen years ago Simpson said he believed that every one of us leaves some trace behind and that each individual must determine whether that trace is to be something positive or not. This was the essence of his humanism and it found concrete expression in his creative output.

Although he had profound doubts about mankind's prospects, his music spoke of a passionate belief in the future, however provisional, however imperilled. I have no doubt that when he wrote he was writing for posterity – something to which fewer and fewer artists are prepared to commit. Hence his legacy: a beacon of sanity, seriousness of purpose and integrity amidst an encroaching sea of mediocrity, flippancy and musical nihilism.

His many friends will miss the man terribly. We will miss his warmth, dry wit, salty humour, outrage at the folly and viciousness of humankind, his generosity and his kindness. But we will be reminded of all these qualities whenever we hear his music, which will, I believe, survive as a permanent and living memorial to a great and noble spirit.

#### DAVID CURTIS (Coull Quartet)

The Coull Quartet had the great good fortune to be able to work with Bob over a period of about ten years, starting when he was still working at the BBC. One of our first meetings was in London, where we were due to record works by Rubbra and Brahms. At that stage the string quartets of Edmund Rubbra were unknown to us and, I suspect, to much of the listening public. Typical of Bob, he had asked us to record one of the quartets by Rubbra. Always ready to support and champion other composers whom he felt had been unjustly neglected, he never suggested that we should perhaps look at some of his own quartets.

It was at the suggestion of Mike George, fellow producer and close friend of Bob's, that we tackled the seventh quartet, an immediate revelation. When we celebrated our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary the obvious choice for a commission was Bob. By happy coincidence this was also his Tenth Quartet, subtitled 'For Peace'. At this time there was considerable public disquiet about the arms race; cruise missiles were being deployed at Greenham Common amid extraordinary demonstrations and scenes of tight security. In typical fashion Bob responded in the way that perhaps all artists with conscience should – he composed a work that encapsulated the ideals of peace as opposed to conflict. Always an entertaining speaker, we invited him to talk about his quartet at a number of our concerts. He delivered his message that we must not choose the road to conflict and destruction clearly and forcefully, but always quietly. He always left his audience deep in thought and not a little discomforted by the message.

That was one of Bob's strongest characteristics – his absolute integrity, whether discussing politics or late Beethoven. It was obvious to all who worked with him that the Beethoven canon of quartets occupied a special place in his affections. On many occasions

he would work with us on one of his own quartets and then say, 'right, let's get down to some real music', and we would spend the next few hours working on one of the slow movements from the late quartets. Again the word integrity comes to mind: never allowing self-indulgence at the expense of the architecture of the music, always reminding us to be conscious of the structure and form within which we had to perform; adhering to a firm and informed idea of the composers intention rather than indulging in self-satisfying whims.

Bob's sense of humour was never far away, his gruff chuckle always ready, especially if he could have a joke with the performers – at times very much to our cost! On one occasion we were working on his Twelfth Quartet when he insisted that we should read through the as yet rather unprepared second movement. Unfortunately, our viola player Philip had copied it out and inadvertently copied a line twice. The rest of us finished more or less together leaving Philip furiously sawing away for several bars on his own, much to Bob's huge amusement. Another typical comment: on being asked about the accents in a scherzo movement 'just sock every note on the bloody nose'.

We all miss Bob – and feel a sense of promise unfulfilled. With the Coull we had discussed the idea of a string octet, and I had also approached him about a possible violin and viola concerto. Such things were sadly not to be, but we still have the most outstanding legacy of string quartets and quintets. Bob added immeasurably both to the chamber and symphonic repertoire and, through his books, essays and coaching sessions, communicated a deeper understanding of some of the great works that were his real passion.

We were privileged to have known and worked with him over many years. There is a real sense that we have lost not only a fine composer and a good friend, but a man of stature and integrity, a man of conscience whose courage, strength and determination make us all the richer.

## DICK EDWARDS

My first encounter with Bob was in 1947. I saw an announcement by the Exploratory Concert Society of a lecture on Bruckner's Seventh Symphony to be followed by a gramophone performance of the complete work. I was immediately struck by the personality of the lecturer, one Robert Simpson. He knew so much about the music, and was able to communicate his enthusiasm so well. I therefore hung behind, and after most of the audience had dispersed I ventured to introduce myself. I told him that I had been recently discharged from the Army and had brought back with me a quantity of records, many of these being of Bruckner's music. He was very interested, and from that time on, until I had to leave London, we spent many happy hours of listening together.

Much happened to prevent our meeting very often over the following years, but I did visit him from time to time when he was living in Muswell Hill.

It was there that I heard my very first LP, of Toscanini conducting Brahms. On one such occasion when I knocked on his door, he let me in and introduced me to General

Eisenhower. For a few seconds I was completely taken in, only to be told that his visitor was a distinguished Danish novelist who bore an uncanny resemblance.

When he moved to Chearsley, and I to Colchester, I still continued to visit him. Colchester and Chearsley are exactly 100 miles apart, and whenever I had more than just a weekend I used to ride there on my bicycle. Eight hours to get there and ten back, the wind being against me for the return journey.

I learnt so much there, as he tried me out on many 'Innocent Ear' projects (often 'Ignorant Ear' as far as I was concerned). Also I heard much of his own music. One unforgettable memory is of Bob, behind closed doors, working on the Clarinet Quintet. I, stripped to the waist on a hot summer day, raking the grass from his newly-mown lawn, listening to him trying out chords on the piano. Yes, in those days he did use the piano a bit.

So many meetings, so many memories. Through him I met many distinguished musicians, and I remember with gratitude the day I spent at the Albert Hall on the occasion of the first professional performance of the 'Gothic' Symphony of Havergal Brian. Bob gave me the job of looking after the aged composer telling me to make sure he didn't get too tired. Some hope! He was in great form, telling me of his encounters with Elgar and Richard Strauss. At the same time he was busy signing autographs for all the children of the Orpington Junior Choir!

I lost immediate contact with Bob for ten years or so, though we did keep in touch by telephone. This was due to Squibs (the affectionate nickname for his first wife) having become rather frail and unable to cope with many visitors. It was during one of these calls that I suggested to him the idea of a Robert Simpson Society.

Much happened to alter the course of Bob's life from 1980 onwards – his resignation from the BBC, the death of Squibs and later on his marriage to Angela. We all thought that they would remain at Chearsley where he would continue to compose and be close enough to London for other musical activities. This was not to be. Bob was always full of surprises and not all of them musical ones. A holiday visit to Ireland became a turning-point in their lives. They fell in love with the country and the people of Kerry and made immediate plans to move there.

All these many friends who had expressed dismay at this sudden move were most pleasantly surprised. 'Siochain', their spacious house commanding a spectacular view over the Bay of Tralee, became a place of pilgrimage, where we could listen to great music and partake of much spirited conversation, not to mention the good whisky and the superb vegetarian cuisine. Holidays, year after year in those days, were planned around Bob.

He has gone now, and we are left with our memories. Memories of a man of the utmost integrity, spiced with wicked but never cruel wit and humour. A man with a passionate concern for the fate of the world, and an equal concern for its less fortunate inhabitants. This is exemplified by his many years of service as a prison visitor, and his active participation in humanitarian causes such as Amnesty International and CND.

Farewell, old friend.

I first met Bob when I attended one of those marvellous music weekend courses at Missenden Abbey in January, 1973, when he and Basil Lam took one composer per weekend and spoke, with musical illustrations, of their music and lives. It was the weekend devoted to Beethoven. I became hooked, not only on their immense knowledge of the composer but on the interplay between them. If I remember rightly, Bob was always encountering difficulties with the tapes and turntables, which all added to the hilarity of the weekend! From thence onwards, I always booked for the next music weekend, secure in the knowledge that I would gain an insight into the composer and his music which would not otherwise be available to me.

