

# TONIC

The Journal of the  
ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY

Vol.5  
*Summer 1993*

Editorial	1
How I Came to Meet Bob <i>J. David Gillett</i>	2
The Ferocious Anti-Pessimist <i>Lionel Pike</i>	5
Clues and Keys <i>Hugh Ottaway</i>	8
Against Lipsius <i>Robert Simpson</i>	11
Chairman's Report for the Year 1992	15

## EDITORIAL

TWELVE years ago, Vol. 1 No. 2 of TONIC carried an article by Hans Keller entitled 'The Man and the Music', which explored the relationship between the personality of an artist and what he creates. One strand of Keller's argument was that creative personalities tend to fall into one of two categories: the artist who sees himself as a 'channel' for his art and for whom creativity largely remains an unconscious act (Mozart, Stravinsky); and the artist as 'striver' forging his work in the furnace of his own will (Beethoven, Simpson). My simplification undermines a subtle thesis, but I hope it might encourage those who have access to that early edition to reread Keller's article as a companion to the present selection.

The nature of this edition of TONIC is slightly different from that of the previous two. Whereas the emphasis in Vol. 4 Nos. 1 and 2 was strongly analytical, the new edition could be described as more 'biographical' in that most of the articles offered here combine to provide a revealing insight into the ideas and the values that shape one particular artist's creativity. The articles are wide ranging: from David Gillett's delightful anecdotal piece on how he got to know RS, through accounts by Lionel Pike and Hugh Ottaway of RS's artistic development, to a reprint of RS's splendid article 'Against Lipsius' (also broadcast as a talk under the title 'The Ferociously Anti-Pessimist Composer') — surely one of the clearest (and wittiest) artistic manifestos ever issued by a composer. I hope the collection informs and entertains in equal measure.

Finally, I should like to draw readers' attention to the fact that as from 1 September 1993 TONIC's editorial address will change. The new address will be:

c/o Department for Continuing Education  
University of Bristol  
Wills Memorial Building  
Queen's Road  
BRISTOL BS8 1HR

*John Pickard*

## HOW I CAME TO MEET BOB

*J. David Gillett*

I HAVE been asked to write a piece on how I came to know Robert Simpson. To do so I have to go back a few years before the actual meeting in order, so to speak, to prepare the ground.

It was 1943 and I was living on an island in Lake Victoria. Now, Lake Victoria is about the size of Ireland (about 67,000 square kilometres) and my island, although one of the larger islands in this freshwater inland sea, was nonetheless a very isolated and lonely place. I had been sent there by the Uganda Medical Department to see if there was any way of putting a stop to the spread of sleeping sickness that was threatening the lives of the 1800 islanders.

A steamer used to call at fortnightly intervals bringing supplies and carrying away large earthenware pots and dried fish — the two main exports of the island — to the people in the rest of Uganda. This service was stopped, however, because it threatened the spread of this fatal disease to the mainland. Thus I found myself more or less completely cut off in this lonely place, where I was stuck for more than a year.

As with all true 'desert' islanders, music was essential for my survival. I quickly rigged up a rather Heath Robinson windmill, which, with more than 320 kilometres of open water before me and thus a steady stiff 'sea-breeze', gave me a supply of electricity that allowed me to use two lights and a radio. Usually there was what I came to call a 2-4 amp wind; this could be boosted to more than 20 amps during the rather terrifying pre-thunderstorm squalls when the whole apparatus, perched on top of a two metre high termites' nest, was blown down more than once.

On going to bed each evening I would tuck myself into my mosquito net and twiddle the knob of the radio in what was usually a vain attempt to find some music. But one evening I came across some strange, unhurried music that was completely unknown to me. I lay there under my net, transfixed in a state of timelessness as the music slowly unfolded, at times standing almost stationary like some lonely distant peak exposed as the clouds momentarily parted. What could this strange, spacious music be, I wondered?

It seemed to go on in this vein for a long time, a very long time in fact, until at last I heard it announced in German, "bla, bla, bla,... something, Anton Bruckner, bla, bla,... Wilhelm Furtwangler". Well, thought I, if that's Bruckner I can't wait to hear more, but which of the nine was it?

When the war ended I was allowed to return to England — after eight years away — only to find that Bruckner at that time was almost never played here. Yet that theme still haunted me. Quickly I bought myself a radio and found that on twiddling the knob across the whole spectrum I could sometimes get music that was unmistakably Bruckner from Hilversum or from one of the Swiss stations. But it was two more years before I discovered that the bit I had first switched on to, when on Buvuma Island, was the slow movement of the Seventh.

