

# TONIC

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ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY

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## EDITORIAL

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Christine Skinner

At long last TONIC has finally appeared! Apologies are due since once more the production of this journal has been beset by problems - this time partly financial. With the recent and rather splendid recordings being partly or wholly financed by the Society, and forgetful people like myself, who easily overlook their membership subscriptions, the printing fund was virtually non-existent last Autumn Half Term. (If this pricks your conscience I'm sure that our Treasurer, John Young, would gladly receive your cheque!) Consequently the final preparation of this edition had to be delayed until the school Easter holidays. However, all was not lost since I spent some of the time producing a few more copies of the RSS Cookbook, which are available direct from me at Ascot. (Please enclose a cheque - payable to the Robert Simpson Society - for £1.50 per book, which includes post and packing.)

Recently we have all been saddened by the sudden death of John Brooks. He was a founder member of the Society, and his tact, patience and wealth of wisdom will be sorely missed by the committee, to whom he was a tower of strength. We extend our condolences to his wife, Sylvia. (A tribute to him from RS appears on the next page.)

As promised, this edition includes Stephen Johnson's article on the Ninth Symphony and Lionel Pike's discussion of the Eighth Quartet. There is also an article by Calum MacDonald which originated as a broadcast talk for Music Weekly. Forthcoming editions will include two transcriptions of Radio 3 interviews with RS - one being the discussion on Quartet No.5 which was accidentally omitted from an earlier edition - and, I hope, articles about the First and Sixth Symphonies by John Pickard and Lionel Pike respectively.

Let us hope that production will run smoothly from now on, and that you will receive the next edition as the Autumn leaves are falling. Please note that TONIC is edited during the Autumn Half Term and the Easter Holidays, and so the deadlines for contributions are the 1st October and the 1st April respectively.

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JOHN BROOKS

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Robert Simpson

Back in the 1950s the cellist Norman Jones, who was then in the Element Quartet, and who subsequently became principal cello of the Philharmonia Orchestra, introduced us to John and Sylvia Brooks, with whom he had taken up lodgings. A little later (February 11th, 1955) the Element Quartet gave a concert entirely of my music (the first three quartets) at the Great Drawing Room in the Arts Council building, which was then in St. James's Square. John and Sylvia turned up, prompted by curiosity, they said - and their good judgment was thereafter suspended by a strange mania, of which neither of them appears to have been cured. Both were the sort of people who stuck by their views, however inexplicable, and in this case they joined with a few others in attempting to do something about them. So the RSS began, despite the scepticism of the composer.

We shall all miss John's steadfast enthusiasm for music of all kinds, his genial kindness and natural warmth. Music was perhaps (apart from Sylvia) his greatest love, and it was always stimulating to talk with him about it. He had a high intelligence, and very decided views, and no one could pass lightly over any opinion he expressed, whether on music or any other matter. Quite apart from my own undying gratitude for all the selfless effort he put in on behalf of my own work, I shall miss his strong and humane personality, and the talk we used to have. None of these things die - they remain in the hearts and minds of those privileged to share them with him, and are still there to be passed on by us if we are worthy to do it. Sylvia must know by now that we all feel love and sympathy for her, and that we are reassured by the knowledge that she is a courageous and resilient person we want to have with us for many years to come.

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## SIMPSON'S SYMPHONIC APPETITE

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Calum MacDonald.

If 'the symphony' as a form has truly proved a 'survivor' in the world of contemporary music, then a most powerful force in that survival has been the symphonic output, and symphonic commitment, of Robert Simpson. There is certainly no unpleasing irony in the fact that the erstwhile leaders of the British avant-garde (including last year's Reith Lecturer '1') have turned back to that most tradition-encrusted of forms, and with it to tonality, as they attain their years of discretion. But RS did not have to rediscover its relevance; he has stuck to it all through, with the result that his symphonies - nine of them so far, with a tenth in the offing - now sound rather less 'anachronistic' than theirs. It is over 40 years since he began writing his 'official' First Symphony, about the time that his contemporaries, the young serialists of Darmstadt, thought they were discovering Webern. While he was composing it RS, instead, discovered Nielsen: and such was the impact of the great Danish symphonist that he found himself unable to finish his own work for some time. Later RS wrote the first and still the only authoritative English study of Nielsen; and people have been seeing Nielsen in his music ever since. But Nielsen's example of tonal expansion and organic growth simply gave him massive confirmation of what he was already doing instinctively. RS's First Symphony really drew its inspiration from much further back, and its unhackened blend of almost pure Renaissance polyphony with a Beethovenian rhythmic pulse sounds completely of the 20th century and yet fundamentally timeless. Listening to it, it is hardly surprising that he was to become one of the most penetrating advocates for the then unfashionable symphonism of Bruckner.

Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen: hostile critics (and there have been some) like to invoke these names as a sort of Holy Trinity in whose shadow RS has conceived his music. He might even agree - though he would probably insist that Haydn should be named as a fourth guilty party. But he once confessed that his initial, cardinal inspiration about symphonic form came from none of these, but from listening to Schoenberg's Piano Concerto. A sudden insight - or possibly creative misunderstanding - about what Schoenberg was or wasn't doing with a hidden tonal centre led him to conceive of a work with two opposed tonal centres, a tritone apart, reacting to one another: and that is one of the things the First Symphony is 'about'.

1. Professor Alexander Goehr

Creative conflict between tonalities became an essential principle of RS's long-range structural thinking. And in the foreground it was mirrored by the moods and textures of the musical events. Right up to today, his music tends to be polarised around well-defined extremes: diatonic simplicity against the challenge of fierce harmonic density; still serenity against furious rhythmic action. There is a very witty example of these extreme polarities in the second movement of RS's Fourth Symphony, a big scherzo with a little trio. The trio is built around an actual quotation from Haydn - an innocent, carefree scrap of tune from his Symphony No. 76. RS lures it into his symphonic stream only to throw at it much darker, more dissonant, mid-20th century elements. Yet the tune glides on its way quite unaffected or perhaps the right word is 'uncorrupted'.

The extremes of RS's music are not the sort that lend themselves to easy, emotive labelling. He has written few works with any overt programmatic intention, and his polarities seldom encompass moods that can crudely be described as 'despairing', say, or 'triumphant'. 'Despair', indeed, is never expressed: RS is no shallow optimist, but admits to being what he calls a 'ferocious anti-pessimist'; and his basically positive stance is embodied in the fact that his music still discovers enduring value in the essential elements of the symphonic tradition.

What he is passionately concerned with is music as organic growth. Revealingly, one of his very rare avowed programmes is that for the Sixth Symphony, which he describes as tracing the evolution of the human organism from the moment of conception, through birth and childhood, on into vigorous maturity. From this I think it is not too far-fetched to suggest that RS's music in general, in its constructive processes, provides a metaphor of the currents of human development - in the individual rather than the mass, and in both the physical and spiritual senses. As the most highly-developed instrumental form, the symphony has always been the most appropriate embodiment of this metaphor; and RS's mastery of movement - not just the extremes of slow and fast, but the gradual transformation of one into the other, sometimes without perceptible change of pulse - makes him a master of the symphony's largest-scale effects: the build-up and release of tension over extended paragraphs - sometimes enormously extended, as in the vast single movement of the Ninth Symphony. (With its huge central scherzo and cosmically slow outer sections, the Ninth seems like an enormous mirror-image of No. 1.)

It is here that the comparisons with Beethoven - not in quality but in method - are most relevant. RS has said that he finds 'more force of life' in Beethoven than in any 20th century composer, and that he would rather learn from him than from anybody. The debt is often most apparent in the sheer physicality with which RS, like Beethoven, invests his symphonic

structures, keeping them in close contact with the pulse of sheer human excitement. He is fond of very quick, almost manic *moto perpetuo* writing, and if his symphonies scorn easy triumph they often culminate in breathtaking explosions of sheer obstreperous energy.

