

TONIC

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Editorial	1
An Astronomical Quartet: a lesson from Robert Simpson <i>Lionel Pike</i>	2
Letters	18
Robert Simpson at 70 <i>Philip Maund</i>	19
1991 Annual General Meeting Address <i>Brian Duke</i>	22
Robert Simpson: an appreciation <i>John McCabe</i>	25
Robert Simpson <i>Robin Holloway</i>	26

EDITORIAL

John Pickard

SINCE the last edition of TONIC, most readers will have heard the dreadful news of RS's stroke. Recovery is slow and painful, but RS is continuing to fight with characteristic bravery and determination. Intensive physiotherapy is proving beneficial, but perhaps the single most morale-boosting experience for RS came in the form of Simon Rattle's astonishing performance of the Ninth Symphony with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the Royal Festival Hall at the beginning of February.

To the delight of their many friends, RS and his wife Angela were able to make the trip over from Eire to attend. The hall was packed and, at the end of the performance, RS and the orchestra received a prolonged ovation which threatened to overlap with the concert's second half (with the result that Simon Rattle had to pull the orchestra off the stage).

As for the performance itself, a more detailed account will appear in the next issue. For the time being, suffice to say that RS's own description was that it was 'truly inspired'. 'Visionary' is the other term which comes to mind. At any rate, the work obviously made a powerful impression on the Festival Hall audience and the concert was, for all concerned, a deeply moving occasion.

The BBC did not broadcast the performance.

This issue of TONIC is dominated by Lionel Pike's detailed and penetrating analysis of the Seventh Quartet. It also includes a transcript of Brian Duke's highly entertaining address given at last year's AGM and a reprint of Philip Maund's 70th birthday appreciation of the works for brass band (first published in the *British Bandsman*). On the subject of the RS 70th birthday, quite some time ago we received tributes from two of our leading composers, Robin Holloway and John McCabe. We print them here for the first time with thanks to both contributors and apologies for our delay in publishing them.

AN ASTRONOMICAL QUARTET¹: A lesson from Robert Simpson

Lionel Pike

MANY people have reason to be profoundly grateful to Robert Simpson for his extraordinarily vivid way of communicating with them: he has an uncanny knack of talking about the complex inner processes of music in such a way as to render those processes palatable, fascinating, and understandable by the layman as well as by the mere expert. It seems strange, then, that he has had—as far as I am aware—no composition pupils, especially as so many people have learned, from discussions with him as well as from his lectures and talks, so much about the inner workings of the composer's mind. Such talks have not been solely about his own music, and many have derived a deep understanding of the compositional processes used by the composers he champions. Nevertheless, I shall take one of his own compositions as an illustration of the manner in which he talks about music, using his *Seventh String Quartet* (1977) as an exemplar.² To listen to him talking about this work is to visit the composer's workshop, and to be introduced to the inner workings of the creative mind in a way that makes one feel deeply privileged. Such a lesson from Robert Simpson will teach one far more than many sessions from a lesser teacher.

In 1977 Lady Susi Jeans organised a concert at Cleveland Lodge, her Dorking home: this concert was held in memory of her late husband, Sir James Jeans, in order to commemorate his centenary. Lady Jeans engaged the Gabrieli String Quartet for the occasion, and—with only three months notice—she asked Robert Simpson to write something for the occasion. Though he could have chosen other media—Lady Jeans herself, as an internationally revered organ recitalist with her own house organ, could have been the chosen performer—it was for the Gabrieli String Quartet that he decided to write. Perhaps this was hardly surprising, for he has said that if he were condemned to write for a single medium he would choose the string quartet; and his previous six quartets had shown ample evidence of the profound quality of his invention and thought processes. They are, indeed, symphonies for string quartet: yet he knew that the *Seventh Quartet* would have to be short, for there was not much time in which to write it, and—once written—not much time for the Gabrieli String Quartet to learn it. Simpson himself said about this:

“You can give an orchestra a piece the night before the first performance and they'll sight-read it. In fact, if it comes to that, you can give the orchestral players the music six months in advance, but even so the best you'll ever get is a piece of sight-reading. A quartet is a different kettle of fish. Quartet players are intelligent and highly musical: they like to practise a piece and not play it in public until they've lived with it for a while.”³

It is also much to the point in this present work to notice that Simpson has very decided views on writing for the quartet medium. He insists that a composer must not forget that he is writing for four solo instruments, each with four strings tuned in fifths. The relevance of tuning will be readily evident in the following discussion: as to the fact that solo strings are used, he remarks that many composers deny the fundamental nature of the string quartet by writing for the medium in the same way as they would for string orchestra.

Simpson's initial idea was to write a work consisting largely of long notes—an Adagio, in fact: the Gabrieli String Quartet would therefore be able to work this up in a very short time. His first musical idea was that of the line that remains stationary while a second line moves upwards to join it from below: the ascending line then passes through the stationary one. One idea, then, was basically static, the other more mobile. Nevertheless the idea, intended at first for a relatively small Adagio, required a much more expansive movement for its adequate treatment. The composer remarks that musical material presupposes a certain scale: "And very soon," he said, "the bloody thing took over."

Simpson does not sketch a work out before beginning to write the full score. Edmund Rubbra, on being asked how he composed, said that he started at the beginning and went on until he had reached the end: since Simpson does the same, it is quite possible for material to 'take over' in this way. He writes straight into the score in pencil, and rubs out a lot: in fact, he maintains that he rubs out more than he writes (if such a thing is possible). On starting a new work he will have no idea of the scale of the finished piece.

After a while, indeed, the Seventh Quartet ceases to be an Adagio and moves into a Vivace. This Vivace turns out to be a middle section: the work is cast in an arch form (ABA), a form of which the composer admits to being very fond. About this central scherzo he says that he woke up one morning feeling rather good, so he thought he'd put that into the quartet. He has always been interested in the way classical composers handled rhythm, and he observes that few contemporary composers show any skill in this area ("they are mostly so bad at movement—so many are spastic, hopping backwards and forwards from one foot to the other"). The middle section continues the basic pulse of the opening, but the note-values are much quicker: it is an idea Robert Simpson had already used elsewhere and was to use again, and it has fascinated him for most of his composing life.

There is very considerable energy in this middle section ('energy', indeed, is a word Robert Simpson often uses): the scherzo, he says, has an energy like that pent-up in the Universe, from which we all derive. "Just think," he says, "of the energy in your little finger—it is all part of the immense pent-up energy in the Universe."⁴ He is very pleased with the climax in this middle section. To produce a satisfactory climax in a string quartet needs great technical command and careful handling: if the tensions and the balances are not quite right in a symphony, the composer can always resort to applying some bangy percussion. This cannot be the case in a quartet, for there the composer has of necessity to get the tensions absolutely right.

Only after writing the Seventh String Quartet did Simpson realise that the idea of solar energy (or the energy in the Universe), along with the apparent contemplation of the vast immensities of space in the slow outer sections, was very appropriate to the occasion for which he had composed the work. Sir James Jeans was a world-famous astronomer, and the composer is himself a keen amateur astronomer and a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society.⁵ The work, indeed, presents parallels to the Universe—quiet and mysterious, yet pulsating with energy.

SECTION A

Although some analysts despise the narrative, chronological, blow-by-blow manner of discussing music, Robert Simpson himself used this procedure in dealing with the Seventh String Quartet. The present discussion follows the composer's approach. His observations were rarely about tonality or themes, and were largely not even about rhythm: instead he was deeply concerned about building tensions and relieving them, about not letting the development of

ideas run ahead too quickly so that the pace gets out of control, about occasionally ‘applying the brakes’ and about various means of indicating milestones, sign-posts and points of reference for the ear. It is difficult to see how these elements can adequately be discussed other than in the order in which they occur, and so this discussion starts with the first note.

Pedals and decorated pedals have a large part to play in this quartet and the very first sound introduces them. The opening D on the first violin changes from a stopped note to an open string of the same pitch so as to give the long note some change of colour and interest. But since the use of an open string provides a sign-post for the ear, the change from a stopped note to an open string does another thing of great significance for the structure of the work as a whole: the open strings are used to govern the tonal development of this piece, as will later become clear. As far as I am aware, this is the first time any composer has used the peculiar scoring of the quartet—that is, the use of the colour of the open strings—to govern the formal organisation of a work.⁶ The opening is shown in Example 1a:

Ex.1a

Tranquillo (♩ = c.56)

The second violin approaches the pedal from below; the opening chromatic C–C#–D (I shall refer to this figure as ‘z’) indicates in miniature at the very outset the general drift of the music towards the final D. The first violin part in bar 5 derives from this, but in so doing it reiterates a semitone rise and fall (which I shall refer to as figure ‘b’). In reality this is a decorated pedal—a device that is destined to play a very large part later on. The first violin in bars 6–8 has two upward leaps (each immediately repeated) against the pedal D: these two leaps regard the static D from different perspectives, and so they make the listener reinterpret the pedal. The D may not move; but it has different implications depending on the listener’s point of view. The G#–B–E arpeggio placed against the D in bars 6–7 implies the dominant seventh sound in the key of A: thus the ear expects D to move down a semitone (or, maybe, a whole tone) as the expected tonic chord arrives. On the other hand, the Bb–F leaps against the D in bars 7 and 8 could represent the dominant chord of Eb if the D were next to move up a semitone. Two tonal centres a tritone apart are thus suggested: if the pedal D were to fall a semitone (or tone) the passage would cadence onto A; but if the same D were to rise a semitone that passage would cadence on Eb. The opposition of these particular keys—A and Eb—is one that Simpson has often explored in earlier works. I shall call the opening theme A1.

