

TONIC

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EDITORIAL

Good news first. RILM, the Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale, have agreed to include TONIC in their bibliographical database. This means that (including past issues) all substantial articles in TONIC will now be named in this internationally most prominent tool of music-bibliographical research. Furthermore, it is intended to supply an ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) for TONIC, which would mean that in the not-so-distant future TONIC will be available in all British copyright libraries. Both these procedures have the obvious aim to increase both the knowledge of Robert Simpson and his music as well future research.

This issue of TONIC collects items previously published in periodicals not so well known. Malcolm MacDonald's 15 March 2000 Wigmore Hall talk was caused by a series of five concerts where the following works were performed: String Quartet No. 2 (11 March), String Quartet No. 15 (15 March), String Quintet No. 2 (29 March), String Quartet No. 7 (1 April), String Quartet No. 6 (12 April). The talk was published in the British Music Society Newsletter No. 104, of December 2004, pp. 237–242; here we offer a slightly edited version incorporating additional information.

Simon Phillippo is a name well known to the readers of TONIC, and I am happy to be able to include his paper on Simpson's First Symphony which was first published in *Tempo*, the periodical edited by Malcolm MacDonald, then with Boosey & Hawkes (Music Publishers) Ltd., London, no. 209, 1999, pp. 2–6. The music examples are copyright 1956 Alfred Lengnick & Co. Ltd.

Martin Anderson's interview with Matthew Taylor was published in the American periodical *Fanfare*, November/December 2004, pp. 75–79, and we are grateful to Martin for reproduction permission, as we are to David Hurwitz, Hubert Culot, and Robert Matthew-Walker. The reviews of the Hyperion CD, largely of less-known or online publications, were kindly supplied by Hyperion Records Limited, I am especially gratefully to their Press and Promotions Manager, Helen Peate. And finally I would like to express my repeated gratitude to Terry Hazell, who has once more been so very kind to proof-read this issue and remark on a couple of points. All remaining errors are my sole responsibility.

Jürgen Schaarwächter

MALCOLM MACDONALD
ROBERT SIMPSON LECTURE WIGMORE HALL, 15 MARCH 2000

It's a bit difficult to know at what level to pitch this lecture. No doubt some of you are members of the Robert Simpson Society, and know all there is to know about him anyway, while probably some others of you aren't very familiar with his music and have simply come along out of curiosity, to learn a few basic facts about a composer whose name and work are, sadly, even now, not as well known as they deserve. I'm proud of the fact that I knew Bob (as anyone who knew him must call him), and I counted him as a friend, though we didn't meet all that frequently. He was enormously helpful to me as I was starting out as a writer on music: in fact, directly or indirectly he got me my first writing jobs, and my first commissions to write books, and I'll never cease to be grateful to him for thinking me worth that sort of encouragement. I sometimes suspect he later thought that, as an editor of a contemporary music magazine [*Tempo*], I devoted too much of my time to music he considered second-rate, or worse. Though perhaps I'm wrong: his own tastes and sympathies and tolerances were a lot wider than he himself would sometimes paint them.

So let me say right away that my own attitude to Simpson's music is unequivocal – he was one of the most important composers anywhere in the world in the second half of the 20th century, and his works – most notably his symphonies and string quartets – represent a vital stage in the ongoing history of those great forms. To some extent he could be said to have reinforced the classical principles of tonality and musical momentum, but though his gods were Haydn and Beethoven, Bruckner and Nielsen, he wasn't really a conservative or backward-looking composer. He was carrying things forward, attempting to continue the complex and meaningful discourse which typifies those composers at a similar level of seriousness, profundity and absolute respect for the fundamentals of musical art. It's always appropriate to review what we know about such a composer, even at the most basic biographical and informational levels, to be sure we know what we think we know. So I'll start by giving a biographical outline, then I'll move on to say a bit about his symphonic music, which I imagine is the best-known and perhaps the most important part of his output, and finally I'll look in some more detail at his chamber music, especially his string quartets, as is appropriate in the context of this Wigmore Hall series. But first, some music [...].

That wasn't something you'll be hearing during this series – it's part of the slow movement of Robert Simpson's Fifth String Quartet, of 1974, and I play it just now – well, because it's good to hear music instead of talk, and because it may concentrate our minds on the truth, which it makes self-evident, that here was a composer who – whatever history's ultimate verdict on his music may be – spoke in music with the kind of utter certainty and emotional truth as the great masters.

Robert Simpson was born in 1921, in Leamington Spa. If that makes him sound quintessentially English, we should note that his descent on his father's side was Scottish, and on his mother's, Dutch. I'm really no friend of theories of racial influence in music and personality, but there were aspects of his humour, and of his uncompromising dedication to matters of principle, that sometimes seemed very "un-English" and more Nordic or Central European. Unusually for a composer, he didn't really play the piano, or a string instrument – all the more astonishing con-

sidering his output of string quartets. He did, in his youth, play the cornet, and the experience probably left its mark: everybody's noted the boldness of his brass writing, and he composed several weighty and virtuosic pieces for brass band. [Robert Simpson's immediate family were all members of the Salvation Army and it is more than possible that the first music he became aware of was that played by a Salvation Army brass band.]

A forebear on his father's side was Sir James Simpson, the Scottish pioneer of anaesthetics, and his parents intended him for a medical career. He did, in fact, study medicine in London for two years before the war, before the lure of music proved too strong. He wrote four symphonies, the first of them while he was still at school, before his official First in 1951.

Simpson was always a pugnacious pacifist. During World War II he was a conscientious objector, and throughout the Blitz he served with an ARP mobile surgical unit, no doubt because of his medical training. It was during a bombing raid that he met his first wife [Bessie Fraser], sitting in a graveyard. She'd just lost her home and family. He took her home with him, and they were inseparable ever afterwards [they married in 1946]. At the same time, he was taking lessons in composition from Herbert Howells.

After the war Simpson lectured extensively and founded the Exploratory Concerts Society. He was one of a rising generation of musical commentators that also included Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, whose magazine *Music Survey* he contributed to, although his principal musical sympathies lay in a different direction to theirs. The first major expression of Simpson's distinctive musical approach and opinions was his pioneering book on Carl Nielsen,¹ which virtually introduced the Danish master to English-speaking audiences and remains, even today, the standard guide to his symphonies.

Meanwhile Howells had persuaded Simpson to take the Durham Bachelor of Music degree and, in 1951, a doctorate. He submitted as his thesis his First Symphony, which was later recorded under the auspices of the British Council [in January 1956 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, now EMI 7243 5 75789 2 9]. From the very first bars there's a sense of an original voice making a decisive, indeed a trenchant statement, starting with a piercing blast on the high D trumpets [...].

That year [1951] Simpson joined the BBC music staff. He became one of its best-known and most respected music producers, working closely with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult. He was also a master practitioner of the art of the broadcast talk, with a rare ability to communicate to listeners both the human power and technical processes of great music.

He was convinced that respect was often lazily accorded to music on the strength of received reputations, so he devised the long-running programme series *The Innocent Ear*, where the composer's identity was only revealed *after* the works had been played. He championed unfashionable figures, notably Havergal Brian, of whose genius he was convinced and whose entire 32 symphonies he eventually succeeded in broadcasting.

Simpson often said, however (he certainly said it to me), that ultimately each century produced only a few composers worth bothering about, and he felt he learned far more from his personal favourites – above all, Beethoven and Haydn – than from any contemporary. This conviction infused his writing, which included short monographs on the Beethoven symphonies and on Sibelius and Nielsen, and his classic study *The Essence of Bruckner*.² And his own music – while

¹ Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen, Symphonist* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1952).

² Robert Simpson, *Beethoven Symphonies* (London: BBC, 1970); Robert Simpson, *Bruckner and the Symphony* (London: BBC, 1960); Robert Simpson, *Sibelius and Nielsen. A Centenary Essay* (London: BBC, 1965); Robert Simpson, *The Essence of Bruckner* (London: Gollancz, 1967).

sometimes highly dissonant in its vocabulary – sought to renew the classical tradition of a dynamic architecture built on the gravitational power of tonality, and to recapture the Beethovenian sense of purposeful human momentum.

Steeped in such precepts, perhaps encouraged by contemplation of the motion of the spheres – he was a keen amateur astronomer who rose, unusually for any amateur, to become a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society –, Simpson naturally thought in large spans, which build organically by the growth of tiny basic cells, as a hundred-foot Giant redwood grows from a tiny seedling. Several works are cast in a single movement whose slow and fast tempi are contrasted expressions of a single underlying pulse. The progress of the music can seem glacially slow, like the ineluctable patient wheeling of the night sky as the Earth revolves on its axis – or it can have a tremendous rhythmic vigour, with a torrential momentum seldom heard in music since the time of Beethoven himself. [...]

I didn't have access to a cassette-recorder that would allow me to fade out my examples when I was preparing for this lecture, and it really brought home to me how difficult it is to cut Simpson's music [in this case the Fifth Symphony of 1972] at any but the most major structural divisions. It's the reverse of bitty or episodic – it's seamless, continuous, without breaks, conceived in huge spans. It's violent, or at least very angry, in mood, but the anger isn't destructive, it's channelled into a tremendous driving force, and the paradoxical result is that it begets an amazing sense of exhilaration. For all its grimness and dissonance I have to say that, for me, that is one of the glorious passages in late 20th-century music. And you have to balance that against the fact that less than two years later, the same composer wrote the extremely beautiful, serene adagio of the Fifth Quartet [...]. They stand almost as expressive opposites, but Simpson's musical personality encompassed them both.