Until the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, I would have said that Nos. 4 and 5, both big works, were probably RS's finest achievements. I still think the Fourth may be my personal favourite: 'may be', not because it has been superseded, but because a few years ago RS decided he was dissatisfied with its slow movement - which I, and many other people, thought was one of the most beautiful things he's ever written - and he replaced it with a new one, which hasn't yet been played. Much as I regret the demise of that deeply expressive *Adagio*, he was clearly within his compositional rights in suppressing what he felt to be sub-standard work, and it was none of our affair to protest.

That action was as characteristic of RS's hard-headed adherence to the highest artistic standards as the occasion on which he returned a commission fee, and demanded the reciprocal return of his score, when he felt the commissioning body had reneged on agreements about its performance.

But this uncompromising artistic scrupulousness goes hand in hand with a concern for human contact in his music: typified by the Eighth Symphony, which was written expressly for the enjoyment of a close friend who, at RS's invitation, provided him with a general outline of the kind of symphony he would like to hear.

In the past decade or so RS has become less interested in large areas of tonality than in the generative power to be found in the basic intervals of music. In the Eighth Symphony nearly all the thematic material seems to grow in a wonderfully organic way from the simple opening interval of a major second. One of the grounds of RS's well-ventilated dismissal of Schoenbergian twelve-note technique is that the twelve tones cannot possibly be equal to one another because of the difference in intervals between them. Whether twelve-note music is actually governed by a series of pitches or a series of intervals is a deep analytico-philosophical conundrum that need not concern us here: but it is undoubtedly a fact that in diatonic music, certain intervals can be used to create situations where the twelve chromatic notes really are equal - if you arrange them in a continuous chain of rising fourths, or descending fifths.

RS has been showing increasing interest in these special cases. For instance, a chain of twelve rising fourths is a kind of *cantus firmus* for the first section of the Ninth Symphony. Descent in fifths is even more ubiquitous. As RS once memorably said, it doesn't matter if you, the listener, can't tell a fifth from a rissole: but anyone can hear the sense of

cadence in a falling fifth, and a chain of them creates the effect of a continued cadence, each note becoming the dominant of the one that follows. RS'S music is full of such figures and cadences made up of short chains. And in the finale of the Eighth, there is an extraordinary passage where the music swings through two-and-a-half complete cycles of perfect fifths, like some fantastic musical equivalent of a perpetual-motion machine.

It may be felt that so far I have begged some important questions. Can an attachment to a quasi-Beethovenian vitalism and a post-Nielsen-esque harmonic vocabulary really make much sense in our contemporary musical world? It is a fair question, since RS has on occasion been a witheringly trenchant critic of many of contemporary music's pretensions. But usually questions such as this are debated more by critics than composers, and in terms loaded with moral implications - 'responsibility' to the audience or to 'sane values'; 'realistic acceptance' of the logic of history; or a 'duty' to explore still further the frontiers of musical experience.

All such debate is essentially cant. True creativity is a matter of appetite. In music, it's a matter of discovering the music you enjoy most, feeling there ought to be more of it in the world, and going ahead and writing it; and if you're a substantial creative personality in your own right, the result will be a new and personal thing, whatever its derivation. In some of his writings RS has tended to cast Schoenberg as a kind of negative pole to the positivism of Beethoven - yet Schoenberg surely learned as much from Beethoven as RS has himself. Maybe he learned different lessons, or more likely the same lessons, which he interpreted in a wholly different way. There can be no such thing as an objective assessment of what Beethoven's music 'means'; we all reconstruct Beethoven for ourselves, even if we're mere non-performing listeners. There are no objective listeners, any more than objective analysts or critics; and there was certainly never such an animal as an objective composer. We shouldn't ask them to be fair-minded, or responsive to a non-existent historical logic, but to indulge their creative appetites to the full. RS's appetite has yielded some wonderfully impressive results, and I, for one, look forward to the Tenth Symphony with keen anticipation.

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## THE NINTH SYMPHONY

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Stephen Johnson.

Robert Simpson began his Ninth Symphony in May 1985. In July of that year with about 15 minutes of it already completed, he set out his overall plan for the work in a letter to Lionel Pike:

*No. 9 [...] will be continuous, on a big scale, [and it] shows the first direct influence of Bruckner I've been conscious of. First part very deliberate and grand, with a slow introduction and a not much quicker main movement, constructed rather like [...] an old chorale prelude with successive entries of a 'chorale' at progressively differing pitches (by fourths), a process adumbrated in the introduction. This will lead to a massive cliff-like climax, over which the Gaderene Swine will rush! - a huge scherzo, in turn making another even bigger climax, gradually merging into an intense but eventfully peaceful slow movement. Everything throughout the work moving by stages of fourths. The whole thing 45-50 minutes long. or so I intend at the moment! The devil knows what will really happen.*

Anyone who has been involved in creative work, no matter how humble, will recognise the aptness of RS's concluding remarks. No matter how intricately one plans in advance, if a piece has life of its own it is quite capable of emulating Prometheus and defying the designs of its creator. Looking at the completed score of the Ninth Symphony, one may recognise the broader outlines of RS's scheme, but with certain significant alterations and enrichments. Nevertheless, comparison of the plan with the finished product can tell us much about the composer's creative processes, as well as giving the listener a few helpful clues as to how to approach the music itself.

RS's first observation is that the Symphony will be 'continuous, on a big scale'. By 'continuous' he does not mean simply that the movements will be linked or that they will successively develop the same motivic-harmonic material. The continuity of the Ninth Symphony reflects RS's abiding concern with question of pulse and movement. Like the First Symphony, the Ninth is committed to one basic pulse throughout, though the material is organised and developed in such a way as to suggest three markedly different tempos. Here the outer movements are marked at *minim* = c.60, while the central scherzo is marked *dotted minim* = c. 120: the *circa* indicates that RS has no wish to be categorical about the basic speed but, as he has repeatedly



insisted apropos other works, the relationship between the metronome markings must be preserved exactly throughout (a *poco rit.* in the closing bars marks the only opportunity in the work for *tempo rubato*). One of the principal advantages of this kind of long-term planning is that it allows the composer plenty of opportunities to play tricks with the listener's perception of musical movement. The eruption of the scherzo from the 'cliff-like climax' at the end of the first movement is quite unambiguous - there is no doubt what has happened or when it happened - but the transition from scherzo to finale is a very different matter: the material on either side of the metric divide ( $3/4$  becoming  $3/2$ ) is very similar, and for a moment one is not sure whether the music is still hurtling through space as before, or whether in fact something very different has started to happen. It is only with the arrival of the slowly-paced string fugue, 22 bars after the change to dotted minim = 60, that the music really begins to flow again. Metre and metronome markings are identical with those of the first movement, but here the relative sparseness of musical incident gives the music an utterly different psychological tempo.

Before passing on to an examination of the movements themselves, it is worthwhile briefly considering RS's remark about the 'first direct influence of Bruckner'. Most critics, armed no doubt, with a foreknowledge of the composer's musical interests, have claimed to discern a Brucknerian element in RS's music. The comparison is not inapposite, though it may signify nothing more than that RS, like Bruckner, is a magnificently assured musical architect, with a rare ability to build climaxes. Until now there has been little in RS's music that actually *sounds* like Bruckner - Nielsen, Sibelius, Beethoven, possibly even Shostakovich, but rarely Bruckner. In the Ninth Symphony, however, the 'direct' influence of Bruckner is on several occasions quite audible, as in Ex.1 from the first movement. The terraced dynamics, the organ-like changes of sonority and the powerful unison string ostinato are indeed echt-Bruckner. RS tells me that at this point he had the first movement of Bruckner's Third Symphony very much in mind.

Ex.1

brass *ff*

strings *ff marcato*

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Bruckner's influence is evident at a much deeper level in the organisation of the first movement, as it is later in the finale. The existence of an underlying 'deliberate and grand' musical argument, proceeding at its own measured rate no matter how agitated the musical surface, is something that RS has always found especially fascinating in the symphonic music of Bruckner, and he has examined this process with great clarity and insight in his analyses of the music of that composer. Here, however, Bruckner is, as it were, wedded to Bach. As RS had told us, his first movement is constructed 'like an old chorale prelude', with 'successive entries of a "chorale" at successive pitches'. This process, he says, is 'adumbrated in the introduction'. And so it is, though the existence of a functionally separate 'introduction' and 'main movement' is much less clear in the completed score, and the removal of the original tempo change at bar 41 (obviously still current at the time RS wrote his provisional programme note) has blurred the distinction still further.

