TONIC

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ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

Martin J. Anderson

After many months of delay TONIC has finally hit the newsstands. My original intention was to consolidate two issues as a bumper number, but there are tactical advantages in displaying my contrition through two slightly smaller efforts, delivered to your door with abnormal frequency. (Accordingly, the next in the series of discussions between Malcolm MacDonald and RS about his Razumovskys has been held over until the next issue.)

A further development is that, after all my pleas for someone to take over the hardly onerous position of Editor of TONIC, such a marvel may have been found. With luck this appointment (to be confirmed in the press) should expedite the production of TONIC. The division between TONIC as a forum for scholarship on RS's music and LEADING NOTES as a news bulletin to inform members of developments in the Society's activities will be maintained. And the hope springs eternal that this renewed activity will provoke written reaction from members. À vos plumes!

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All correspondence concerning TONIC should be sent to the Editor:

Martin J. Anderson
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COMPOSITIONS

RS has revised two of his recent compositions for forces that should foster their performance. The Quintet for three double-basses, clarinet and bass clarinet has been rescored as a quintet retaining the original winds but with a normal string trio. And The Four Temperaments, the rescoring of which was announced in the last issue of Leading Notes, has now been completed in its second form, the instrumentation being that of Elgar Howarth's transcription of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. And, certainly not least, the Tenth String Quartet has been completed.

PERFORMANCES

Tuesday, 14 February, 7.30pm
Farnham Maltings, Bridge Square, Farnham, Surrey GU9 7QR (0252 725887)
'Meet the Composer': RS will give an illustrated introductory talk on the Ninth String Quartet, which the Delme String Quartet will perform after an interval. RSS members are offered a special discount (£1.25 instead of £1.75), and advance booking would be appreciated. If many members have to travel any real distance, the Maltings will be happy to arrange to have light refreshments available.

Thursday, 29 March, 7.30pm
Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (01 928 3191)
SYMPHONY No. 5
Philharmonia Orchestra, cond. Andrew Davis
See 'TALK by RS' and 'SYMPHONY No. 5' below.

SEE ALSO 'STOP PRESS' PAGE 7

BROADCASTS

SYMPHONIES Nos. 5, 6 and 8
The performance of the Fifth Symphony announced above will be broadcast live, as was the other RS Symphony performed in the Great British Music Festival, No. 2, in an exhilarating and attentive performance by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Vernon Handley. But just before and after No. 2, studio recordings were made of No. 8 (in September, with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edward Downes) and of No. 6 (later in November, with the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra under Bryden Thomson); these have yet to be broadcast. No. 8, indeed, was recorded in two separate performances, the first with the Rachmaninov C minor Piano Concerto and the second with Bax's Tintagel: RS advises that this second recording allowed the orchestra to settle into the music even more, with the result that the playing and performances are yet more satisfying than before.

TALK BY R.S.

Thursday, 29 March, 6.00pm
Waterloo Room, Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (01 928 3191)
RS will give an illustrated talk on his Fifth Symphony prior to its performance in the RFH (see above). This talk is being promoted entirely by

the RSS, not least in the hope of recruiting new members although it is hoped that there will be a strong contingent of members present. Tickets are available @ £1 each from the RFH Box Office one month in advance, or directly (and already) from RSS Joint Secretaries John and Sylvia Brooks, 3 Engel Park, London NW7 2HE (tel: 01 346 3073) - please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your order.

RECORDINGS

One of the most exciting bits of news in this issue of TONIC is that the Society's Recording Project has already been successfully inaugurated. The Seventh and Eighth String Quartets have already been recorded by the Delme String Quartet for the Hyperion label, and it is hoped that Hyperion will be able to release the disc around the middle of this year (although, patently, any dates are provisional at this stage). The Delme Quartet then mean to record the Ninth shortly after their concert performance at Farnham (see above), also for release later on in the year, and again on the Hyperion label, through whom the Society intends to release the entire canon of RS's String Quartets.

In a month or two the RSS will have only seven quartet recordings to sponsor before we have caught up with the current stock (although the Eleventh has already been commissioned and ideas, we are informed, are already flowing). But this will require further financial assitance from the members, and we ask you, now that this long-discussed project has begun to become reality, to dip deeply into your pockets: if each member were to contribute £10 - not that much these days - it would go a long way towards helping to pay for two more discs; £20 each, oddly enough, would go twice as far. And if RSS members could equal the generosity of those of the Havergal Brian Society, whose donations (often £50 each) enabled the recording of his opera The Tigers to become reality, we could commit much more to disc even than is already planned.