I think it's true to say that he was radically uninterested in trends or fashions. He composed principally in the great classical forms: eleven symphonies, fifteen string quartets, as well as concertos and sonatas. He was also a master of Variation: his Ninth Quartet encompasses 32 (palindromic) variations on a theme of Haydn, while Quartets Nos. 4–6 are personal variations upon the background of Beethoven's three 'Rasumovsky' Quartets. He wrote no opera, and indeed hardly any vocal music, but there's a handful of significant works for piano and organ, and as I've already mentioned there's a notable group of virtuoso pieces for brass band. He characterized himself not so much as an optimist as a "ferocious anti-pessimist"³; and, whether contemplative or muscularly energetic, his work is always fundamentally positive in its effect. He used to say a composer ought to spread some sanity around him. He also maintained that children should be taught scepticism at school.

Popular with musicians, endlessly helpful to ordinary music-lovers, Simpson was no respecter of authority and was a man of unaccommodating principle. In the later part of his BBC career he frequently clashed with management: in the 1970s, for instance, he was one of the leaders of a famous producers' revolt over the proposed axing of five of the eleven BBC house orchestras. During the 1980 musicians' strike – which caused the cancellation of that year's Proms – he resigned from the Corporation, publicly alleging, in a letter to the *Times*, a "degeneration of traditional BBC values in the scramble for ratings". He was bare retirement age anyway, but it was typical of the man that he resigned on an issue of deeply-held principle, even though if he'd hung on for just a few more months he'd have qualified for a full BBC pension. Subsequently he published

³ Robert Simpson, "The Ferociously Anti-Pessimist Composer", in *The Listener*, 12 May 1971.

⁴ Robert Simpson, *The Proms and Natural Justice. A Plan for Renewal* (London: Toccata, 1981).

a very lively little book, *The Proms and Natural Justice*,⁴ in which he deplored the system by which over-mighty music controllers could determine the repertoire to be played at the Proms for over-extended periods. Simpson was deeply unhappy about the way his BBC career ended but, as years went on, he felt eminently justified by the continuing slide into mediocrity of what he once called "a very Kremlesque organization".

After his first wife's death [in 1981], he married Angela Musgrave [in 1982], his faithful indispensable assistant in his BBC years, and was cheered by the growing public reception of his work. But as an instinctive socialist, he abominated the ethos of Thatcher's Britain and in 1986 he could stand it no longer: He moved to Ireland, settling in a beautiful location on Tralee Bay in County Kerry – where he wrote his last works, and seeming to get more and more productive with each year that passed.

Only five years later, however, while on a lecture tour in England, Simpson suffered a severe stroke. By very bad luck, it caused irreparable damage to the pain-centre of the brain, which left him in more or less constant, debilitating pain, impervious to therapy or painkillers. He never recovered the use of his affected limbs. Although he remained mentally alert, further composition proved a physical impossibility, though with great effort he managed to dictate the bleak ending of his String Quintet No. 2 in 1994 [...]. He died in November 1997 – and those of us who felt in any way close to him, either in reality or in our vicarious imaginations, miss his presence very much indeed.

Simpson is best known as a writer of symphonies. There's good reason for this. His symphonic works are strikingly original, inventive and powerful in expression – they immediately impress audiences in the large, public environment of the concert hall and they have a highly distinctive personality: I think the examples [...] from Nos. 1 and 5 show that well enough. He wrote 11 symphonies in all: It's an imposing oeuvre that makes a definite, downright statement about the continuing validity and meaning of a great traditional musical form.

But his approach to form wasn't in any sense conservative. One of the great qualities about Simpson's music, it seems to me, is his continual concern with how musical structures and designs should grow out of their basic materials of tones and intervals, and the new and different shapes they can assume. This is, if I may make a cruel and sweeping distinction, what separates the serious composer from the dilettante: Respect for the Material, allowing the work to grow from the inside, and respect also for the hard work necessary to facilitate that growth: "Redlichkeit im Handwerk", as I think it was Schoenberg used to say. Nothing is imposed from the outside; above all there's no programme or political or parodic or ironic interpretation that can be easily evoked to shore up a bit of jerry-built note-spinning. Of course Simpson was passionately interested in the world outside him, held very strong political convictions, and wasn't above guiding a symphony's development according to a programmatic idea – *if* it was an idea that suggested a fruitful line of musical development that was congenial to his concern with growth, continuity, energy.

His first brass-band piece is called *Energy*. Subsequent ones have titles like *Vortex* and *Volcano*, so as you can see he was deeply interested in powerful processes in the natural world. But he was just as interested in people and human character. Another brass piece is a suite, *The Four Temperaments*, which emulates, though entirely in Simpson's own language, the idea of character-portraits of contrasting human types which his hero, Carl Nielsen, had previously essayed in one of his symphonies. And one of Simpson's most fascinating and challenging symphonies. No. 6 of 1977, which is dedicated to a distinguished gynaecologist, emulates in its processes the idea of conception, the growth of the embryo up to the moment of birth – "contractions and all" said the

composer – and then the further growth of the young human being to full vigour. Though I don't think he was thinking of this, the work is a kind of opposite to Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* [*Tod und Verklärung*] – *Birth and Individuation*, so to speak. And the musical result is that you get a work in a single movement in two more or less equal halves, the first part prelude and of gradual growth, the second part a typically determined, constructive Allegro, and between them a tremendous central climax – the "moment of birth" – which sets the Allegro off into motion. He probably didn't think of this analogy either, but in a way it's like the first movement of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony, though on a much larger scale, the first half gradually accumulating substance and building up to that grand central moment out of which the fleet, scherzo-like development takes wing.

So Simpson had no set notions about what constituted symphonic form. (He had strong ideas about what made Symphony a Symphony, but that's another matter.) Of his eleven symphonies, only three are in the "conventional" four movements: and two of those, Nos. 8 and 10, are among his toughest pieces to understand. He liked works in contrasting halves, negative and positive, slow and fast, mysterious and energetic: I'm sure the example of Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, perhaps the first great symphonic masterpiece planned in only two movements, was one he took infinite inspiration from. He liked three-part designs, partly I think from the aspect of symmetry, and partly because if the first and third part of a piece are closely related in mood or material, while the second part is highly contrasting, the contrast is set within a wider context of motion and expression, you get more of the sense of a foreground and background, of differing points of view, differences in consciousness – and these were issues he thought about and cared about.

But the two parts or three parts needn't be three separate movements, though Symphony No. 2 has indeed three movements, and Symphony No. 3 and Symphony No. 11 have two movements each. Simpson was especially prolific in writing pieces in one movement, and that movement subsuming into itself two or three or more parts. The Sixth Symphony, which I've just described to you, is a two-in-one kind of design, the First Symphony is three-in-one, the Fifth Symphony [...] is a kind of symmetrical arch, five main parts, mirrored from a central point. And the Seventh and Ninth Symphonies are also big single movements that prove to have a natural three-part shape to them – though the Ninth, which lasts for 50 minutes without a break, can be read in more than one way, and some may prefer to see it as a work of two vast halves, hinged upon a shorter scherzo. We like to call things with big single movements "monolithic", like a great block of stone, all the same substance or element, as you find in ancient standing-stones or that enigmatic block of material in the film *2001*. But I feel maybe we should be referring to three-in-one designs as "trilithons", like those great structures at Stonehenge, one huge menhir laid horizontally across two vertical ones, like a gateway – perhaps, in view of the astronomical use of such ancient sites, and I hope it's an image Simpson would have approved – a gateway for the sun and stars.

[... T]he Seventh Symphony [...] is a genuine three-in-one design, with fast outer portions and a central slow movement [...]. In contrast to that fiery Allegro from the Fifth Symphony [...], it's very intimate music despite its symphonic scale, a landscape with a solitary, contemplative figure. Note, by the way, the extraordinary economy of it all, the way everything is spun out of a figure of three notes. This is another longish passage, and here it may seem that nothing very much is happening, but then it's music that seems to have all the time in the world, and your ears need to adjust to its *chiaroscuro* of colour, just as your eyes need time to adjust to twilight. [...]

Although Simpson was by any measure a major symphonist, his first love was chamber music – especially the string quartet. He often said if he was compelled to write only one kind of

music he would choose the string quartet. His quartets are more numerous than his symphonies – 15 in all – and they're no less precious a creative legacy. Indeed the Quartets have perhaps even greater claim to contain his most distinctive musical thought: here, more than anywhere else, we find the essential Robert Simpson.

He acknowledged fifteen quartets – the same number as Shostakovich, and only one less than Beethoven. If we add to that total, as we should, his two String Quintets and his String Trio, that's eighteen works of string chamber music. And there's one other work of Simpson's maturity that we can fairly describe as a major feat of string-quartet writing, namely his transcription for String Quartet of J. S. Bach's *Art of Fugue*, with the completion by Donald Tovey.

Fifteen may be a smaller number than the eighty-odd quartets by Haydn, but it's still hard to hold such a lengthy sequence of works in the mind as individual creations. With Beethoven, of course, we tend to divide his output into three stages, "early, middle, and late", but that scheme doesn't really work with Simpson. It's sometimes said that his quartets span his whole composing life, but that isn't entirely true. He may have thought about quartets all the time. But in fact he wrote Quartets Nos. 1 to 3 very rapidly, in his early thirties, in 1951 to 1954, and then there was a gap of 20 years until Quartets Nos. 4 to 6 emerged, again very quickly, in his early fifties, in 1973–4. His early symphonies, written at progressively longer intervals, spanned that gap more effectively. However after Quartet No. 6, a new quartet emerged every two or three years, with a definite quickening of activity, in this as in all compositional fields, after Simpson resigned from the BBC in 1981 and could devote as much time as he needed to producing his own music. The last three quartets, Nos. 13 to 15, again appeared in a short time, in three successive years. We can regard Quartets Nos. 1–3 as his "early period", if we wish; and certainly Nos. 4–6 initiate a much later "middle period" just as Beethoven's 'Rasumovskys' did. But there's no obvious further division, and no sense that the last quartets are in any way valedictory: the "middle period" is still extending, and growing into the wisdom of age, when the creative flow is cut off.