Ex.2

Marcato, tempo giusto  $\text{♩} = c 60$

pp

3 3 sim

ob pp

(NB: decorative violin figures omitted)

y z

etc.

1. Rudolf Reti: 20th century theorist, and author of *The Thematic Process in Music*.



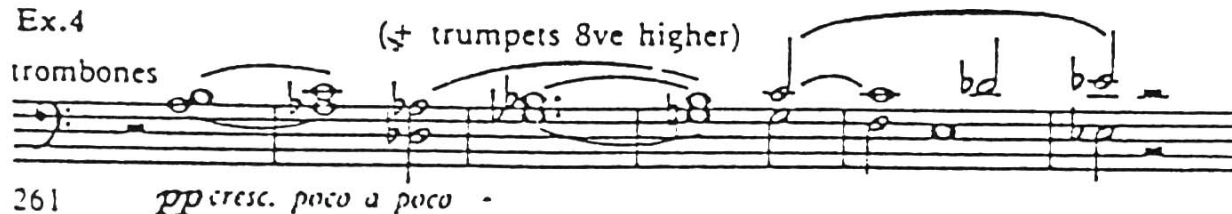
Ex.2 shows how the symphony opens: woodwind fanning out from an initial pedal D sharp, presenting in the process a series of simple but highly distinctive motivic ideas. To say that everything in the Symphony derives from this material may sound like Retian '1' overstatement, but in this case such a claim carries the endorsement of the composer. The overall progression D sharp - G sharp marks out the interval of the perfect fourth (as do the flute and oboe parts at the end of figure x). Throughout the 40-bar introductory section the pedals continue to rise by fourths or fall by fifths; the rate of progression accelerates, generating considerable excitement, until at bar 40 the music arrives back at the original D sharp (now written enharmonically as E flat), having taken in all twelve tones on the way. This process is now worked out at a much slower rate, but with the same gradual acceleration over the next 262 bars. The 'chorale' makes its first appearance at bar 93 on trumpets, trombones and tuba (Ex.3). The listener should have little difficulty in identifying it (or at least feeling it) as a derivation from figure x of Ex.2 in inversion - that characteristic wedge shape remains plainly audible.

Ex.3



As the movement progresses, the note values of the chorale theme shorten, as the episodes between the entries contract; further modifications are achieved by octave displacement and rhythmic variation. Eventually Ex.3 appears in a kind of telescoped version, underlining its allegiance to Ex.2 (see Ex.4 below).

Ex.4



The one constant in this process is the interval of the fourth - each entry of the 'chorale' is a fourth higher, or, by inversion, a fifth lower, than its predecessor. And while this 'deliberate and grand' process is going on, RS treats us to a musical 'foreground' of great subtlety and fecundity: new ideas are constantly shooting into flower, and the composer's contrapuntal ingenuity is evident at almost every turn, Ex.2 remaining the *fons et origo* of everything.

2. literal translation: source and origin

Once the chorale theme has arrived back at its original pitch, Ex.1 enters majestically in 2/2, building slowly to the movement's 'cliff-like climax'. As for the Gaderene Swine - perhaps they didn't make it to the final version (RS tells me that he had a very different, quiet ending in mind at the time of the letter quoted above): instead, there is an overwhelmingly powerful coda in the original 3/2, with once again a cycle of pedals rising by fourths, this time from B flat to B flat. It is important to note, however, that neither these pedal points, nor the progressively rising entries of the chorale theme, can be said to define tonal areas in the traditional sense. They can perhaps better be understood as local centres of gravity - temporary harmonic axes in relation to which configurations of notes discover their meaning - but no longer providing (as in some of RS's earlier works) the foundation of the musical argument. Musical organisation, says RS is now 'intervallic' rather than 'tonal in the classical sense'. It is ironic that as RS's reputation as a composer of traditionally tonal music grows, so his interest (as a composer, that is) in diatonic tonality wanes. This reliance on intervals as a germinating force is a relatively recent development for RS, but it is important to stress that it is a highly personal technique which can be seen to have grown out of the composer's particular musical preoccupations rather than a peculiarly belated attempt to move with the times. Few composers have shown less deference to what others have fondly considered the 'stylistic imperatives' of the age.

Now follows RS's 'huge scherzo' - huge, that is, in every sense but that of duration. (It lasts about six or seven minutes.) With four emphatic Ds from trumpets, woodwind and strings, the scherzo tears itself free from the granitic textures of the first movement's coda, and thus begins a veritable riot of invention on the elements of Ex.2: themes and chords in multiple fourths and wedge-shaped themes derived from  $x$  in Ex.2 rush past the listener, and a good deal of obsessive Beethovenian repetition is needed to give the various transformations time to impinge on the consciousness. At the centre of the movement, woodwind gradually pile up a 12-note chord in fourths (one instrument to each note), while strings develop  $x$  from Ex.2 in even, staccato crotchets, and trombones dwell menacingly on the descending lower-line of  $x + z$ . This passage generates enormous tension, which RS skilfully uses to fuel his ascent to the movement's final climax. As at the end of the first movement, the culmination is centred on a massive B flat, this time spread through five octaves. Against this figure  $y$  from Ex.2 rises heavily on the brass, *fff*.

Now begins the remarkable transition to the finale referred to above. The metre changes from 3/4 (dotted minim = 120) to 3/2 (minim = 60). Ex.2 continues to rise slowly in the brass, then suddenly the bass is wrenched away from B flat, and the energy

accumulated at the end of the scherzo is gradually discharged as the bass sinks, by fifths, on to a low A. Echoes of the brass version of *y* are heard quietly on the strings, the rising lower voice being extended so as to suggest a retrograde version of the wedge-shaped *x* (Ex.5).

Ex.5

RS's 'intense but eventually peaceful slow movement' opens with a high, *pianissimo* fugue subject on the first violins, while the 'cellos slowly rising chromatic scale suggests an inversion (or retrograde) of the lower voice of Ex.2. Similar scale-like passages have appeared from time to time in the first two movements, but from now on they are to play an increasingly important role. The writing is highly charged, but restrained (dynamics never rise above *pp* during the next 82 bars). This kind of quiet, mysterious and yet somehow powerfully compelling writing is highly characteristic of the more recent RS, though it is in the quartets rather than the orchestral works that it has chiefly been found until now. The fugue continues on strings alone (entries descending at the interval of the minor ninth) until two bassoons enter with a new figure, marked *misterioso*, which proves to be the beginning of a nine-bar palindrome, based on the wedge shapes of Ex.2. Here is yet another visitation from the world of the quartets, specifically the Ninth, with its 32 palindromic variations on a similarly reversible minuet by Haydn. The idea of incorporating palindromic material here was apparently suggested to RS by the increasing frequency of retrograde formations - the 'cellos rising chromatic scale, the reversed wedges of Ex.5.

For a while the strings' fugal writing and the *misterioso* palindromes alternate, the former becoming increasingly intense, the latter remaining as darkly enigmatic as ever. Eventually, after a huge rise and fall on a bass E, RS begins to build his final climax. This takes the form of a set of free variations on the palindromic figure, each entry a fourth higher - decorated a la Bruckner with string and woodwind ostinatos. Finally horns and trombones storm in with versions of *x* from Ex.2 in jagged dotted rhythms, culminating at bar 1561 in a *sfff* statement of *y*, doubled at the twelfth - another characteristically Simpsonian device.