A thought occurs even as I type this (material in the other typeface was most generously typed by Christine Skinner, much of whose Christmas holidays must have been dedicated to the task: our thanks): any member who donates £20 or more to the Recording Fund will receive a free copy of RS's The Proms and Natural Justice with the compliments of (quick change of hat) the publisher, Toccata Press. Cheques, POs, stamps and other currencies will be gratefully received by the Joint Secretaries (address above).

MJA

PUBLICATION

RS hopes shortly to begin revising The Essence of Bruckner, which was published by Victor Gollancz in 1967, and issued again in 1977. Gollancz have a mere thirty or so copies left in stock and do not intend to re-issue the book once they have gone. RS is using the opportunity to expand his examination of the Third, Fourth and Sixth Symphonies in the light of the closer attention he has been able to give to the first versions of these works. Details of the enlarged Essence will be given nearer the date of publication.

R S S OCCASIONAL PAPERS

We hope this year to begin issuing a series of RSS Occasional Papers, based on material which would sit less happily, either because of size or content, in the pages of TONIC. The first projected title is an edited reprint of 'The Symphony', which appeared first in the BBC Third Programme series, Musicians Talking, in the 1960s. The second in the series will, we hope, be an edited transcript of the conversations, nine in all, between RS and Julian Budden that were broadcast last year on the BBC's World Service.

Suggestions for further titles in this series will be welcomed, not least if they give rise to other events the Society might organise - through, say, publishing the proceedings of RSS seminars.

'THE INNOCENT EAR'

Many members will have noted with pleasure the return of RS's programme, The Innocent Ear, of Radio 3, beginning on 7 January; the format is, of course, that the identity of the music played is not revealed until after it has been heard. On 7 Jan., the works performed were a Trio by Arnold Cooke & Tovey Piano Quartet: between ourselves, RS hoped to make a tape of these, but forgot that the programme was on; if any member had his or her tape-recorder running in the hope of good things, could he or she (very quietly, of course) let RS know, either directly or through the Society? (Now forget you've read this!)

SYMPHONY No. 5

Members whom distance or illness kept away from the performance of the Second Symphony in November will not have been able to buy the programme book for the Great British Music Festival; if they are likely also to be kept away from the performance of No. 5, the following programme note, for which we are grateful to RS, may prove a help before the broadcast.

* * * *

Allegro - Canone I, Commodo e tranquillo - Scherzino, Molto vivace - Canone II, Adagio - Molto allegro e con fuoco

Commissioned by and dedicated to the London Symphony Orchestra, this one-movement symphony is divided into five sections. At the beginning and at the end are weighty fast movements. In the middle is a short Scherzino, while on either side of that there are canonic slow movements. The soft string chord sustained at the opening of the Symphony is basic to the work, structurally and emotionally; it is like that part of you that coldly observes yourself no matter what upheavals occur.

The Symphony begins with this stillness, soon to be broken as the first allegro heaves and crashes about. At length the allegro starts to break up; between shortening outbursts we hear the original soft shord, as if it had been there in the background all the time. Then only the chord is left. Its top note (a high C) is taken by a piccolo and made the first note in a long quiet canonic subject. The canon forms in the woodwind, and each voice enters on the next note of the chord (going downwards); as each woodwind instrument starts, its first note is taken away from the strings, so that the chord slowly vanishes. The mood is quietly reflective (the

subject is marked grazioso ma non espressivo), as if the static chord shows a life of its own utterly removed from emotional or physical stress.

Out of the quietness a rhythm grows, initiating the brief but aggressive Scherzino; this is in the form of what used to be known as a 'patrol', essentially a crescendo-diminuendo, like a band approaching, passing and receding. The rhythm is, in effect, six-eight plus three-four plus three-eight, continuously hammered. It dies away, leaving only a pianissimo low C. This is the bottom note of the original chord, and whereas the first canon gradually broke down the chord, this second one slowly builds it up, each voice entering on the next note ofthe chord, from the bottom up instead of from the top down. The subject is a long slow crescendo-diminuendo and the answer is inverted; this canon is really only nominally such, as there is no real counterpoint - each voice, when it has finished the subject, sticks to its original note so that the chord shall be built.

A harsh crescendo leads into the fast finale, which is a metamorphosis of the first allegro, plus a long coda. The tempo is very quick and the temper rough. The coda drives to a massively resonant climax; then the music, as in the first movement, begins to break up. At length all that remains is The Chord, and even that fades away, note by note, until only the highest C is left.