After Basil Lam's death, Bob continued to return to the Abbey at least twice a year, and I grew to appreciate his unique and wonderful powers of musicianship and dry – and wicked – sense of humour. Alongside grew friendship and I met his first wife, who sadly died, and then Angela. I think Bob found me interesting as someone, God forbid, who actually admired and followed Mrs. Thatcher! My Conservative politics he could just about tolerate, also my Catholicism. We had many hours of quite heated, but always well reasoned, debates on contemporary beliefs. We did, however, share a deep knowledge and love of sport and in the last few years I made a point of staying with them during Wimbledon and Test matches, when we could talk for hours on the merits and faults of the competitors and their playing tactics. I tried to keep up with his great musicianship, well aware that mine, though rooted from childhood in my family's professional music background, was strictly amateur, albeit just as deeply held. Almost instinctively I recognised his genius as a composer, and I never ceased being moved by his greatness. This was re-enforced when I attended the series of chamber-music concerts given by the Delmé Quartet at Brunel University in the 1970s, when his quartets were played alongside Beethoven's. Subsequently, whenever possible, I attended performances of his symphonies, including the premiere of his mighty Fifth, and of his chamber music in London and elsewhere.

When Bob and Angela moved to Ireland, amidst some misgivings of his English friends, I thought it might be the end of our friendship. I need not have worried. With their never-ceasing hospitality, all his friends were invited to stay, me included. I also became hostess to him whenever he was lecturing at Missenden Abbey. I provided a bed and vegetarian meals, and ferried him to Luton or Stanstead airports on his return to Kerry, and loved entertaining him. He and Angela invited me each year, right up to his last few months, to stay at their marvellous cottage, literally on the Slieve Mish Mountains overlooking, the Bay of Tralee, at Killelton. I was allowed to indulge my craving for shell fish, either at Fulton's in Dingle or at Spillaine's, though they both declined to join me in such barbaric past-times! Each year, I looked forward to these visits as some of the happiest moments of my life. Of course, I listened to his jokes: hilariously funny if often crude and racy, evoking winces, but his reminiscences of his days as a music producer at

the BBC were gems of pure historical value about composers, players and conductors who were hitherto only names to me.

I truly loved the man, and he will be so deeply missed by me as by his other friends. Thank you for giving me such a wonderful twenty five years of friendship.

## BOB HILL

I first saw Bob at a lecture he gave on the symphonies of Nielsen sometime in the early 1960s at Luton. He was asked by one member of the audience why he had talked about Nielsen rather than about his own music and (as far as I can recall) he replied, rather crustily, that he didn't like talking about his music and preferred to talk about music that was more important. And then an elderly, grey-haired woman stood up looking confused. Bob walked over to her, said something to her and, taking her gently by the arm, led her out of the hall. I had no idea at the time who this woman was but I was struck by the contrast between his previous crustiness and his compassion.

I remember my first meeting with Bob which was in the Chapel of the Royal Holloway College, Egham back in February 1989 where he was giving a talk on *Eppur si muove*. Pam Bacon introduced us, whereupon Bob leant forward and growled 'She's a fascist you know' which rather took me aback. Then I realised that they were both smiling. It was one of those moments when a fraction of time can give you a whole history. These were close friends. I, a stranger, had been read like a book and had been accepted in the intimacy of his remark, as a friend. During our conversation I made the mistake of referring to the Robert Simpson Society as being 'his society' meaning the one that bore his name. 'It's not my Society', he said gruffly. 'Nothing to do with me. They're a bunch of nutters.' But it was clear from the recital that followed that he thought of us as anything but that. Each one of us was given a photocopy of the score; one detail in what turned out to be a carefully thought out and memorable presentation.

This meticulous attention to detail was evident later that year at the seminar held at his home in Ireland. The amount of time and energy that he and Angela must have spent in ensuring that our stay should be as comfortable and as informative as possible can only be guessed at. He was genuinely surprised that so many of us should want to travel so far just to listen to a week of his music. Each morning he would speak for just under 45 minutes, without notes, on one of the works, illustrating his talk with extracts played at full volume through massive speakers and with music examples projected through his video camera on to a large TV screen. Most memorable was the talk on the Ninth Symphony. 'This is the one I didn't write', he began. 'This one was written by Angela.' He was joking of course, but only half joking, and we understood perfectly what he meant. Just before he played the whole symphony for us, Angela came in from the kitchen and sat on one of the dining chairs. As the symphony began, Bob went over to sit on the floor in

the cradle of her legs and they listened together, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders. It was a week to remember with the intimate atmosphere of a family reunion, and on the final day, as I drove round the side of the bungalow to leave, both Bob and Angela came out from Bob's study to wave their farewells.

Rosemary Few and I stayed with Bob and Angela for a week in May 1996 and this was to be the last time that we were to see him. He and I would sit together listening to music, either Beethoven or the late quartets of Schubert. On the last occasion, we listened to the Schubert Quintet in C. At the end of it he started to read a magazine article and then looked up, evidently in great pain. 'Do you know of Paul Robeson?', he asked. I said that I did. 'A great singer', he said. 'I have this song of his going over and over in my head; "Nobody knows the trouble I feel".' He paused and then went back to his reading. Later, he revived a little and Angela brought in a CD of the Constant Lambert Piano Concerto that Ted Perry had sent to him. He listened to it attentively and by the end his spirits had lifted. 'You know', he said, 'That is a very good concerto'.

He once asked me in a letter whether I thought that, somewhere in the immensity of the universe, there might be a world like ours where intelligent beings lived together in peaceful harmony, and where the idea of wars would be inconceivable. I do not recall my reply except that in it I missed the point of his words. Some time later, after a performance of the Fourth Symphony, a member of the audience came up to me. She introduced herself as a friend of Bob's from the days when they were together in the peace movement. 'And how did you enjoy it?', I asked. 'I didn't like it one bit', she replied. I explained that it might take time to understand. 'Oh, I understood it', she exclaimed, 'but why does he have to be so aggressive!'. Later, I thought, no, not aggression, but a fierce joy; a Promethean affirmation of humanity despite all evidence to the contrary, which shines through all of his music. The home that he and Angela created in Ireland was named Siochain, meaning Peace, and the name permeated the whole bungalow affecting all those who stayed within it; peace, not meaning just a state of inactive rest, although rest has its part, but meaning an active coming together in the energetic joy of creation.

After a particularly bad day at work, I would sit in the evening and listen to the recording of the Seventh Quartet and at the end of it feel renewed and at peace with the universe. Music as therapy perhaps but I would prefer to think of it as joining in Bob's certainty of the essential goodness of humanity and, through his life-affirming music, his hopes for a better world.

KEITH BENNETT

Unlike many members of the Society I cannot claim to have been a close friend of Robert Simpson nor even a friend. What I would assert is that I have been a friend of Bob's music since the early fifties when Sir Adrian Boult's pioneer recording of the First Symphony became available.

I first met Bob in the mid-1950s when he was giving a talk at a weekend school on what was then the only Symphony. This was held at the oast home of a mutual friend, the late David Gow, another composer, whose Violin Sonata is well worth getting to know. Bob endeared himself to me with his no-nonsense approach and also the way in which he took down one of those hunting horns which one sees in antique shops and played a hefty part of *Brandenburg* No. 2!

For my part, I defended his Symphony when some of the school said his music was tuneless, no doubt humming that slow section (what Matthew Taylor has described as 'very restrained and pensive'), no doubt in the wrong key. Our next brief meeting was at the session held in Barking Assembly Hall on 5 July 1970 when Jascha Horenstein was conducting the LSO in the first recording of the Third Symphony. I recall that Bob was full of praise for orchestra and conductor commenting that 'Jascha understands this music': he was later to dedicate the Fifth Symphony to the London Symphony Orchestra.

At that first meeting, Bob must have mentioned his Second Symphony and when Robert Walker announced in the December 1996 issue of *The Gramophone* that RCA were to record this together with the Seventh I contacted Bob (through Angela) with an idea of three interviews/articles (I was then music correspondent for the Greater London Council's house magazine) along the lines of a discussion on such topics as 'The symphony is dead' (can't you just hear Bob exploding?); then Bob's resumes on the two symphonies, and finally my review of the recordings. Sadly, the recordings did not materialise so the idea was shelved.