There is one other observation to make about the first violin part of bars 6–9: the perfect fifth leap Bb–F (to which attention is drawn by means of repetition) is a version of the fifths separating the open strings of each instrument, though here the interval is pitched a semitone above the A–E

which would be provided by the open strings (and, indeed, towards which the previous dominant seventh sound has apparently pointed). I shall refer to the fifth leap as figure 'y'; it is simply an inversion of the B–E–B–E fourth leaps which precede it. The interval of a fifth is one that Robert Simpson says that he particularly loves; and he specially likes the sound of open fifths. Before the next statement of the opening theme one other development occurs: this is a figure consisting of a rising and falling minor third (E–G–E–G–E, in bars 9 and 10). It is evolved logically from the opening D, for it too is a decorated pedal: it is part of a steady evolution whose second stage was the D–Eb–D–Eb figure in bar 5, itself decorated by alternating the stopped and open strings.

In bar 10 the opening theme returns, but D is now the lower voice rather than the upper one, so the initial material is repeated sequentially a tone higher. The interval of transposition is in fact not a tone but a ninth: the reason for using the higher pitch is to make it possible for the upper part (the pedal) to be shared between stopped and open strings at the same pitch (the E string of the first violin), just as it was on the D string at the first appearance. D and E, when one considers only the open strings of the violin, are a ninth apart rather than a tone. The tonal area chosen has been governed by the necessity to set the pedal on a pitch for which there is an open string. Talking about the music so far the composer says,

"All this time the poor viola and 'cello are sitting doing nothing. It's an awful waste of money to engage a string quartet and then not use the two lower instruments. Clearly it is time to give them something to do. But equally clearly the whole scale of the piece is going to be bigger than I'd originally thought."

The viola and 'cello entries at bar 17 are a fifth (= 'y') below the initial entries in the violins: the pitch of the new entries is again governed by the need to have the pedal alternate between a stopped and an open string of the same pitch. The violins simultaneously introduce descending lines which balance the rising ones on which the music has so far concentrated. The impression created by the music of the opening is akin to Renaissance string consort fantasias, though set in a twentieth-century idiom: if Simpson were to continue in the same manner as at the opening, he would follow the entry of the viola and 'cello with a statement of the initial theme a ninth higher, building it around a pedal A. Although this is basically what happens at bar 25, there are some changes. The pedal, for example, is this time given to the second violin rather than the 'cello (if the opening had been shadowed precisely, the viola and 'cello would have shared this statement). The violin's open A string has so far been avoided, and it now becomes the pedal, while (as before) G becomes the lower part so that the processes of bar 16 *ff* are repeated a tone—or rather, again, a ninth—higher. But there is also some new counterpoint this time: I shall call this new version of the material (in the 'cello, at bars 24 *ff*) figure A2 (see Example 1b).

Ex.1b

Like the old theme, this new one has lines which start dissonantly and then coalesce. Simpson says of it:

"Obviously I'd now have to do something else with this material—you can't go on repeating it all the time. So I made it into a short rising scale, and to give it some character and memorability I added a rhythmic kick at the top."

Meanwhile the former material is still present in the second violin and viola: the outer instruments, though, begin to use the new A2 theme in imitations of a stretto character. This new development is soon cut short by the lowest note of the 'cello—the open C string—sounding alone for a whole bar, though it also extends as a pedal on either side of that bar. Robert Simpson says that the development was beginning to move on too fast for the sake of the music and its ideas so far, and at this point the progress needed to be held back: the arrival of this bottom C in the 'cello keeps everything in check. The composer is, in any case, very fond of the lowest note of the 'cello, which he points out is a readily identifiable sound. "Any listener will immediately recall it, even if he doesn't know it's a C," he says. "This bottom note of the 'cello is a glorious sound; I could listen to it for ever." So far all the pedals have been set on notes to which the strings of the instruments are tuned—the notes the audience hears when the players are tuning up. Because in this work they act rather like the old 'circle of fifths' I shall refer to this series of notes—the open strings of the four instruments—as the 'charmed circle' of tuning pitches. This circle provides a force which one might compare to gravitation, controlling the movement of stars in space: the music may seem to move slowly in various directions, but it always remains under this tonal-gravitational control. The 'charmed circle' of tuning fifths has different effects depending on the way we seem to be facing.

There are other things to notice about the 'cello's bottom C: it is, for example, the first bottom note of any of the instruments to be used in this quartet. Moreover, so far we have heard pedals on D and E (tuning pitches which are two fifths apart) and then pedals on G and A (tuning pitches which are likewise two fifths apart): the G and A pair of pedals is a fifth lower than the later D and E pair. Logically, then, the next pedal should be another fifth lower, starting with C: in fact, Simpson goes down a twelfth rather than a fifth. Before bar 31 all the open string notes except C have been heard: like the 'cello, the viola has not used its open C string, but it is the peculiar colour of the 'cello's bottom note which causes that instrument to be chosen rather than the viola. Despite the fact that its arrival sounds surprising, then, C has been extremely well prepared.

After the braking effect of bar 33, which contains only the 'cello's bottom C, the music starts to move on again by introducing Bb in the second violin against that low pedal. The relationship is the same as that between the D pedal and C lower voice at the very beginning of the quartet, though in bar 34 the pedal is below rather than above the more active part: obviously, Simpson could not put a Bb below the 'cello C, since none of the instruments extends downwards that far. The Bb in the second violin also reflects that in bars 7–8, and the result is that there is a feeling of Eb in bars 34–36. Eb is one of the two key areas which were suggested in bars 7–8: the other tonal pole, A major, is reached soon afterwards (in bars 40–41). That very tritone between Eb and A is also twice presented melodically in the viola between bars 38 and 41. As I have already pointed out, the tritones in this quartet ultimately derive from the music in bars 7 and 8.

The upshot of these tritones is that the next pedal to appear jumps out of the 'charmed circle' of tuning fifths: it is, in fact, a tritone away, rather than a perfect fifth, and occurs on F# in bar 43. This, then, is the first pedal not on one of the notes of the 'charmed circle': indeed, it is a semitone short of the G pedal that the listener might reasonably expect. This provides a nice balance

to the fifth in bars 7–8, where Bb–F is a semitone above the open notes that might well have been expected at that point, given the preceding dominant seventh chord. As if to make the point even clearer, the perfect fifth leap D#–A# in bar 45 is immediately transposed down a semitone to D natural–A natural (though that particular fifth is in fact sounded an octave above the open strings tuned to those pitches).

The semitone deflection out of the orbit of the ‘charmed circle’ forestalls the next shift, in that at bar 49 a new pedal appears, on G, the lowest open string but one of the ‘cello. The accompanying part has again to be above the pedal, since no other instrument can go down to the F below it. At the entry of this pedal Simpson has moved back to the key of Eb; but soon A major is yet again approached. One of the factors governing this move is that the pedal G is weaker—less persistent—here than ‘open string’ pedals have so far been, possibly because of the recent appearance of a pedal built on a note outside the ‘charmed circle’ of tuning pitches. Be that as it may, in bar 50 the pedal G moves away from its ‘open string’ note onto B, providing another indication that the orbit of the ‘charmed circle’ is losing its grip on the tonality, and that other pitches are beginning to exert a more powerful influence. As had previously happened, the A-majorishness which results in bar 52 *ff* gives rise to another pedal that is a tritone away from its predecessor, and thus a semitone away from the pitch provided by one of the open strings. This note—the pedal C# in bar 53—is also logical in that it is a perfect fifth away from F# (though by inversion, as it sounds in a lower octave), the only previous pedal outside the orbit of the open strings (see bar 43). This bottom C# is the lowest note so far used by the viola; it is, of course, just a semitone above the lowest open string of that instrument. The avoidance of the viola’s open C string here is a positive advantage for Simpson, since it does not confuse the listener by providing a sound that is relatively close to that of the bottom note of the ‘cello (albeit an octave above).