FRIENDS AND MENTORS

Herbert Howells, composer and teacher; Adrian Boult, interpreter and encourager - both gone within a couple of days. They enjoyed long and valuable lives, and it was a privilege to count them as dear friends. Howells I knew longer - from the time when I gave up medical studies and it was necessary to prove to my parents that I was not a drop-out. I didn't know how to get the kind of lessons I needed to have a go at the B.Mus. and I couldn't afford to go to a music college full-time. In any case, the war was on, and, as a pacifist, I was working in civil defence on a mobile surgical unit, as driver and orderly. So I wrote to the registrar of the RCM, asking if he could tell me who might give me private lessons (not too expensive). He suggested either Herbert Howells or Gordon Jacob. I had heard more of Howell's music, and so I approached him. He took me on - and what a teacher he was. He was one of the most naturally gifted musicians I have ever met. I remember taking him a fugue once, on a subject of my own - just an exercise. He read it through and found a few bugs here and there, which he showed me how to get rid of. Nothing remarkable about that, you might say. But then he got a few sheets of MS paper and said, 'Let's see what else could be done with that subject'. I watched while he wrote, about as quickly as you'd write a letter, a fugue of maybe a hundred bars on my subject, which he hadn't seen before that day. Then he took it to a piano (It was in open string quartet score) and played it through, most beautifully. It was a lovely little fugue, and I felt crushed and encouraged at the same time - which is the only spirit in which you really can learn anything. He was always forthright, but always kind. If he was five minutes late for a lesson he would refuse to take any money for it; even so he would often add the time to the other end. It's probable that if he hadn't spent so much time teaching and adjudicating he would have produced a lot more music. I remember him with love and gratitude, both as teacher and kind friend. He inspired the confidence that meant you could put yourself unreservedly in his hands, as you might with a trusted doctor. After all, a student is a kind of patient, isn't he? - though it was Herbert who showed most of the patience.

Friendship with Adrian Boult came later, at the BBC. I worked with him many times. He was always ready to conduct anything you put in front of him, and you got no clue as to what he thought of it, though he always did everything he could for it, and the result was nearly always a proper performance. In music he loved he could be, in his gentlemanly way, inspiring. Long before I met him I went to a concert in which he did Debussy's La Mer not long after Toscanini had given an absolutely electrifying performance of it in the same (Queens) hall. Adrian was never a competitive man, but something must have got into him that night: the top of his bald head went a fierce red, his whiskers bristled, his eyes flashed, and his nose seemed about to impale the nearest members of the orchestra.

The performance was hair-raising, and Toscanini must have heard the climax of it in New York. Years later I reminded Boult of this and he said,'Yes, it did go rather well'. When he conducted my own music I found him always anxious to find out exactly what was wanted, to the smallest detail, and the dedication of my First Symphony to him followed the first performance in Britain. (It had been first done in Denmark, but not nearly so well). He then recorded it, and the performance is still satisfying after a quarter of a century.

He had a goodness, a kindness, rare among the dangerous breed of conductors; he had so gentle and unassuming a nature that it was hard to believe that he could ever have had the urge to be a conductor. Yet he could bark if he liked - though it never lasted long, and there was no malice in him. Orchestras and composers alike loved and respected him. In his last years, when he had stopped work, I would sometimes go and see him for an hour or two, and he still loved to talk about music, its interpretation, and its structure. He read carefully and critically every word I wrote in The Proms and Natural Justice, and added a preface, saying, 'That lot ought to be taught a lesson'. They weren't, of course. Adrian never really got over the cold routine of his compulsory retirement by the BBC at the age of 60, and always insisted on referring to it as 'the sack'. The BBC lost, and could not replace, the ideal radio conductor; this was mercilessly made plain to them, not only by his successors, but by the magnificent Indian summer of his association with the LPO. There have been more spectacular and more compulsive conductors, but before Boult, only Henry Wood was able to do equal service to the music of his contemporaries. You might say, what about ....., and name some avant-garde specialist - but all the new music Boult brought out was placed against the background of the masterpieces of history; this gave it a truer perspective than one could perceive in any esoteric ghetto. This great and modest man has gone - but has he? Everything he was lives on in those who were lucky enough to know him.

R.S.

S T O P P R E S S !

The Coull String Quartet will be playing RS's 7th String Quartet at the Purcell Room on Tuesday 6th March. The concert, which includes also John McCabe's 4th string quartet and David Blake's 3rd, is due to begin at 6 p.m. Tickets (from 6th Feb.) at £2 each: telephone 01-928 3191.

THE ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY STUDY ARCHIVE

On 16th October 1982 the Robert Simpson Archive was established at the Royal Holloway College (University of London), Egham, Surrey, on the most welcome initiative of Dr. Lionel Pike, a member of the Music Department and of the RSS Committe, and with the very kind permission of Professor Ian Spink, Head of the Music Department.