When the Robert Simpson Society was formed I was privileged to be asked to serve on the Committee, and perhaps played a small part in getting the idea of recording projects accepted as a prime aim. Later, when my old friend, colleague and Committee member, Ray Few (then the GLC's Music Adviser), planned to put on some of Bob's quartets with the Delme at Ranger's House, I belted down the corridor to put in my plea with the Director, Lord Birkett, who, fortunately, was very musical (not that Ray needed any assistance in putting the case, but allies can help a little if doubts start appearing).

Today, I would applaud the Committee's initiative in attempting to get Bob's music to a younger generation by approaching music's training establishments. It's preaching to the converted to say it, I know, but the music is worth it.

MICHAEL BENTLEY

Robert Simpson's music has been special to me for nearly ten years now, ever since I was first bowled over by the Ninth Symphony. It's hard to express just why his music impresses me so powerfully (apart from the conviction that he is a great, or at least very nearly great, composer), but it's my impression that it expresses something very special in the context of our present culture.

For me it has no contemporary parallels, except perhaps the equally wonderful music of Vagn Holmboe, with which I feel it has a certain kinship. I know that Simpson's music is 'abstract', unprogrammatic; and what I'm writing in this little piece is clearly a very subjective reaction to it. But I thought I would try to express something of why I feel so strongly for this music, despite the fact that I often struggle to get fully to grips with it. I find it quite awe-inspiringly tough and complex, and though I have all the Hyperion CDs, I still have to catch up with much of the music on them.

Like Simpson himself, I have long had a deep interest in astronomy, and I always feel that his music reflects something of the burning energy of the universe, as well as the awesome feeling of stillness one can get from looking at vast starfields (whether through a telescope or just by looking up). When I first got to know the Ninth Symphony, my instinctive reaction was that it was 'like a planet forming'; and although I don't know very well how planets form, something about the music must have given me that impression – not being a musician, I don't exactly know what it was. Perhaps something to do with an increasingly complex order and cohesion being gradually built up by implacable forces? The incredible energy of it all feels both inexorable and quite beyond the scale of everyday life. Yet it clearly has a human dimension above all, without which we couldn't be so deeply moved. The Ninth Symphony is music, not description, and it does for me what perhaps all great music aims to do: it gives me access to a unique human experience.

The calmness, meanwhile, expressed in many of Simpson's slow movements, for me reflects the other side: deep, yet frequently restrained human feeling, akin perhaps to a sense of awe at the natural universe. But there's nothing dreamy about even his quietest music; it stays alert, alive, clear-eyed. The music keeps moving, preparing for later explosions of energy. The stars, which from vast distances seem so still, so calm, in reality are blazing with unimaginable ferocity. We can hear both the calmness and the energy in the Seventh String Quartet – and goodness, after seven minutes of quiet contemplation, does the music move in the 'vivace' section! I only fully realised quite recently what Simpson meant by 'movement': not just tempo, but the rate at which things happen. I think that's one reason why I often find his music quite difficult – one has to keep up with the pace of events.

What I've been describing may not be a unique achievement in our time – I mentioned Vagn Holmboe, and there must be other marvellous composers around whose music I haven't yet explored – but it does seem extremely rare. Listening to the wonderful Fourteenth String Quartet is like hearing the voice of sanity; completely clear of hype and bombast and sentimentality and the plastic, clichéd product music to which, as a fairly young person still, I am frequently exposed. It has what for me is a profoundly calm and touching slow movement, and the whole work, like so many of Simpson's, seems to seek out timeless musical qualities, and renew them in a personal way. It always makes me think that this is how Haydn might write, if he were alive today; in fact, it reminds me very much of Haydn's very last completed quartet, whilst still sounding quite new and the purest Simpson. How wonderful to find something like this in the last decade of



the 20<sup>th</sup> century! And what a loss to think that, following the dark Fifteenth, there will be no more quartets like this. Yet I feel that both these masterpieces, and indeed most of Simpson's work, will stand far longer than the work of many of his trendier contemporaries.

It's not only the toughness and complexity of Simpson's music which, for me, can make it hard to get really 'inside' his works. I find this difficult to do at times, but even then something gets through to me from Simpson's music: a vision of virtually boundless energy, uncontaminated by commercialism and fashion. At times I'm amazed that art like this could be created so recently, and feel grateful to Simpson for experiences which remind me of what is pure, profound and long-lasting. Not many people have actually seen Saturn's rings, or the Pleiades cluster in all its glory – except second hand, of course, through photographs. I feel quite privileged to have seen these things and appreciated them, and also to have heard and appreciated Bob Simpson's music. Because, caught up in everyday concerns, it can be easy to forget the calmness and energy of the real universe, which somehow, Simpson's music always seems to see with clear eyes. When I can manage to concentrate and fully appreciate it, the experience is tremendously refreshing – and there's a wealth of music there which I have still to get properly acquainted with!

I'm grateful also to have met Bob on a few occasions, years ago before his illness. He was a wonderfully humorous man, full of life and energy like his music, and judging by the accounts of those who knew him well, was clearly an exceptional human being of amazing integrity (again like his music). His death is a huge loss, both to the musical repertory of the future and of course to the people who were close to him. But what he left is a body of work perhaps unequalled in our present time, and one which, I feel sure, will last a very long time. Perhaps one day, as it did with Galileo, the rest of the world will catch up with him.

## BRIAN DUKE

Robert Simpson had such a passionate love of real, full human beings that any kind of sham instantly repelled him. He saw what Carl Nielsen saw, that this world is the stage for the 'battle for man's soul'. That was Nielsen's description of his own vademecum, Plato's *Republic*. Bob had one advantage over the majority of us: he was a totally secure left hander, for whom the fulcrum of perception is displaced but is in no way abnormal. As the poet said, 'What should they know of England, who only England know?' This is the key to the contrasts and apparent paradoxes that he showed. Ultimately there is no seam between the love and the repulsion; they come from the same insights about his fellow humans and his unified stance to life. Take his pacifism; this requires the courage and heroism that only those of the 'right' perceive; or, rather, do not perceive: the world as a fish perceives water. Surrounded by it, they do not savour it.

Thus the paradox of the awkward one who is nonetheless steeped in his past, our good past. There is nothing to deny in that past. And thus the paradox of one who has left us but has left for us what cannot die. These paradoxes lie only on the surface. The title of one of his choral pieces puts it perfectly:

*MEDIA MORTE IN VITA SUMUS* – In the Midst of Death we are in Life.

## DOUGLAS GORDON

I was on leave from Nigeria in 1962 when I first encountered his music. Hunting for LPs to take back to the musical desert – or swamp rather – of Lagos, I came across an enthusiastic review of Robert Simpson's Third Symphony, so I bought it. I can't claim that it was my 'road to Damascus' (that came later). I was impressed, certainly, but I can't say I was bowled over, as I was to be many years later by the Ninth. Perhaps it wasn't quite the music to play on a hot night with all the windows open, not a piece that felt quite at home in the tropics, far from its northern roots.

It was sometime in the early 1980s that a couple of friends persuaded my wife and myself to join them on a weekend course on Beethoven's symphonies at Theobald's, a further education centre just north of London. As we assembled in the music room, the tall, intense and academically formidable figure I'd expected Dr. Robert Simpson to be was nowhere to be seen. Instead there was this diminutive, gentle-voiced man chatting to a group of young and not so young men and women, who all addressed him as 'Bob'.

Was this some charmed circle of cronies, or disciples, and we just privileged interlopers? Any such thought was immediately dispelled as we were introduced, shaken warmly by the hand, thanked for coming, and welcomed into the circle.

We came away with our fondness for Beethoven reinvigorated, our appreciation of the symphonies lifted onto a quite different plane by Bob's insights and explanations. Neither of us had heard or read anyone who shed light so penetratingly yet so simply and apparently effortlessly as he did.