I started to collect all the recordings (78s) that I could get hold of in preparation for my return to Uganda. In 1948 I read in a local newspaper that a certain Mr Robert Simpson had played his records of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony to some students. But I was under the impression that there was no recording of the Eighth, so how come? I wrote to the said Mr Simpson (care of the newspaper) and he replied that he had just acquired a new German recording and characteristically added, "Why don't you come and hear it?" Well I did, all 21 sides of it, and he introduced me to the E Minor Mass of 1866 and to the Nielsen Clarinet Concerto. Characteristically again, he said, "Why don't you come again next Saturday and hear the Eighth again?" adding, "One hearing is not enough." I duly went and began to get to know, just a little, about Simpson the man.

The following year I returned to take up my work in Africa. We kept up a desultory correspondence for a few years but this, alas, gradually fizzled out. I returned to Britain in 1962 and shortly afterwards acquired a recording of Bob's Third Symphony. Ah, I thought, here is what I have unknowingly been searching for, the Bruckner serving to prepare the way. A few years later I went to the Royal Festival Hall to hear the Fourth and, bowled over, I went behind the scenes afterwards to pay my respects and hoping to renew our friendship.

After some 20 years we had, I suppose, both changed a bit and, of course, he met very many people in the course of his work at the BBC. Actually he was not quite sure who I was until I confessed that I had befriended Dr Goebels during the war (Dr G., I hasten to add, was a baby monkey whose mother had been shot by the local islanders on Buvuma). Apparently my stories had impressed Bob in 1948 and he had, he confessed, often dined out, so to speak, on some of the strange exploits of this lovable rogue.

The Fourth Symphony seemed to me to epitomise that saying (whose author I regrettably forgot), 'To suggest is to create, to define is to destroy.' One sees this quality to some extent in Bruckner and in certain other works of art, including some famous gardens in which one can go on a voyage of discovery, wondering what is in store round the next bend. But I digress. The Fourth was followed by the equally engaging Fifth and, by then, I was getting to know some of the string quartets as well.

My love of Bruckner was not diminished by these developments, rather my horizons were greatly enlarged. It seemed strange to me that there was a bust of Mendelssohn at the Royal Festival Hall and, later, even one of Nelson Mandela, but nothing whatever, there or

anywhere else, to commemorate Bruckner's visit to London in 1872. I approached the GLC about putting up a blue plaque at the place where he stayed in Finsbury Square. But the building had since been pulled down and replaced by an enormous office block. Half the interest, they told me, was the building itself, adding, however, that there was no reason why I should not do something about it myself.

To cut a long story short, the plaque was eventually put up in Finsbury Square and I invited Bob to do the unveiling in the presence of the Austrian ambassador and others interested. This little episode served to strengthen the ties between us and led to our jointly arranging, with the help of the Arts Council, two series of concerts at Brunel University. The first included all the string quartets of Martinu, the second (in 1978) all the string quartets of Robert Simpson. Both series were broadcast live.

It was clearly Bruckner that had drawn us together in those far off days but it is Simpson that has maintained and strengthened the bond that has grown between us. When we talk of Beethoven or Schubert we are usually referring to their music but there is also, of course, Beethoven and Schubert the men. With Simpson, too, there is both the music and the man. Simpson is not only a great composer but also an author of note with a gifted turn of phrase. This gift of his is also manifest in his conversation.

At one of the concerts referred to above, Bob introduced me to one of the members of the quartet. "This is David Gillett," he started in his unmistakable way. "He is professor of biological sciences here, but," he added, "he knows far more about music than he does about biology." Then his punch line: "And he knows a hell of a lot about biology!" All this impromptu. He was not always so generous, particularly when dealing with some petty power, but his gifted turn of phrase was always present. It was precisely to preserve some of these Simpson gems for posterity that I suggested, early in the history of TONIC, that we include a section to be known as 'Simpson Antagonistes'.

What a rich harvest I have reaped, all from the lonely musical journey that night on my island. Alas, my hero is now far from well. But, as I said above, there is both Simpson the music and Simpson the man. Perhaps they are inseparable, I don't know. But I do know that the latter's indomitable spirit will ensure that he will surmount his present appalling difficulties and, with Angela's help, rise again to add to this new dimension in music.

I set out to give an account of how I came to know Bob Simpson. Well, I probably don't know him, not really; he is much too complex a person for anyone really to know. But, how I met Bob, that's a different matter. All I can say in summary is that my own work has brought me into contact with many famous people, but none so great or so fine, none simpler and more delightfully straightforward yet complex, and none so brave and generous than this great composer and person, Robert Simpson.

## THE FEROCIOSUS ANTI-PESSIMIST

Lionel Pike

(reprinted from *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* 21 December 1984)

'One day we shall outgrow our present sensationalism and again ask for new music that is both an intellectual structure and also a qualitative comment on human existence. Then, no doubt, Robert Simpson's stature as a composer of just such music will be fully recognised.'