The afternoon's proceedings were opened by Professor Spink, who welcomed members of the Society and spoke of the Department's pleasure at providing a home for the Archive in its Library. After members had inspected the archive material, RS gave an illustrated talk on the composition of his Seventh String Quartet, following it with a tape-recording of the work. We should like to thank Mrs. Jenni Pike most warmly for providing the excellent tea that concluded the proceedings.

Members will be interested to know that RS has most generously lodged with the Archive the original manuscripts of many of his works: Symphonies Nos. 1-5 and 7, String Quartet No.1, the Clarinet Trio and Quintet, the Horn Quartet, the Piano Concerto and the brass band pieces Energy and Volcano. There are also study scores, kindly supplied by Alfred Lengnick, the publisher, of Symphonies 1-3, String Quartets 1-7, and the clarinet works. RS had also placed in the Archive reel-to-reel tape recordings of most of his works, and of various broadcast talks. The Archive also contains concert programmes, and scrapbooks containing press cuttings and other memorabilia.

The Society would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Spink and Dr. Pike for their kindness in making space available for the Archive, and, of course, RS and Mrs. Angela Simpson for depositing in it such a wealth of manuscript and recorded material. The Archive may be visited by members and bona fide students on application in advance to the Music Department Librarian.

The material currently held in the Archive will be listed in the next issue of TONIC.

FORUM

Beethoven found the writing down of a score a task of immense difficulty, while Mozart would shape the work in its entirety in his head, and the committing of it to paper would not even distract him from conversation. Beethoven, also, would scribble down ideas as they came to him, and his sketchbooks, like those of Janáček (who would jot down rhythmic figures, melodies, etc., suggested by the day-to-day activity around him), offer rich digging ground for musico-archeologists. How smooth a path do you find between composition and writing down, if there is any divergence between the two activities? Do you use such aide-memoires as a note-book, a broad shirt-cuff, or whatever? And when ideas occur to you, are they in any 'prescribed' form, key, instrumentation or such shape as will dictate how they can best be used? Or do you find that to impose conscious changes of key, rhythm, pitch, tempo, etc., on the originally spontaneous notion will often render it easier to work with?

Gordon Roland-Adams

RS replies:

Not much sketching - only if I want a very long melodic line: sketching it out helps to 'see' it from start to finish and to get details in the middle right. Shorter ideas get shaped firmly in the head, and don't get written till they're fixed. Composing a large work is usually started from a small idea, which is then allowed to proliferate under sharp discipline; as it proliferates, it undergoes metamorphosis, so that the continuity is (one hopes) organic. The whole thing is really a process of controlled improvisation on paper. You have to get rid of what doesn't feel right and find out what does. You worry at it until the current starts to flow. If an idea feels wrong, chuck it out; if it feels right, keep it. It's purely a matter of intuition - it's not analytical, consciously, and it's not theoretical. That's work for other people, afterwards. If the intuition is working, and the composer intelligent and honest with himself, the result should bear any kind of analysis. Nothing should be 'imposed'. All very difficult, or easy, according to how you're feeling. Everyone has different methods - Haydn was helpless without a piano. Some composers write orchestral works in reduced score - I have to do it in full score, right from the start, partly because I tend to keep off the piano. (Everyone knows what would happen if I wrote only what my fingers would play.)

THE GENESIS OF THE EIGHTH SYMPHONY

A radio discussion between RS and Michael Oliver

MO: What is a symphony, or rather what must a composer be capable of in order to write what we call a symphony? Sixteen years ago Robert Simpson put forward this list of essential components: the fusion of diverse elements into an organic whole; the continuous control of pace; the reserves of strength necessary to achieve both of these and to express size, 'bigness', even if the symphony is quite short. And the music should be active in all possible ways: rhythm, melody, harmony, tonality - all in a state of onward movement. Robert Simpson is undeniably a symphonist. His Eighth Symphony was first performed on 10th November 1982, by the Royal Danish Orchestra under Jerzy Semkow. It was a commission from the Royal Philharmonic Society who did not, of course, say: 'We want it to be in four movements; the first in sonata form, allegro con brio, D major; the second a ternary andante in A minor,' and so on. Dr. Simpson did, though, write the Symphony to a formula provided by someone else, which at first glance seems like a novelist agreeing that his heroine should come from Gloucester, be blackmailed in Chapter Seven and end up happily married on page 280. Why would he do such a thing?

RS: Let me put it this way. I thought for a long time with envy about the way Haydn and Bach and the old composers knew everybody in the audience that was going to hear next week's symphony or next week's cantata. It must be marvellous to be able to sit down and write and say: 'Well, this will shake old so-and-so' or 'What's-his-name will like this', or maybe: 'So-and-so will hate this', or perhaps make somebody laugh. They could actually see their faces. Haydn knew them all individually, and Bach knew a great many of the people who went to the church every Sunday and heard his cantata. This is something that we lack nowadays. A composer can't see many people listening to his music (except his friends, perhaps, and a few colleagues) but, generally speaking, all he can imagine - if he's lucky enough - is a sea of faces in the Festival Hall, or nothing at all on the radio, where it just seems to disappear into thin air. So, thinking about this, it seemed to me rather a good idea to talk to an old friend of mine, Tony Dorrell. He's a painter, but he has in fact broadcast on music quite a bit and he's an intensely musical person.