More weekend courses followed, now at Missenden Abbey, including for me one on Bob's own music. This set the seal on my ambition to get to know everything he'd written – an ambition now well advanced, thanks to retirement and Hyperion Records. Then came the fateful Reger weekend, when Bob suffered his crippling stroke. What to say, except that I can't remember a thing about Reger ...

By this time I'd joined the Robert Simpson Society, attended a party for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, met his wife Angela, and made many new friends. Was ever a man more generously endowed with the gift of making friends, and friends for friends, than Bob? Easy to explain why one felt the way one did about him, but how was it you always got the feeling he felt just the same about you?

From then on it had to be just letters and phonecalls, except for that one great evening at the Royal Festival Hall when Bob was able to hear his Ninth conducted by Simon Rattle, and except for the four precious days in the autumn of 1993 that my wife and

I spent at Killelton — days of quiet loving enjoyment: great music, good talk and laughter over Angela's exceptional food, interspersed with reading and snoozing, and simply gazing out over that glorious bay.

No doubt in recent weeks all his friends and admirers have like me felt severely bereft, and wished there could have been more — more of his music, more of him. But then I think of how much we have already been given. To music, to musicians, he has after all left a unique oeuvre, so many great works for them to study and, please God, to perform. And to those with more innocent ears like mine has been given the chance to share it with them, as frequently as we wish, through the splendid monument built by Hyperion. Already I feel I know and understand his music well enough to feel confident of introducing it successfully to my friends — it's too rich a treasure to hoard.

Robert Simpson, composer and astronomer, has expanded my universe, and it will surely go on expanding as long as I have ears to hear.

#### DONALD MACAULEY

Every time of life, recalled, has both sad and cheering aspects, though not usually in equal measure. Nobody who attended the seminar at Missenden Abbey in October 1991 is likely to forget the sense of shock and disbelief which followed the realisation, during the Saturday morning, that Robert Simpson had suffered a major stroke, although knowledge of the hideous thalamic complication had yet to come. Whatever positive could be retrieved from such a calamitous occasion?

Well, for a start, the composer's typical determination not to let this spiteful twist of fate deter him from his purpose. He made his way from his room to the afternoon session unaided (I need hardly add that people ran to help as soon as he appeared) and was only with difficulty persuaded to abandon the remainder of the course and take the rest he so sorely needed. This seminar was just one of dozens given over the years at the same venue, to say nothing of other lectures, radio broadcasts, books and articles all devoted to the music of others. It is pointless to speculate how many further symphonies and quartets Bob might have written without this selfless devotion to obtaining a fair hearing for fellow musicians — this was not his way. Music was his life: he wanted to share it, and not merely with a narrow circle of cognoscenti. No non-musician ever felt at a disadvantage with him. Nor did you have to share his taste exactly (I was always puzzled by his indifference to Franz Schmidt) — it didn't matter. So long as you had ears, and were prepared to stretch them, you were welcome.

Berlioz apart, I can think of no major composer with a comparable gift for words. Consider this description of the scherzo from Bruckner's Sixth Symphony: 'We are out in the night with owls and blown leaves, and the sharp tiny glint of unthinkably alien stars. We sense a soft drumming in the earth. A door flies wide with a flare of light and din; there is the smith and the anvil. At all events there is no nightmare in this music — only wonder.' Or this, on the trio of Beethoven's Ninth: 'Beethoven's trio, for the first time in the

symphony, seems to be ordinary human music; but its sense of delight does not comprehend the enormous forces pent up in the scherzo – to a child a pantomime fairy is as magical as a real one, and the gaiety of the trio is as real as a child would think it. And a man is a child in the face of things that are either too vast or too minute for him to grasp. This trio, moreover, is in D major; in the first movement the sound of the major mode was as a flaming cosmic catastrophe; here it is entrancing and delightful – a child might not see much difference between photographs of the Crab Nebula and an exploding rocket'. Reading these is almost as good as hearing the music (the author would no doubt have disagreed) and, of course, you hear the music in your mind at the same time.

The perception remained during the long and debilitating years of illness. I recall listening to a record of the Berlioz *Te Deum* (Bob had ruled out *L'Enfance du Christ* as 'not devastating enough'). I can't recall what I said as the echoes of this shattering work died away (something banal, probably) but Bob's comment was simple and to the point: 'Whatever he wrote, he gave it a hundred per cent'. Who has not thought so, and never articulated it? The half baked, the half-hearted, the condescending and the perfunctory were as alien to Berlioz's nature as they were to Simpson's. Those who have a copy of *The Essence of Bruckner* will almost certainly know by heart the last paragraph, where the author allows his feelings to show more than usually: 'Yet within this oddly humble and puzzled little man was hidden a majesty he discovered for himself with infinite patience and a sublime conscientiousness typical of a great artist. His surroundings and he himself have vanished, and many a sparkling and scornful intellect can bewilder and plague him no more. Though there are Hanslicks still with us, they can no longer trouble him. The frothing tide that often threatened his work and his sanity has long since drained into crevices in the soft earth, but the hard and jagged rock of his life's achievement is still there. It has survived all seeming odds. The cracks in the stone are honourable scars on its mighty face.'<sup>4</sup>

I know of no more moving tribute from one composer to another - or, rather, from one master to another. Temperamentally, the two were miles apart; Bob was neither humble nor puzzled. Few people have been clearer in their minds as to their aims and principles and, although he never bragged, he had a proper sense of his own music's worth. Any sparkling and scornful intellect who tried crossing swords with him would shortly retire, whimpering faintly. We too have our shabby, cut-price Hanslicks, but they are of no consequence and will soon be forgotten. Robert Simpson's music will not, nor will his other great gift, his power to illuminate the music of others. There is so much to treasure in both. Wordsworth (as always) puts it far better than I ever could:

'Thou has left behind Powers that will work for thee; air, earth and skies; There's not a breathing of the common wind That will forget thee; thou hast great allies; Thy friends are exultations, agonies, And love, and man's unconquerable mind.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Robert Simpson, *The Essence of Bruckner*, London: Victor Gollancz 1967, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth, from *To Toussaint L'Ouverture*.

I first became aware of the name of Robert Simpson through listening to the BBC's Third Programme when I was in my mid-teens. A few years later, when I was studying the timpani at Birmingham School of Music, my teacher, Ernest Parsons, told me about the first performance of Simpson's Third Symphony in which he had been involved with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. 'It's a most interesting timpani part and, in some places every note is different,' he told me, adding, 'with all the pedalling up and down, it was almost like riding a bicycle and at the end, I was hot!'

Over ten years later, I met the composer himself at a meeting to discuss a possible recording of Havergal Brian's *Gothic Symphony* and he and I achieved an immediate rapport. A fellow Midlander, he had a refreshing directness and absence of any kind of stuffiness associated with some musicologists and holders of doctorates and we soon became friends.

At the time, I was working for United Music Publishers (UMP) as a part-time promotion manager while holding a position of co-principal percussionist in the orchestra of English National Opera. At the meeting, Bob (as I soon came to know him) dropped the bombshell that the BBC was to mount a performance of the *Gothic Symphony* with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1980 and he asked me if I would have a look through the orchestral material to make sure everything was in order before it was sent off to the orchestra's librarian. I set to work but discovered to my horror that the parts had never been proofed and were crawling with errors and I contacted Bob to ask him what I should do in the case of ambiguities and discrepancies between the manuscript and the published score. With characteristic bluntness, he replied, 'We can't ask Havergal Brian because he's dead! I trust you because you're a composer so just do what you think it should be and I'll back you.' That was very typical of Bob and a tremendous complement to me (he knew my work because I had dedicated my Fourth Symphony to him, to which his response was, 'Very good, Rodney - it should be done!').

1980 also saw a musicians' strike in response to the BBC's attempt to disband all of its regional orchestras. At the height of the dispute and to the great embarrassment of the BBC, Bob resigned from the Corporation. I visited him at his Yalding House office and he said that he was resigning not just because of the BBC's current actions but because they were, for him, the last straw in a long history of decline. He said to me, 'It's not the same organisation I joined in the 1950s - it's become a market place!' He told the controller of music and head of radio exactly what he thought of them in no uncertain terms and Angela Simpson remembered the latter beating a hasty retreat from Bob's office with a very red face!