The viola’s C# pedal is not left unchallenged for long, for a second pedal joins it in bars 54 *ff*, this time quite high up: it is another tritone away, on G. Simpson’s accompanying material is used simultaneously against both pedals, providing a nice working-out of the tritone distance between them. Other pedals are added; the texture thickens; smaller note-values proliferate; and the tonality moves back to Eb only to return to A yet again. Then, as the composer says, “its all moving on too fast again, so I realised that I had to recall that low ‘cello note in order to hold it in check.” This note arrives at bar 62, and stops the music abruptly so that bar 63 is empty except for the ‘cello’s bottom C.

At bar 64 the material of bar 34 returns: this is the same material as had been used after the previous ‘cello C interruption, though it is somewhat revised. The ‘cello, for example, does not this time use the chromatic figure ‘z’ in its original form, as it had in bar 37; instead the viola has it at bars 66 and 67 and the ‘cello makes up for its alteration by using an exact ‘z’ in bar 76—both on the precise original notes C–C#–D. There is a tendency for the higher of the two dissonant notes to shy away upwards from the dissonance rather than to wait for the lower part to coalesce with it: Simpson makes considerable use of this idea later. As before, there is an Eb tendency; but it is a tendency that is soon—yet again—changed to A major as the opening theme once more appears beneath a pedal E in the first violin. This entry, though, is subtly different from the one in bars 10 *ff* (also below an E) in that in bar 69 *ff* the revised counterpoint of theme A2, with its rhythmic snatch at the top, is used against the pedal. Moreover, as has happened once before, the ‘open note’ pedal very soon shifts away from its original pitch, up a semitone to F: this shift of a semitone reflects the earlier one in which the fifth leap of bars 7–8 was a semitone higher than expected. The accents are also shifted, for the top notes of the theme (bar 73) are now placed on the weak quavers rather than on strong beats.

The next pedal to occur is on D (in bar 80): Simpson has, then, returned to the pedal with which he opened the work, but here it is the A2 material, rather than the material used against the original pedal, that accompanies it. Yet again there is a contrapuntal build; here the two lines which derive from the opening theme make dissonances with each other, but the upper voice shies away upwards from the lower (see bars 88–89, an idea previously used in bar 66). Again Simpson halts this build with a pedal C on the lowest note of the 'cello: yet again the 'cello's open C string has been well prepared, the E pedal of bar 69 *ff* being followed by one on D a ninth lower (bar 85 *ff*). Clearly the next step in the chain is a C pedal, though the one that is actually sounded in bar 91 is not a ninth below the preceding D but a further octave down. But there is a notable difference here in that the pedal C does not remain for long, once it has momentarily interrupted the processes of development, for the flow of the evolving logic has now become strong enough to carry right through the 'end-stopping' nature of the 'cello's pedal: indeed, it is strong enough to affect the pedal itself with development. Like two previous pedals, it shifts away from an open note and the use of the theme 'z', and instead gradually shifts upwards through the texture, so that it ceases to act as a pedal. This new treatment (involving C# and D in bars 92 and 93) suggests that the material which follows the pedal should now be in A major rather than (as previously) in the opposite pole of Eb.

From here to the end of section A a series of 'open string' notes is built up in multiple pedals: the only one which uses the alternation of stopped and open strings is the viola G pedal in bars 98–102 and 111–113; but other notes of the 'charmed circle' of tuning pitches are used at different octaves. The result of this is that the 'charmed circle' of fifths re-establishes its influence before the section ends: meanwhile Eb and A coexist (for example, in bars 102–104), and the section ends with a clear descent around the circle of tuning fifths, from the violin E in bar 116, to A, then D (bar 117–8): G is not included since it has only just been left (in the viola at bars 111–113). The bottom C natural at the end of the section is thus quite logical, even though it is only briefly touched upon.

The use of the 'charmed circle' of string tuning fifths in section A, and of the moves away from that circle, can be traced by listing the pedals used (see Example 2). These pedals largely govern the main tonal movement: what Example 2 does not show is that there are smaller-scale alternations between other tonal centres (Eb and A in particular).

Ex.2

Bar Number

1: 12: 17: 25: 31: 43: 49: 53: 56: 57: 62: 69: 80: 91: 98: 103: 104: 111: 116

The diagram shows a musical staff with two staves (treble and bass clef) representing string tuning fifths. The notes are connected by lines and labeled with 'y' (stopped) or 'tritone' (open string). The sequence of notes and their relationships are as follows:

- Bar 1: Treble C4, Bass C2 (y)
- Bar 12: Treble G4, Bass G2 (y)
- Bar 17: Treble D4, Bass D2 (y)
- Bar 25: Treble A4, Bass A2 (y)
- Bar 31: Treble E4, Bass E2 (y)
- Bar 43: Treble B4, Bass B2 (y)
- Bar 49: Treble F#4, Bass F#2 (y)
- Bar 53: Treble C#5, Bass C#3 (y)
- Bar 56: Treble G#4, Bass G#2 (y)
- Bar 57: Treble D#4, Bass D#2 (y)
- Bar 62: Treble A#4, Bass A#2 (y)
- Bar 69: Treble E#4, Bass E#2 (y)
- Bar 80: Treble B#4, Bass B#2 (y)
- Bar 91: Treble C#5, Bass C#3 (y)
- Bar 98: Treble G#4, Bass G#2 (y)
- Bar 103: Treble D#4, Bass D#2 (y)
- Bar 104: Treble A#4, Bass A#2 (y)
- Bar 111: Treble E#4, Bass E#2 (y)
- Bar 116: Treble B#4, Bass B#2 (y)

SECTION B

The central section consists of a scherzo that Simpson found was essential to the overall balance of the piece that he had at first intended to be only a relatively small Adagio. There is a rhythmic relationship between the slow and fast sections, the crotchet of the new tempo being equal to the semiquaver of the old one. The change is not imperceptible, as it is in Sibelius' Fifth Symphony,

for it is quite clear where the Vivace begins: but nevertheless the old pulse remains in the mind, even though it is syncopated across the bar-lines. The old pulse would have coincided precisely with the new bar-lines only if the new time-signature had been 4/4: if that had been the case, one crotchet beat of the old tempo would have become one bar of the new. But with the change to 3/4 one three-beat bar of the opening slow tempo is equivalent to four bars of the scherzo. Nevertheless, the viola and first violin of the first two bars of this central section help to make a smooth join by fitting in with the crotchet beat of the previous section (see Example 3).

Ex.3

Example 3 shows three staves. The top staff is Violin 1, the middle is Viola, and the bottom is Previous Tempo. The Previous Tempo staff shows a continuous crotchet pulse. The Viola staff shows a sequence of notes that align with the crotchet beats of the Previous Tempo. The Violin 1 staff shows a sequence of notes that also align with the crotchet beats of the Previous Tempo, creating a smooth join.

The first three notes used by the viola in the central section are the figure 'z', which the 'cello part had short-circuited at the end of section A (see Example 4).

Ex.4

Example 4 shows a musical score starting at measure 118. The tempo is marked 'Vivace (♩ = ♩ del prec.)'. The score includes staves for Violin 1, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The Viola part features a sequence of notes that are identified as the figure 'z'. The Cello part has a decorated pedal D. The Double Bass part has a thematic tag. The score is marked with 'pp' and includes triplets.

Moreover the opening phrases which the violins play in this section sound the notes of the two first pedals of section A—that is, D and the E a ninth above it: the opening sound of the scherzo is thus a spaced-out version of the opening dissonance of the quartet. The wider spacing does much to create the brightness and verve of the middle section, and it also gives Simpson the opportunity to suggest two separate tonal planes. The alternating with Eb in a decorated pedal indicates a pull towards the key of Eb: the idea is an expansion of that in bar 5. The other plane is suggested by the alternation of E and C# in a thematic tag that is much used in the central section (it derives from bar 9); this indicates a pull towards the other tonal pole, A major.

These two parts, unlike those at the opening of the Quartet, do not coalesce, and the failure to do so results in a much more dynamic feeling here. The decorated pedal D is a varied version of the opening D pedal that had alternated between stopped and open strings, whereas the first violin theme derives from the one that has accompanied the opening pedal of section A, and especially

Simpson's re-writing of it at bar 25 (the scales derive from theme A1, but the overall shape is derived from A2). The decorated pedal—either with alternations of a step or of a minor third—and the scale passages derived from A1 and A2 provide the material of this central scherzo. The simplicity of the clearly identifiable pedals of the opening section is thus somewhat clouded in the scherzo by the use of pedals which alternate with notes a step or a third away: this, too, fires the dynamic character of the middle section.