But it may at least help us chart that flow more clearly if we think of Simpson's fifteen quartets in five groups of three: that seems to be their internal rhythm, so to speak. Certainly the first six quartets form two very clearly defined groups. Dr Simpson himself said of Nos. 1 to 3 that though they "were not consciously designed as a group, they nevertheless seem to fall into a natural sequence". Nos. 4 to 6, on the other hand, *were* consciously designed as a triptych, since they were conceived as extended variations upon the three Beethoven 'Rasumovsky Quartets' – so they're "Simpson's 'Rasumovskys'" in more senses than one.

After that there were no further intentional groupings, but it seems to me that in Quartets Nos. 7 to 9, and again in Nos. 10 to 12, you have an initial, highly contrasting *pair* of quartets – Nos. 7 and 8, 10 and 11 – almost conceived as opposites, or as thesis and antithesis. And in each case the result is a larger third quartet – Nos. 9 and 12 – which subsumes aspects of the other two and transcends them, creating something new and unexpected from common elements. Admittedly Quartet No. 9 is unique in Simpson's output, in its vast size and its formal design as *32 Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Haydn*: yet it does seem a necessary outcome of the contrasting aspects of Quartets Nos. 7 and 8 – the cosmic contemplation of No. 7 and the near-classicism of No. 8; just as No. 12 is more obviously the synthesis of the divergent impulses of Nos. 10 and 11 – No. 10 entitled *For Peace* and No. 11 a tough, sinewy, argumentative work.

And finally Quartets Nos. 13 to 15 form a new kind of "classical" group, almost like another 'Rasumovsky' sequence, but on a smaller scale and without any obvious reference to Beethoven originals. The two one-movement quartets, Nos. 13 and 15, flank No. 14 which is in the classical four-movement form; but they themselves are so clearly defined in their subsections

(four in No. 13, three in No. 15) that they suggest a classically of design that's taken up into the onward flow of musical invention.

If I have a grumble about this Wigmore Hall series containing five examples of Simpson's string chamber music – and of course one should hardly be complaining, it's welcome enough to find any sustained attention being cast upon Simpson's output – it's that four of those five works are among his shortest. These four – the Second, Seventh and Fifteenth Quartets and the Second Quintet – are also one-movement pieces, their argument being continuous and concise. It's only in the last piece to be heard in this series, the Sixth Quartet, that you get a work in several movements, and on the large scale in which Simpson habitually wrote. Indeed, as I hope I've made clear by now, the sense of large scale, the ability to project an argument along imposing spans, is one of his characteristic qualities as a composer. But none of the works heard in this series could be described as "minor". Simpson had that power of compression, of ferocious concision even, that we find in the great masters from Bach to Sibelius. There are no redundancies in his music, no padding. He had little interest in the colouristic and textural effects which some other masters have made the stock-in-trade of modern quartet-writing: no slap pizzicatos, no wild glissandi, no mistuning of the instruments, no playing on the wrong side of the bridge and with the wood of the bow – he doesn't even use harmonics, as a rule, except for the natural ones obtainable from the strings without special fingering. I think he felt quite strongly that such things were decoration, or misdirection – they got in the way of the real stuff of the music. In Simpson, what you hear is what you get: music as *substance*, and that substance in motion, or finding rest, to create meaning. Objects in Motion; Objects at Rest (you can tell I'm a *Babylon 5* fan).

Also, of the four Simpson Quartets that are being played in this series each comes from a different one of these three-quartet groupings I spoke of: No. 2 from his early trilogy, No. 6 from his 'Rasumovskys', No. 7 perhaps the work that initiates his later period, and No. 15 [...] his last essay in the genre and very nearly his last work of all. He wrote only one piece after it, and that's the Second String Quintet [...].

So I'll just say a little about these four quartets and the Quintet, taking them in chronological order rather than the order in which they're being heard in the series. In the early part of his career Simpson enjoyed a close association with the violinist Ernest Element, leader of the Element String Quartet, who gave the premieres of his first three string quartets [available on CD as Dutton @@@@]. Quartet No. 3 is dedicated to their violist Dorothy Hemming, while Quartet No. 2 [...], is dedicated to the Element Quartet as a whole. As I've mentioned, these first three Simpson quartets, though not planned as such, came to form a kind of trilogy or triptych. Quartet No. 2, as the central panel of that design, has an expressive argument of strenuous development that carries it from a mood of cheerful relaxation (in which Quartet No. 1 had ended) to one of despondent melancholy (in which Quartet No. 3 would open). It's an excellent example of Simpson writing a piece in a single movement that's articulated by the idea of different speeds obtained through lengthening or shortening notes and phrases over a constant pulse, with the metronome mark at the start holding good until the end. Different characters and kinds of motion are thus created as different aspects of a single underlying tempo – this was to become one of Simpson's compositional trademarks, whether in single movements or entire works.

There's a carefree opening idea, like some kind of Haydnesque bird-imitation. But this immediately comes under attack from a sinister, swift-moving idea that starts with a low thrumming in the cello and then disappears as quickly as it arrived. [...] After this the carefree opening never really re-establishes itself. A third theme in a contrasting *cantabile* vein enters on Violin I, and these three ideas constitute the Quartet's principal material. It's among the most intense of

Simpson's essays in the form, as it's also one of the most concise. Most of it is given over to development of the contrasting ideas, culminating in a fugato whose searching and abrasive qualities look forward to the Quartets of his later years. Every time the cheerful tune tries to take command it creates further tension with the other elements, engendering eventually a wild climax; and the end of the Quartet is unmistakably tragic, with the appearance of a new, lamenting viola melody (which seems, in fact, to presage the opening of Quartet No. 3).

Simpson is often celebrated as a renewer and continuer of the great classical traditions of tonal composition. But he's also a modernist. His love and appreciation of Haydn and Beethoven allowed him to understand their music "from inside" as very few other modern composers have, but he still viewed it from the perspective of a different century, and brought to it a critical knowledge of what had happened since, in music and in the world. On the most basic levels of melody and harmony, Simpson's music could only have been written in the second half of the 20th century. These issues are raised in acute form in his Quartets Nos. 4, 5 and 6, which followed his first three after a gap of nearly 20 years. Each is in the classical four-movement form, and on a very ample scale, approaching or surpassing 40 minutes' duration. Form and scale are intimately connected with the fact that these three Quartets were conceived as counterparts of the three 'Rasumovsky' Quartets of Beethoven. As Dr Simpson himself put it, they "constitute a close study" of these particular Beethoven Quartets. Now, these Quartets of Robert Simpson will certainly enhance our understanding of Beethoven's 'Rasumovskys', if that's what we want to use them for. But their primary purpose is simply to be real, magnificent music – Simpson's music, not Beethoven's. They're satisfying and indeed enthralling musical creations absolutely in their own right, without any need of reference to Beethoven. They aren't any kind of musicological treatise. We could say they carry the principle of Variation to an entirely new level, each Quartet being not a variation on a Beethoven theme, but on a whole pre-existing Beethoven Quartet. Simpson's approach should remind us that all art is, ultimately, *patterned energy*, which awakens answering patterns on our pulses and our minds. What he does in Quartets Nos. 4-6 is to find, in his own 20th-century language, patterns of energy that will affect us in ways comparable to Beethoven's 'Rasumovskys'.

When we come to the Sixth Quartet, the one modelled after Beethoven's Third 'Rasumovsky' [...], we find Beethoven's original being treated with the greatest degree of freedom – though paradoxically the superficial resemblances are obvious. The result is work that seems to mark a significant development in the evolution of his own musical language. As is well known, in the Third 'Rasumovsky' Beethoven begins with an Introduction that concentrates on a tonally ambiguous dissonance – a diminished seventh – from which he opens up new harmonic vistas, leading into the main Allegro. [...] Simpson felt he could no longer use a harmony as obvious as a diminished seventh, but he devised an equally ambiguous chord consisting of a pair of major seconds, width separated by two octaves and a fifth. Strung out over these intervening octaves, the notes of the chord – A, D, G, C, reading downwards – give you a stack of perfect fifths that can move in many different tonal directions. [...] The result is striking, but it's utterly unlike Beethoven it sound, even if you notice a direct quotation from Beethoven in the cello. The music seems to grope towards the light, and it finds it in a rough triple-time dance, complete with allusions not to Beethoven's Third 'Rasumovsky', but rather to the famous dotted rhythms of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

Now that seed of harmony Simpson uses to start off the Sixth Quartet – its intervals reading downwards major second, major fourth with or without octave extension, and major second again, or rearranged into a chain of fifths – that interval collection comes to determine the course

of the music in many ways. For example, there's a lot of melodic doubling at the fifth, a sonority we find frequently in his later music. But the interval collection can also become a melodic motif, and even more importantly it acts as a harmonic ordering of contrapuntal material. All the other three movements begin with some form of melodic imitation, such as a fugato or a canon, and the four imitative voices will come in on pitches reflecting that initial dissonant harmony.