Throughout this passage the accompanying figures have been increasingly drawn to the note E flat, the timpani triplet E flats recalling, however distantly, the pulsating bass D sharp of the Symphony's opening. Eventually we are left only with E flat, above which a final fugal section begins, *pianissimo tranquillo*, on strings. All the material plainly derives from Ex.2, though now the originally chromatic character is somewhat mollified by an increasing use of whole instead of half tones. At the close, a relaxed 'diatonicised' version of *z* (Ex.2) opens out to an octave E flat, and the whole-tone scales rise softly through almost the entire compass of the orchestral range. Again one is reminded of the quartets, in this case the mesmeric rising semiquaver scales at the end of the Seventh Quartet. Here too there is a deeply satisfying resolution, but not, as one might expect, on an unambiguous E flat/D sharp. A reminder of *y* and the strings spell out the first four notes of *z*, this time in rising fifths (Ex.6).

Ex.6

The musical score for Ex.6 consists of two staves. The top staff is for piano, marked with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a tempo marking 'poco rit.'. It begins with a dynamic marking 'ppp(+ vn harmonic 15ve higher)'. The bottom staff is for violin, marked with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a dynamic marking 'y' and a measure number '1670'. The piano part features a rising semiquaver scale, while the violin part features a rising fifth. The score is enclosed in a box with a double bar line at the end.

The key? Certainly not E flat/D sharp; nor does that bass C sound like a point of tonal repose; and yet this bringing together of the elements of Ex.2, with *z* verticalised and thus purged of its original linear chromaticism, provides one of the most satisfying resolutions in all of RS's output. 'I think I'm changing - getting calmer', he remarked to me just after I saw the score for the first time, and indeed this is the first of his symphonies to end with an extended, ultimately tranquil slow movement. Perhaps an important change of outlook is taking place, necessitating a new kind of finale. Perhaps; but what this new symphony demonstrates most forcibly is that RS is still fully capable of setting himself new musical problems, and solving them in his own highly original and resourceful way. It certainly augurs well.

This is a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in The Musical Times in April 1987; our thanks to its author and his editor for permission to reproduce it here. Music examples reproduced by permission of Faber Music. Eds.

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THE TWELFTH QUARTET (1987)

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Robert Simpson

This work was commissioned for the 1988 Nottingham Festival, and is dedicated to the composer and scholar Lionel Pike. It is in two large movements, *Adagio* and *Molto vivace*, each lasting about fifteen minutes. The first is a predominantly peaceful fugue; some passages become intense, but most of the movement is gentle and contemplative. Its subject makes close use of minor thirds and fourths, and these intervals penetrate the whole work. They dominate the opening of the exuberant, propulsive second movement, which is in Beethoven's one-in-a-bar triple-time scherzo tempo. The pace is sustained for no less than 1800 bars, though not with unrelenting sound and fury - there are many soft, unforced passages where calmer ideas float over the fast tempo, which never changes. But the material does change as the minor thirds and fourths are put to many different uses - and it is these intervals that provide the kaleidoscopic process with consistency. The movement ends with much energy.

The quartet as a whole is "tonal", but not in the sense that there is a "tonic" or a "main key"; its "tonal" feeling grows from the intervals themselves and their natural resonances relative to each other, used to create both tension and relaxation where required - consonance and dissonance create and release tension much as in classical music. Intervals remain eternally what they are, but there are always new ways of hearing them and by so doing, hoping to open fresh horizons for the listener.

Lynwood Music

Robert Simpson

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\* Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano 1984

\* Sonata for Violin and Piano 1985

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

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THE EIGHTH QUARTET  
RS's 'New Way'

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Lionel Pike

The 1985 recording of RS's Eighth String Quartet' has given us an opportunity to examine a change in that composer's approach to large-scale form. He himself mentioned the 'new way' - without using such a Beethovenian expression - in a BBC Radio 3 discussion with Michael Oliver, on 6 November 1982:

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. I 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 by 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.

The discussion arose from the first performance of RS's Eighth Symphony; but this work is not yet available as either a published score or as a commercial recording. It therefore seems sensible to examine a work for which both are available, in order to understand the new procedures mentioned by RS.

The Eighth String Quartet was written in 1979, and is dedicated to the entomologist, Professor David Gillett, and his wife Irena. It is in four movements, two of very large scale framing a central pair of miniatures. The first movement is a big fugue, on a subject that gradually develops as the piece progresses <sup>2</sup>. One feature that remains more or less constant is a figure that rocks back and forth over a minor third. Most other elements - leaps of a fifth and octave leaps - are subjected to evolution in one way or another; yet the listener has no difficulty in following the logical progression from one entry to the next.

The subject itself is conceived so as to use all the strings of each of the instruments in turn; and it makes a feature of upward leaps of a fifth <sup>3</sup>.

1. The Eighth Quartet, recorded by the Delme Quartet, is issued on Hyperion A 66117
2. An idea followed up by RS again in the Finale of the Ninth Quartet, also recorded by the Delme Quartet (Hyperion A 66127)
3. The Seventh Quartet had also dealt with the possibilities of the perfect fifth, but in an entirely different way from that discussed here.

In Ex.1 they are marked *a*: particular attention is drawn to these leaps, because each is unexpected. That is, the particular tonal area implied by each leap of a fifth is unprepared by the context in which it occurs. The first of these leaps, C sharp - G sharp, is immediately filled in with an E sharp to form a 'triad': this initial 'triad', melodically stated, is the first indication of the tonic of the movement, even though the listener cannot be aware of it at this stage. There are also octave leaps in this theme; but though the octave is (because of its size) potentially a more striking interval, it does not here command the same attention as the fifth because it sounds more 'inevitable'. Indeed, it would be true to say that the octave leaps at the beginning help to draw attention to the fifths: by providing three E naturals on the first two beats, they lead the ear to hear the first F natural as if it were a down-beat: the resulting 'hemiola feel' (as compared with the notated 3/4 time) will make the upper note of each fifth an accented beat - at least mentally. One result of this is that the fifth leaps seem to fall over one another because of their rhythmical positioning. The fact that the F natural is heard as a downbeat after the octave leaps is significant in another way, and its importance only fully emerges later in the work; the semitone rise E - F natural is emphasized by this (mental) accentuation, and semitones are used again, in inverted form, several times before the fugue subject is finished.

Ex.1



This subject, just six bars in length, contains the seeds of all the other elements that the composer will use during the work - some 30 minutes of music. The 'rocking back and forth of a minor third' (*b*) is one that is almost immediately developed (I shall also use *b* when single minor thirds are used): a pendant to it is the minor third filled in by step (*d*). This does not by any means exhaust the possibilities of the theme: the composer often uses the head (the first four crotchet beats of the subject) melodically later on, and the tritone (*c*) has enormous significance which only emerges later in the work. For the moment it is enough to realise that the tritone symbolises the distance of tonal travel in the work from the initial E to the final A sharp of the Finale - indeed, the two will be heard together immediately before the end of the work.

Such a complex distillation of ideas as is presented by this theme needs to be repeatedly insisted upon in order to implant itself in the listener's mind, so that the full significance of the material can be appreciated. There could be no better form



for this purpose than fugue, particularly since entries at the fifth (a) are such a normal feature of it.

Fugue, however, is not 'dynamic' in the same way that sonata form is - it does not normally have ongoing development combined with tonal argument and duality of texture and material. Nevertheless, sonata dualism is a concept near to RS's heart; and perhaps for this reason he has appropriated it in this fugue by, among other things, developing the subject. Thus the answer in bar 6 enters on a third beat (rather than a first) and doubles the number of octave leaps at the opening, further unsettling the underlying rhythmic pulse: the top of the melody is also changed. The 'dynamic' fugal style is then contrasted with a more reserved type of writing which does not treat the fugue subject directly, though its handling of intervals is derived from that theme. These contrasted areas - episodes, technically - behave like the contrasting second subject areas of a sonata structure. The first episode, which is very short, makes two significant points: it sounds the first vertical octave of the work, and this B flat is the ultimate tonal goal of the quartet (written as A sharp at that point) - though of course the listener cannot be aware of it at this stage (see Ex.2).



The second point made in the Episode is perhaps more immediately relevant: the fifth (a), which has so far been treated melodically, is now used harmonically. The feature of the episodes throughout is the approach to and departure from an open fifth: these statements of a may in themselves be brief, but are nevertheless frequently used at very many different pitches.