WE ARE as far from this happening as the day in 1973 when Martin Cooper made these comments in the *Daily Telegraph*. It is true that Hyperion has recently issued a record of the Delmé playing Simpson's Seventh and Eighth String Quartets, and that a recent performance of the Fifth Symphony, played by the Philharmonia Orchestra under Andrew Davis, had an excellent critical reception. The Ninth String Quartet, given superlative reviews at its first performance in 1982, has just been released in a recording by the Delmé. Yet the scarcity of performances of music by this fine composer, the rarity of recordings of his work, and the lack of knowledge of his music by the general public are something approaching a national scandal.

The bare facts about Robert Simpson are easily told. Born in Leamington in 1921, his early musical experiences were in brass bands; he studied for the external DMus degree at Durham University with Herbert Howells (though as a composer he is self-taught); he is a pacifist, with a profound interest in astronomy (he has a small observatory in his garden and is a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society); and most of his working life has been spent as a producer for the BBC. But these bare bones need some fleshing out before one can really understand the composer or the man.

Robert Simpson — Bob to all who know him — is a born communicator. He has been described as the new Tovey and he has that happy knack of introducing and elucidating complex ideas in such a way that the non-expert can appreciate them. Something of a crusader, he has certain beliefs about music, and his perceptive musical mind has grasped fascinating things in other men's compositions that he has felt a compulsion to evangelise. This he did in his early days by founding the Exploratory Concert Society, in which he explored little-known musical territory, avoiding the avant-garde as well as received opinion as to what constituted the musical mainstream.

His success in this venture led Sir Steuart Wilson to invite him to join the staff of the BBC in 1951. In the days when Bruckner was little played in this country Simpson waged a

personal war on that composer's behalf, and this he did to such effect that Bruckner is now well represented in the concert hall. Simpson then did the same thing for Nielsen, and so Nielsen's works are no longer the rarities that they were. A crusade on behalf of Havergal Brian included the gigantic undertaking of putting on the first professional performance of the Gothic Symphony — the largest ever written and calling for a vast number of performers. There were many radio talks, including one (entitled 'The Ferociously Anti-Pessimist Composer') that set out his *credo* as an artist. Alongside all this activity, composing was relegated to a spare time pursuit and Simpson, always dedicated to advocating other men's music, never pushed his own.

It is as a communicator of knowledge about other men's music that Simpson is at present best known. His monograph on Beethoven's symphonies and his pioneering books on Bruckner and Nielsen have been much admired, yet he denies that he is a musicologist. As he put it in *The Essence of Bruckner*, 'This book attempts to consider Bruckner through the ears of a composer. It is my belief that the inner processes of music reveal themselves most readily to another sympathetic composer...' His interest in symphonic processes, evident in the special regard he has for the music of Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen and Sibelius, made him the obvious choice for editor of Penguin Books' two-volume survey, *The Symphony*. Simpson himself contributed a brilliant introductory essay outlining his view of the art-form. For him, symphonies are works in which every element evolves in a logical manner; some admirable works with the title 'symphony' were excluded in the survey because they did not fulfil this criterion, and something of a critical outcry ensued. As unrepentant as when faced by adverse criticism of his own music, RS has always maintained his position. Indeed, his own works — and not only the symphonies — are notable for the sense of logical growth with which every element is imbued.

In 1980 Robert Simpson resigned from the BBC because of the corporation's musical policy — particularly that relating to the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts. The book that followed this, *The Proms and Natural Justice*, caused an even greater stir than did *The Symphony*, but Simpson nevertheless maintained the justice of his point of view. This belief in himself, and the kind of integrity that makes a man resign a prestigious post on a point of honour, shines through his music too. Every page of his manuscripts is alive with confidence and energetic strokes; even the pencil drafts seem to leap from the paper with a life of their own. He writes his music with Carl Nielsen's pencil, given to him by the composer's widow. "I hope," he says, "that some of Nielsen's spirit will come through it."

Too often, this and his love of Beethoven and Sibelius has led commentators to say rather glibly that Simpson's music is 'like' Nielsen's, or Sibelius', or whoever. Naturally, one or two pieces bear such traces, but Simpson's music is really only like Simpson. To suggest that it is merely a reflection of one of his mentors is less than just to a composer who writes everything with burning sincerity. Like the music of those mentors, it is usual that a single bar of Simpson's music is instantly recognisable as his own. Nevertheless, certain proce-

dures of his forbears have had a profound effect on Robert Simpson's style. He has always admired the sense of muscular forward motion found in the Viennese classics and believes that the secret of handling this kind of rhythmic energy has been lost to most twentieth-century writers. In his own works he has tried to recapture this art. After some early serial experiments (the music of which he subsequently destroyed) Simpson has found much satisfaction and endless possibilities in the tonal system, though it is often futile to attempt to pinpoint actual keys in his works.