At bar 152 Simpson gives a variant of bars 6*ff*. This is a procedure that he expanded upon in his Eighth Quartet, in which the finale is a variation of the first movement: it is an idea which, he says, he does not think any other composer has ever used. He insists that, when writing a big work, it is important to be able to make one thing become something else, and still remain recognisable. This variant is based around D at first (the pitch used at the opening of the quartet), and is also immediately repeated on B. After more use of the decorated pedals and scalar material, this passage returns, but starting in Eb, at bar 177. But, as Robert Simpson himself says, "It's building up to a climax too soon; so I put a rest in to cool it off a bit and keep it under control. Damping the music down occasionally is necessary to avoid getting to the climax too soon." This rest is in bar 199.

As in the opening section, the interruption is followed by music for the lower instruments. Here a new theme appears, though one compounded of elements already heard. This theme involves the 'horn-style' writing (the kind of passage which composers have written for pairs of natural horns for centuries) in the second violin at bars 203–207: although sounding new, the theme develops elements already heard (see Example 5).

Ex.5

The upper part in bars 204 and 205 is a pedal decorated by stepwise movement up and back (indeed, Db and Eb alternate in all the first five chords), and the lower part is a decorated pedal moving a third away and back (Ab alternates with F, in fact, in each of the first six chords); moreover the part moves to and from an open fifth (= 'y'). The idea can be traced back to bar 110, as well as to elements in the opening section of the work. At bars 229*ff* the idea is used in diminution in the two violin parts as an accompaniment to theme A2: indeed from here on the 'horn-writing' plays quite a prominent part, and by its use in diminution greatly raises the temperature of the music.

Yet again—as if to keep the music in check—the bottom C of the ‘cello occurs. Certainly the temperature drops slightly at bar 242: but the build is not much held back since the forward rush has become so dynamic, and from bar 252 onwards the ‘cello’s bottom note has no effect at all on the progress of the music. The continual reiterations of this open C can only be followed by upward movement, since this is the lowest note possible in the string quartet medium: and following the lead of theme A1, the bottom C turns gradually into an upward scale, starting from bar 270. The initial ‘cello run starts on C and moves up to the D a ninth above (using the chromatic figure ‘z’ on the way): this ninth encompasses the two fifths that make up the ‘charmed circle’ of tuning fifths for the bottom three strings of the ‘cello, as well as being the initial harmonic idea of the quartet. Almost immediately the viola attempts to build upon the idea, but its progress is halted by an interruption from the second violin. This new statement begins in bar 281 with the second violin’s bottom note: the use of the open G string makes the start of the new scale immediately identifiable as being related to that of the ‘cello. The scale begins a fifth (or rather a twelfth) above the one in the ‘cello, and it also covers a ninth (that is, two fifths), so maintaining the span of the ‘charmed circle’ of tuning fifths. In bar 291 a scale shared between the first violin and the viola spans a fifth only, G up to D: since the G is the bottom note of the first violin, and the D is marked as an open string on the viola, the listener must also hear this as part of the same ‘charmed circle’.

This use of scales to span the fifths of the ‘charmed circle’ is an amplification of the use of pedals to draw attention to those same tuning pitches in the opening section. Just as in that earlier section Simpson moved the pedals away from that orbit at times, so in the scherzo the upward scales now begin to revolve around other pitches. The long scale in octaves beginning on G# in bar 306 is an example of this: meanwhile the tension has been increasing as the texture fills with very fast scurrying up and down simultaneously. It is with all this, plus the decorated pedals that alternate up and down a minor third, that Simpson builds the enormous climax of this section. “I’m pretty pleased with this climax,” he says: “very powerful for a string quartet.”

The music retreats from this climax into quite a foreign world: it comes to rest outside the tuning orbit, more or less on a G# (a tritone away from the home tonic of D). In a rather quiet fashion (but without a change of basic tempo) the music proceeds to explore aspects of the relationship between Eb and A: G#, for example, might well be the subdominant note of Eb (spelled enharmonically), as well as being the leading-note of A. Indeed, flat and sharp keys co-exist relatively amicably for some time, the searing decorated pedals in triplet quavers and powerful upward thrusting scales being forgotten for the moment. For some time there is polyphony that sounds as if it has fugal elements in it (the passage from bar 402, for example), though in fact the counterpoint is free. The composer observes that it is important in a passage like this—a quiet passage following a climax—to create enough momentum to carry something quieter that will float on this momentum.

In bar 375 the ‘cello enters on low Db. At one of Robert Simpson’s talks on this quartet, a member of the audience asked why he had not always returned to the ‘cello’s bottom C, but had instead used Db. Either the composer did not know, or else he did not want to say; perhaps he thought he would be giving away too much information if he explained further. Simpson’s comment was, “There was just one place where I used Db instead of C in the ‘cello; I thought it would give some relief, and not be quite so obvious.” Despite this disclaimer, there are additional clear reasons for the use of Db here. One of these is concerned with the way that fifths work—and fifths play an undeniably large part in the quartet. Talking of Beethoven’s processes, Tovey remarked that if you prolong any note sufficiently it acts as a dominant: in this section of Simpson’s Seventh

the prolonged reiteration of G# has led to it being thought of as Ab and taken as the dominant of Db. Such an overt dominant usage builds up the impression of dominant seventh effect created as early as bars 6–7. Another passage in the opening section of the work prepares for this dominant-tonic feel: the unexpected F# pedal ('unexpected' because it lies outside the orbit of the 'charmed circle') of bar 43 *ff* has forced the pedal of bar 49 away from its original pitch and up to B: G is therefore the first pedal in the 'charmed circle' to be shifted out of its course, and F# has acted like a dominant in order to introduce B as its answering tonic. Shortly after this, at bar 53, a C# pedal has arrived in the viola, providing a further precursor of the Db of bar 375.

But there is another reason for using the Db rather than C in bar 376. The overall tendency of the work is summed up in figure 'z', with its chromatic motion on the notes C–C#–D. Much use of the low C has already been made: now the use of C# (= Db), foreshadowed by the powerful scales that start on C# in bar 346, is an indication that the overall direction is shifting upwards towards that final D, on the very largest scale as well as on the smallest.

After a while the 'cello shows its impatience with this, and at bar 460 begins to insist more firmly upon the quaver triplets figure of decorated pedals leaping up and down a minor third which had occasionally been heard during the preceding quiet passage. Simpson builds up to a second climax. It is as if we have been traversing a high plateau between two mountain ranges, and are now beginning to climb the range on the far side of that plateau. At bar 464 theme A1 returns, based around a pedal G#; but instead of the parts coalescing on the pedal, G# this time moves upwards to A natural at the last minute (as had happened at bar 88 *ff*). In bar 472 this is developed when the viola begins on its bottom note and proceeds to use figure 'z': but the 'cello simultaneously inverts figure 'z' rather than provide a stationary pedal.

The 'horn-style' theme returns (at bar 496) and helps to build the pressure again; and at bar 505 theme A1 reappears, though the upper voice keeps moving away from the lower (as has already happened several times earlier in the quartet), so that the two do not coalesce. This idea is explored thoroughly from bar 526 onwards, where the melodic material very clearly derives from bar 6: at the same time decorated pedals (up and down a minor third in triplet quavers) and quick scales again help the sense of growing energy and excitement.

Shining—or perhaps searing—through all this tumultuous music come the open strings drawing attention to the 'charmed circle': they are C in the viola and 'cello (bar 547), A in the viola (bars 556 and 557), E and G in the violins (bars 561–565), and G in the second violin and viola (bars 571–574). This leads to a dramatic *sff* series of 'cello bottom Cs that form the retransition—the preparation for the recapitulation. Though the listener cannot yet know it, the opening music is shortly to return, albeit in an enhanced form: the influence of sonata form is clear, even if the exact ground plan of that form is not used. The open strings, then, have served to recall the music to the basic tonality in preparation for the reprise. Always the most dramatic moment in classical sonata form, Simpson makes it so in this quartet also. The large leaps in the build-up, the slowing-down of the decorated pedals to crotchets that grind outwards in both directions by a semitone before returning, the double-stopping, the cross-accentuation—all these features make for a climax of quite staggering intensity. Simpson might well be proud of it: but it needs to be held in check if the motion characteristic of the opening section is to be regained—and Simpson does intend to return to that slower type of music, creating an overall ABA arch shape. The pedal on the 'cello's open C string was used to slow the progress of the music in the opening slow section, and that function is now recalled. But such is the energy of the music during this climax

that the pedal C has at first little effect on the music: nevertheless, by persisting it helps to begin stemming the flood of notes. It has, then, a dual function: it recalls the effect of the pedal Cs in 'applying the brakes' during section A, and it prepares for the recapitulation of the opening theme, the lower of whose parts began on C.

Before leaving this central section it will be useful to look at the tonal scheme (see Example 6).