He and I have known each other for many, many years and we have very similar outlooks in all sorts of ways. He knew my music very well, and he knew the sort of thing which could come out, so I said to him: 'Tell me what kind

of a symphony would you like to hear, and I'll see if I can oblige'. He was a bit shaken by this and he went away full of thought. When he came back (with a letter, because he lives in Cambridge quite some way from where I am), he came out with a description of the sort of symphony he might imagine. Then we talked it over, and it changed a bit - as it always would and I warned him that he shouldn't be too exact in his expectations because once you start on a big piece like this, it just takes over, and it might turn out quite different. But in fact that's the way it started.

MO: But presumably he didn't give you detailed instructions like: 'It should begin with a sombre melody in D minor, which is answered by the clarinets in whatever'.

RS: No, nothing like that. It was a general outline. For instance, his first idea was for a large symphony in two halves, with two movements in each, so there's only one break in the middle: the two movements in each half are joined together. The first movement was gradually to be invaded by things that seemed rather threatening and which took over in the second movement, which was a sort of scherzo. After the break came the slow movement, very intense in its reaction to all this, a sort of severe passion. In fact, it's a fugue, and this gradually gives way to calmer elements, and when the thing has become calm enough, then there's room for energy, in a finale with some positive action in it, which is not so full of conflict as the rest - just energy, a feeling that now that we have thought things out, we've got some strength back.

MO: You began at the beginning, did you?

RS: Yes, I always do that.

MO: It sounds a daft sort of question, but it is possible to begin in the middle.

RS: Oh yes. Beethoven used to begin in all sorts of odd places, and leave enormous gaps in the work sometimes, to be filled in afterwards.

MO: It's called 'Symphony No. 8', but not 'Symphony No.8 in anything'.

RS: No. It eventually arrives at the key of G, but by a complex process which I wouldn't like to try and illustrate.

MO: Is Tony Dorrell going to understand the process, do you think?

RS: I don't think he'll have any difficulty in following it instinctively. Not being a trained musician, he won't be able to say: 'Ah, now the centre of the tonality is C, or F sharp,' or whatever it happens to be at a particular time. He won't be able to follow all those things and

he won't be able to say: 'Well, that theme occurred five minutes ago, and it's now changed into something else, and it's combined with something else.' But I do hope - and I hope it's the same with any other musical person - that the processes in the piece will reveal themselves just as naturally as any other natural organic processes will. As I see you sitting there, I know that all kinds of organic processes are producing the phenomenon which I am looking at, but, God knows, I can't understand them.

MO: He described the symphony he wanted in quasi-emotional terms, and you seem to have accepted that that is the way that you do write symphonies, that you can attach words like 'optimism', 'conflict', 'attack', and so on, to particular passages.

RS: It's a very good question, I think. Tony's description was in emotive terms which he couldn't put in any other way, obviously. To me they mean musical things, not emotive things in an extra-musical sense. For instance, the first movement begins calmly enough and it flows along in a fairly gentle way. One of the reasons for that was Tony's wife, Daphne, had a say in it, too, and she said that she hoped gentler elements would come in as well as all this conflict and violence. So I thought that in any case the best way to start any kind of symphony with conflict - begin it quietly, and let the thing develop its conflict, not start it with everything going flat out at everything else, because you wouldn't know which was which at all. So it starts quietly and gently, and moves along and is gradually invaded by contrasting - rather than conflicting - elements. They are conflicting because they are so contrasted, sometimes violently contrasted, in terms of dynamics and sound and everything. If that is emotive to some people, to me it's a stimulus in musical terms. Of course, naturally I experience some kind of emotion while I am writing it. I must feel it, because if I don't feel that, then I know that nobody else will.

MO: The difficulty comes, though, when you've written a piece of music that can be described in shorthand as 'triumphant', but then somebody interprets this as a triumphant view of human life, or even as a description of a particular triumph.

RS: I would say that that would be true of my Symphony if it were ending triumphantly, which of course it is not. It ends energetically, but that's another thing altogether. Energy can be used for whatever purpose you like - destructive, constructive or whatever. It simply means that after a certain amount of clashing of elements in this Symphony, there comes a point when these clashes are resolved into what you might call an undirectional energy which is canalised, which is positive in that sense.