His interest in Nielsen's so-called 'progressive tonality' (which he prefers to describe as 'emergent tonality') has led him to explore means of playing off contrasting tonalities against one another. More recently he has turned his attention to the exploration of simple intervals; he approaches them as if he has never heard them previously and tries to discover what will happen if, for instance, he plays off a semitone against a perfect fifth. In all his large-scale works — there are at present eight symphonies and eleven string quartets as well as much music for other forces, including brass band — it is the handling of tonality and the organic development of motivic material that most fascinates him.

His music is absolute in the sense that the processes governing its evolution rely on purely musical forces, yet it is not absolute in the way that Stravinsky meant when he said that music should express nothing beyond itself. It is clear that Simpson's music reflects the world around him; he is fond of referring to the 'life-force' in music (an idea of Nielsen's), and when discussing his own music he will often draw analogies with natural forces such as energy, with some human predicament, or with astronomy.

The necessity to communicate is as vital to RS's music as to his scholarly pursuits. He insists that it is a composer's job at first to create a gripping sound, one that will attract the listener. About his methods he says, "If an idea feels wrong, chuck it out; if it feels right, keep it. It's purely a matter of intuition; it's not analytical, consciously, and it's not theoretical. That's work for other people afterwards." The result is that Simpson makes his appeal to the audience directly and unaffectedly.

Robert Simpson says that if he were condemned to write only one kind of music, he would choose the string quartet. His quartets, no less than his symphonies, are truly 'symphonic', and they span his whole composing life in a way that makes a fascinating parallel with his great forbears Beethoven and Bartók. In his music, no less than in his exploratory concerts, he eschews the avant garde and has little truck with received ideas about what music should be like. He has the integrity to write the kind of music he feels, and to fly in the face of those who tell him that tonality is dead. To such comments, Simpson's uncompromising reply is, "It's composers that are dead."

## CLUES AND KEYS

Hugh Ottaway

(reprinted from the *Listener* 21 May 1970)

As a musician and a man, one of the greatest integrities alive, and as a composer the most key-conscious in a period whose cluelessness distresses him more than its keylessness.

Hans Keller

MUSICALLY speaking, cluelessness is now a way of life. Provided your packaging is right, anything goes, no matter how puerile, pointless or downright phoney. And packaging is largely a matter of words, words whose purpose is to justify deeds, usually by blinding us with pseudo-science (the exploration of spatial environment, etc.) or pseudo-philosophy ('the highest purpose is to have no purpose at all'). The words, that is, are a substitute for clues, an 'ad man's' exercise to make us fall for the newer-than-new. Perhaps the ultimate in cluelessness is the infantile delusion that history began — I put it moderately, of course — quite late last night; that there is no tradition, and if there were, it would have to be abandoned; that the only clues are the ones you found in the morning dew.

Cluelessness is often presented as the total situation, or as the only part of it worth taking seriously. Those with the clues tend to be far less vocal. Perhaps they are too busy making music the hard way, which used to be known as composing. Or is it quite simply that clues are not news?

Robert Simpson has clues. The best way of knowing this is to listen to his music, the second best is to read him on music that has his special sympathy — Beethoven's, Bruckner's or Nielsen's, for instance. Either way, you will find a vision that is clear-headed and comprehensive, a perspective that reduces the vagaries of fashion to trifling proportions and correspondingly enlarges what is basic and enduring. Clues and comprehensiveness go together: if your outlook is inclusive, you will not be caught by the prospect of a new musical language, 'a complete break-off point' in relation to the past, and you will see that the scramble to go one better than the most 'advanced' musicians of the year before last — again I put it moderately — is a special kind of rat-race, more silly-silly than silly-clever. Simpson will tell you that this silly-silliness, or 'doing your thing', is simply one more way of exploiting 'personality' as a substitute for creative effort. And he isn't very wide of the mark. It is undeniable that all great art has a strong personal presence, which is an inevitable concomitant of its greatness. But if you try to achieve greatness, or even a minimal

significance, by means of a self-conscious projection of personality — the little-man complex — you are not only romanticising your own ego but heading in a direction where the gimmick and the newly-struck attitude are supreme. At the end of the road is a musical state where there is no real tension because each and every sound (or noise) exists in its own right, and no real mastery because mastery implies tradition, purposeful selection, organisation. No wonder Simpson considers Stockhausen a deluded romantic — and has told him as much.

Simpson and Stockhausen are opposites. In saying so, I don't wish to set up Simpson as some sort of 'anti-messiah': I don't believe in messiahs, anyway, nor does he. But I do find in his work many of the qualities which seem to me fundamental if the world is to become a saner and happier place. Far from any suggestion of a 'break-off point', there is a powerful sense of re-engagement with the humanist mainstream. His admiration for Beethoven is boundless; it is also both realistic (unromantic) and musically searching — see, for instance, his review of Martin Cooper's recent book (*Listener* 19 March 1970) which is very revealing of himself. When he tells you matter-of-factly that he has been listening to *Fidelio* and has got some ideas from it, you know that, for him, Beethoven is still a new composer whose music is not only relevant but full of possibilities for further development. The attitude of mind which places Beethoven as an Old Master infinitely remote from our own creative problems — 'My dear, we simply can't compose tonally, can we?' — is one that he finds particularly crass.