The tritone (c) is used harmonically in Ex.2, first between adjacent chords, and then (when the upper part begins to move in syncopation) as a direct harmonic interval. The tritone, like the fifth and octave, was used melodically in the subject, but is now harmonically treated: but, perhaps more than that, the tritone is an obvious counter to the stability of the perfect fifth. By shifting the upper voice downwards a semitone, a becomes c: the semitone - itself a melodic feature of the fugue subject - thus begins to take its place as part of the overall argument.

The semitone, however, can act on the perfect fifth in another way, which is implied in the fugue subject (see Ex.1). In bars 2 and 3 (read enharmonically) the rising fifth F - C is approached by a minor third down (A flat - F) and left by a minor third down (C - A natural): in bars 3 and 4 the pattern

is repeated, the rising fifth A - E being approached from C natural and followed by a move to C sharp. Two minor thirds, then, placed within a perfect fifth, fail by a semitone to fill up that interval. Indeed, they may be used in such a way that the semitone occurs between the two minor thirds, in which case the fifth will have both the major and minor third sounding in the middle of the interval. This position, suggested melodically in the fugue subject, is stated harmonically later in the movement (bars 41 and 42), where the fifth C - G is filled in with a minor third at both ends, leaving E flat clashing against E natural (see Ex.3). This passes by with little attention being drawn to it, but it is of considerable significance later on.

Ex.3

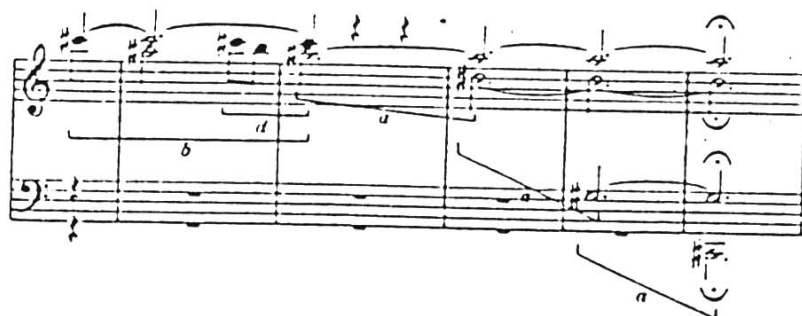


The processes of development involving intervals do not, of course, imply a neglect of other areas of composition which have always intrigued RS. Musical motion has long been of interest to him, and an example of its working is evident at the climax of this fugue. One of the ways in which the subject quoted in Ex.1 is developed is by using shorter note-values - not necessarily to present that subject in diminution, but often to add 'divisions' to it. There is an inexorable increase in power, speed and propulsion. The headlong scurrying of little notes in the viola and cello eventually helps to set up a slow swinging motion in A major on the two violins, in a passage clearly derived from the episodic material shown in Ex.2. By the time that this passage is reached the momentum is such that the composer is able, after a while, to remove the scurrying viola and cello and leave the chiming violins to continue sounding under the pressure already attained. (He had remarked to me that he could not have used this device at any earlier point in the movement, since he had to build up sufficient latent momentum in order to be able to leave the slow chiming to make its effect.) The chiming fades gradually, in an 'active pause' which defuses the energy attained, and the episode material appears in a key a tritone (c) distant - in E flat. The prominent use of descending semitones in this movement has resulted in the tritone gaining more power than the fifth: that is, the fifth has got 'squashed' into a tritone by the descending semitones. Thus the use of the tritone tonally at this point is quite logical: indeed, the interval, which has already appeared melodically and harmonically, is now also used tonally.

Such a treatment is extended to the perfect fifth, the most prominent of all the intervals in the quartet. We have already seen how the fugue subject treats it melodically, and the episodes (as well as such passages as that quoted in Ex.3) treat

it harmonically. The overall tonal plan of the work is governed by rising fifths in that the tonal centre of each movement is a fifth higher than that of its predecessor - they end respectively on C sharp, G sharp, D sharp, and A sharp. The end of the fugue foresees this by using these very notes as its final chord (see Ex.4).

Ex.4



This presentation of the four finals in reverse order reflects the fact that strings of descending fifths have been used at times during the movement. The first violin in bars 126-8 presents eight in a row (though with two 'octave break-backs'), while in bars 114-6 the second violin and viola share another series of eight descending fifths. The use of descending fifths (with some prominence at times) acts as a counter to the steadily rising fifths of the overall tonal scheme of the work. The quartet thus begins with a movement based on C sharp, and ends with one on A sharp: the shortfall of a minor third is expressed in the quartet's melodic material by two important features (*b* and *d*). (Incidentally, the tonal distance from the E opening of the fugue to the C sharp ending is likewise a minor third.) The cadence quoted in Ex.4 clearly shows how this tonal shortfall and its melodic expression are interconnected: this, of course, is yet another way in which the fifth and minor third act on each other (one has been demonstrated in Ex.3, and another is that two minor thirds placed exactly above one another form a tritone).

The final chord of the movement, indeed, has some relevance to the tritone. The 'chiming' passage in A major at the climax of the movement had, it will be remembered, been succeeded by music in E flat. Both areas are suggested in the final chord, in that the viola and cello have notes closely related to A major, whereas the two violins have E flat stated enharmonically.

Ex.4 contains one further point of relevance. The semitone - which plays some part melodically in the fugue subject, and is the result of placing two minor thirds within a fifth (either squashing it to a tritone, or alternatively making a major-minor third interval as in Ex.3) - is much used in the first movement. At many places the descending semitone is used like a suspension (or appoggiatura) onto a consonance: these uses are summed up in the final B natural - A sharp at the last cadence of the first movement. It will later emerge that the approach to A sharp from a semitone above has considerable importance to an

understanding of the end of the Finale. Moreover, it is certainly not without significance that the last real melodic move in the fugue (a semitone fall) balances its first real melodic move (a semitone rise) - a 'mirror' on the minutest scale which will have repercussions in the following movement.

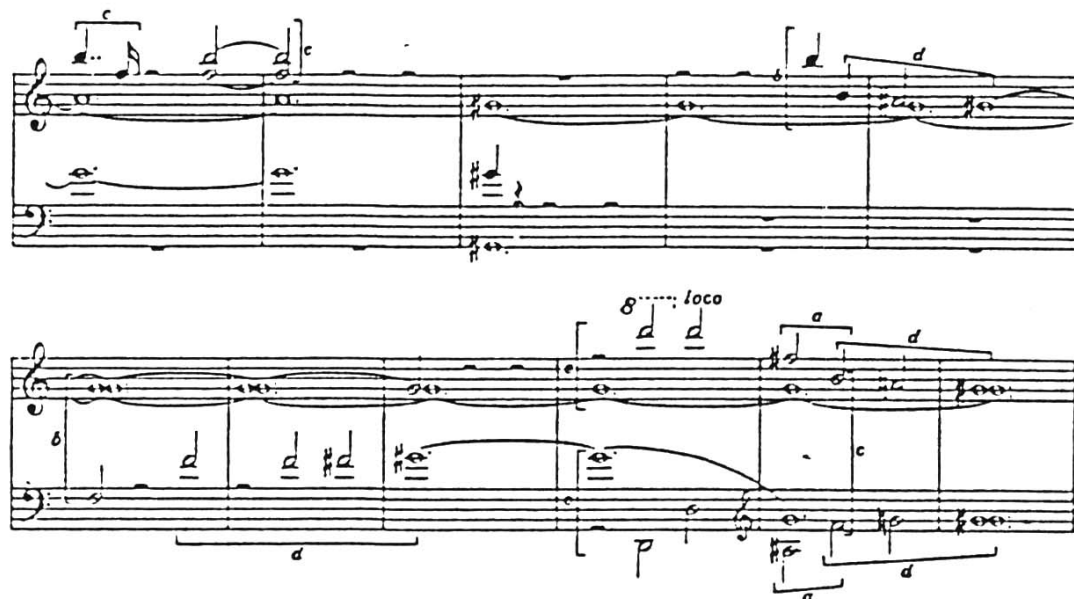
This is a tiny scherzo depicting the mosquito *Eretmapodites gilletti*, named after its discoverer, the co-dedicatee of this Quartet. The semitone flick (D sharp - E) on the viola at the start is a very fast version of the semitone rise at the opening of the fugue; and in the remaining two movements the first activity is also a semitone (falling in the third movement, rising in the Finale). Moreover, if we ignore the D sharp (which is on the briefest of upbeats), the E at the start of bar one - however short - will be heard as starting the Scherzo with the same note as had started the fugue (but an octave higher). The tonal centre of the movement is, however, G sharp: perhaps one might feel that this has been prepared as early as bar 3 of the work (see Ex.1), though at that earlier point the note merely acts as the dominant of C sharp rather than as a tonic in its own right. The first theme of the Scherzo incorporates many upward semitone 'flicks' like the opening one: they are applied first of all to a series of rising fourths, which amounts to the same thing as flatwards moving circle of fifths. One might argue, therefore, that the four last bars of Ex.4 are translated into the fast opening theme of the Scherzo, but with the addition of a 'subsemitonium' on each note. Semitones play a very considerable part in this Scherzo - indeed, it is the semitone appoggiatura as much as anything that gives the movement its character. Soon after the start the two violins snap at D sharp, approaching it by semitones from either direction (E - D sharp and D natural - D sharp simultaneously): this tiny figure prepares the cadence passage quoted in Ex.5, as well as indicating the direction to be taken for the following movement's tonic.<sup>4</sup> The next pitch (D sharp) is also suggested at a false start of the repeat of the Scherzo towards the end of the Trio (in bar 84), where the second violin uses the opening 'flick' on the notes D - E flat. It is a nice point that the E flat is common to this false recapitulation and to the opening, where it is given enharmonically in the D sharp - E figure.