It's very energetic, very lively and, I hope, very

exciting. The last movement is very fast indeed, and it gives the orchestra a heck of a lot to do, but it doesn't end with a sort of blazing chorale or anything like that, or a feeling of romantic triumph. It ends with energy which finally comes to a point when it has got to stop sometime or other. I don't go along with Stravinsky who said that music can express only itself; I think it is much too complex for that. Music expresses all sorts of things that we are not really aware of. I don't know what I am expressing when I compose. I know that there is something coming out of me, and I know it must be human because I presume I am human, and I know that sometimes it appeals to other people and sometimes it doesn't. But one thing I know for sure, and that is that if as I write I don't experience that intense thrill (call it an emotion, whatever you like) at the time, when I know it feels right, then I know nobody else will.

MO: Does it break any new ground for you? I presume every new work breaks new ground in a way, but is there any particular new process in it, or anything like that?

RS: Yes, in some ways, although not exactly new, because the Seventh Symphony (which hasn't been played) also starts to do this, and so do some of my other works: as I have got older, I've become more interested in the effects of intervals than tonality. In earlier times I was interested in large-scale tonality, large areas of tonality, but now I'm trying to find what intervals themselves can generate, using the resonances inherent in simple intervals like the fifth, the fourth or the third, and to try to generate something from that by feeling it in a novel way, by approaching the interval of a fifth as if I had never heard it before, and trying to find what can happen, or using intervals against each other. Take two intervals, the second and the fifth; then you have a combination of intervals and you can use them in different ways against each other. But I should emphasise this: that it's no good thinking of intervals or chords. None of this can mean anything at all unless it generates musical invention. It's terribly important for composers to write music, and you don't write music just by knocking a lot of chords or intervals together.

MO: So the business of setting intervals against one another is something you start thinking about once the basic ideas have arrived.

RS: In a way, yes. Of course, when I think of the basic ideas - some theme or some subject or some germ figure, a rhythm or something of the kind - then you look at it to see what it contains. It might contain this interval, or these intervals, and you think of how it can develop, how it can grow. And you let it grow like a seed, like a germ, at the beginning - that's one reason I have for starting at the beginning - and it just grows, develops, multiplies and takes new forms. For instance, the last Quartet I did, No. 9, ends with a fugue. As the fugue

goes on, the subject continually changes, so that by the end it's a completely different subject. If you heard the first version and the last version together, you would hardly associate them with each other at all, but all the intermediate processes, of course, make quite clear what is happening, and that is done all through thinking in terms of intervals, the combinations of intervals and rhythms.

MO: And, of course, thinking in those terms almost implies symphonic structure, doesn't it?

RS: Well, what I call organic structure, the felling of creating a current, creating movement. That's something where I learned a great deal from the Classics, from Beethoven, and Haydn particularly, and then later from Nielsen and Sibelius. And Nielsen said: 'Unless my music has a current, it's nothing', and that is a feeling I share very strongly.

(This is an edited version of a discussion first broadcast on Radio 3's Music Weekly on 6th November 1982. My thanks to both contributors for permission to reproduce it here - Editor.)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

I welcome the inclusion, in TONIC Vol.1 No.4, of a transcript of Robert Simpson's discussion with Malcolm MacDonald on the Fourth Quartet and its relationship to Beethoven Op.59 No.1. This is very worthwhile and enlightening, and we should all be grateful to have it in print.

One would not, of course, expect the transcription of a discussion to be reproduced verbatim; and this one is not. I can readily understand the reasons for many of the changes made: but I would like to record that some points have suffered in the process. These are:

1. Page 11 Line 12 of the quotation should read: 'string quartets enhance the understanding of the genius of Beethoven...'.

2. Page 12 Twenty-two lines up from the bottom, after the phrase 'of its own', the following should be inserted:
'and the nature of the material itself dictated the nature of the work'.
This phrase seems to me vital to an understanding of musical form, and should not have been omitted.

3. Page 14 In line 4, the second dash should come between the words 'sense', and 'my'.

4. Page 15 As found twelve lines up from the bottom, E major is not the same as C flat. The phrase should, of course, read 'key of B major (or C flat,that is)'.

There are several other errors and misprints, though these do not affect the sense quite so badly.

Lionel Pike

STRING QUARTET NO. 9

A Review by
DAVID CAIRNS

Dr. Robert Simpson is more familiar to the musical public as a commentator and controversialist than as a composer. A good many people know that he produced a pamphlet vigorously attacking the administration of the Proms, and that he resigned from the BBC (to the BBC's loss) in protest at the official handling of the crisis over the future of the Scottish Orchestra; and some of them have also read his powerfully argued writings on Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen and Sibelius. Far fewer know that he has written nine string quartets.