Compose tonally? Simpson did write an atonal symphony — very strictly serial, he says — but destroyed it almost at once. Since then clues and keys have always been closely related. He did in fact write — and destroy — four symphonies before his published No.1 (1951), the work by which he is most widely known. The earliest work he has permitted to survive is the Piano Sonata (1946), which shows us a young man of 25 looking towards both Beethoven and Bach in a way that is completely self-possessed — looking towards, be it noted, not back: there is nothing here of the Neo-classical spirit. The First Symphony is a highly original three-in-one design whose sustained musical thought is thoroughly compelling, despite some impurities of style. The very active treatment of E flat and A as rival tonal centres; the impact of Nielsen — largely, I believe, a matter of self-revelation — when the composition was at a crucial stage; the profoundly human implications of the work's basic scheme: these will always give the First Symphony a special place in Simpson's development.

The String Quartet No.1 (1951-2) followed closely on the symphony, in more than one sense. In two movements, this takes its starting-point from the middle section of the symphony (*molto tranquillo*) and resumes the opposition of E flat and A in a manner that is quite distinct. Fortunately, this is soon to be recorded, for it is Simpson's first true masterpiece and a splendid vindication of his creative outlook. One important aspect of its mastery is its sense of tradition: the composer's awareness of quartet writing from Haydn

to Bartók, not as a burden that inhibits, or prompts a violent reaction, but as a stimulus to be joyfully accepted and responded to. At length, the work's acute tensions are resolved in a simple melodic statement, almost Haydn-esque in character (*poco pensoso*). I can think of no other composer today who could have carried this off naturally.

Two more string quartets were composed in quick succession. No.3, another two-movement work using 'progressive tonality', is probably Simpson's finest achievement before the Third Symphony (1962) and the Clarinet Quintet (1968). The Third Symphony is indeed another major landmark — C major to be precise (Schoenberg once said, etc.). To be still more precise, which we must be in our listening if we are to do Simpson (and ourselves) justice and not make silly remarks about 'no unusual demands', C major emerges from an extended conflict with B flat. The first movement, a sonata form, is in B flat (ultimately minor), but with a recurring pull towards C, the latter being felt as a region of promise. The second movement begins in B flat but ends in C — after an extraordinary sequence of events in which energy is at first repressed and then released.

Once again there are only two movements, though the second may be said to combine slow movement, scherzo and finale, though 'combine' is too clumsy: there is nothing sectional about it. The barest facts are these: it is monothematic (the theme is heard at the outset); the pace gradually quickens from *adagio* to *presto* (the theme is repeatedly transformed); for page after page the dynamic marking is *sempre pp*; the suppressed energy at last erupts in a blazing tutti, and we realise that an immensely powerful finale has come into being.

How did it happen? Essentially, by means of the closest control over every aspect of the material and its development. That, at least, is the simple answer. Many clues went into the making of this movement, clues which could only be spelt out in terms of the composer's imaginative and practical experience. Not the least of them underlies the magically quiet ending where the once imperious B flat is merely a note (the flattened seventh) in the key of C. And the great exclamatory chord by which the ending is prepared — a dazzling new discovery? — is a monument to Simpson's grasp of tonality. The most telling monuments, by the way, are often the plainest.

## AGAINST LIPSIUS

*Robert Simpson*

(first broadcast as 'The Ferociously Anti-Pessimist Composer'  
R3, 12 May 1971 and subsequently published in the *Listener*)

**I**N A BROADCAST discussion not long ago between Deryck Cooke and Jascha Horenstein, I was described as an optimist and a humanist. The same thing, more or less, was said about Nielsen, whose music has greatly influenced mine. I'd like briefly to examine these concepts, at least as I think they apply to me and my work.

A composer can't see himself as others see him, but he's the only one who really knows what he's got to cope with. Edmund Rubbra, who heard the discussion, wrote in the *Listener* that he saw no necessary connection between optimism and a humanism, as he put it, 'devoid of religious faith'. I'd go further than that and say that I can see no necessary connection between optimism and humanism, or between optimism and religious faith, for that matter. I tend to think of religion (at least in its most common forms) as man's failure to recognise his own wholeness, pessimistically attributing those parts of himself he doesn't understand to the supernatural. To that extent I suppose I'm a humanist of sorts, though I don't have most humanists' faith in human nature, certainly not as it appears to have shown itself at large so far.