Following his resignation from the BBC, the organisers of the Cheltenham Festival planned to feature his works. Unfortunately, they neglected to comply with his request concerning certain artists whom he wanted to perform one of his chamber works, engaging other performers instead. In response, Bob withdrew all his works from that year's festival which deprived him of the performance royalties they would have accrued. As ever, he

stuck to his principles, even if it meant that he was out of pocket.

When I became involved with the brass band movement, I was asked by the editor of *British Bandsman* magazine to review his latest composition for the medium, a gritty, tightly-constructed work called *Vortex*. I rang him to ask him about the piece but he declined to say much about it, responding cheerfully, 'You're a composer, you'll see what I've done,' (he certainly wasn't going to do my job for me!).

I attended a performance of his Eighth Symphony under the direction of Jerzy Semkow. Bob was critical about the conductor's tempi, making acerbic comments about his personality ('He's an arrogant, egocentric bastard!') and his failure to comply with instructions. He sent me a cassette recording of the symphony that he had put through some kind of electronic process which enabled him to adjust the tempi while maintaining the same pitch (the last movement went like the wind!).

Robert Simpson was person of great honesty, integrity and courage, stoically working on his own music right up to the end of his life despite acute physical discomfort. More than this, he was a loyal and valued friend and one I miss increasingly as the years roll by.

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DAVID JONES  
THE ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY  
FOUR DECADES OF 'THE GLORIOUS NUT CASE SOCIETY'

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*'In case you're interested, some people have formed a society for my music – they seem very keen and determined in spite of my discouragements!'* (Letter to the author, 4 June 1981)

When the Robert Simpson Society was formed in June 1980 it was thought to be unique as a society devoted to the music of a *living* composer, and it demonstrated the strength of feeling among Simpson's friends that despite his eminence as a composer so little of his music was recorded, played or broadcast. Tonal music appeared to be out of fashion and Simpson, as a music producer for the BBC, could hardly promote his own music.

The idea of a society to remedy this state of affairs was first suggested by John and Sylvia Brooks, but the composer had firmly discouraged them: anything resembling a pressure group might be counter-productive. However, in 1978 Dick Edwards, a friend of Simpson since 1947, had independently come to the same idea, and similarly wanted to know what the composer thought. This time Simpson said, 'Well, if you really want to do this, I suppose I can't stop you. Don't expect me to be involved though.' In fact he went so far as to supply some names and addresses of those interested in his music, including John and Sylvia Brooks. As Dick Edwards wrote in *Leading Notes* (December 1997), 'I lost no time in contacting them ... I have seldom experienced such a fund of ideas coupled with the energy and determination to carry them out ... were it not for their whole-hearted commitment the Society would never have got off the ground.'

It was decided to launch the Society at a propitious time when Simpson's music was receiving more performances than usual. In 1980 the Sixth Symphony was premiered on 4 April, and on 21 June the Delmé Quartet were set to complete their cycle of the quartets, played at Brunel University, with the first performance of No. 8. That June day was chosen for the inaugural meeting, attended by twenty interested persons, at which the aims of the Society were drafted: 'to promote knowledge and appreciation of the works of Dr Robert Simpson, and to this end to encourage and sponsor the performance, study and recording of his music.' A provisional committee was set up, consisting of Professor David Gillett (Chairman), Dick Edwards (Vice-Chairman), John and Sylvia Brooks (Joint Secretaries), Geoffrey Seddon (Treasurer), Martin Anderson, Pamela Bacon, Keith Bennett, Professor Ian Craft, Brian Duke, Dr Lionel Pike, Philip Potter, Kenneth Reynolds, Alastair Sampson and Dawn Williams. (Of these, Lionel Pike and Martin Anderson are still serving.) The annual subscription was to be £5.

By the time of the first AGM in June 1981, Sir Adrian Boult had accepted the honorary

position of Patron (Edmund Rubbra agreed to become President in 1982) and membership stood at 105, including among others the Delmé Quartet and the distinguished Danish composer Vagn Holmboe. The officers and committee were formally elected and the constitution was adopted. Two issues of the journal *Tonic* had already appeared, edited by Martin Anderson and intended as a vehicle for the discussion of Simpson's music; and a recording fund had already raised £784 (£300 from one donor alone).

Recordings were seen as a priority, since their almost complete absence was the chief lament of the early members. By 1984 £3,200 had been given in support of the Delmé's recording of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> quartets, and by 1991 quartets 1–12 had been recorded, either by the Delmé or the Coull, all on the Hyperion label. The Vanburgh Quartet recorded Nos. 14 and 15 in 1992, and the Delmé completed the cycle with the 13<sup>th</sup> in 1997. While the Society contributed what it could to these recordings, the cost of the symphonies was much greater, and at the AGM in 1985 it was recognised that sponsorship from wealthy organisations would be needed. In 1988 additional funds were supplied by The Rex Foundation, established by the bass guitarist of The Grateful Dead, which sponsored the recording of the Ninth Symphony (jointly with the RSS) and gave generous assistance to the recording of symphonies Two and Four. Symphonies Six and Seven were subsidised by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

However, particular tribute must be given to the commitment of Ted Perry of Hyperion. He became convinced of the importance of Simpson's music after hearing the first performance of the First Symphony and later wrote, 'it struck me as what I then called, and still call, "real" music. I sensed structure and shape, momentum, seriousness of purpose and – well, integrity, with no "effects" or empty gestures or sonic doodling.' Although Perry said he didn't 'understand' a note of it, he sensed its greatness, that 'it was bigger than I was', and that further hearings would reveal more than first met the ear. When he set up his own record company, Hyperion, he was prepared to bring out music he believed in, regardless of commercial considerations. Funds from the RSS were certainly welcome, but with full orchestral works costing £30–50,000 the Society's contribution could never be more than a token gesture. It was Ted Perry's belief in Simpson's music that saw the symphonic cycle completed by 2004. It was a labour of love, for even the award-winning recording of the Ninth Symphony barely recouped his costs. His appointment as a Vice-President of the RSS was well merited.

Another early aim was to establish a Robert Simpson archive in a secure location. This was suggested by Lionel Pike, who by October 1982 had made arrangements for his college, Royal Holloway, to house the material, which included the manuscript scores of the first five symphonies and the Seventh. (These were later deposited with the British Library, as was the score of the Eighth, given by its dedicatee Daphne Dorrell.) The archive remained at Royal Holloway until Lionel's retirement in 2005. At that point the then RSS Chairman Terry Hazell gave the archive a temporary home in his house until a suitable alternative could be found. In 2010, after much discussion and anxious soundings of several possible locations, it was safely lodged in Oxford's Bodleian Library,



where it is currently under the care of the Alfred Brendel Curator of Music, Martin Holmes. Lionel also alerted the RSS to the fragile state of the manuscript score of the Third Symphony, and £104 was raised to pay for its professional conservation in 1984.

In the early years of the Society initial enthusiastic ambitions soon hit practical difficulties, and ones which were to persist. It was intended that the journal *Tonic* should appear quarterly, and at first there was plenty of existing material to fill it. But it rapidly became clear that the amount of work required from people busy with their daily jobs was too great, and in 1983 it was decided to scale back to two issues a year. Even that proved impossible and it was quite enough work even to manage an annual issue, since on top of that Martin Anderson was also bringing out a newsletter to give information about new compositions, broadcasts and concerts. The first such newsletter in February 1982 consisted of a single sheet printed on both sides, and it was possible to bring this out more frequently in order to give members sufficient notice of forthcoming events. It was called *Mediant*, but soon changed its name to *Leading Notes*, and settled into a pattern of three issues a year. While Bob was still composing there was much to report: performances, including premieres, could be as many as a dozen a year. Later, in the years after the composer's death, performances and broadcasts dwindled, and it became harder to find material to fill the publications.