If the other eight quartets are anything like as good as the Ninth, which was given its premiere by the Delme Quartet last autumn, that is a quite absurd state of affairs. The new work is a major contribution to the repertoire of 20th-century quartets, a superb feat of sustained and passionate musical argument and, with all its technical complexity, a delight to listen to.

The Delme commissioned it (along with four other new pieces, which they performed in a series of fortnightly concerts at the Wigmore Hall) to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Haydn's birth and at the same time to celebrate their own 20th birthday; and it takes the form of 32 variations and a fugue on a Haydn minuet. The Haydn movement is palindromic (the second half is the first half backwards). Simpson - with the heroic cussedness which is recognisable from the author of the Proms pamphlet - has taken it as a challenge and made every variation a palindrome.

This kind of problem-solving approach to composition will seem drily academic only to those who forget that in music more mathematics does not necessarily mean less poetic expression (in Bach it often means the contrary), and that every composer must choose the particular means that are best for him, regardless of dogma or received ideas of any kind. What matters is that the palindrome device has acted as a stimulus to Simpson's powers and has released in him a flood of invention so strong and fresh that the work strikes you not by its complexity but by its inevitability of movement and design, its sheer spontaneity of expression.

It lasts more than 50 minutes of uninterrupted, continously evolving music - a prodigious length for a string quartet - but seems much shorter. One is carried along irresistibly on the current of its discourse, from abrasive argument (often of extreme rapidity) to a rapt Beethovian serenity and back again. In the last few variations the music rises to a still more serene, translucent lyricism.

Out of it grows the long fugue that concludes this remarkable work. At first the calm, conflictless flow is maintained. Then very gradually the tempo increases, the tension heightens, the pace becomes more hectic, and the quartet culminates in an explosion of rhythmic energy which has the listener on the edge of his seat. The work makes formidable demands on the players, but is intensely rewarding, as the Delme showed by their exhilarating performance, and I hope that its length will not deter other quartets from taking it up.

(This review - here slightly adapted - first appeared in The Sunday Times on 10th October 1982. I am grateful to the author and the paper for permission to reprint here. I should point out, too - lest RS's comments on newspaper criticism elsewhere in this issue be taken to reflect adversely on this contribution, despite its enthusiasm - that Mr. Cairns was furnished with a copy of the score and thus writes not with snap judgement but from a position of knowledge and experience - Editor.)

PUBLICATIONS

The Seventh and Eighth Symphonies are being published by Faber Music Limited. There are no dates yet for the printing of the scores, but they are available on hire. Details are given in the advertisement elsewhere in this issue.

Rosehill Music Limited is publishing the Suite of Brass Band, The Four Temperaments, in separate movements. At twenty-one minutes in length it falls outside the average size of pieces in the brass band repertoire, and the publishers hope that making the work available in its individual moods, so to speak, will encourage its dissemination in the brass world. Rosehill Music can be contacted at The Old House, London End, Beaconsfield, Bucks HP9 2JD; tel. 04946 71717 or 4411. An article on The Four Temperaments will appear in the next issue of TONIC, to be published perhaps even more speedily than usual.

COMMENT OR PERCEPTION?

A Sentient Artist's Reply to Unjust Criticism

The right to criticise can't be objected to. If criticism is based on mature reflection and solid knowledge it can become almost an art in itself, as many distinguished writers have proved. But there can't be much of a defence of the snap-judgement experts, the professional opionists of the newspapers. Their verdicts, on new works especially, are too often and inevitably based on insufficient knowledge. How can it be otherwise, when they so frequently have no chance to prepare themselves properly? Artists often and reasonably ask this question, notably those whose art depends on performance, whose work lies in other people's hands. Your work in their hands? Their hands in your work, mostly. We can't blame the unfortunate journalists (if they must do such work) when pressure compels them to make hasty judgements, when they are unable to tell what the composer really wants, or what the work really ought to sound like. The composer himself is usually the only person in the hall who knows that (which is why you can see him sweating). Both audience and critic may get an impression of efficiency and certainty in the performance, and that in itself might seem to the critic as good a reason as any to charge the composer for whatever he fails to receive from the music.

But we can blame the critic for not realising the obvious dangers in this stance, and we are entitled to regard his tactics as unfair and perhaps even disingenuous, if like Mr. Frank Barker in The Guardian for instance, he goes so far as to dogmatise: 'The hard tone of the Danish players and the stolid conducting of Jerzy Semkow were reasonably well suited to Simpson's gritty score'. No music could be 'well suited' by a 'stolid' conductor; surely Mr. Barker must know that all music, of whatever quality, requires imagination from its performers. Is he really sure that the work, in a vivid performance, perceptive in every detail, absolutely free from stolidity, would not have struck him differently? Here is the perfect example of the apparently wishful snap judgement shattering all logic and good sense - to say nothing of charity.