The central Trio is much concerned with an argument between fifths and tritones, after which the repeat of the Scherzo begins at a new pitch: the G sharp -centered opening is recapitulated in A sharp before moving back towards G sharp (the relevance of A sharp is that it is the tonal goal of the whole work). All the elements so far discussed are incorporated into this movement: it is hardly necessary to say that, despite its illustrative properties, it fits in with the logical processes which govern the whole quartet.

4. Though it is true that the passage is based on E, not D sharp at the repeat of the Scherzo. This transposition upward by a semitone is not without significance, as will be clear later.

Indeed, these processes are taken further in this Scherzo. There are clear references to the episode material of the opening fugue, though at times the perfect fifths of that material become tritones in the Scherzo. In the little coda to the movement the tritone begins to dominate melodically as well as harmonically (see Ex.5). The final G sharp pedal is approached by semitone steps simultaneously from above and below (though the cello G natural in fact moves to a G sharp that is a fifteenth lower than the expected resolution). This is a minute 'mirror' shape: the idea has been foreshadowed at the end of the 'Trio', in bars 89-91 of the second movement, as well as in bar 21. Mirror shapes predominate to the end of the movement, as Ex.5 shows.

Ex.5



The cello freely inverts the violin's phrase, and then the two approach the final unison G sharp simultaneously from the two extremes of the quartet's compass. What was the minutest kind of mirror in the opening fugue has become very large here - and moreover makes evident use of fifths, minor thirds and tritones. The last bar but one has the clearest indication yet that the result of piling two minor thirds one above another (F - G sharp, G sharp - B natural) is a tritone. Clearly, the tritone has become of more significance than the fifth at this stage of the argument: and this has happened despite an evident attempt to introduce major thirds (as opposed to minor thirds) during the movement.

The third movement, in which all the instruments are muted throughout, is the most relaxed of all; and its tonal centre (D sharp) has been well prepared. Firstly, the relaxed end of the fugue begins in that key (though partly notated as E flat). Secondly, a tendency towards E flat in a set of strettii at bars 48-56 of the first movement is followed by an episode of a more



relaxed kind beginning in D sharp (bar 65ff). In both these instances E flat or D sharp is a key associated with music of an introspective kind - the type of music used in the third movement. Thirdly, the 'misleading Recapitulation' at bar 84 of the Scherzo was on the notes D - E flat, with D on a weak pulse and E flat on a stronger one (this had been preceded by a fairly strong use of E flat/D sharp's in the Trio section). Fourthly, the tonal scheme of rising fifths presupposes another shift upwards by that interval: as part of this scheme, the upper notes of the final chord of the first movement (see Ex.4) indicate this key. Lastly, the snapping at D sharp from both directions just after the start of the Scherzo (noted above) helps to prepare the following stage of the tonal argument. The third movement is cast in a miniature sonata form, but without any strong feeling of tonal-dynamic conflict - that idea having been transferred to the opening fugue; nevertheless, one nice tonal point is made. The second subject area occurs in the *same* key in both exposition and recapitulation: instead it is the first subject that is in the 'wrong' key in the exposition and resolved into the 'correct' key (a minor third lower, on E flat) in the recapitulation. This unconventional reorganization of the normal sonata procedure is possible because the preceding movements have already set up the tonal norm for this particular work - there is no need, therefore, for the first subject to establish the tonic. Nevertheless, the pedal F sharp on the cello at the end of the development might be thought of as preparing a first subject at its original pitch (G flat): the difference of a minor third between this and the eventual entry on E flat is no other than the minor third which, as I have pointed out, is the distance of shortfall between the tonic of the fugue and that of the Finale. This minor third difference is recalled immediately prior to the end of the third movement when, just before the last D sharp, the first subject material is brought back at its original pitch (but now written enharmonically).<sup>5</sup>

The first subject's opening material neatly symbolizes what is going on in the work. It consists of a quiet rocking backwards and forwards of a semitone. An equal amount of time is given to upper and lower notes of this interval, so that one is in doubt as to whether the 'semitone up' or the 'semitone down' is uppermost as an active agent. In the first movement the 'semitone down' figure was very prominent, and was heard as the last melodic activity; but in the Scherzo rising and falling semitones balance each other out in such a way as to produce 'mirror images' around a note. Inverting the first movement's falling semitone could, of course, be one way of helping to overcome the tritone - by expanding it back to a perfect fifth.

5. It is preceded by an octave G sharp, which perhaps recalls the key of the Scherzo.

The little semitone figure of the third movement occasionally has its position in the bar changed so that the upper note is not always felt as rhythmically the stronger; and at one point the figure is simultaneously used in recto and inversion. This tiny semitone figure permeates the whole movement; but throughout it the upward and downward versions are held in balance. One other figure appears very commonly in the third movement, and it likewise symbolizes the dichotomy between the tritone and the perfect fifth. This figure (see Ex.6) contains a tritone between its first and last notes, yet overall it spans a perfect fifth. Perhaps the shifting of G up to A flat used here gives us the first indication that tritones will eventually be succeeded by perfect fifths.



But, one may ask, is the tritone so very incompatible with the perfect fifth? If you go on adding perfect fifth above perfect fifth, continuing the process started by the tonal centre of each of the movements of the quartet, you will eventually arrive a tritone away from the point of departure. The third movement suggests this position in bar 92 (see Ex.7), where there is a chord of piled-up fifths which nevertheless includes the tritone A - E flat (the E flat and its repetitions recall the tonic of the movement, but spell it enharmonically).<sup>6</sup>



Rising fifths and falling fourths, used melodically, then take over the whole texture, so that the lines continually wheel around circles of fifths, so including various tritones. This passage, just before the recapitulation, forms the climax of the movement. Nevertheless, the descending semitones recur six bars before the recapitulation, and act as an elegant means of reintroducing the first subject's semitone rocking figure. The final pedal D sharp of this movement is approached from a semitone below; this is something of a barometer, indicating the progress of the musical argument.

6. The process had been foreshadowed in bar 38 of the movement.



The fugue had ended with a falling semitone: the second movement also ended in this way, but with a rising semitone played against it in a simultaneous inversion. The rising semitone which closes the third movement constitutes another stage in the overall tonal argument. RS has himself commented that the Finale is, for much of its length, a variation of the first movement, but without the fugal texture. If this is literally so, how can the logical argument be furthered and the problems it raises be resolved? Clearly there must be some resolution of the tensions already set up - particularly those between the tritone and the perfect fifth.