The social activities of the Society were more in evidence in the first decade than subsequently. Simpson was still alive and active, the original core of the Society were his friends, and it was natural for social gatherings to take place. His sixtieth birthday was marked by a party at London's Conway Hall on 25 April 1981, advertised in *Tonic* as 'a lecture-cum-recital-cum-social evening'. Simpson gave a short talk on his Eighth Quartet, which was then played by the Delmé. Wine, refreshments and conversation followed, and a chance for members to talk to the composer. The Society presented him with a bound book of thirty-stave manuscript paper, and in return Simpson presented the dedicatee of the quartet, David Gillett, with the autograph score. In September 1983 Bob Simpson and his wife Angela held a garden party at their home in Chearsley, and in June 1984 John and Ann Marshall held a party for members in their home in Bewdley, at which Bob and Angela were present. There were also plans for a group trip to attend the first Danish performance of the Fifth Symphony, given by the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra under Ole Schmidt on 29 November 1984. In January 1985 Lionel Pike organised a Robert Simpson Society day at Royal Holloway College, at which Simpson gave a talk on his Seventh Symphony in the morning; after lunch members could attend the symphony's rehearsal, followed by the performance in the evening. There were at least three more parties that year, culminating in a farewell party for Bob and Angela in October, following their decision to move to Ireland.

Even after the move (in February 1986) the composer returned to give talks at the Misenenden Abbey weekends and later at the Malvern Festival. To mark Simpson's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1991 the Coull Quartet gave three performances of his works at the Wigmore Hall, on 2, 7 and 9 March. Society members were invited to join the Coull and the composer in

the Green Room for drinks after the concert on the birthday itself, 2 March. The following day Ray and Rosemary Few held a party at their home in Surrey, at which Simpson was presented with a fax machine from the RSS. Despite his original scepticism about the value of the RSS, which he called 'the glorious Nut Case Society', he could not help being touched by 'the support and love you have made me aware of'.

By the early 1990s the RSS could look back on an encouraging decade. The recording cycle of the quartets was almost complete, and the Coull and Delmé quartets continued to perform them. Symphonies Six, Seven and Nine had been recorded, the latter winning *Gramophone* magazine's Contemporary Music of the Year Award, and Ted Perry was intent on recording the others. Simpson's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday had brought him more attention, and Lengnick had marked the occasion by publishing *The Symphonies of Robert Simpson*, a study initiated by Jim Pattison and edited by Robert Matthew-Walker. (The profits went into the Recording Fund.) It was possible for Terry Grimley of the *Birmingham Post* to write in May 1992 that 'interest in [Simpson's] music has never been greater'. Simpson himself said, in interview with Grimley, 'It's certainly a lot better than 20 years ago, when I was getting raspberries from all directions'. By 1993 the RSS had almost 200 members. Following the death of Edmund Rubbra in 1986, the distinguished Danish composer Vagn Holmboe had accepted the position of President. That two eminent composers should lend their names to the cause of Simpson's music indicates the respect it commanded.

The situation changed in the course of the Society's second decade. During the Misenenden Abbey weekend 27–29 September 1991, Simpson suffered a stroke which effectively ended his work as a composer. The stroke damaged his thalamus and he was left in constant pain, a condition he bore with remarkable fortitude. He was able to dictate the ending of his Second Quintet, and that was his last completed work. A projected (choral) Twelfth Symphony remained unwritten. His 75<sup>th</sup> birthday year was marked by several concerts, an exhibition at the Barbican arranged by John Young, and the publication of *Robert Simpson on Beethoven*, essays lectures and talks selected and edited by Lionel Pike. But most of these events resulted from initiatives of the Society, and there was a feeling of disappointment that others had shown scant interest in the birthday year. RSS Chairman Graham Melville-Mason in his 1996 report deplored 'the almost studied ignoring of this event by the musical establishment'. The BBC declined to give a live broadcast of the Second Quintet, premiered at the Cheltenham Festival on 11 July 1996, and it took pressure from an 'old school' producer for Simpson to be featured as 'Composer of the Week' in December.

The perception of neglect was expressed by member Ian Craft when he appeared on Michael Berkeley's Radio Three programme 'Private Passions' on 4 October 1997. Professor Craft, a distinguished gynaecologist, was the dedicatee of Simpson's Sixth Symphony, which naturally was one of his chosen CDs for the programme. He said of Simpson, 'I feel that he is a modern musical genius who's actually been by-passed to an extent. His time will come, and there's a Robert Simpson Society dedicated to helping that along.'

Following Simpson's death on 21 November 1997 it seemed as if his music would suffer the same fate as other composers in the years immediately after their deaths, of disappearing from concert halls, airwaves and music journals. There were, of course, obituaries, and the RSS brought out a 50-page booklet of tributes from friends, musicians and composers.<sup>1</sup> In December *Gramophone* devoted a 60-page spread to the Hyperion catalogue, giving prominence to the Simpson cycle of recordings and a photograph of the composer. The Piano Concerto was performed at the Proms on 6 August 1998, and a Memorial Concert was arranged at St John's Smith Square for 19 September 1998. But there were fears that performances and broadcasts would become fewer in the future, and there was a feeling that the Society was at a turning point. At the AGM in 1997 John McCabe (President since 1986 in succession to the late Vagn Holmboe) suggested it was time to redefine objectives.

There was also a renewed concern about recruiting members to take on the work of the Society. In the early 1990s several long-serving RSS officers had felt it was time to stand down, both on account of the demands on their time and the need to allow people with fresh ideas to come in. Lionel Pike had succeeded David Gillett as Chairman in 1987, serving until 1994, when he handed over to Graham Melville-Mason, but professional commitments similarly obliged Graham to resign after just three years. Dick Edwards then took the chair until 2002. In 1991 Martin Anderson had handed over *Tonic* to John Pickard, and *Leading Notes* to Matthew Taylor and Douglas Gordon, having edited both publications for over ten years. Simon Phillippo assisted John Pickard from 1996. Following Douglas Gordon's death in 1998, Donald Macauley became editor of *Leading Notes*, and also took on the secretaryship in succession to Pam Bacon, who was standing down after eleven years. John Young, Treasurer for twelve years, had been succeeded by Bob Hill in 1993. Bob was to remain Treasurer for many years and also took on the editorship of *Leading Notes* from 2001, but otherwise the pressure of professional work meant more, and more frequent, changes of officers in the decade from the mid-nineties.

These two matters, objectives and officers, were to be subjects for debate and anxiety respectively for several years to come. With the quartets and all but one of the symphonies recorded, attention turned to the question of sponsoring performances, but fears were expressed that performers would automatically come to expect a subsidy. John McCabe wondered if a donation might be accompanied with a suggestion that a second performance might follow, but the general feeling at that time was that sponsorship would set a dangerous precedent. The future of the archive was of imminent concern since it could not remain indefinitely at Royal Holloway College. Targeting music colleges with introduction packs to Simpson's music did not seem to have brought much response. However, one promising prospect did appear when in 2000 Graham Melville-Mason and Lionel Pike initiated the idea of a 'Symposium' of scholarly essays on Simpson's music. But the 2000 AGM also highlighted the need for new officers (Chairman, Treasurer and Editor of *Tonic*), and Angela Simpson voiced what others may have been

<sup>1</sup> The recollections on pp. 11–35 are taken from this publication.

thinking: was it time to wind up the Society? That seemed a drastic step, and one which would have to be put to members.

In the issue of *Leading Notes* that followed a month later (August 2000) the editor Donald Macauley put the position to members in stark terms. Under the heading 'THE LAST ROUND-UP | Society at risk of collapse!' he wrote: 'The situation is frankly dire ... It must be bluntly said that this Society cannot function, legally or otherwise, without a Treasurer ... A volunteer from the membership is therefore essential. The alternative, I'm afraid, is that the Society will have to be wound up – a sad prospect after twenty years, but a real one nonetheless.'