Ex.6

Bar Number

152: 177: 199: 204: 223: 242: 250: 269: 279: 281: 289: 294: 309: 324:

b; same material

b

similar, not identical

y

y

upward scale passages beginning on open strings

346: 360: 376: 432: 452: 453: 460: 472: 480: 505: 547: 556: 561: 565 575:

y

y

y

upward scale passages not beginning on open strings

open string

all open strings

RECAPITULATION OF SECTION A

Simpson's first move is to make a change to 2/4: this helps him to forge a smoother link back to the Adagio section. When the change to Adagio comes, then, one bar of the scherzo can become one quaver of the recovered slow tempo: or, to put it another way, six bars of the fast tempo become one bar of the slow. This smooth transfer could not have been made if Simpson had maintained his 3/4 signature right up to the point of change.

For the moment, however, Simpson maintains the fast speed, rewriting the Section A material in much longer note-values in order to compensate, and in order to make a smooth join. At bar 580—the point at which the Recapitulation starts—the pedal C is joined by a pedal D in the second violin. C arrives before D this time—as a result of the dual function of the 'cello's open C string mentioned above; but it still moves upwards, using figure 'z', to meet D: fast decorated pedals are added to maintain the pressure. Both instruments alternate open with stopped strings: the 'cello has to do this by touching the C an octave higher (and double-stopping the upper octave with the open C). The violin double-stops a unison D on open and stopped strings, alternating this sound with the stopped D. This gives a much more powerful impression than is found at the

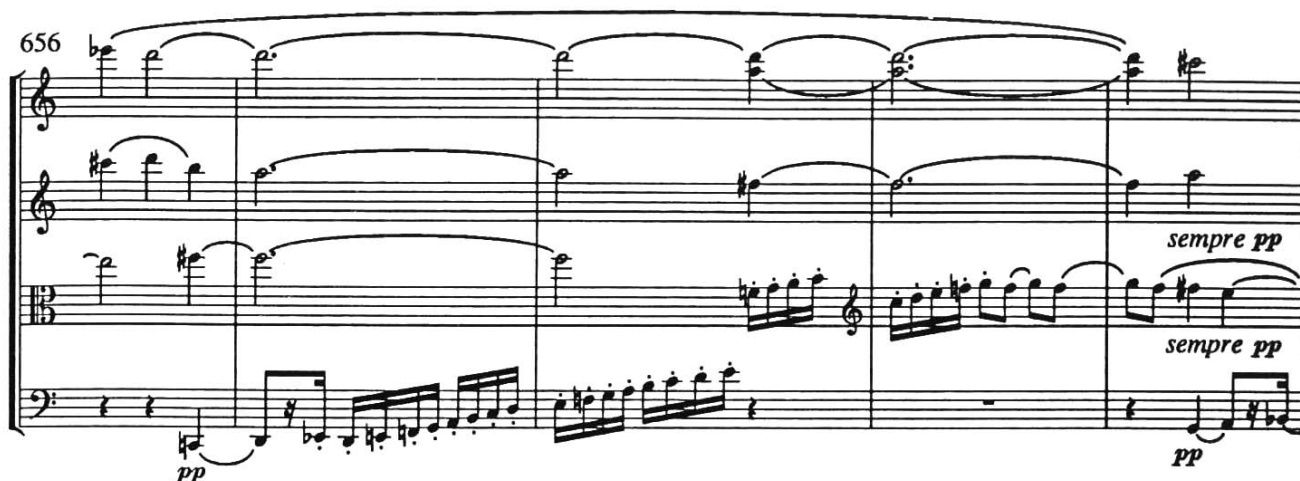
opening—it is more than a question of the dynamic markings, and more even than the manner of scoring, that makes for this power. Despite the attempts of the 'cello's C pedal, the immense energy built up in the middle section has not yet been dissipated, but remains a powerful force free-wheeling onwards in the listener's mind. The effect of the re-introduction of the slow material at section A is thus akin to moving up into over-drive: so powerful is the climax that it will be some time before the energy is dissipated and the wheels stop spinning. The basic pulse may be the same as at the opening, but the overall feeling is utterly different. As Simpson himself commented, "The theme is not the same as before: how could it be after all the things that have happened to it?" This re-writing might well have suggested to Simpson the idea (in the Eighth Quartet) of using a whole movement as a variation of another: moreover, the idea of using the interval of a fifth which breaks down into two minor thirds with a semitone between them—a feature of the Eighth Quartet—also shows up in this Seventh Quartet (in bars 279 and 280, for example: it is an idea that had also appeared in the Sixth Quartet).

One of the new counterpoints placed against the Recapitulation of A1 is a great series of descending fifths. This starts on D, very high in the second violin in bar 608, and comes tumbling down through the whole texture like a shooting star; there is one sixth and one fourth in bars 610–611; this is difficult to account for, and it would appear that Ab is a mistake for Bb; if this were so, all would be fifths, with an octave break-back in the 'cello.

At the change of time-signature back to 3/4 (and Tempo primo, $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ del prec.) in bar 625 the music reverts to the key of A, built around the pedal E, as it had been in bar 11. The bottom note of the 'cello reappears in bar 633, and again does not succeed in interrupting the flow of the music—there is still too much ongoing groundswell of energy for it to do so: at this point theme A1 appears in the outside parts, though in double counterpoint as compared with the opening. Nevertheless, the flow does stop at bars 640–1, even though the 'cello seems here to be groping for the low note that had played such an important part earlier on. Indeed, the 'cello finds Db before C—a feature foreshadowed in bar 376. Gradually the free counterpoint floats higher and higher (theme A1 appears at bars 648 and 653): eventually the 'cello's low C does arrive quite clearly, as if to anchor the counterpoint. At this point (bar 656) the part-writing clearly foreshadows that in the final cadence, though the listener cannot yet know this. The simultaneous approach to D from a semitone above and below neatly draws together the Eb tonality and the A opposite pole (as represented by C#: see Example 7). The fact that this progression occurs at the very point where a new stylistic idea begins neatly prepares the ear for the final cadence.

Ex.7

The musical score for Example 7 consists of four staves. The first staff is in treble clef, the second and third are in alto clef, and the fourth is in bass clef. The music features a series of descending fifths across the staves, with various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and slurs indicating phrasing and melodic lines. The score is marked with bar numbers 649 and 650.



At bar 656 a series of upward scales—a derivation from bars 3–6—begins. Simpson says,

I haven't used straight scales until now—but I have used something like them. There is something very tranquil about a scale. I didn't see why I shouldn't use them here—after all, Beethoven made a pretty good job of them at the opening of the Seventh Symphony.

Each scale is played against a high chord, and each migrates between the instruments (as do the chords). Every scale spans a fifth (= 'y') between each crotchet beat; moreover each new scale begins a fifth above the previous one (or, with an octave displacement, a fourth down in bar 665). At this point the music becomes very cold, with all passion spent: the intense heat—the solar energy—of the central section is here replaced by stellar coldness.

The continual versions of figure 'z' around bottom C, C# and D in the 'cello from bars 671 to the end foreshadow the ultimate shift onto D. Bottom D—a retarding element in the work, if not quite a disruptive one—is eventually drawn to a resolution on the pedal D with which it had initially clashed. Bar 680 has a final version of the opening theme, though continually held back and interrupted by rests so that—like the end of the second movement in Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony—the music disintegrates. By dismembering the material in this fashion Simpson separates out the G#–B–E phrase (which implies sharp-side keys, and particularly A major) from the Bb–F phrase that implies flat-side keys (and particularly Eb). This separating-out of the rival areas leads to the simultaneous statement of Eb and C# (standing for A major) within the final cadence (see Example 8).

Ex.8



Moreover Eb and C# were the first two chromatic notes heard in the quartet, so the final cadence is ultimately the result of bars 4 and 5, and it resolves those chromatic pitches. The approach to D from Eb and C# (figure 'b' in each case) simultaneously looks back to bars 547 *ff*, 556 *ff* and 656: and it is clear also that the 'cello in this cadence concentrates on fourth leaps on the sharp side (reflecting the G#–B–E in bar 682) while the viola concentrates on fifth leaps around the flat side (reflecting the Bb–F in bars 685–6). The slowly climbing viola fifths balance the tumbling ones at the start of the Recapitulation (bars 608 *ff*). The tonal outlines of this Recapitulation are shown in Example 9: nevertheless, this is the first piece by Simpson to be based on a pitch rather than a key—keys are not really important to it.

Ex.9

Bar Number
580: 602: 625: 632: 656: 660: 665: 669: 674: 676: etc. 680: 687: *b* 691:

upward scale passages not really established

Simpson has often said that he writes a theme first, and then examines it to see what is of interest in it, and what he can do with it. In this quartet he thought first of a stationary line which is approached by another line starting below it and moving up through it. What, then, has come out of this idea? And what has our lesson with him taught us? There seem to be basically seven points, though they are clearly interconnected.