One of the most basic ways in which this Finale is a variation of the fugue is its overall plan, in which sections of a contrasting type alternate. In the Finale, the material that corresponds to the fugue's subject is re-written in a non-fugal way, and is less close to its model than in the contrasting material based on the first movement's episodes. Whereas it is the introspective episode type of music that is uppermost at the end of the fugue, in the Finale it is the tumultuous material which corresponds to the fugue subject that is eventually triumphant. This latter material certainly develops and extends that presented in the fugue subject. The filling-in of a fifth from both ends by the distance of a minor third, so that a semitone (major/minor) clash results, is forcibly stated harmonically; and in bars 2 and 3 two statements are placed a fifth apart, so further emphasizing the fifth. In turn this, of course, means that the two resulting semitone clashes (F sharp - G, and C sharp - D) are placed a fifth apart (see Ex.8).

Ex.8

Risoluto e concentrato



The second violin's first *arco* chords in Ex.8 constitute a neat summary of the stage which the argument has reached by the beginning of the Finale. The new tonic - here written as B flat - is sounded with its fifth: the resulting F natural would be the next in the logical sequence of tonics if there were to be yet another movement to follow. The sounding of F natural helps the ear to hear the tonality of the Finale - at least for some of the time - as a flat one rather than a sharp one; and this helps the aural sense of tonal balance. (It is, after all, at about this point in the circle of fifths that the ear would normally switch over from sharps to flats: one is unlikely to think of E sharp.) The tonal over-reaching of the circle of fifths - that is, the setting up of F as the possible next tonic in the series - is also emphasized in the detached octaves used towards the end of the movement. At bars 211ff a pedal C sharp in three octaves is followed by four detached octave G sharps (these notes recall respectively the first and second movements); the D sharps in the cello are sounded almost simultaneously with the decorated pedal A sharp in bars 218f (these notes recall the third movement and emphasize the Finale's tonic). The six detached octave F naturals in bars 220 and 221 are, logically, the next step.<sup>7</sup> Yet this continuation of the sharpward circle of fifths beyond the final tonic is balanced by the use of a flatwards circle in such places as bar 3 (see Ex.8); here the viola imitates the second violin a fifth lower (recalling the A flat of the third movement). The chord in bar 5, though could either be construed as the flatwards circle C - F - B flat - E flat - A flat - the ear probably hears the chord as a flat one rather than a sharp one; or it could be construed as a sharpwards circle reaching yet farther beyond F (G sharp - D sharp - A sharp (i.e. B flat) - F - C).

7. The passage recurs, with some changes from bar 258 to bar 265.

At bar 5, the minor third B flat - G, melodically stated, is expanded to a major third before contracting again. This has been foreshadowed by the A sharp - C sharp - D natural of the first two bars - notes which are amplified by runs on the first violin, while being stated plainly on the other three instruments. (The B flat - C sharp - D natural is then stated vertically in bar 3.) The resulting B flat - G - B natural - B flat - G line is the start of an attempt to counteract the minor thirds which have so often made the perfect fifth into a diminished one; one of the thirds must be major and the other minor if they are to fill in the perfect fifth without recourse to the semitone which so easily acts against it in this work. Thus the semitone, which was the shortfall when the two minor thirds were used within the fifth and which decreased that interval to a tritone, must be used to increase one of the minor thirds to a major one. Nevertheless, the harmony of bars 5 and 6 - besides being built up of interlocking fifths, as mentioned above - consists of two minor thirds, though it is true that there is a major third between the higher note of one set and the lower note of the other.

Ex.8 also illustrates another important feature. It will be recalled that the end of the opening fugue had made it clear that the distance between the tonic of that movement (C sharp) and the Finale's tonic (even though one cannot know it at that stage) is a minor third. This 'shortfall' was stated in descending form during the closing bars of the first movement (see Ex.4). Just as the falling semitone has at times been inverted - indeed, the opening 'flick' of the first violin of the Finale is an obvious example - so this 'shortfall' is also inverted. Indeed the B flat - D flat interval (or A sharp - C sharp) is used most prominently as a melodic feature throughout the Finale. Because of its prominence earlier in the fugue, C sharp is bound to have considerable importance in the Finale: only with the greatest force can this minor third be countered by the major third, D natural. This explains the unison halt on D in all four instruments in bar 102, as well as many other powerful statements of that note (sometimes clashed simultaneously with C sharp).

The new tonal centre is, of course, also a development in a sense. A sharp (or B flat) has been prepared throughout the Quartet. It will be recalled that the first octave harmony to be heard (see Ex.2) was on B flat: movement from C sharp to A sharp (see Ex.4) is the last melodic activity of the opening fugue; and in the Scherzo the repeat of the opening is based around A sharp rather than G sharp used at its first statement. But perhaps primarily the opening A sharp - C sharp of the Finale, inverting the end of the fugue, provides the most powerful link between the two outer movements.

This recollection of the opening fugue's tonality might prompt us to look for evidence of the other movement's tonal centres in the Finale. The D sharp of the third movement is often invoked

during the passages in the Finale that are variations on the 'episode' material from the fugue - though the pitch is enharmonically spelled as E flat. This tonal area is particularly relevant, for the third movement is the most relaxed in the Quartet, and that tonal centre is now applied to the most relaxed music of the Finale - the 'episode' material. The influence of E flat at times occurs elsewhere, and is in fact carried on until the very last bars of the work.<sup>2</sup>

The loud and prominent tritone A sharp - E, which begins at bar 355 and symbolizes the first and last notes of the Quartet, is changed to A sharp - D at bar 366.<sup>3</sup> The D of this interval is the major third from the movement's tonic (A sharp) - another indication that major thirds are attaining prominence at the end. D, however, soon scurries up in a series of runs to reach G sharp, a tritone above (a ploy repeated several times); the combination of A sharp (i.e. B flat) - for the pedal on that note is persistent and prominent - with D and G sharp (i.e. A flat) is the chord we know as the dominant seventh in the key of E flat (see Ex.9).



This key, belonging to the third movement (though spelled enharmonically), is not, however, attained at the end - it is not, here the introspective mood that triumphs, but the tumultuous energy of the material based more directly on the fugue subject. Instead of resolving onto E flat, G sharp moves on up to A sharp (the pedal A sharp remains throughout, like a beacon beckoning the music home) in a very powerful statement of the semitone A - B flat (written as G double sharp - A sharp).

8. I am grateful to Bernard Jacobson for pointing out that E flat is also a fifth down from A sharp, just as F (in the context of a hypothetical extra movement suggested earlier in this article) is a fifth up from it. This is yet another case of intervals being mirrored in upwards and downwards directions in this quartet.

9. This may recall bars 189 - 194 of the third movement.

The upward semitone is stated with the utmost strength, so countering the downward semitones that had made the perfect fifth into a tritone; moreover, the rising semitone that had started the movement in a 'throw-away' manner that might easily be overlooked, returns in the most dramatic and unmistakable form to end it. The first and last real melodic moves in the Quartet as a whole are both rising semitones; whereas the last melodic motion of the opening fugue had been a semitone downwards onto A sharp.

If the B flat - D flat third symbolized the distance travelled since the opening fugue and E flat recalls the third movement, what reference can be found in the Finale to the G sharp tonality of the Scherzo? Naturally the strong G sharp in Ex. 9 (and used repeatedly in the preceding bars) is one; but it is also used as A flat in bars 301ff. Other developments and resolutions of the foregoing material are to be found in the closing pages: among these are the G major scales which are played against the long-held tritone E - A sharp.

This passage juxtaposes the major and minor third, so often in conflict in the Finale, since the A sharp is heard as B flat in the context of the G major scales. Moreover, the G major scales force the mind to reinterpret A sharp enharmonically; and this, along with the E flat feeling mentioned above, is a splendid counter to the sharpward tendency which is a feature of the Quartet as a whole.