This process has sustained effect in the third movement of the Sixth Quartet. Beethoven's third movement is a formalized Minuet, an unusual archaic survival in the context of the otherwise boldly symphonic idiom of the 'Rasumovskys'. For the form of his movement Simpson goes even further back, to the strict counterpoint of Bach, and he writes, not a Minuet, but an elaborate and very ethereal double canon. It's absolutely strict, and very resourceful in the way the two subjects, as they proceed in parallel, answer and mirror and share each other's salient figures. But there's no hint of archaism in the actual sound of it for once again the four voices are separated by the interval structure of the seed chord, the four instruments entering once again in a descending order on A, G, D and C. [...]

This process of obtaining a new harmonic direction through exploitation of a particular set of intervals is one that profoundly influenced Simpson's later music, and for a composer whose name is associated with traditional tonal language it led him in some very unorthodox directions. He'd now more or less turned away from the ideas of "progressive tonality" that he had found in Nielsen. In his later works it's often a single pitch or group of pitches, an interval or group of intervals, rather than a key as such, that provides the listener's ear with a firm reference point. The ear, however, always remained central to the entire process. As Simpson said of this canon in the Sixth Quartet, the strictness with which it follows a particular order of intervals had to be "a strictness in relation to fundamental and natural harmonic phenomena".

Quartet No. 7 [...] strikingly illustrates this new approach. In this work Simpson, a passionate amateur astronomer, celebrates the birth centenary of the distinguished astronomer Sir James Jeans. Utterly different in form from the three preceding Quartets, No. 7 is in a single movement – indeed, like Quartet No. 2, a movement with a single controlling pulse, where different tempi are suggested by the use of longer or shorter note-values. So in essence, this Quartet is a study in motion: Simpson suggested it could be seen as a metaphor for aspects of the universe as revealed to us by astronomy: something quiet and mysterious yet pulsating with energy. The music suggests vastness and slowness, yet it also hones in on objects moving, within that cosmic context, at unimaginable speeds. Though the Quartet begins and ends with the note D, repeated on the cello, it can hardly be said to be "in" the key of D: rather Simpson uses the physical fact of the instruments' tuning, with their open strings tuned in fifths, to enact a vast circle of fifths like a journey through successive fields of gravitation. Basically it falls into three spans, the outer ones slow, the central one a tremendous *Vivace* expressive of mighty elemental processes. Simpson's by now profound mastery of motion is clear in the way he moves from span to span, from slow to fast and back again.

Many works of subsequent exploration lie between that work and the Fifteenth and last Quartet – though of course Simpson had no thought it would be his last – of 1991. This [...] work [...] again [...] is very concise, in a single movement that nonetheless divides clearly into three different spans: it's not so symmetrical in intention as No. 7. It's a tough, hard-bitten piece, which I personally find one of Simpson's hardest and grimmest, not to say most enigmatic, quartets. The intervals from which it springs are unusually dissonant ones – minor sevenths and semitones – and it's fascinating how much of the work grows from pairs of voices moving in contrary motion, or even mirroring each other, the upper voice falling while the lower voice rises, and vice versa. [...]

The main part of the Quartet is a big central scherzo marked – unusually but accurately – *Severo*, severe. The harmony in this movement is among the toughest, the most granitic, that Simpson had written. And the ending, too, is unusual for him. The final section is marked *Allegretto*, and it's the first area of relaxation in the entire Quartet, beginning with a tender violin melody. Many of Simpson's works bring clarity and sweetness out of struggle, often signalling the moment where this is achieved with a burst of lyric melody. But this time the piece doesn't, as we might then expect, move to a quietly decisive end: instead it evanesces away into silence, without a resolution. I'm sure this reflects the fact that Simpson wished to return to the issues raised by this Fifteenth Quartet in the subsequent quartets he planned to write. And indeed I feel he did return to them in the one piece he wrote after this Quartet, namely the Second Quintet [...].

In its severity of utterance, the Second Quintet seems very much a continuation of Quartet No. 15. It's entirely based on the melody heard at the outset – a duet for the two cellos which outlines the salient intervals of perfect fifth and tritone, both rising and falling. A single eventful movement grows out of this opening. Essentially it divides into seven sections, alternating two contrasting (but not opposing) tempi: the *Moderato* of the beginning and an *Allegro* that sets in after the first few minutes. The four *Moderato* sections are interleaved with three *Allegro* ones: the *Moderatos* contain music of gaunt, intense polyphony, rather like a very severe modern version of a 17th-century fantasia for viols, while the *Allegros* are appropriately fleeter, more scherzo-like, though there is no lightening of mood throughout this deeply serious, formidably focused piece. The effect is of two separate, but mutually enriching processes of development, proceeding in tandem to the explosive yet wintry climax of the third *Allegro*. Suddenly its energy seems to dissipate and the last *Moderato* begins as an intensified variation of the first, subsiding to a mood of bleak calm and a final, glacial sequence of chords which descend, in *diminuendo*, to extinction. [...]

Those were the last bars Robert Simpson wrote, and he wrote them with immense effort, after his stroke. There is a sense of finality there, as I feel there isn't after the previous Quartet. Some might say it's a very bleak finality, and probably at the time he felt so too. But after all, he had also written, in the text for his motet *Media morte in vita sumus* – one of his very few vocal works – "All perceived human acts endure / through the generations. / Among his fellows no man can vanish / utterly, not even in death. / All human lives change others, and so through the generations." Robert Simpson's music is a human act worthy of perception, if ever there was one. In Simpson's Quartets, just as in those of Haydn or Beethoven, you feel yourself in touch with the absolute essence of music, without any distractions or double meanings or questions of style. It simply *is*, immovable and undeniable, with the physical and intellectual force of an absolute truth.

SIMON PHILLIPPO
SYMPHONIC MOMENTUM AND POST-TONAL DRAMAS:
SIMPSON'S FIRST SYMPHONY

Robert Simpson died on 21 November 1997, leaving behind him an impressive body of works. At its core are 11 symphonies and 15 string quartets; also three concertos, two string quintets, sonatas, some choral music, even some much admired pieces for brass band. While a thoroughly individual, music-as-process modernism imbues all he wrote, the prevailing image of Simpson is that of the conservative classicist, clinging to the apparent certainties of antiquated forms and diatonic tonality – a view that begins to some extent with the composer himself. He is widely known for his influential writings on Beethoven, Nielsen, and Bruckner among others; writings that, along the way, fiercely and polemically extol the enduring virtues of symphonic composition, manifestly swimming against the tide of contemporary music of the mid-century. Simpson's symphonism was always ideologically opposed to the post-war trends towards total mechanization, as much as to the experiments with extreme irrationality and chance in the 1960s.

His crusade did not stem, as might be assumed, from a personal need to defend any cosy traditionalism in his own music. True enough, Simpson was most interested in predominantly classical media, quartets, sonatas, and so forth; and certainly the rhetorical stock is that of the Beethovenian symphonic model. But the appropriation of these historical elements is not entirely a reactionary, or, as Simpson himself often put it, a "conservationist" enterprise; there is no bland filling-in of historical forms with modern notes. When modelling of any kind takes place, there is an active dialogue with the sonata tradition, motivated above all by a desire to create for his large-scale designs a sense of structural dynamism, a logic of temporal unfolding that so-called post-tonal music finds very difficult to convey (if indeed it is even concerned to, which is another matter altogether). This he developed into a concept of modern symphonism, at the heart of which lay the metaphor of organicist evolution taken to extremes, the apparent inner conviction and self-motivation of the musical work. His emphatically linear symphonic paradigm differs markedly from the essentially rounded forms of classical models, and also in respect of the single-mindedness of the musical process, with its relative lack of surface contrast. To stand still and enjoy a sound, a texture, or a tune for its own sake would run counter to Simpson's musical aims, and would interrupt the teleological effort (which may, of course, be enjoyable in itself). Such things must form a suitable link in the "evolutionary" chain: we might say that the "development section" has become the whole form.

Simpson's structural goals may appear to be eminently apropos, even retrospectively inevitable, but in post-classical symphonism a work's conclusion is in no sense preordained: within certain generic limitations, anything could happen. So teleology as such is illusory, yet faith in it remains crucial to our mode of listening, implicated as it is by the classical-tonal symphonic tradition that forms the background to these new pieces. Directed motion is not necessarily progress towards a goal, but it may nevertheless remain as an aesthetic characteristic. Particularly in Simpson's later music, it is the movement itself that matters, the "striving" that Hans Keller recognized as the life-blood of Simpson's art:

" [...] 'momentum' [...] is the ideal word for the kind of intra-musical striving which lies, or rather moves, at the centre of his [...] art [...]. The concept not only covers the quantity of motion, but also the product of a body's mass by its velocity: no mass without velocity for Simpson, and no velocity without mass, without substance. Moving substance is the essence of his art, ever-changing without being transient."¹

Simpson's later music, in the creation of the teleological illusion, might be said to essentialize the structural and expressive properties of tension and release inherent in traditional tonality; while the music he composed between 1946 and 1956, comprising his first two symphonies and first three string quartets, is more overtly key-orientated, and the dialogue with the sonata tradition more explicit and more intense. Yet the standard assessment of Simpson's tonal language in his early works, the notion that specific tonal oppositions fuel the momentum and generate a sense of teleology, is seriously problematic. In post-tonal music, in which no common-practice harmonic procedure supports the individual work, tonal structure, as well as form, must be invented anew for each piece. Even then, it is doubtful that in music as harmonically wide-ranging and often ferociously chromatic as Simpson's any background structure will have prolongational value, in the Schenkerian sense. Once obscured, an initial tonic can no longer be said to underpin the diversity of harmonic activity on the music's surface. It may be reinstated, or it may never return. The logic of either option will emerge only in retrospect, and we can only hope to claim that, given sufficient strength of recurring tonal patterns within a piece, a tonal-structural resolution is the most likely out of a number of possible outcomes. Contrasting key areas will still be valuable as a means of architectural organization, but the difficulty lies in regarding these notional tonal antagonisms as dialectically active, as harbingers of large-scale closure, and thus as the source of the all-important momentum.