Firstly, the piece makes great play of all kinds of pedals and decorated pedals. The fundamental conflict between the static and the motile is one of the bases for handling of tension throughout the work. Complex structures, then, can be built quite logically from simple material. A pedal, moreover, can have different implications depending on the material that sounds against it: such a simple idea, too, can have far-reaching tonal implications.

Secondly, the fact that the first pedal is decorated by moving to and from an open string suggests the use of the 'charmed circle' of string tuning notes as the quartet's tonal norm. The work, then, takes the fundamental character of the four instruments—with strings tuned in fifths—as its basis, and builds from that basis. The colour of the open strings is used for tonal purposes and as a mental sign-post. Transcription for another medium—a wind quartet, for example—would be out of the question in such a piece as this. Mental sign-posts have been shown to be important—as are mental milestones—if the listener is to follow the evolution of the logic. For the same reason, memorability of thematic material is vital.

Thirdly, the open strings themselves suggest fifths—one of Simpson's favourite intervals either as a chord or a leap. The theme itself contains a fifth leap, and its inversion (a fourth). The 'charmed circle' works like a version of the old 'circle of fifths': Simpson's view of tonality is a fundamental fact of Western music leads him to insist that certain intervals and combinations of sounds create a certain expectation, however hard some may try to deny it. He is not ashamed

to continue to use so old-fashioned and generally despised a device as the dominant seventh for his own purposes: he is quite content to accept the age-old lore that certain sounds are expected to move logically onto other sounds, and he does not iconoclastically try to deny the fundamental nature of the harmonic series and its implications.

Fourthly, the leaps suggest keys a tritone apart—Eb and A; and these are explored, offering a dynamic contrast to the ‘charmed circle’ with its implication of much closer relationships. The two areas are in conflict throughout, and are eventually resolved onto D in the final cadence.

Fifthly, the thematic material (fifths, the two semitones ‘z’, the rising and falling semitone and the rising and falling minor third, the repeated-note figure of bar 6) is all abundantly used. A good composer does not waste any of his material; and Simpson has used all the available figures suggested in his initial idea. The logical growth from the little particle at the beginning to the great galaxy later on is easily apprehended by the listener. Moreover, the material has itself overridden the composer’s initial intention, and has indicated its own manner of proceeding and its own scale. The memorability of the themes, and the way in which their features help the listener to identify them, is also important to the composer.

Sixthly, the Retransition—the preparation for the Recapitulation—and the Recapitulation itself are quite staggering. The intense power is the result of many things; but one from which we can learn much is the handling of motion. In this quartet the slow music which sounded quite calm at the opening (because it was played ‘from cold’, with no music preceding it) is provided with an intensely raised temperature—despite the use of the same basic pulse—at the Recapitulation. The lesson is that themes can never be quite the same after they have been subjected to development: and that the very context of a theme can alter its effect. Furthermore, tension and climax are not simply the result of adding dynamics to music that otherwise changes little: the structure of the music itself makes just as much of a contribution—or more—to the intensity. We have, moreover, seen how a composer of genius gives thought to the pacing of such growths of tension, taking care not to let it grow too quickly.

Lastly, it is foolish for a composer to decide on the scale and direction of a piece before investigating the material. Forms are not empty vessels to be filled up, but living organisms that grow in a manner suggested by the thematic material.

At a talk he gave on this quartet, Simpson said, “There’s been a lot of ballyhoo and praise recently about the Ninth Quartet—which is nice. But I think the Seventh is not bad really....” That surely must rank as one of the understatements of the century.

NOTES

1. The title ‘An Astronomical Quartet’ was given by Dr Robert Simpson to a talk he gave on his Seventh String Quartet during a seminar at his home in Killelton, Eire, in July 1989.
2. The score is published by Alfred Lengnick and Co. Ltd (1979): it will help the reader if he or she follows the discussion with the score at hand. The work has been recorded by the Delmé String Quartet on the Hyperion label.
3. All the quotations used in this article are taken from a talk on the Seventh String Quartet given by Dr Robert Simpson at a seminar held in his home at Killelton, Eire, in July 1989, and at a lecture given prior to this at Royal Holloway College (University of London).
4. He has additionally said that the central section suggests the concentration of energy within the atom, while the outer sections show the vastness of space. He points out that it has been observed that, in size, man is half-way between the largest and smallest objects in the universe.
5. The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society carried the only notice of the first performance: it went by without the world taking much notice of it.
6. This is foreshadowed in the third movement of Simpson’s Fifth String Quartet; and the interval of a fifth is much in evidence throughout the Sixth Quartet.

LETTERS

I wonder if I might enlist the assistance of your readers in my search for tape-recordings of Robert Simpson's great 'spiritual ally and intellectual adversary' the late Hans Keller? Although he was a tireless lecturer, speaker, teacher and coach as well as a broadcaster, few of his appearances seem to have been preserved institutionally, and it would seem wise to catalogue that which survives in private hands. Could I therefore ask readers who are in possession of any such recordings if they would kindly contact me, with the details? Should it emerge that a substantial amount of material exists, it may be deemed worthwhile to establish a tape archive dedicated to facilitating study of this most stimulating thinker.

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ROBERT SIMPSON AT 70

Philip Maund

ON 2 MARCH 1991, Dr Robert Simpson celebrates his 70th birthday, but this year also marks the 20th anniversary of his controversial début as a composer for brass band. The appearance of *Energy* at the World Championship in 1971 (won by the GUS Footwear Band with Stanley Boddington) provoked strong reactions. For several weeks the letters column of the *British Bandsman* played host to a heated discussion concerning the 'difficult' nature of the piece. One correspondent expressed what he felt to be a widespread bewilderment among the audience, describing the piece as 'cacophonous', whilst another, in voicing his approval, thought it 'an ideal test-piece'. 'I venture to hope,' the latter stated, 'that one day we shall have progressed sufficiently to understand and enjoy such works as *Energy*.' This autumn, *Energy* returns to the Royal Albert Hall as the top section test-piece in the National Championship finals. In the meantime, with a further four major works for brass band, Robert Simpson has become the most distinguished British composer to show an abiding interest in the brass band medium.

Born in Leamington Spa and educated at Westminster City School, Simpson received his early musical training as a brass player, and soon gained experience of the brass band tradition as a soprano cornetist. He turned to composition after abandoning a career in medicine, and became a private pupil of Herbert Howells, with whom he studied harmony and counterpoint from 1942–46. After several years as a freelance writer and lecturer, in 1951 he joined the BBC Music Division. For 30 years he worked as a producer, broadcaster and writer, devoting his considerable energy to the music of others, whilst his own compositions were the products of free weekday evenings and weekends. His championing of the music of Nielsen and Bruckner earned him international honours, and brought both composers to the notice of the British public for the first time. He has also written with enormous clarity and insight on the music of Sibelius and Beethoven (with whom he identifies most as a composer). Since his resignation from the BBC in 1981, in protest over broadcasting policy, he has been able to devote himself entirely to composition in the peaceful surroundings of County Kerry in the Republic of Ireland.

Simpson's current list of works is dominated by symphonies and string quartets, both cycles spanning his entire compositional career. However, despite his experience as a youngster, it was not until his 50th year that Simpson turned to the brass band medium (although *Canzona*, a short work for brass ensemble, had appeared in 1958). After an initial gap of some eight years between *Energy* (1971) and his next piece for brass band, *Volcano* (1979), new works have appeared at fairly regular intervals. The suite, *The Four Temperaments* (1982) was followed by the *Introduction and Allegro on a bass* by Max Reger (1986), and most recently *Vortex* (1989) was given its first performance at the Leeds Festival in 1990.

Simpson's style in the works for brass band is very much that with which followers of his orchestral and chamber music are familiar. It is deeply rooted in the symphonic tradition of those composers, already mentioned, whom Simpson most admires, and builds on rather than

dispenses with the past. The apparent absence of emotional excess and sentimentality is the hallmark of a composer whose aim is to be all-embracing rather than to focus on the individual.

Musically, the concept of 'organic development' is of central importance to Simpson; works are usually sparked off by an initial idea which is then allowed to grow naturally. The composer has described the process as 'controlled improvisation on paper', suggesting at once the freedom and discipline that is involved in his writing. The initial idea may be something as simple as an interval or a short series of notes, which then becomes the basis for melodic lines, chord structures, and even the large-scale organisation of the piece. To use an analogy, this occurs in much the same way that a living organism grows from a single cell containing all the biological information needed for life. This continual growth also leads in much of Simpson's music to a strong sense of momentum and accumulating energy (as the organism develops, its powers increase), and this energy is frequently released in climaxes of alarming intensity.