One of the worst features of humanity (perhaps the worst) is the inertia with which the vast majority allows the aggressions of the power-hungry minority to dominate; it has always been so, and much as I would like to, I'm not really able to share the Marxist optimism that it will ever be otherwise. This mass inertia, it seems to me, could well be the result of some basic flaw, such as the isolation of individual consciousness, perhaps. I'm not talking about 'original sin', but about a possible wrong turning in evolution. There are millions of life-forms on this planet, and probably countless more in the universe. From what we know about the history of life on earth, all the various forms that have existed have either become extinct through inadequacy or changes of conditions, or reached a static state — the dinosaurs on the one hand and the ants on the other, for instance.

Man would not readily assume himself to be doomed in this way — but his behaviour is no warranty of exemption. The distinction he seems at times to be approaching is that of being the first creature to annihilate itself by means of its own ingenuity, perhaps by totally polluting his environment, by blowing himself to smithereens or (most likely) by besotting his own intelligence and sensitivity with the foul products of rampant commercialism. All

these possibilities could be the consequence of inertia. The difficulty that faces any honest creative artist lies in the fact that at no previous time have these dangers seemed so imminent.

All this would seem to brand me as a pessimist, not an optimist. But if I can't cheerfully describe myself as an optimist, I must insist that I'm an anti-pessimist of the utmost vehemence—ferociously anti-pessimist, in fact, for there's no other realistic form my anger can take. Pessimism would allow all these fearful things to happen; it would do nothing. In Nielsen's music we can already find this kind of anti-pessimism, foreseeing a situation that did not quite exist in his time, though it was incipient, and reflected in the gloomy late romanticism against which he reacted so powerfully. Nielsen understood that things were going seriously wrong, but he hoped there was a chance. One of the profoundest of his simple remarks was that music was the sound of life.

In a sense all art is optimistic; it's an optimistic act to write something down, since you presumably hope somebody will take some notice. In this sense the smallest artist is an optimist. But there is a great gulf between what I call 'Yes art and No art'; I prefer these terms to the more equivocal 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic'. The greatest art I know (and which I think most perceptive people will recognise) defies death by being organic. When Nielsen said that music was the sound of life he also meant that it was not the sound of death. And I don't think he meant just any music; he meant music of a certain organic vitality, such as he himself was aiming at.

Serious artists and lovers of art reserve their deepest appreciation for what they call organic; if they see in a work a convincing analogue of living processes, these they recognise as art that says 'Yes' to life, whether the expression is tragic or comic. All great art defies death. It resents and challenges it, even where it depicts it. When we call it organic we mean (as Nielsen meant) that it is the sound of life, that its processes are like living processes, informed by vital interactions that inwardly cause it to take forms that are superbly clear and energetic, the complexity of their inner forces inevitably resolved into outer forms that are unmistakably alive.

There's precious little such art today, and I think we must be very cautious about worshipping the gods that such an age as ours throws up. In a time when mental pollution is even more serious than physical, popularity is no commendation. In all periods of so-called civilisation, most art has been worthless and I have had it put to me that the same is true now, that my depressing view of the appreciation of the arts today doesn't properly take this into account. But all mediocre (and even bad) art of the eighteenth century or any other period than our own aims at being art. This is the first age to produce anti-art, consciously and deliberately anti-organic, not defying death but playing with it. The abrogation of the artist's authority is the snuffing out of his life. He becomes a symptom of a sickness, the smell of the corpse. I don't want to be either of these things, even if I end up

as useful compost. This makes me not so much an optimist as an anti-pessimist, and a humanist only insofar as I hope humanity at large might eventually emerge. It takes a Beethoven to demonstrate that humanity isn't merely a concept; the rest of us can only try, but it's important that we do. The moment I'm completely unconvinced of this I shall stop composing.

In the discussion I referred to, Jascha Horenstein remarked that what interested him in my work was 'the absence of any reference to the existence of people like Schoenberg, Webern, Bartók, Stravinsky — his behaviour as a composer is as if these people never existed.' If my dear friend had stopped to think about it, he wouldn't have said this about any serious composer, even if he meant it as a compliment, which I naturally think he did.

Schoenberg is far from being my favourite composer, but it so happens that the idea for a new treatment of tonality came to me from listening, not to Nielsen or any other composer I love, but to Schoenberg's Piano Concerto, many years ago. It struck me that in spite of the serial technique the work was fixed to a tonal centre, which loomed periodically behind the murk, and was deliberately avoided at the end — as if Schoenberg had finally made a fearsome effort to exorcise a ghost. I thought then, though I didn't know how, that it might be possible to make a positive use of this phenomenon. I didn't want, as Schoenberg did, to deny tonality — I wanted to find a way to make tonal centres react against each other, not make non-tonality react against tonality. I felt (and still feel) that to try to anaesthetise the listener's tonal sense was to deny oneself a powerful means of expression. So atonality was not for me.