It is always difficult for a composer to rebut criticism, however misdirected; in saying the performance was inadequate he can be suspected of trying to put the blame on somebody else. But orchestral premieres are nearly always bad. A string quartet will rehearse and rehearse, considering every note, every phrase, often with the composer's help. An orchestra has a set number of rehearsals (always too few) and depends utterly on the conductor; it contains a hundred people; such a crowd, however talented individually, can't hope to get the heart of a difficult and unfamiliar new work - there simply isn't time. I remember the first

performance of Tippett's Piano Concerto, when the orchestra produced a consistently inchoate swamp of sound; the soloist could do nothing to prevent the wholesale rejection of the piece by the critics, and it wasn't heard for another ten years or so. Then John Ogdon recorded it, and then conditions allowed a properly prepared orchestra; since then there has been no doubt about its appreciation.

So far only one of my symphonies (No.5) has had a good first performance; significantly it's also the only one to have had a good press on its premiere. I don't think all the others are bad. No.3 got an awful first performance and was immediately written off. Some ten years later Jascha Horenstein recorded a magnificent performance and the work was cordially received by nearly all the reviewers. This and other lessonshave taught me that I would rather have no performance at all than a bad first one. So far as the most recent symphony (No.8) is concerned, the very fine orchestra was not given the chance to penetrate the music; rehearsal time was inadequate and there was a number of works to prepare for the English tour. The result was a skilful tightrope act. Not much of the real music emerged, and how could it? We may scarcely expect the press to appreciate this. If the extravagantly praised Quartet No.9 had been interpreted no better than the symphony, it would most likely have received similar treatment. The symphony is a difficult work, but far clearer and more direct than it seemed; when it was composed I thought it my best, and can still hear it in my head as it should sound.

Critics are sometimes apt to pick up things you say and make little theories from them, often with excellent intentions. But it is rather a mistake to propose that a deepening interest in intervals and their long-term resonances precludes the invention of actively expanding music. In the radio interview referred to, I was at pains to point out that merely knocking intervals together is not composing music. A more comprehensive performance of No.8 will show that it subsists on large ideas, that it is full of stretching melody, and that not one note of it is automatic. The unromantic energy with which it concludes will no longer be 'puzzling', or naively thought some kind of failure to be 'a struggle won or a quest ended'. We have no such expectations of Bach, from whom this work derives more of its nature than from any later music. It is essentially a polyphony, growing accordingly, its inner forces and tensions (however extreme) becoming ever more closely balanced, canalised as energy. That has nothing to do with romanticism.

Two small factual matters need correction. One writer seemed to think it a pity the Danes hadn't brought with them a symphony by Vagn Holmboe. So do I; he is a magnificent composer. Mine was played at the request of the Royal Philharmonic Society, who thought it would be somehow appropriate, given my associations with Nielsen. But next

time they really must bring a Holmboe symphony - preferably one they have rehearsed to recording point. Another critic supposed I might have been surprised by the length of my own work (42 minutes). Not so - the wrong space in Radio Times was no fault of mine; I had actually given a timing of 45 minutes, and this might in the end still prove to be the right one.

R.S.

SIMPSON ANTAGONISTES

"In No. 3 Sibelius has already slimmed away superfluous fat; here [in Symphony No. 4] the economy is so drastic as to create almost an impression of emaciation. Yet nothing could be less true; this music is not starved; nor does the notable tendency to elision result in any loss of substance. Sibelius does not, like some of his own contemporaries and plenty of present-day composers, imagine evisceration to be a proper cure for obesity."

"Sibelius, Nielsen and the Symphonic Problem" in Carl Nielsen - Symphonist, Kahn & Averill, 1979.

"There is some excuse for the idea that the late romantic composer, bent on the colossal, extruded his vast and sometimes prolix masterpieces with protracted grunts and snorts; high aspirations could prove no more than ambitions, and if imagined inspiration brought quick results, they were apt to want substance. Mahler wrote his enormous Eighth Symphony in a very short time; its first part is solidly composed, but its second, from the first solo baritone entry, is thrown overboard into a ocean of shameless kitsch from which it is never rescued, least of all in the inflated ending, and it must be regarded as one of his weakest compositions."

"Afterthought: The Composer and the Audience" in The Proms and Natural Justice, Toccata Press, 1981.

"...it is to be hoped that no one again asks the BBC Symphony Orchestra to play Le Sacre du Printemps and Bruckner's Seventh Symphony in one programme; the brass section is unlikely to forget this concert."

"The Planner" in ibid.