It is not surprising then that Simpson should have given his first work for brass band the title *Energy*. The structure of the work is that of a composed *accelerando*, another characteristic feature of his music. From today's perspective it is perhaps difficult to understand the criticisms of 20 years ago, as *Energy* contains a great deal of melodious writing (especially in the soprano and flugel solos of the second section) and much of the harmony is at least superficially diatonic. Among the adjudicators in 1971 was Eric Ball, the work's dedicatee. His understanding of *Energy* is evident from his remarks on the first three placings, which draw attention to the 'growth' of each of the performances in parallel with the growth of the music. Perhaps this year's competition will be a step towards a more widespread understanding.

Volcano erupted onto the band scene as the test-piece for the 1979 National competition, won by Peter Parkes and the Black Dyke Mills Band. Dedicated to the composer Edmund Rubbra, it produced a far more favourable reaction than its predecessor and it has since become the best known of Simpson's band works. Although it has a programmatic title, the music does not simply describe a non-musical event (although the composer allows that it may be heard as such). Rather, it is the title that is descriptive, reflecting the sudden upheavals that contrast with passages of utter stillness in the music itself.

A similar reversal of the traditional approach to programme music is to be seen in the work that followed. *The Four Temperaments* is Simpson's most substantial work for band, lasting just over 20 minutes, and perhaps for this reason it is (unjustifiably) the least performed. It bears a surface resemblance to the similarly named *Symphony No.2* by Nielsen (although the relative positions of the movements entitled 'The Sanguine' and 'The Choleric' are reversed in Simpson's work), and appeared in the same year as the *Variations on a theme of Carl Nielsen* for orchestra. The sanguine temperament is reflected in the blustery opening *Scherzo*, the briefest of pauses the only interruptions during its head-long charge. Placid chords characterise the phlegmatic *Intermezzo*, and demonstrate a calm indifference to increasingly disruptive assaults from the side drum and timpani. A dignified *Elegy* echoes the strength behind the sadness of the melancholic temperament, whilst the rapidly changing moods of the final *Fantasia* find a counterpart in the choleric temperament.

The *Introduction and Allegro* on a bass by Max Reger provides perhaps the most graphic illustration of growth in Simpson's band output, and is dedicated to Peter Wilson. The bass theme, taken from Reger's *Fantasia and Fugue in D minor op.135b*, is present in its entirety (albeit heavily disguised and fragmented) from the first page, and offers a rich resource from which the

whole work is derived. During the course of the monumental introduction, the fragments of the theme gradually cohere until at the start of the allegro the complete theme leaps out fully formed. At the climax of the work it appears in its original context (quoting from Reger's fugue), the preceding music offering, along with much else, evidence of Simpson's consummate skill as a contrapuntist.

The most recent work, *Vortex*, dedicated to John Pickard, a friend and fellow composer, maintains a single fast tempo throughout. The title once again suggests the form the work takes. All three sections begin with quiet activity, and grow in volume and intensity to the point where they are sucked into a unison note (each a semitone lower than the previous). Each phase is increasingly prolonged and more powerful, and the closing pages are a torrent of sound and motion that explodes onto the final unison F.

In August 1990 the Desford Colliery Caterpillar Band directed by James Watson undertook an ambitious project to record all of Simpson's brass band works for the Hyperion label; the prospect of its imminent release is keenly awaited. Although the composer is apparently reluctant to make a great deal of having reached the proverbial three score and ten, perhaps he would forgive others for taking this opportunity to celebrate his fine achievements. At a time in life when others might think of slowing down, Simpson's compositional powers continue to expand and new works are now appearing with unprecedented speed. May there be many more, and the repertory for brass band further enriched.

Since this article first appeared in the *British Bandsman* (2 March 1991) the Hyperion disc of the complete works for brass band has been released. The National Brass Band Championship in October 1991, where *Energy* was used as the top section test-piece, was won, appropriately, by James Watson with the Desford band. The reaction at grass roots was once again mixed, which is far more revealing about the arch-conservatism within the banding fraternity than it is about the work itself. *P.M.*

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*An adaptation of the talk given at the 1991 AGM
by committee member Brian Duke*

HISTORY is a delicate plant, made unwittingly by sleepwalkers and idiots. The sleepwalkers are usually bright-eyed and bushy-tailed creative people like you and me. Sometimes the idiots are clever enough to let destiny take its course. Either way, alien breeds of human are brought together; they may even listen to each other's voices. The biologist might call the result 'hybrid vigour', even when the fruit is thought or art.

Let us have a musical illustration. Without the intervention of Adolf Hitler, Bob would be much the same composer and fellow we know and love, but would this haunting passage from the Seventh Symphony have come out quite so? (The Adagio, towards the end, tracks 18–19.) We know that Milein and Hans Keller are the dedicatees. Hans once said that composers employ quotations because they are home-sick; they have lost their personal bearings for the moment, and need something to hold on to; in extreme cases they may even be saying "Show me the way to go home". Bob does not do that. If he uses someone else's theme or idea, it is because it is really worth pinching; it could be a glorious rock on which to build a splendid castle of variations. In his Seventh Symphony there is another kind of musical rock. There is a 'chorale' for trumpet and lower wind (**track 15, 50 seconds** and on) which also recurs in our first quotation. In all, three times, conspicuously to the ear. Amid many processes, this chorale has a binding function, just as the famous trombone solo in Sibelius' Seventh has a binding function, amid many other processes. Both change but remain recognisable, just as our friends change with their differing moods, yet remain recognisable.

There is however one crucial difference between the use of these 'rocks'. In the Sibelius, the ship ties up in the harbour labelled C major, and this is the centre of those trombone passages, first and last; the symphony converges onto the key of C, like a long voyage that has seen many things but nevertheless ends up, very definitely, at home. The Simpson does not do that; its 'chorale' does not recur at the same level, for it rises. This is a voyage that crosses an ocean; it ends in a new world; dry firm land, to be sure, but alien. No other symphony ends quite like this (**final track**).

The ending of the Simpson is firm but it sounds like exile. It will have to do as home. This is an extreme example of a creative artist thriving on an alien voice. This alien voice needs cultivating. Someone once said of Benjamin Britten, born 1913, that he was the last composer who grew up without the influence of the gramophone. As a bald statement that's fine. The writer meant it to have edge. Like fin de siècle Vienna the situation is not difficult, it is merely desperate. Music, creatively speaking, is doomed; interpretatively speaking it will soon go the same way. Constant Lambert wrote of the appalling popularity of music. Of course; we can hardly live without it. Witness the fellow who came to read my electricity meter years ago:

What's that lovely music?

Psalm 23, actually, set by Havergal Brian.

Witness the apparent opposite, a London Schools Symphony Orchestra concert, also years ago, in the Royal Festival Hall. They opened with Cockaigne, not easy for starters, but good. The symphony was the Carl Nielsen *Espansiva*, not easy either but also well done. Perfect, no; an entry on two clarinets in thirds lacked one of its first notes, though only someone with the score in his head would have known that fine detail. And what put the score into my head? Repeated hearings of the piece through loudspeakers; I'd never before heard it live. As Bob would say, we must look with our ears. There was of course all the charisma of a live performance in a hall where Toscanini had conducted Brahms. On their night it was packed with supporters, the kids who had come to hear their mates. What a marvellous act of promotion!

The radio and the recording industry has thus an opportunity to intensify our listening. We can explore. We can hear alien voices that our past could hardly be aware of: original versions have appeared that we hardly knew of; researched versions to clear out the earwax of habit; completions to set us arguing. The old tag needs revising, perhaps to: Where there are two performances there are three opinions and none may be declared either good or bad.

Of course the danger remains, earwax. Carl Nielsen declares Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* to be a beautiful piece. A remark of its time. Of ours, Hans Keller points out how the same piece may become musical wallpaper as children do homework and adults their tax returns. In between lies the loudspeaker revolution. That danger remains for the creator of new music; the other side of the coin is the immense enrichment of aural experience to one who is in just the right place. This requires no vast personal travel; much of the material may simply be summoned or lie on a nearby shelf. The time is efficiently spent and directly with the music. Thus it may be that Robert Simpson is one of the first major beneficiaries of this electronic age.

The cry goes up, keep music live. We do. Consider the proliferation of the string quartet these days. The phrase 'string quartet' itself has two meanings which are surprisingly alien to each other—the group of players and the pieces that they play. Of players we need fear little. They have been inspired by what exists already, and as individual groups may well inspire or commission fresh creation. Of the pieces composed for them, however, a distinction may be drawn: real string quartets and something that is less really string quartet. On the one hand, pieces where the composer has in Carl Nielsen's phrase, crept inside the instruments themselves, and those where an act of courtship may indeed have taken place, but the lady is not to be had. Do instruments discuss the musical material as individuals and to their utmost? Or is the material, however musical in itself, merely resisting such a discussion? There is a possible alienation here which might become tragic. The musical material is undoubtedly great, its treatment and unfolding excellent, but it fails as quartet writing. Set for a string orchestra it might succeed. Permit me to invite disagreement by instancing the César Franck quartet and the Sibelius *Voces Intimae*. The latter title is justifiable on the grounds of, one instrument to a part; yet the texture too often remains orchestral in its genesis. This is not a matter of music difficult to play, that is expected; or a stray miscalculation, that may be corrected. Could the trouble lie in an imperfect sense of instrumental colour? Possibly; the example of Bach who transcribes so notoriously well hardly helps the discussion, for his counterpoint will still remain an act of musical discussion between the heard voices.