Simpson's single-movement First Symphony (1951) makes use of A and E \flat as counter-tonalities, and is generally considered a prime example of his use of opposing keys. Yet there is not the same "vivid expression of energy" in this tritonal duality as Simpson finds in Nielsen's Third Symphony, due simply to the fact that Simpson's music, with all its chromatic and whole-tone possibilities, may connect these two pitches by step with no difficulty whatever. The tonics A and E \flat are alternatives, not active opponents. If there is any real dynamism to be heard in Simpson's tonal relationships, as the motivation for a teleological structure, its agents are to be found in middleground intervallic tensions. The antagonism lies less in the tritone separating A and E \flat than in the semitonal dissonances between constituent pitches of the triads on these roots. As the following voice-leading analysis will reveal, this symphony may be summarized more precisely, not as a dramatic conflict of A and E \flat , but of A and its flattened supertonic, B \flat .

This opposition comes into focus gradually in the First Symphony, though the use of the semitone as a disruptive force is immediately apparent: the opening B \flat flourish is met with a grim B \sharp in bar 2. Not until bar 25 is A declared the tonic, from which point a large-scale progression towards E \flat takes place, cadencing on this new "tonic" at bar 171. This remains the pitch centre for the start of the "slow" section which follows, but is left for C by bar 260, a minor-third shift which is then repeated, returning to A in time for the change of metre at bar 286. Instead of regarding this whole series of deep-structural pitches as an elaboration of A, it is preferable to refer to such a background process as an "excursion", implying the departure from and return to a single pitch

¹ Hans Keller, "The Man *and* the Music", in TONIC 1/2, p. 10; reprinted in Hans Keller, *Essays on Music*, ed. Christopher Wintle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 117.

centre, the route of which is mapped out through successive middleground reductions. Ex. 1 gives an outline of the First Symphony's tonal excursion thus far.

Ex. 1



In conferring any real tonicity upon a particular pitch, either as a goal tonic or as a suitably stalwart counter-tonic, the cadential definition provided by the dominant proves to be very helpful in this music. In fact, as an active tonicity marker, a properly articulated dominant can become more important than the tonic itself, assuming that the context does not exclude such a harmonic possibility. (More commonly in 20th-century music, tonicity comes of sheer insistence, rather than this kind of cadencing.) The two parallel cadences on A and E \flat in the first "movement" of the symphony are each prepared by their respective dominants. But in such an "excursive" tonal structure as this, neither a perfect cadence alone nor any number of them will be sufficient to end the work in a state of tonal security. Such final closure must be unequivocal in all respects, if the possibility of continued vagrancy (beyond the end, as it were) is to be disallowed. The symphony moves towards a definitive use of both the perfect cadence, with its inherent leading-note resolution, and the $\flat\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ progression. Their suitability at the critical moment depends on effective contextual preparation, to ensure that these devices do not sound disingenuous. The main tonal business of the "finale", then, is to establish the means of its own ending.

Ex. 2 consists of two successive middleground reductions of this finale, beginning at bar 439. This shows only the bass line, and so is far from being a thorough explication of the music's processes; however, the sketch contains all the major progressions and is quite sufficient as a basis for tonal investigation here. (Surprisingly perhaps, the bass seems to retain its syntactical privilege in all of Simpson's early tonal works, despite such contrapuntal and chromatic complexity, as the principal means of harmonic and linear definition.) Occasionally this connective line may be conceived as migrating into other voices, as in the fugue from bar 903; the graph at this point plots the successive entries, the means here of sequential organization, rather than the bass.

The finale may be divided conceptually into two parts. In Ex. 2, the upper graph shows groupings into numbered sections, 1 to 3 comprising the first part, 4 to 7 the second. Each section in the first part corresponds to its equivalent number in part two: sections 1 and 4 involve a movement away from the tonic to the dominant, and a perverted stepwise return in both cases; 2 and 5 broadly consist of a movement from A to B \flat ; and 3 and 6 effect a return from B \flat to A. The sections of part two are more concise than those of part one, in keeping with the usual practice of structural contraction in the latter stages of a large-scale work. But the second part also functions as a restoration of order to certain features of part one: the A-B \flat -A excursion of sections 2 and 3 involves a complex series of linear connections, often far from clearly audible. Furthermore, the arrival of B \flat at bar 710 is a misfiring attempt to recapitulate the opening of the symphony. In part two, the excursion is effected through more familiar sequential methods, culminating in the fugue from bar 903, and B \flat 's appearance at bar 865 at last forms a successful reprise of the opening material.

The image displays a musical score for three systems of staves. The notation is complex, featuring various note values, rests, and performance markings. The first system includes measures 440-710, with a first ending bracketed from 510 to 544. The second system includes measures 744-1062, with a first ending bracketed from 822 to 865. The third system includes measures 1034-1062. Performance instructions such as *mgd*, *bgd*, *p*, and *(whok-hans 8-173)* are present. The score is divided into three sections labeled 1, 2, and 3. Measure numbers are placed above the staves at regular intervals.

The significance in the finale of $B\flat$ -A is suggested at the outset, by the violas' melodic incipit at bar 286 (see Ex. 3).

Ex. 3



The flattened leading note, $G\flat$, is also present here; Simpson is partial to such Phrygian-mode flavouring, though in this work the voice-leading neutrality of $G\flat$ is later called to account. The sharpened leading note, essential for a perfect cadence, is not provided at the return to A at bar 744 (a moment of understated significance in any case). Neither is a $G\sharp$ in the "perverted step-wise return" to A of section 4. The perversion is diatonically rectified only at the very end of the symphony, as the dominant's $G\sharp$ is supplied in a marked mutation of the fugue subject, at bar 1034, and a major-key diatonic $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{8}$ effects the work's closing progression (above a tonic pedal – a genuine prolongation). The structural obfuscation of this standard device, along with the surface proliferation of Phrygian sevenths, creates a tonal "need", such that the provision of the leading note becomes a major *telos* of the finale. $B\flat$ itself has been a central player throughout the work, and this movement in particular. The final side-step onto this pitch, following the double-speed return of the first movement's memorable cadence figure (bar 1045), is heard against a pounding tonic on the timpani. The gravitational pull of the $\flat\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ progression is by now deeply established as the symphony's primary cadence. Once this has been provided, and the seventh sharpened again in bar 1067, the D-F dyad from the symphony's very first bar is finally integrated within A major, the $F\flat$, turned into $F\sharp$ to form a $I\frac{9}{4}-\frac{5}{3}$, signifying the thorough defusing of the work's main structural dissonance.

But one further process is completed in these closing bars, providing a third source of resolution and finality. The fugue has passed through a virtually complete cycle of fifths, arranged in the second reduction of Example 2 to reveal a conceptual whole-tone progression from A at bar 919. Missing from this progression is $E\flat$, the "key" which began the "slow movement", only heard later at bar 1062, by which time A is so securely in place that $E\flat$ is not the danger to it that it might have been, had it been included within the harmonic cycle of the fugue. The completion of this whole-tone linear progression, the return to A via a descending fourth (D provided by an inner voice), may be heard in the closing five bars of the symphony.

These tonal processes are given further driving force in the First Symphony by the work's virtuosic demonstration of "composed flexible pace".² The initial crotchet pulse is maintained throughout, though it undergoes two transformations: becoming a subdivision of the minim in the *alla breve* slow movement, and of the dotted minim in the one-in-a-bar finale. Such tempo relationships are nothing new within single movements, and have even been suggested as a means of unifying the numerous movements of entire symphonic works.³ In the First Symphony, however, Simpson not only maintains a common pulse for his material, with all its apparent variety of tempo, but uses this to generate a kind of sophisticated metric counterpoint at both ends of the finale.

² Robert Simpson, ed., "Introduction", in *The Symphony*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 13.

³ See David Epstein's "temporal umbrella" theory in *Beyond Orpheus: Studies in Musical Structure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1979), p. 78.

Although the swift 3/4 begins at bar 286 with the return of A, as early as bar 328 the slow movement material returns at its original tempo, and the triple-time of the finale literally recedes to *niente*. This coincides with the return of E \flat as tonic, combining to suggest that, in fact, the finale began prematurely, and has been no more than an interpolation, a larger version of the intrusion of finale material heard between bars 246 and 258. The finale proper begins at bar 439.

The lack of a clear start to the finale not only helps the symphony to resist easy division into movements (a subtlety Christopher Ballantine overlooks in his somewhat bland description of the work as a "compound sonata form"),⁴ it also establishes a regime of metric overlapping. At bar 865, the material from the very start of the symphony returns at its original speed, but this time the finale continues against it, withdrawing slowly only once the mammoth fugue has got under way, from bar 903. Solid V-I harmonic functionality is adumbrated throughout this section in the sequence of fifth-related fugal entries, a contrast to the quicksilver stepwise motion of the rest of the finale that suits the monolithic expansiveness of this fugue. The return of the characteristic ♩. ♪. ♪. rhythm, supplied by the timpani, coincides precisely with the symphony's tonality-defining perfect cadence and adds to its dynamism. The reprise of the weightier first-movement material has temporarily sapped the energy of this finale, and the reversion to the livelier rhythmic state is felt to be desirable – the symphonic "carrot", as it were.