But the fact remains that it was Schoenberg who started this train of thought, who, by making me react against him, had a positive effect. It was only later that I found confirmation of my own instincts in Nielsen, as if I had discovered a kind of music that I knew ought to exist somewhere — and there it was. Horenstein, incidentally, said that Nielsen wasn't an intellectual. Well, he met him, and I unluckily was born too late, but to judge by the music, and by Nielsen's beautiful prose style, by his comprehensive appreciation of literature, painting and sculpture, and his profound knowledge of philosophy, I'd say he was an intellectual of high distinction, and I can only assume that his quietness and modesty (to say nothing of a foreign language) wouldn't permit him on that occasion to indulge in conversational fireworks. After my encounter with Schoenberg had produced what Hans Keller calls productive tension, Nielsen gave me the kind of intellectual and spiritual support I needed to help me go my own way.

As for the other composers Horenstein mentioned, Webern certainly had no influence on me at all, except the negative one of indicating to me in wonderfully precise terms exactly what I don't want to do. Bartók and Stravinsky have interested me in certain aspects of sonority, but I have reacted strongly against the inorganic nature especially of Stravinsky; I'm quite convinced that if there's ever a better age, he won't be its favourite composer.

All this goes to show that one doesn't need to reveal one's influences in any imitative way; negative influences are as important as obviously positive ones, of which (on the other hand) one shouldn't be ashamed — no-one born deaf could ever be a composer, though if it could happen, now is the time; only the fact that I've conversed with some so-called avant-gardistes and they've heard what I said has convinced me that they are at least able to perceive sound waves. It's not impossible that one of these gentlemen might get the idea of getting hold of a congenital deaf mute, of somehow explaining to him that there was such a thing as music, and getting him to write some down — aleatoricism come full circle, the random achieved by deliberate and precise notation! I can only hope I haven't given someone an idea, though in this I'm no optimist. Not long ago a man came and showed me a score (or rather a diagram) and I jokingly said I didn't understand why no-one had thought of the idea of inviting the audience to go up and poke the musicians with umbrellas, to see what effect this would have on the sounds produced. To my horror he said with incorruptible sincerity and seriousness, "Well, ye-es... maybe... interesting idea... perhaps... why not?" And, believe me, there are not a few critics who would write solemnly about it.

All this is only a symptom of the real pessimism which I'm ferociously anti. But it's not enough to be a merely anti. It may be platitudinous to follow this up by saying that something positive is needed. But it is! If I react against the situation into which I've been pitchforked through no choice of my own, I'm entitled to look for sustenance where I can get it. I find it in art and in people that in the profoundest sense defy death, perhaps above all in Beethoven, who does not belong merely to the past. In Beethoven I find more force of life than in any twentieth-century composer; his is still the most powerful heart, mind and voice in music. I'd rather try to learn from him than from anybody, and trust to luck and what talent, guts and scepticism I've got to pull me through the ordeal. Scepticism is very important — it should be taught in schools. We must try to write music for a better age; unless we try, no-one will ever succeed. Some people are trying. As for the rest, Laurence Sterne prophetically had them taped as long ago as the 1760s. I'm extremely grateful to Mr Bernard Dunstan for quoting in a letter to the *Listener* this, from *Tristram Shandy*; his letter is about the similar situation in the field of painting:

You forget the great Lipsius, quoth Yorick, who composed a work the day he was born; they should have wiped it up, said my uncle Toby, and said no more about it.

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR 1992

THE TWELVE months or so since the last AGM, which began so well with Matthew Taylor standing in at short notice for the indisposed Vernon Handley at Bournemouth, have subsequently been coloured by Bob's illness. Naturally we all wish a speedy recovery for him, and send him our warmest greetings, while hoping that ways will soon be found to help him resume composing. The enormous output of new music that preceded his stroke was evident to all who attended the Malvern Festival, for no less than four pieces were given their first performances there this year. It was marvellous to see him there, and marvellous to know his trenchant wit remains as it always was (as the little talks with Festival organisers and BBC personnel showed). Bob's illness is all the more sad when one recognises that he is breaking new ground in these latest compositions. The Festival, however, was also a cause for great rejoicing, for it is clear that Bob is now beginning to receive the accolades that are his due; the excellent audiences, and the attention with which they listened to the music (as well as their evident enjoyment of it) are all encouraging signs. As you all know, this recognition is long overdue: Stephen Johnson was right when he said in his review of the Festival:

The reasons may be thorny and complicated, but the fact remains: Robert Simpson, one of this country's most widely-admired composers, has had to wait until his seventies to achieve the exalted status of 'Featured Composer' at a British music festival.

The Robert Simpson Society nevertheless still has some way to go before its work is done: Jane Glover gets an honorary DMus of the University of London; why not Bob? A recent French guide to the symphonic literature does not include Bob, though he is in the new *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Composers*. The *Dictionary of Twentieth Century World Biography* includes Richard Rogers and Michael Jackson but not Robert Simpson. Obviously there is still some way to go before justice is done.