Part of the problem may lie in the matter of tremolo; it is a 'special effect' and therefore the more telling the less it is used. The mature Haydn is instructive. He uses tremolo but once in his later quartets, a hushed couple of bars near the end of the slow movement of the *Rider*, Op.74 no.3 in

G minor. Equally telling, but for a different reason, is the raw open E sounding through a busy, hectic texture in the Simpson Ninth String Quartet. Can the eye see it? Hardly; it is like trying to spot a personalised number-plate in the rush hour. To the ear it is unmistakable: only a violin can make that sound, for it is natural to it (**Variation XIX, track 20**).

It is significant that in Bob's chamber music the special effects are rare and they are telling: each implies the other, as is the case with Haydn's tremolo. The distinctions within a string quartet are thus plainer; they are inherent to it. The musical thought becomes clearer and the distinctions within each instrument are allowed to blossom. The middle strings of a violin are closer mutually in sound than the same strings, the D and A, of the viola; there is a firmness of sound in the bottom open C on the 'cello not possessed elsewhere in a quartet, which an orchestra can exploit, a chamber group even more. In this last point, the opening of the Simpson Fourth String Quartet invites two comparisons. We all know the parallel with the first Razoumovsky quartet of Beethoven, for it has been declared. Their openings thrust forward equally into their respective musical dramas, yet the Simpson commandeers where the Beethoven infiltrates. Each has its vital 'cello tune: Beethoven's expands both up and down, sweeping the deck space clear both ways before further action; but Simpson's cannot do that; it begins from the lowest note of the 'cello and can only expand one way. There is another chamber piece that commandeers in just that way, from another century, speaking in another key and with the same initial idea. It is of course Mozart's String Quintet K.515. That is something for an alien ear to notice.

Of course, Bob is dead right. We must, we can only see such things with our ears. Scores may help; they can hinder. You try following the full score of the Scherzo of William Walton's First Symphony during performance. You will soon give up, for it will run away far too quickly. Try, on the other hand, following a score of Bob's Ninth Symphony during performance and you find a virtue never suspected, the tidy clear paragraphing. The score is physically massive; it is easy to lose the place with conductor's size pages; but the thread is quickly regained without being too expert at score reading. It is all done by the general appearance of the pages.

Bob is too good a creator to want, or to need, to repeat himself. He is as Hans Keller might have pointed out, the opposite of Vivaldi. His music is the solution of purely musical problems. Occasionally we do catch Bob using a good idea more than once. Here I am not thinking of an all embracing concept such as variation form, which is as varied as the imagination can take it. Variation form is one of Bob's instincts of which he is so well aware that he is able to repeat himself. Not out of homesickness but out of sheer daring. Can bits of the theme interpenetrate? Yes. Can you start the tune in the middle? Yes, if the theme properly has repeat markings. I instance the Ninth Quartet. All this is looking into what is there, rather than through it, which would be the earwax approach; doing perhaps to the theme of another man what every confident creator hopes that someone will do to his own work. To say, in effect, "That's smashing!" There is after all no other aim in any true art.

No. I have already more than hinted that Bob's music tends towards a destination, each piece to its own. Something is launched and then, at the end, it arrives. Those who explore the music do not need me to elaborate, beyond a reminder that we have here one of the hallmarks of a great composer, the finding of new detail and new beauties that previously escaped the attention. Mind you, my acquaintance only goes back a third of a century; can it really be that long?

ROBERT SIMPSON: an appreciation

John McCabe

ROBERT SIMPSON is a man and a musician of the greatest integrity—it is difficult to imagine him ever doing or writing anything cheap or less than totally straightforward. Sometimes a composer's music reflects aspects of character that might not be imagined from purely social knowledge of the person. In Bob's case, the strength of purpose demonstrated in his music, and the total commitment and lack of compromise, reflect admirably in his own personality (though it might be added that his dry wit is less a feature of his music than his conversation).

He has made an indelible mark on British musical life in three particular areas. One is his long period of service at the BBC, when his advocacy of sometimes unfashionable composers was a valuable counterbalance to prevailing trends at the time, and when his *Innocent Ear* programmes provided an admirable opportunity of assessing unusual or neglected works fairly (the composers were only identified after the performance, leaving the listener to enjoy the music without the bias of received opinion).

As a writer on music, with innumerable articles and volumes, he has written in particular superb books on Beethoven and Nielsen (still the classic on this composer), while *The Essence of Bruckner* is another classic of music literature. He has brought a composer's insight, as well as a broad and cultivated intellect, to the subjects closest to his heart.

More than anything, however, it is his music that has made a permanent and invaluable contribution to our culture. The composers about whom he has so perceptively written are among those who mean the most to him, into whose music he has an exceptional insight, and to whose values he has been faithful throughout his career. Comparing early works such as the *First Symphony* and the *Piano Sonata* to more recent music one realises that, however much he may have travelled in technique, he has pursued an individual and entirely consistent path with unerring single-mindedness. Technically, his music follows the traditions of tonality laid down by the great symphonic lineage, but whereas some composers might use this as a means of avoiding confrontation with the musical issues of our time, Simpson's music not only reaffirms the continuing validity and power of this tradition but also expresses it without compromise—he never offers easy options, but expects the listener (who will be richly rewarded if the challenge is taken up) to meet him half-way and, as it were, participate in the composition's progress.

The power of Simpson's music, not only in the great series of symphonies and quartets but in a variety of other music (notably several magnificent works for brass band), derives in my view from the vivid nature of his musical imagery. I do not mean anything pictorial here—even when deriving inspiration from an extra-musical source, his ideas have a pure, abstract character. Simpson's imagery is, rather, solely musical, but as rich in evocative power and communicative

authority as any other kind of imagery. His command of large-scale symphonic form, as in the vast frescoes of his Ninth Symphony and Ninth String Quartet, is remarkable. We are fortunate to have a composer whose stature and ideals represent something of exceptional value as human documents. Long may he continue to challenge and move us with the products of one of the most profound musical imaginations of our time. Happy birthday, Bob, and back to work—for our sake!

ROBERT SIMPSON

Robin Holloway

THERE is much talk today of the 'new tonality'. Now that the majority of composers in Britain are tonal in at least some sense, it is intriguing to trace the history of the whole post-war avant-garde tradition; from its gradual emergence, eventual world-wide domination, to its collapse into gesture and decorative prettiness. Yet despite the continual changes in compositional style and thinking since the 1950s, Robert Simpson's music has always remained tonal. For him there is nothing to suggest tonality is a soft option, for he demonstrates that it really has the power to make an impact or even to hurt, just as much as the music of an avant-garde figure such as Xenakis, or the Stockhausen of *Trans*. But perhaps more importantly, Simpson's mastery of tonality, together with his supreme control of 'movement' or 'current' (whether in a fast or slow tempo) shows that there is as much validity in the old tonal system as there was in the music of Haydn, Bruckner or Nielsen, to name three of his favourite composers.

My one small reservation is the virtual absence in his output of pleasure-seeking elements, sensuousness and colouristic harmony, that have been such significant features for other composers, though I fully realise that such aspects are probably incompatible with his high aim and artistic seriousness. So I conclude by sending heartiest best wishes for his 70th birthday, as I'm sure do his many admirers, with hopes for continual creative successes and perhaps a late-period mellowing of language.



Robert Simpson

ORCHESTRAL:

Symphony No.1
Symphony No.2
Symphony No.3
Symphony No.4
Symphony No.5
Symphony No.6
Symphony No.10
Symphony No.11
Violin Concerto
Pianoforte Concerto
Allegro Deciso for String Orchestra

BRASS:

Canzona for Brass

CHAMBER MUSIC:

String Quartet No.1
String Quartet No.2
String Quartet No.3
String Quartet No.4
String Quartet No.5
String Quartet No.6
String Quartet No.7
String Quartet No.12
String Quartet No.13
String Quartet No.14
Trio for Clarinet, 'cello and Piano
Clarinet Quintet (Clarinet and String Quartet)
Horn Quartet (Horn, Violin, 'cello and Piano)
Violin Sonata
Viola Quintet
String Trio
Sonata for Two Pianos

PIANO SOLOS:

Variations and Finale on a theme of Haydn
Sonata
Variations on a theme by Beethoven

CHORAL:

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