This unpalatable prospect was faced at the next AGM in July 2001, by which time the situation had become even more problematic. John McCabe had written to resign as President, since he was heavily committed with his work as a performer and composer, and felt that a more active President was needed to help the Society at a difficult time. But a further reason was his unwillingness to be associated with the views expressed in recent issues of *Leading Notes*: these had been critical of the BBC and seemingly dismissive of composers whose styles were different from Simpson's. McCabe felt that these put him in a difficult position professionally. Editor Donald Macauley, while not agreeing with the criticisms levelled at *Leading Notes*, therefore decided to resign both as Editor and Secretary. Dick Edwards repeated his wish to stand down as Chairman in favour of someone younger and more conversant with modern communication technology. Had the Society reached its end? Although Terry Hazell had agreed to become Treasurer, and a new editor had been found for *Tonic* (Jürgen Schaarwächter), the Society still needed a Chairman and a Secretary. The immediate situation was saved through the dedication of Bob Hill and Terry Hazell. Terry took on the chairmanship and served as Acting Secretary, with Bob Hill taking on the role of Acting Membership Secretary as well as the editorship of *Leading Notes*. Terry also found an honorary (non-RSS member) Treasurer for a year until Sue Kennedy took the post, while Jürgen Schaarwächter proved to be an energetic and efficient editor of *Tonic*. In 2003 Vernon Handley, who had recorded all the Simpson symphonies except the Eleventh, agreed to become President.

There were still several years of uncertainty to come. The AGM of 2004 was inquorate and at the 2005 AGM Terry Hazell reported that the Society was struggling, with too few active members. Winding up the Society was again mooted, but Pam Bacon countered that it still had a purpose, not least the publication of Simpson's writings on music. The 2006 AGM saw a larger attendance thanks to Terry Hazell's generosity in organising a garden party at his home in Putney, but the same question remained unresolved: who would shoulder the work of the Society now that its officers were ageing and at the same time holding more than one office? That question was partly answered when David Jones agreed to become Secretary (2006), and greater stability followed with the elections of Jürgen Schaarwächter (Chairman 2007) and Gary Jobsey (Treasurer 2008): all three remain in post. From time to time there had been a separate Membership Secretary – Brian Duke and Bob Hill had filled this role – and in 2017 the post was revived, Mike Lunan making

an efficient job of chasing overdue subscriptions and updating the list of members. Continuity was maintained by the presence of Lionel Pike, Martin Anderson and Donald Macauley on the Committee, the two former since the Society's inception and Donald (also Secretary and Editor of *Leading Notes* 1999-2002) since 1999. In 2009, with typical magnanimity, John McCabe agreed to return as President following the death of Vernon Handley. (*Leading Notes* had ceased publication after 2006 for want of news, so the risk of association with controversial articles had been removed.)

The question of objectives and ways of promoting Simpson's music was discussed in two issues of *Leading Notes* (August and December 2000). In August Julian Cole wrote to suggest sending publicity material and a free copy of *Tonic* to university music departments and conservatoires, advertising the RSS in the 2001 Proms guide and BBC Music Magazine, writing to organisers and conductors regarding Simpson's forthcoming 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary year (2001), and giving funds to help the recording of the Eleventh Symphony. Editor Donald Macauley replied that information packs *had* been sent, with little observable effect, and that £2,000 had been pledged towards the cost of recording the symphony. Advertising was very expensive, and as for writing to the BBC the prospects were not encouraging, if the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday experience was anything to go by.

In December Jim Pattison, owner of Dunelm Records, wrote a longer response, based on twenty years' experience in the field of technical publicity and his time as a Committee member and Editor of *Leading Notes* in the 1990s. He recalled how he and Brian Duke had sent extra copies of *Tonic* and *Leading Notes* to people of influence in the music world. For all the expense, he wrote, 'I have no direct evidence that it made a ha'pence-worth of difference to the cause!' Similarly there had been limited response to the CD 'An Introduction to the String Quartets of Robert Simpson' sent to nine heads of college string departments, four music magazines, four music journalists and the producer of BBC's Record Review. Advertising was prohibitively costly: for example, £7050 for a page in the Proms guide, and £4771 for the BBC Music Magazine. The BBC were showing no interest in marking the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday/anniversary, and when Pattison had spoken to the chief executive of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic (which had premiered the Tenth Symphony) he was essentially told that Simpson's music did not draw a sufficient audience - this despite a BBC Music Magazine readers' poll (Dec. 1999) which placed the Ninth Symphony third (alongside Shostakovich's Fifth) in the list of the best works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which also put Simpson as fifth favourite composer.

While the results of these various initiatives did not justify the expense, there were still useful things to be done. Following the postponement of the 2004 AGM for lack of attendance, and when it seemed that the Society might fold, David Jones wrote to Terry Hazell, 'I shouldn't be too discouraged by the apparent lack of response among members. I imagine all societies have a handful of activists and no more.' He went on to list the tasks that still could be accomplished: the Symposium, with a deadline to encourage busy contributors to put it top of the agenda; finding a permanent home for the archive, with a short check-list or even catalogue to attach to the RSS website; a collection of Simpson's

writings, as suggested by Pam Bacon; the digital typesetting of the MSS scores to help performers, as suggested by Terry Hazell; and a biography. There had been some reservations about the latter but Jones wrote, 'Sometime this will be done, I'm inclined to think. Simpson is too interesting and important a composer to avoid this. So the immediate task is to collect memories of Bob while the people who knew him are still alive.'

By 2006 the possibility of a biography of Simpson was on the agenda, and Donald Macauley agreed to take it on. In 2007 Terry Hazell organised an exhibition at the Barbican in November to mark the tenth anniversary of Simpson's death. A website was established in 2009 by Raymond Luckhurst, which was a valuable addition to the means of promoting interest in Simpson's music. The use of email greatly facilitated the work of the Committee (particularly given that the Chairman was resident in Germany) removing the need for periodic face-to-face Committee meetings and inconvenient travel. In this regard, changes to the constitution were also needed to enable the Society to function more efficiently. The amendments made in 2011 were prompted by the fact that many members found it difficult to attend the AGMs, which in some years had been inquorate. Elections of officers therefore became triennial, proxy voting was introduced, and the numbers for a quorum at an AGM was reduced from eight to six. (There were further amendments in 2020 to permit online meetings and decision-making.) In 2010 the archive was transferred to the Bodleian Library and the care of Martin Holmes, the Alfred Brendel Curator of Music, who joined the RSS and succeeded Terry Hazell as the Society's Archivist. Angela Simpson, who had previously wondered if the Society had reached a natural end, was invited to become Patron in 2009. This title had lapsed with the death of Sir Adrian Boult, as Bob Simpson had felt uncomfortable with the suggestion that his music had a patron. Twelve years after Simpson's death this understandable scruple no longer had relevance. Angela was a generous supporter of the Society and her cooperation had been essential for Donald Macauley's biography and the Symposium. To everyone's delight she accepted the title.

Meanwhile Robin Taylor, a member of the Leamington Blue Plaque Committee, had been making the case for a plaque to be placed on the house where Simpson had been born, ideally in time to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. He succeeded, and on 17 June 2011 members of the RSS, including Patron Angela Simpson and President John McCabe, were present to see the composer's sister Miriam MacEwan unveil the plaque at 21 Rosefield Street. By a happy coincidence, the current occupant, previously unaware of the history of his house, had a CD of the Ninth Symphony which he played through the open window while RSS members waited for the Blue Plaque Committee to arrive from an earlier ceremony. It was both fitting and moving to hear this great symphony reverberating through the modest terrace house where the composer had begun his life ninety years before. At tea in the Town Hall Roger Coull spoke of his memories of Simpson and of discovering and performing his music. In the evening the Coull Quartet performed the Seventh Quartet, to round off a day meticulously planned by Robin Taylor, who became the latest recruit to the RSS.