The resolution of the semitone, and of B \flat to A in particular, is also set up by the slow movement. This section, with its archaic polyphonic style, makes use of a cadential cliché involving a 4-3 appoggiatura, and as this is first heard on the supertonic of B \flat at bars 190 and 191, the pitches in question are b' and a' (see Ex. 4). Such an unproblematic, easily assimilated use of this figure not only gives a clear hint of the later structural use of this same resolution, but it neatly reverses the tendency of the first movement to subvert such expectations.

Ex. 4

The image shows a musical score for three staves: Violin I (Vn.), Violin II (Vn.), and Viola (Va.). The score is marked 'mf dim.' and includes a measure number '188' at the top left. The music illustrates a 4-3 appoggiatura resolution, where a note on the supertonic (B \flat) resolves to the tonic (A). The notation shows the notes and their rhythmic values across the three staves, with a fermata over the final note.

In post-tonal symphonic music, to talk of tonal oppositions as the engines of a teleological structure is to assume too easily the intrinsic potency of such relations. Deep-structural voice leading, as this brief analysis of Simpson's First Symphony has shown, provides a stronger tonal reading of this music than those which assume the continued sufficiency of traditional, triad-orientated tonal procedures in 20th-century music. Yet pitch structure will still not manage it alone. Style, metre, and rhythm are also essential factors in generating a telos of resolution for the primary dissonance, the timely fulfilment of which provides the work with a convincing, "inevitable" conclusion.

⁴ Christopher Ballantine, *Twentieth-Century Symphony* (London: Dobson, 1983), p. 119.

MARTIN ANDERSON

MATTHEW TAYLOR CONDUCTS ROBERT SIMPSON'S SYMPHONIC SWANSONG

So we're finally there—the last issue of Robert Simpson's might symphonic canon on Hyperion (though not quite the last Simpson CD from Hyperion, I'm happy to say), with the Eleventh Symphony, written in 1990, and the *Variations on a Theme by Nielsen* of 1983. The Eleventh was Simpson's last symphony: Shortly after finishing it, he was afflicted by a vicious stroke which left him in permanent pain, borne with stoic courage and the grim humor characteristic of him in happier times.

The cycle to date has been conducted by that champion of British music, Vernon Handley, and indeed, he was scheduled to share the honors here with the composer-conductor Matthew Taylor (b. 1964), for whom the Eleventh Symphony was written; in the event, Handley had to cancel through illness, and Taylor found himself with four days' notice to prepare the Nielsen Variations before the recording sessions last December. As a conductor, Taylor has been particularly active in what might loosely be termed the Sibelian tradition, with premieres of people like Vagn Holmboe and David Matthews under his belt; and his own music – which includes three symphonies, four quartets, and concertos for piano, clarinet, horn, and double-bass – places him clearly in the same "Nordic" stream that embraces Simpson.

I began our conversation by asking Matthew Taylor how he first came into contact with Simpson's music. "This goes back to a radio broadcast I heard as a kid in 1977. It was that fantastic old Boult recording of Symphony No. 1 – I'd have been twelve or thirteen. I had just discovered Nielsen at that point, and so I knew the name of Robert Simpson as a champion of Nielsen (bearing in mind that Nielsen was much less of a household name than he is now). I was particularly interested in hearing it, and I was immediately struck by that craggy opening, with those two trumpets in thirds. And even though I didn't make any adventures into the Simpson archives then, the name stuck with me. Of course, there was so little around then.

"The next time was in February 1980, when the Gabrieli Quartet did the String Quartets 4, 5, and 6, the 'Rasumovskys,' supported by a very illuminating talk by Calum MacDonald" – Simpson's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Quartets offer a commentary on Beethoven's op. 59 not in words but in highly original music. "I would have been about fifteen then. It was the day before my French O-level mock exam, and I should have been revising my set texts, etc., and I didn't do any of that at all: I was absolutely swept off my feet. At that stage I was already composing, and the Beethoven energy, the Beethoven architecture, was something so lacking in music then – and here was a composer who was making this relevant to modern consciousness, and doing something with it. Even though my understanding of the Rasumovskys was very sketchy, probably even less so, I could see what a genuine and exciting artistic route this was, and from then on, I was hooked."

How about Taylor's first personal contact with Simpson? "I wrote to him, as I think many young composers did, to ask if he would give lessons. I had just gone up to Cambridge to read music. He wrote back a few days later to say that he didn't give lessons – he was too hesitant to impart his own ideas – but come and meet for lunch. And so I did. It must have been about January '84 when I went to see him and Angela; they were still living in Aylesbury then" – in Buck-

inghamshire, north-west of London (the Simpsons moved to Ireland a few years later, since Simpson, a hard-core pacifist, could then live in a country without a nuclear arsenal; as a committed socialist, he took an almost gleeful pleasure in leaving Thatcher's Britain). "Even though it wasn't official tuition, the extraordinary wisdom that was imparted – not only on music but on life in a very general sense – was something that you felt so enriched by, intellectually and spiritually. I remember when Bob put me back on the train at Aylesbury, I thought: 'My God, here is a great, great man.' Soon after, we became very good friends. He really was a sort of musical father figure to me. He's a guy I still think of probably every day. So much of his writing about music had an illuminating quality, as if he was getting under the skin of it – even the composers who weren't so close to his heart he could be incredibly penetrating about. His comments on the Schoenberg Piano Concerto, for example, and the way that he sensed there was a hidden tonal center there – he could sense what Schoenberg was trying to do but was anesthetizing his tonal senses. Another one was his comments on Bartók, who is a composer I like more than he did. He used to say that Bartók's allegros rather struck him as an overturned car, with the wheels revolving furiously without any real action or real energy. Even if one disagrees with that, it's such an incredibly penetrating thought." Another Simpson metaphor described Stravinsky as having the kind of energy that props a crocodile's jaws open on the river bank. "Exactly!"

When, then, did Taylor's involvement with Simpson's music become a hands-on affair? "I conducted his Second Symphony while still up at Cambridge. It was a scratch band. I chose No. 2 because (a) it's small, and (b) it's the only one that's playable by the very best amateurs. It was a bit of a ragbag of a performance." Did he come to hear it? "He didn't, no; I think he had another commitment that day. The turning point was when I did the Seventh in London with the Thames Sinfonia, which is an orchestra made up mainly of post-grad music-college students and supplemented by some professionals as well. He was in Ireland at that time, but as luck would have it, he was in London doing a few things, and he came to hear us. He was so moved by the performance that he said afterwards: 'Look, the next symphony I'd like to do must be for you' – which, of course, is an enormous privilege. Hence the genesis of the Eleventh."

Before we get on to the music and the recording, we ought to say something of Taylor's own music. Just as Simpson at a similar stage in his evolution was clearly in a post-Nielsen generation, Taylor is audibly in a post-Simpson one – fair comment? "Yes." And he doesn't mind that kind of obligation? "No." But one hears (for example) Franck's students struggling, and often failing, to shake off the influence of their teacher – doesn't Taylor worry about that? "I do. The problem is, if you have a mentor with a monumental musical personality like Bob, the thing that I found very difficult, certainly in my twenties, was trying to make it sound not too much like Simpson! Not that one wanted to shake that influence off because it in any sense was not close to one's soul, but because it was so all-enveloping. So it was quite difficult, not so much to distance oneself from it but to take the elements from it that were closest to one's heart and then develop in different directions. Another composer I'm very passionate about is Tippett. One of the things I learned was the wonderful freedom and danger in Tippett's music, the way that he would take on any influence from any seemingly diverse and often bewilderingly strange culture or cultures, and somehow it would go through his own personality and come out sounding like him – not always to the greatest effect, when you think of the 'sixties and 'seventies pieces, when he's got his cool American hat on; that hasn't inspired some of his bravest efforts. That was also an important influence in just opening up. What one learned from Bob was this tremendous control of material, this energy, this way that tonality was in no way a soft option: It could still hurt, it could still drive, but it was capable of great, great beauty as well."

By the same token, does the fact that Taylor the composer had to emerge from the shadow of Simpson allow Taylor the conductor to get closer to it; if Taylor sees himself downstream from Simpson, does he find a deeper sympathy with it than if he were writing different music himself? “Yes, that could well be. The wonderful thing about Bob’s music, certainly if you take the symphonies, is that they do radically re-assess what symphonic form is about, and that’s what all the good guys have done since Haydn. Nearly every one of his eleven symphonies (No. 2 doesn’t, really) takes a radically new departure on what a symphony can do, yet being inherently symphonic at the same time. I think that’s what excites me most about them. He’s not the only man to do it, of course. David Matthews is another composer whose symphonies do that – his No. 2 is a very fresh look at symphonic form, as is his No. 4.” All of Simpson’s symphonies contain great music; the one which, to my mind, has the strongest claim to being a great piece (and I use the word “great” very sparingly) is No. 5. “It certainly has the most physical impact; I’m not sure if it’s the one which will get closest to my heart.”

Let’s get onto the one which might be, then – Taylor’s “own” Simpson symphony. Coming after the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Symphonies – mammoth, monumental slabs of sound – No. 11 offers a completely different twist on the idea of what a symphony is; in his booklet notes Taylor draws a pertinent analogy with the purity of Sibelius’ Sixth Symphony. “Well, certainly in the first movement, in its transparency. I remember when Bob was writing it, he said he wanted to write something with a lot of air in it, and that’s absolutely what that opening is about: Less notes doing more. That’s not to say that Eight, Nine or Ten are prolix in any way, but every time Bob wrote a new symphony, he was wanting to explore new directions. With this one, it’s going back to the chamber orchestra. It’s the one that’s closest to a sort of polyphonic fantasia: Nearly everything seems to generate from that single line on first violins that we hear at the start (it’s later accompanied by cellos). It’s almost like a single monody that is presented and allowed to develop freely. As far as I can see, all the material is based on that opening melodic line, and elements of it.” Simpson didn’t write much about Purcell and the other British composers of viol music, but his conversation would occasionally reveal that he knew far more about them than his articles suggested. “Exactly, yes. You mentioned No. 5; I think in terms of its mood, it’s never likely to have that sort of smash-hit appeal; it doesn’t have that in-your-face titanic energy. Perhaps that’s what I was trying to get across with the parallel with Sibelius Six, in that it may take longer to get to the heart of the audience – but I’m sure it will.”