The essential organic unity of thought in the Quartet is obvious from this splendid closing passage: but, naturally, it has been present throughout the work. In summary, one might perhaps express the overall logic in this way. The Quartet is very much concerned with the perfect fifth, and the way in which other intervals can affect it. The four movements are set so that their ultimate-tonics rise a fifth above the preceding one - C sharp, G sharp, D sharp, A sharp. The distance of travel in the work as a whole is a minor third (as is the distance of travel, E - C sharp, in the opening fugue); so that interval plays an important part in the Quartet. Applying this minor third to the fifth, moving inwards from both upper and lower notes, does not bisect the interval, but leaves a semitone - the major and minor third in opposition. Just as there is a shortfall of a minor third in the overall tonal scheme, so there is a shortfall of a semitone within the fifth itself. The Finale debates the semitone opposition of major and minor thirds, and the semitone difference is melodically expressed throughout the Quartet. Yet, looked at in another way, two minor thirds added together make a tritone - an interval that also results if you diminish a perfect fifth by a semitone. The tritone in this Quartet is also the distance between the opening note of the piece - played by one instrument - and the closing note, played in a fierce unison by all four. This distance of travel is recalled by a loud double pedal on E and A



sharp in the closing bars of the Finale. One can take the argument a stage further, since if you continue to pile perfect fifths one on top of another (in the manner chosen for the sequence of movements in this Quartet) a tritone from the point of departure will result. Indeed, the Quartet, which begins with the note E, moves in its first movement through B and - more questionably - F sharp (among other keys) before cadencing on C sharp: so the whole circle of fifths from E as far as A sharp is actually stated as tonalities in the whole Quartet. RS uses the circle of fifths, though, on the smaller scale in both sharpwards and flatwards directions. The tritone is an ideal foil to the perfect fifth - and a foil is, of course, essential if there is to be symphonic tension in the work. The upward turn of a semitone at the end is a powerful symbol of the change back from tritone to perfect fifth. The balance throughout has been remarkable: rising and falling semitones, sharpward and flatward circles of fifths, ascending and descending minor thirds, major against minor, and so on, have all been played off against one another. The closely interlocking processes may be shown thus:

Ex.10



The quotation from RS's discussion with Michael Oliver, used at the opening of this article, continues with RS saying:

But I should emphasize this: that it is no good just 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.

I, personally, have not the slightest doubt that this Quartet is real music - of a most attractive, powerful, and gripping kind - that will take its place among the great string quartets. Indeed, it would not be too much to predict that RS's quartets will find a place in the second half of the 20th century to correspond with that enjoyed by Bartok's in the first.

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## REVIEWS

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The following review of the world premiere of the Ninth Symphony appeared in the Sunday Times on 26th April 1987:

*The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra is among the more active of the country's permanent ensembles, both in the sense of being mobile and enterprising. With its marsupial offspring, the Bournemouth Sinfonietta, it tours the South and West constantly, the orchestra striking as far west as Redruth, the Sinfonietta reaching even Penzance.*

*The BSO is also, on current evidence, active in its support for new and unfamiliar repertoire. In the last fortnight it has been drawing audiences for two brave ventures, the world premiere of Robert Simpson's specially commissioned Ninth Symphony, then the British premiere of Clinton Carpenter's realisation of Mahler's Tenth Symphony..... I heard the Simpson symphony at a concert given in the Guildhall, Southampton, and ..... this performance also constituted a whole evening, for the appointed conductor, Vernon Handley, was rushed to hospital with an unstoppable nose bleed and it was decided to scrap the first item on the programme, Dvorak's Cello Concerto.*

*Simpson's symphony went ahead (though the planned BBC live broadcast had to be cancelled) under the composer's own baton. He does not conduct frequently, but, even if he did, he would still face a formidable challenge in this 50-minute, continuously running three-movement symphony, which retains the same pulse (the different tempi are proportional) throughout its length. He rose to the challenge superbly: apart from holding the baton in his left hand (but the BSO got used to that under Paavo Berglund), he seemed thoroughly professional and gave us a spacious, majestic and firmly disciplined account of his music.*

*Simpson is preoccupied chiefly with three of the "Bs" in this symphony: Bach, Beethoven and Bruckner. The Nielsen-like harmonic logic and linear gestures of which he is generally enamoured are there (most obviously, a passage of stabbing Fs on the violins in the first movement), and there are echoes of other composers in the modern symphonic tradition, for instance Shostakovitch. But overwhelmingly the work is a - rather successful - attempt at reclaiming specifically Brucknerian musical space, and the influences of Bach and Beethoven are felt as influences which have already been exerted on Bruckner's own style. Thus Simpson's symphony is a kind of genealogy.*

*He describes his mighty maestoso opening movement as a blown-up Bach chorale prelude - one certainly feels the truth of this, as*



the instrumental sub-groups make their successive sustained entries, forming a severe sort of efflorescent polyphony and entailing some bold, palpable shifts of harmony, like gear-changes. The texture here, as in the last movement (also marked *maestoso*), is predominantly fugal and often the effect of organ pedal notes is recreated.

The movement - the whole work - is rigorously constructed from the opening melodic line and its harmonic derivatives, and the procedure sometimes imparts a dour, over-intellectual character to the music, not alleviated by the composer's fondness for plodding Brucknerian four-square rhythms. He says he has buried a quotation from a Bruckner symphony in the movement, which I think is the rising figure from the start of the Seventh Symphony, disguised in Simpson's baseline at bar 219; but I may be wrong.

Doubts about dourness were, however, promptly dispelled by the absolutely marvellous scherzo middle movement, which exploits "Beethoven's characteristic fast triple-time" to stunning advantage. The gunshot rhythm never lets up, not even in passages where the woodwind fan out in an iridescent 11-part polyphony. The finale is the most leisurely movement, fully in the spirit of Bruckner's quiet majesty, free from a hint of pastiche and memorably culminating in an ecstatic, tranquil hushed ascent for the first violins.

There are few musical minds in the world capable of completing such a large and complex symphonic structure (Maxwell Davies, for all his distance of style, is the only other who comes to mind), and if one finds Simpson's idiom a little colourless or dry or anachronistic, it undoubtedly affords the manifold satisfactions of "pure" music.

PAUL DRIVER

\* \* \* \* \*

This review appeared in The New York Times on Thursday 14th April 1988

The Coull String Quartet, a British ensemble, made its New York debut Sunday afternoon at the Frick Collection. Formed in 1974 and named for its first violinist, Roger Coull, the group produces a bright, robust sound and plays with a stylistic command that matches its exuberance.

The highlight of the afternoon was Robert Simpson's String Quartet No. 11, a spellbinding work in four connected movements, composed for the Coull quartet in 1984. Clearly written with the group's strengths in mind, the work has an acerbic edge, a propulsive rhythmic sense and, in the quick first and third movements, a brash and almost barbaric energy. The slow movements, alternately introspective and eerie, are no less gripping, and the ensemble brought to the work what seemed an ideal blend of adrenaline and concentration.

ALLAN KOZINN

On Monday 6th June 1988 at Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire the Coull Quartet gave the premiere of the Twelfth Quartet. The following day the following review appeared in the Nottingham Evening Post.

Robert Simpson's twelfth string quartet had its premiere at Newstead Abbey last night. It was vigorous proof that classical music is not altogether - or even primarily - a thing of the past.

The work came between pieces by Mozart and Haydn. Simpson speaks from a contemporary angle, but uses basically the same language as theirs. As he himself puts it, he can't be classed with the spit-and-cough brigade.

Commissioned by the Nottingham Festival, the quartet comprises just two, broadly designed movements. The first, headed ADAGIO, presented an original fugue, mainly pastoral in character and with moments of fervid lyrical beauty.

The second movement, a kind of perpetuum mobile, could well be the biggest scherzo ever written for string quartet. It also sounded one of the most bracing: a muscular display of Olympian humour, artfully sustained through nearly 1,800 bars.

The performers - Roger Coull, Philip Gallaway, David Curtis and John Todd of the Coull Quartet - launched Dr Simpson's two preceding quartets. His life-enhancing twelfth is plainly in capable and appreciative hands.

PETER PALMER

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