The year 2011 brought an encouraging amount of interest in Simpson's music. The website led to an increase in the number of inquiries received, and there was an outstanding performance of the Fifth Symphony on 10 February, given by the students who made up the Royal College of Music Sinfonietta, conducted by Peter Stark. Ann Marshall, who had recently joined her local music society, Bromsgrove Concerts, persuaded them to programme Simpson, with the Coull playing the Seventh Quartet and the Tippett Quartet playing the Eleventh Quartet in the 2012-13 season. Subsequently Bromsgrove Concerts programmed Simpson regularly, with the Tippett Quartet adding Simpson to their repertoire. These and other performances often came with requests for financial support from the RSS, and the former policy of resisting them was now abandoned in favour of showing appreciation by making at least a small donation, in line with what the Society could afford. The membership subscription, which had remained unchanged for at least ten years, left very little surplus for sponsorship once printing and postage costs had been met, so the matter was discussed at length at the 2011 AGM. John McCabe said that £12 p.a. was 'incredibly cheap' and gave the wrong message about the Society. It was finally decided to raise the subscription to £15 p.a. with an option to add a further £5 to go to the Recording Fund.

By 2013 the Symposium, now bearing the title *Robert Simpson, Composer: Essays, Interviews, Recollections* had been published in time to be displayed at the Coull's lunchtime performance of the Tenth Quartet in Leamington on 4 May. Its appearance, over a decade after its inception, owed much to the energy of Jürgen Schaarwächter, who edited the book and arranged for its publication in Germany by Olms after several English publishers had turned it down because of its length. The Society had supported it to the tune of £6,252. Jürgen also did the typesetting to save considerably on printing costs, and donated ten copies to the RSS (at his own expense) so that they could be offered to members at a discount, with the proceeds going into the Society's funds. In the same year Donald Macauley's biography *The Power of Robert Simpson* also appeared, bringing the composer vividly to life and striking a skilful balance between biography and comprehensive musical analysis.

A new project was under way in 2013: at Lionel Pike's suggestion and with Angela Simpson's approval, Matthew Taylor was undertaking a revision of the Violin Concerto, which Simpson had withdrawn after two performances and had never revised. The Society gave £1,000 in support of the work, which was completed in 2014, but there were delays in resolving matters of copyright (now settled) and problems with digital score editing, and so far the concerto has not been performed.

The year brought sad news when President John McCabe was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour and was obliged to relinquish the presidency. He died in 2015. He had been a very active President in the two periods when he had held office, making a point of attending AGMs whenever he could and offering valuable suggestions and advice. The Society was fortunate in recruiting composer David Matthews as the new President, for he has been equally involved and able to give much practical advice through his knowledge of the music world.

Although the symphonies and quartets had all been recorded, the Society had begun to think of getting the concertos onto disc, and in 2011 the Recording Fund was re-established. Within a year £1,900 had been raised but this was nowhere near enough to be of significant use, given the cost of an orchestral recording. Some wondered if the money might be spent differently. But if the Society could not initiate recordings it could assist, and the picture became more encouraging in 2013 when SOMM Recordings approached the RSS for a contribution to the costs of recording Simpson's string orchestra arrangement of the *Allegro Deciso* from his Third Quartet (along with arrangements of the Elgar Quartet and Arnold's Second Quartet). The orchestral costs for the day of the Simpson work alone were £3,000, and the Society gave £500. (Regrettably this assistance was not acknowledged on the CD.) More was not given because there was now news that *two* performers wished to record the Flute Concerto. This was a dilemma. Susan Milan was the dedicatee of the concerto, but her proposal was considerably more expensive than that of Johannes Hustedt. In the end it was felt right to support Susan Milan, for whom Simpson wrote the concerto, and £500 was pledged. Unfortunately the recording was delayed through the indisposition of another soloist in a supporting work, and at the time of writing (February 2021) Susan Milan is contemplating a new recording arrangement.

It was with enormous pleasure that the Society heard the news that Raphael Wallfisch was recording the Cello Concerto, released in 2014 without any financial assistance from us. In recognition of this, the Society extended to him an invitation to become a Vice President, which he was pleased to accept. That left the Piano Concerto, hitherto only available in a concert recording by John Ogden (complete with hacking coughs from the audience), and the Violin Concerto, revised by Matthew Taylor; both await recording. In 2021 Lyrita issued a CD of first performances of the Fifth Symphony (Andrew Davis and the LSO 1973) and the Sixth Symphony (Charles Groves and the LPO 1980), for which Jürgen Schaarwächter supplied the accompanying notes and which the RSS agreed to support financially.

Making good use of modern communications was another matter for consideration. In 2016 a non-member Edward Johnson pointed out that the website had not been updated for two years. Work was set in train to redesign the site, and in 2018 Gary Jobsey volunteered to take responsibility for regular updating. By 2019 Ray Luckhurst had remastered the site, making it more attractive and more easily navigated. As well as news, information about the RSS, details of the archive, a biographical sketch of Simpson, a list of compositions and a discography, it was now possible to access back numbers of *Tonic* and to follow links to two talks on Simpson by Malcolm MacDonald (previously published on cassette by Dunelm Records) and recordings of rehearsals of several of the symphonies.

The Society lost several notable members or long-serving former officers in these years: Bob and Rosemary Hill, Graham Melville-Mason (who was also Simpson's close friend and executor), Ian Craft, and Vice Presidents Malcolm MacDonald and Ronald Stevenson. In 2016 Simpson's sister Miriam MacEwan died, and in 2018 the Society lost its Patron Angela Simpson. Eight members attended her memorial service at the Friends'



Meeting House in Charlbury, and Matthew Taylor gave an address. However, a link with the composer was re-established when his niece Helen Reynolds joined the Society.

The approach of Simpson's centenary had been raised as early as the 2013 AGM, and from 2018 it was regularly on the agenda. An initial task was to improve the website, as described above. Martin Holmes (Archivist) undertook to mount exhibitions at the Barbican and the Bodleian Library. Above all, it was important to aim at broadcasts and performances. By 2019 over thirty letters had been sent to performers and conductors thought to be sympathetic to Simpson's music, but the response was disappointing. It will be a pleasant surprise if the BBC marks the occasion. David Jones wrote in a private capacity to Donald MacLeod to suggest that he might feature Simpson on his Radio Three programme *Composer of the Week*. A member of his committee replied with thanks to say that it would be considered, but time will tell if the request was successful. However, Richard Phillips, the organiser of the Leamington Music Festival, wrote to the RSS in February 2019 with proposals for performances and talks to make Simpson's centenary the focus of the May 2021 festival. In addition he arranged for concerts in February and November 2021. Bromsgrove Concerts and the Alnwick Music Society both offered concerts in March and February respectively.

The issue of the Lyrita CD of the Fifth and Sixth symphonies in January 2021 (see above) was timely, and members of the Society have worked on publications to mark the centenary. Robert Matthew-Walker has written a memoir of Simpson, while the publication of Lionel Pike's study of Simpson's symphonic achievement, *A Passion for Symphonies: Robert Simpson (1921-1997)*, is an event of the greatest significance. Martin Anderson is currently working on an ambitious and long-held plan to bring out the complete writings of Simpson on music, starting with Lionel Pike's edition of Simpson on Beethoven. There were even hopes of a documentary film; in 2015 Tony Palmer, having read Donald Macauley's biography of Simpson, contacted and met Donald to express his interest in making a documentary. Funding, as so often, has proved to be the stumbling block and nothing has come so far of Palmer's interest.

At the time of writing (February 2021) the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the postponement of the planned centenary celebrations, although the Tippett Quartet have enterprisingly recorded themselves playing the String Quartet No. 1, to be available online in a 'virtual concert' on the day of the centenary, 2 March, and for fourteen days thereafter. The 2020 AGM had to be held online via the 'Zoom' facility, but the benefit was a bigger attendance than ever, including members from overseas. This might be the pattern for the future, even when some kind of normality returns.

And what of the future, once the centenary is past? As mentioned above, several of the officers of the Society have been in post for well over a decade. They were regarded as young new blood when they took up their posts (i.e. middle-aged!) but the years roll on, and it may now be time for new people to take the Robert Simpson Society into the future. There is still work to do to increase recognition of one of this country's greatest composers.

## THE ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY

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