The Malvern concerts were recorded and broadcast by the BBC, and what a splendid series they turned out to be! However, I did not myself encounter a broadcast of the Eleventh Symphony: if the BBC have indeed decided to omit this performance, then they are misguided, for the work is one of Bob's finest, and its dedicatee, Matthew Taylor, gave what Bob assured me is one of the very best first performances he has ever had. [This performance was subsequently broadcast. — Ed.]

The first London performance of the Ninth Symphony took place at the Festival Hall under Simon Rattle, and Raymond Clarke gave the first performance of the Variations and Finale on a theme by Beethoven at the Purcell Room. Matthew Taylor has had to stand in for Vernon Handley as conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra on more than one

occasion, but it seems that the recording of the complete cycle of symphonies is progressing steadily despite these illnesses. Indeed, the Hyperion recordings that have already been issued — of chamber music and music for brass just as much as the symphonies — have attracted a steady stream of requests about Bob's work, and Brian Duke is dealing with these requests —many of them from overseas — with admirable care and efficiency.

Brian has taken over responsibility for new members because of an IRA bomb that wrecked John Young's office earlier this year. John had much of his work destroyed, and years of labour will be necessary to restore his files to the state they were in before the blast. Luckily the software pertaining to the Simpson Society existed in copies stored elsewhere, but John nevertheless feels that he must cut down drastically on his work for the Society in order to make good the destruction of his office work. While we all hope that things will be back to normal for him soon, and that he will one day resume the RSS duties he has carried out with such exemplary efficiency, we understand how he must feel, and we all thank him most warmly for the immense amount of work he has done for the Society.

Martin Anderson has asked your Chairman to prepare an edition of Simpson's writings on music; indeed, Martin has already announced in print that I will have it ready in a year (it was the first I had heard about this time-scale). I would be grateful if anyone could point me in the direction of writings (other than letters, for the moment) that I have not encountered. There is increasing interest in Simpson's music on the part of the academic community, and —in fact— a postgraduate student is about to start research on RS's music at my own College.

So it has been a mixed year: on the debit side, the committee has been handicapped by the lack of a secretary for many of its meetings (incidentally, that reminds me to thank Pam Bacon once more for her hard work, not only as a past secretary who had to give up through illness, but also for her part in making today possible; we give her our best wishes for a continued recovery). The loss of John Young's expertise is bound to be felt deeply, but we are all grateful to the members of the committee who have taken over some of John's functions. Though neither debit nor credit, I should thank Royal Holloway and Bedford New College for continuing to allow us the use of a room in the Bedford Square Building, which is so central as to be extremely handy. I sometimes reflect that the only reason why you keep me on as Chairman is to continue to have the use of those premises. On the credit side of the past year's activities are the appearance of a TONIC most splendidly edited by John Pickard, the appearance of new recordings and scores (doesn't the Ninth Symphony look wonderful in score?!), some new members, and a good crop of first performances.

Before closing, you will all wish me to thank David and Irene Gillett for allowing us to use their incomparable home as a setting for the AGM this year; and you will wish me to thank Rosemary Few, Pam Bacon and Jenni Pike for organising the refreshments.

And now we must look forward to a new year — how shall we meet its challenges? We can hardly do better than to take Bob as our example: even in his illness, he looks to the future with hope, and so must we if our Society is to remain worthy of bearing his name.

## THE ROBERT SIMPSON SOCIETY

*President:*

Professor Vagn Holmboe

*Vice Presidents:*

Professor David Gillett  
Dr Vernon Handley  
Phil Lesh  
John McCabe  
Ronald Smith  
Ronald Stevenson

*Committee (1993-4):*

Graham Melville-Mason (Chairman)  
Matthew Taylor (Vice Chairman)  
Pamela Bacon  
Michael Bentley  
Sylvia Brooks  
Brian Duke (Minutes Secretary & oversight of new members)  
Richard Edwards  
Rosemary Few  
David Gillett  
Robert Hill (Treasurer; Publications; Records and Scores)  
Jim Pattison (Editor, *Leading Notes*)  
John Pickard (Editor, *Tonic*)  
Lionel Pike  
John Young

**Editorial** Dr John Pickard, Dept for Continuing Education, University of Bristol, Wills Memorial Building, Queen's Road, Bristol BS8 1HR   **Design and Typesetting** Philip Maund   **Printing and Distribution** Dunholm Publicity Limited, 277 Stockport Road, Ashton-Under-Lyne OL7 0HT.

General communications for the Society and enquiries about membership, subscriptions etc. should be addressed to the Secretary, Brian Duke, 24 Regent Close, Fleet, Hampshire GU13 9NS. Record and score orders should be sent to Mr R.D. Hill, 37 Clarence Walk, Meadvale, Redhill, Surrey RH1 6NF.