The finale (it’s a two-movement work) is as different from the first movement as the Symphony is from its predecessors. “I don’t know if there is really a precedent: It’s all at one single tempo.” Well, the Ninth Symphony, despite its huge, three-movements-in-one design, is also based on a single pulse. “But unlike many of his finales, where there’s an acceleration – not a real acceleration but a contraction of the bars – this one keeps all the way through, in *alla breve*. I think this starts with an influence one again wouldn’t associate with him, and that’s with Mendelssohn – in texture, rather than in technique or tonality or language: The lightness, the busyness, the quicksilver textures, quite frequent changes of texture (much more so than before), and much more interest in color for its own sake. He has often been criticized – I think unjustly – for not being a colorist. He’s no Messiaen or Debussy, but the color is there. Here it seems that there’s a lightness, a transparency, at the beginning of this movement, whilst not reinforcing the orchestra with any unusual instruments at all.” Taylor has touched on a point that I’ve made before, not least in *Fanfare* reviews: Because attention is always focused on the musculature of a Simpson symphony, it tends to overshadow the fact that he was an extraordinarily skilful orchestrator. There’s an enormous amount of color and timbral contrast in his symphonies, but because the

sheer vigor of the music tends to force you to concentrate on what is going on, and because, too, the orchestration is there to serve the musical idea, Simpson hasn't yet had the credit he deserves as a master of orchestral texture. "No, he hasn't. That's part of the problem. Years ago he was so wrongly labeled by some as a strange conservative symphonist, and the more you look at his pieces, you see they are highly radical works. I think it was Robin Holloway who so acutely said it was in his sheer tenacity in symphonic thinking and the way it can evolve that he was one of our radicals. And he was absolutely right."

Before we get on to the *Nielsen Variations*, let's think about what might have been. Before he was felled by that vicious stroke, Simpson was talking about his Twelfth Symphony, which was to have been choral. Does the evidence of the Eleventh Symphony allow Taylor to conjecture what No. 12 might have been like, or does Simpson's constant radicality rule out intelligent guesswork? "It's a tricky thing. It was going to be a collection of texts from various different writers, all with a common theme that unless humanity changes its course to choose peace instead of war, we're all for the chop. It was going to be for chorus and baritone solo and orchestra. About the last time I saw Bob before his stroke he was poring over possible texts. He was thinking of some Gandhi, which would have been very interesting. While there might not have been notes in his mind, certainly the architecture was there—it was not a whiff of an idea; it was a serious project that was brewing quite hard." This from a composer who said that if words were good enough to set, they didn't need music! "Yes! When we listen to that disc of his choral music [Hyperion CDA67016], we realize what a fine choral composer he was. Alright, that's a *cappella* stuff, but if one thought: 'Would the choral writing be sufficient?', well, yes—though it wouldn't have been easy!"

The Nielsen theme Simpson took for his variations is, to put it mildly, weird—it's an essay in good-humored angularity. "Isn't it extraordinary! In quadro-tonality, if such an absurd title exists. It's from the incidental music he wrote for *Ebbe Skammelsen*, a play that was put on in 1925. He actually broke off writing the Sixth Symphony to write these little pieces down. It's scored for winds, three horns, and tuba. It's the second number that Bob chooses for his theme. Of course, it's so rife with possibilities for variation. Not only do you have the four keys so well highlighted; the theme itself is so quirky and so wonderful." Simpson's Nielsen Variations have something in common with Franz Schmidt's *Variations on a Hussar Song*: You can make out the outlines of a four-movement symphony within the structure. "Yes, it's the way the variations tend to go in groups of two or three. You've got that first-movement set, and then a scherzo-like set beginning with No. 4, that very quiet, rustling-string one, with three variations forming a crescendo, then that big, ballsy, brassy one, and then a very light, fast one, and then that extraordinary last one, that slow, ruminative one, with chorales being exchanged between trombones and celli—that's wonderful music, so beautiful, so profound.

"I should say something about CLS [the City of London Sinfonia]. Getting that all in in four sessions was not easy. These rehearse-record days—I guess that's how life is these days, so we just have to grin and bear it. But I was astonished when we got to the early sessions that absolutely all the notes were there and tight already; they were all bowed up. Some of Bob's string-writing is very taxing indeed, and it really is wonderful playing. Even though it's not a big string section in the Nielsen Variations, it still sounds completely full."

The fact that we now have all eleven Simpson Symphonies—indeed, virtually of his music—on CD is a tribute to the late Ted Perry, the founder of Hyperion Records, who stuck with the project despite poor financial returns: He believed in it, and he saw it through—almost to the end. This CD has proved to be not only a memorial for Robert Simpson but also for Perry, too. Matthew Taylor nods: "Yes, it is—and how nice that it stands at that."

REVIEWS

ROBERT SIMPSON Symphony No. 11. *Variations on a Theme of Nielsen*
City of London Sinfonia; Matthew Taylor, conductor • HYPERION CDA67500 (54:55)

David Hurwitz in *Classics Today.com*, 30 August 2004

It's been a long time coming, but Hyperion concludes its series of Simpson symphonies triumphantly with this latest release. These recordings have been a true labor of love, for Simpson's music never courts popularity, nor is it all equally good. He can be pedantic and austere to the point of dryness, but that's never an issue here. In Symphony No. 11, Simpson justifies his use of a classical-sized orchestra by quite literally making every note count. In two movements, slow-fast, you can hear from the outset how he colors the string lines with wind timbres, always making sure that each entrance contributes to the evolving musical argument.

Though not conventionally tuneful, the music has recognizable themes, and it builds to a violent central climax very similar to what happens in the first movements of Shostakovich's Fifth, Eighth, and Tenth Symphonies – though it takes only 13 minutes. The finale is light and fast and a couple minutes longer than the opening. Thematic material darts from section to section, generating a powerful amount of momentum before vanishing in a flicker. Again, the music is more about motion in time than it is about thematic development, but Simpson's control of pace and texture ensures that the ear is constantly engaged.

Variations on a Theme by Carl Nielsen is a delight, plain and simple. Sure, the harmonic scheme gets increasingly gnarly as the work strays farther and farther from the theme, but Simpson both knows his Nielsen and understands exactly where he wants to go. Nine short and characterful variations precede a bold, 11-minute finale. The tune comes from Nielsen's incidental music to the play *Ebbe Skamulsen*, written around the same time as the Sixth Symphony (there's at least one recording, on Kontrapunkt). It's a wonderful choice: humorous and so instantly identifiable that whenever one of its elements reappears, you'll have no problem catching it. The scoring is a bit richer than that of the symphony, with especially prominent percussion.

I have nothing but praise for these excellent, committed performances, in which every section of the City of London Sinfonia acquits itself with honor, and Matthew Taylor leads very sympathetic and confident interpretations. Having just encountered the music for the first time, I can't honestly say whether it's the music itself or the way Taylor & Co. play it that accounts for the unusually purposeful progress of both works, but Simpson seldom has sounded less dutiful. First class sonics put the icing on the cake, making the strongest possible case for Simpson as a composer whose works deserve to endure.

Hubert Culot in *MusicWeb International* – Recording of the Month September 2004

Alongside many other enterprising ventures, Hyperion have put us in their debt with their impressive Simpson series. As far as symphonies are concerned the present release completes the cycle. Moreover, the *Variations on a theme by Nielsen*, one of Simpson's most enjoyable and approachable works, have – at long last – found their way onto disc. (My fingers are still hurting

for having been kept crossed for so many years!). I have long loved this marvellous work, and I cannot understand why it is not heard more often and why it has remained unrecorded for so many years. Now, here it is in a superb performance, carefully prepared, magnificently played and entirely convincing. Simpson's long-lasting affection for and understanding of Nielsen's music are well known, and his book (*Carl Nielsen, Symphonist*) remains indispensable reading for anyone interested in the Danish composer's work. Nielsen's shadow has loomed large over Simpson's symphonic output, more in spirit than in letter. However the *Variations* are the only work of his that pays a direct though entirely personal tribute to Nielsen. The theme chosen by Simpson comes from some incidental music written in 1925 for Bergstedt's play *Ebbe Skammelsen*, thus more or less contemporary with the enigmatic Sixth Symphony. Simpson alone could have lighted on that theme, for who else may have known that score? The theme is scored for wind instruments; and its jollity conceals some unexpected things, for each instrument or group of instruments goes on its own way, each in its own tonality, something that surely appealed to Simpson. The *Variations*, though they are played without a break, fall into two large sections of fairly equal length, viz. theme and nine variations and a long Finale. Moreover, the first part itself falls into four different sections: theme and variations I-III forming the introduction, variations IV-VI forming a Scherzo-like build-up to the climactic seventh variation, variation VIII being a quicksilver, humorous Scherzo leading into the ninth variation (the longest one) functioning as the slow movement. The whole set is then capped by the imposing Finale. This superb work is as intricately worked-out as anything else in Simpson's symphonic output, but the colourful scoring as well as the energy and humour displayed throughout make it one of Simpson's most endearing achievements.

The *Symphony No.11* was written for Matthew Taylor after Simpson had heard him conduct a performance of his Seventh Symphony with a (mostly) student orchestra. So, no wonder that Taylor took over from Vernon Handley here, the more so that Taylor actually conducted the work's first performance. When compared to the monumental Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, the Eleventh Symphony is shorter and more economically scored, and – on the whole – rather more austere and restrained than any of its predecessors, although it too has its grand moments. It is in two movements of equal length, i.e. a long predominantly slow movement and an equally long and weighty Finale. The lighter, chamber-like textures emphasise the strictly contrapuntal writing of much of the music. This is particularly striking in the somewhat understated first movement. The Finale opens like a light-footed Scherzo *à la Mendelssohn*, but soon gathers considerable momentum, briefly relieved by more static episodes, finally reaching a towering climax punctuated by defiant, menacing timpani strokes, before dissolving into the ambiguous coda, "until the whole thing ends with a flick of the wrist, as if dismissed" (thus Robert Simpson as quoted in Taylor's notes). Simpson's Eleventh Symphony, however, should not be regarded as a musical testament of some sort, but rather as a pointer towards new directions he might have followed. This is how I understand its somewhat inconclusive ending.

This release, appropriately dedicated to the late Ted Perry, is up to Hyperion's best. Performances and production are simply magnificent, so that this splendid disc is warmly and unreservedly recommended. My record of the month, for sure. Maybe Hyperion will now manage to record Simpson's concertos?

With this record, Hyperion's profound commitment to the symphonies of Robert Simpson is brought to an end, and I have to say, with some regret, that I wish the performance of the symphony were wholly worthy of the work itself. The Eleventh Symphony (1990) is a magnificent composition, with Simpson, at the age of 69, striding out along new paths after the breathtaking achievements of his Eighth, Ninth and Tenth symphonies.

The Eleventh is in two large movements, each lasting about a quarter-of-an hour. The essential, not to say constant, pulse remains the same in each movement: the first is slow and unhurried and the second is fast throughout. The symphony is scored for a 'classical' sized orchestra, with two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. It is dedicated to Matthew Taylor, the conductor on this record, who directed the work's premiere in 1993 at the Malvern Festival.

There is much that is new and exciting in this Symphony - and not just in Simpson's language. Whereas in earlier of his works, the establishment or emergence of a key, or tonal region, informs much of the argument in its overall construction, in the Eleventh the key - B flat - as it were wins the day not through a fierce battle but almost through sleight of hand, or even as a card trick or two, juxtaposed against a kind of A: the final 'throwaway' gesture in as amazingly unexpected as it is original and totally convincing - the attentive listener experiences the gesture with a knowing half-smile, as when a great magician or card player reveals what we half suspected was there all along (or was it?). Our expectations are not at all easily met, but we are reassured when this master composer seems to say to us 'Look, that's what it was all about!' This extraordinary journey, not to say adventure, is undertaken with commanding newness of expression, by way of orchestral textures that, amazingly, we have never heard before - and all from an orchestra the strength of which (apart from four horns, not two) would have been familiar to Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. This is amazing music.

Here is this fabulous symphony, conducted by the man for whom it was written and who have the premiere with this same orchestra - so what is the problem?; what could be wrong with this performance? Am I just being picky? I don't think so, to take the second question first, What is wrong can be briefly stated - in this performance the slow first movement is too fast and the fast second movement is too slow. The symphony begins virtually from nothing: the merest idea, from which evolves this large stretch of music. It is almost as though it has been there all along, and we are now making our own acquaintance with it, at our own pace. Taylor is a gifted musician, but he is unable to sustain this movement at the pulse in which the composer's expression can be properly made. The pulse should remain constant, but it varies - sometimes slightly, as in the longish stretch for divided cellos, virtually alone (divided into four parts); this is not so much a question of changes of gear, but of having the interpretative courage to set the pulse from the start and keep it at that, as if we were resting, breathing steadily (perhaps sitting in the garden, or on the beach), and letting our creative imaginations run, self-analytically, observing our own freedom of association of ideas. It is a question of degree, of a greater element of profundity, which is within the music but which here remains not wholly realized, for in this performance the overall timing of the movement is fully three minutes faster than the composer specifies. One is reminded of a note in the score of Simpson's Second Symphony: 'If this movement takes less than eight minutes, it is too fast!'

A similar point, in reverse, can be made with regard to the second movement. This is quicksilver music, light and airy, fleet of foot and surely challenging (but I suspect immensely reward-

ing) for the orchestral players, exhilarating, surprising and uplifting by turns. Taylor and his orchestra are good here, as indeed they are also for most of the first movement, but for the fullest impact to be made, the tempo in this finale should be quicker throughout: the overall timing is two minutes slower than it should be. Nor am I convinced by the realization of the closing pages, where the strictest control over pulse would have made Simpson's points more directly and effectively.

Variations on a theme by Nielsen constitutes a relatively easier work, structurally, with which to come to terms (not that the Symphony is at all forbidding), and here the sectionalist construction poses fewer problems for conductor and orchestra. Simpson offers more than what might be thought of as a straightforward set of variations, particularly the final Variation Ten, the duration of which is almost half that of the entire work. This would seem to offer the best introduction to Simpson's orchestral style, and it receives an altogether more convincing overall performance. Throughout this disc, the orchestral playing is first rate.

This CD couples two very important works by a major twentieth-century symphonist, I am well aware that the latter phrase is bandied about rather too frequently these days, largely by those who could not define a symphony if you asked them, but it is true. If your local orchestra can play Haydn and Mozart symphonies they can play this one, but as the publishers have not seen fit to issue a score, and are unlikely to do so, your best bet is to get this record, dedicated to the memory of Hyperion's founder and lifelong friend of Simpson, Ted Perry. It is very finely recorded, but it is with a heavy heart that I have to say I wish the performance of the symphony were better, for we are unlikely to get another on disc.

Martin Anderson in *Fanfare*, November/December 2004

Robert Simpson's Eleventh Symphony caps one of the mightiest symphonic canons not just of the twentieth century but of any composer – and just as with Bruckner's and Vaughan Williams' last symphonies, you can sense the music reaching out into wholly new territories. One can only wonder what music he would have produced had he been allowed to reach old age – were he alive today, he would still only be 83; who knows, he might have enjoyed the geriatric productivity of his friend Havergal Brian. So there's no sense of valediction about this score; instead, one senses Simpson girding up what he had learned about symphonic architecture and applying it to generate new discoveries. The form is one such: two movements, the first an *Andante* thirteen-and-a-half minutes long, the second an *Allegro vivace* two minutes longer yet. The opening of the Symphony is spare and lean, feeling its way forward on unadorned *piano* melodic lines, gradually unfolding like a winter landscape slowly warming into spring, strength and purpose stirring at their own speed; and, like nature, there's no single moment of truth, no transfiguration – though there is what sounds like one of Simpson's favorite *doppio movimento* gear-changes eight minutes in, energizing the whole. The music continues to grow steadily, reaching a powerful climax on C, after which it is laid to rest in a gentle coda – and the music simply disappears. The textures are translucent, the instrumental writing often chamber-musical – you sense the power of the orchestra held in reserve, never fully deployed.

In the *Allegro vivace* the sense of accumulating energy is even stronger – but, again, at its own speed. An impersonal humor suffuses the entire movement; if the first movement suggested natural processes of growth, the dancing lines here, bounced from winds to strings and back, sound like nature chuckling at some huge existential joke, with the brass gradually draping long

chorale-like figures over the leaping string figuration, until a timpani tattoo silences the advance. A few instruments mutter objections which are brushed aside: “the whole thing ends with a flick of the wrist, as if dismissed,” as Simpson put it. Astronomical images are common in writing about Simpson’s music, not so much because he was himself a keen amateur astronomer but because its ability to suggest primal forces at work naturally calls up allusions to cosmic activity. Surprisingly, then, in what must be one of his longest symphonic movements, there’s a very human glow at the centre of the music. It’s not overt—Simpson was never a sentimental composer—but it is readily perceptible; if nature is laughing here, there’s no hostility in the mirth.

The *Variations on a Theme of Nielsen* constitute a *symphonie manquée*, with the first three variations offering the bones (and muscle!) of a first-movement allegro, the third pulling back the tempo to offer a contrast with the next group, which open with a surging, rhythmically charged figure in the strings that unites the next variations as they power towards a climax—Simpson retaining the capacity of Nielsen’s theme for a bit of mischievous tonal wrong-footing, particularly when the tuba enters in the *Prestissimo* eighth variation. The delicate *Adagio* ninth, the ‘slow movement’, features some beautiful writing for solo cello, set against a dignified chorale in the trombones—perhaps one of the most sheerly lovely things Simpson ever wrote. The eleven-minute finale (out of a total of 25) sets off on its course with a spacious, gentle fugato in the strings, gradually picking up momentum, given a sense of inevitability through the constant pulse (another device Simpson enjoyed using). Grinning reminiscences of Nielsen’s theme occasionally crest through the texture as the work builds organically to a gripping conclusion.

Both works contain writing as exposed as anything he ever penned, and Matthew Taylor and the players of City of London Sinfonia are very good at attending to the detail of the score, reflected in Simon Eadon’s translucent recorded sound. I daresay that, given a chance to play the music in, they would have found more of the sheer excitement that’s always a feature of Simpson’s music—but there’s plenty of excitement here already! Taylor’s notes are literate and helpful.

Altogether a magnificent recording, then, and I recommend it enthusiastically. Simpson’s music is always absolutely honest, as was the man; like him, too, it is tough and uncompromising. But he also had a gruff sense of humor and a profound sense of the demands of humanism. And these characteristics of the man illuminate his music. We are the richer for it.

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