

## ‘FIRST BROADCAST PERFORMANCE’

The most important musical event of the last quarter has undoubtedly been the first broadcast performance of Bela Bartók's *Divertimento for strings*. Almost all other contemporary music pales into fumbling insignificance besides such assured mastery, such fiery vitality and such freshness of outlook which is yet perfectly reconcilable with tradition. If the work is, as its name implies, relatively easy to listen to compared with (say) the later Bartók quartets, this is only because it is written with such Mozartian clarity and with a technical ingenuity that has come to function instinctively, not because it deals with ranges of experience that are in any way superficial.

The slow movement is, I would say, among the two or three most profound structures in twentieth-century music, and although powerfully dissonant and startlingly original in the very texture of its sound is never *outré* because its organism is (like the whole work) essentially melodic and polyphonic, even the dissonances being melodic in that they are created by a logical technique of unresolved appoggiaturas based on a telescoping of the idiom of the eighteenth century, whereby a passing note may become identified with the tone to which it might be expected to resolve. (One of the consequences of this procedure is an elastic ambivalence between the major and minor tonality and triad). Traces of the rhythmic complexity and modal formulae of Magyar folk-music in the melodic material are reconciled with this European classicism, but the idiom is no longer one that can be discussed in terms of the influence of this or that: henceforth it exists in its own right as a technique which, if more ‘personal’ than, is as consummately realized as, the idiom of Mozart or of Bach. Not only the slow movement, but also the intensely concentrated development of the first movement and the tumultuous, but always strictly controlled, energy of the finale seem to have, unlike the noisily self-advertising ‘vitality’ of much contemporary music, something that one can only call a spiritual foundation, so that the counterpoint communicates an *elation* comparable with that produced in the listener by the greater fugues of Bach. Considering, comparatively, the social

and spiritual climate in which Bartók has lived and worked his achievement may seem scarcely less remarkable; though naturally this doesn't therefore mean that Bartók equals Bach. It is sufficient that we can say that Bartók is certainly a major composer in European history, and probably the greatest composer now actively creative.

I hope the work, which was splendidly played, will soon be heard again and that Decca, or so other enterprising company, will give us a recorded version. Since the music is so immediately impressive, becomes even more so with study, and is so masterfully conceived for the congenially recording medium of string orchestra, I am sure that this company would not lose money, besides performing a cultural service of the utmost importance. The score has been published by Boosey and Hawkes, price 15/-.

I am afraid that the much heralded first English performance of the Walton *Violin Concerto*<sup>1</sup> was one of the things that, compared with the Bartók, looked decidedly off-colour. The opening and coda of the first movement, and the second subject of the finale, were very beautiful in their fluid lyrical expansions of diatonicism but said nothing of consequence that Walton hadn't said already in the *Viola Concerto* which still remains, I think, his most convincing work. The noisy Elgarian climaxes manifested Walton's old failing in that logical polyphonic evolution tends to dissipate, at the most crucial moments, into rhetoric; and the Scherzo, modelled closely on that of the viola concerto, completely lacked the earlier work's delicate nervous agility and seemed to me pedestrian and trite. (The celebrated 'neapolitan' trio, besides being fatuous in itself, is in the context a glaring inconsistency of style that Walton would never have perpetrated in the days of the viola work). Whereas vitality glows in every detail, however apparently trivial, that makes up the self-subsistent Bartók creation, one feels that there is vitality, and that necessarily of an inferior order, only in isolated patches of Walton's concerto while the rest, if it does not exactly express feelings at second-hand, at least expresses feelings that have been so long in Mr. Walton's hands that he has grown to accept them as habit rather than as experience.

This emotional staleness, which is fleeting in the concerto,

---

<sup>1</sup>A violin and piano score is published by the Oxford Press, price 7/6.

dominated entirely an appalling production called *Scapino*, which was also given its first broadcast performance. Here was none of that youthful jocularly, effectively crude in line and rhythm, which had marked the early, and ostensibly comparable, *Portsmouth Point*: this music had no more meaning for the contemporary world than a nineteenth-century tone poem without even the synthetic vigour of the later Strauss. The programme note informed us that the work was 'fresh and witty.' Since there was nothing in the musical ideas that could conceivably be graced with either of these epithets, nothing, indeed, that showed a glimmer of distinction of any kind, I can only conclude that there must be some exquisite risibility in the quaint percussive effect or the squawk of an over-blown trumpet that regrettably escapes me. If Mr. Walton wants to know what wit in a musical idiom really means he should listen to Mr. Tippett's *Fantasy Sonata* (see page 309), or even at a more superficial level, to his own *Façade*: and then throw *Scapino* on the fire. One must think very gratefully of the Viola Concerto, and very hard of the Battle of Vittoria, for this piece was enough to ruin most composers' reputations.

Although untrumpeted, the first broadcast performance of the second set of Edmund Rubbra's *Spenser Sonnets* for voice and string quartet was, I think, a more significant event in English musical history than the performance of the Walton works. I have previously pointed out how Rubbra's imagination seems to function most freely when he is preoccupied with a tough technical proposition, and the problem which he has tackled here is how to set a verbal text in the most sensitive way possible with reference to the exigencies of language, while at the same time sublimating the contour of his line beyond declamation to a sustained and musically organized lyricism. There is very little contemporary music that could be put beside *Like as the culver* (the third of these sonnets) for length and plasticity of line which is not mere rhapsody but a self-contained lyrical and vocal structure. I commend this song to the majority of contemporary composers who have forgotten, or who never knew, what the element of line in musical speech ought to be; it is noble, magnificent, and sad, and if it reminds us a little of the line in some of van Dieren's larger vocal works, that is not because it is any the less Rubbra's unique creation but merely because both van Dieren and Rubbra were concerned with the pro-

blem of lyricism and the English language and because their technical, if not spiritual, solutions were based on the same polyphonic principles. Here, as in Rubbra's earlier series of Spenser sonnets, as in van Dieren's setting of the same poet, as (for that matter) in the Tudor air and madrigal, the peaks of the lyricism coincide with the expressive interpretation of the most impassioned passages of the text (note for instance the marvellous efflorescence of line on the word 'entangling'); here again the idiom extends, but never denies, the modal fundamentals of vocal writing as established in the sixteenth century, with their attendant rhythmic and tonal fluidity.

While Rubbra's command of vocal lyricism is the essence of his genius, I believe that it is only in his symphonic work—in the manner in which he applies his lyrical gift to the symphonic problem—that we can realize the importance of his contribution. Rubbra is that rare phenomenon, a contemporary composer who naturally does his musical thinking on an extended scale, and apart from *Like as the culver* the sonnets are perhaps more interesting for the light they throw on the symphonies, than intrinsically. Although superlatively well written for the voice and although an entirely personal creation apart from one or two reminiscent-sounding passages which perhaps can be traced back rather to the nature of the English language than to the direct influence of Vaughan Williams, the sonnets, no doubt inevitably, lack the richness and variety of emotional temper that characterizes the symphonies. But if the Spenser Sonnets aren't such assured and classic masterpieces we must remember that Rubbra's teacher, Gustav Holst, spent the greater part of his creative career trying to solve the problem of the English musical idiom and the English language<sup>2</sup> and never, I think, came as close to a solution as does Rubbra in his best vocal work: all those who are interested in English music and who try to create it, should certainly study the Sonnets, along with the finest music of Holst, as inspiringly moving and honest statements of the fundamental issues involved.

W.H.M.

---

<sup>2</sup>I have written further on this subject in an article on *Holst and the English Language*, published in *The Music Review*, August, 1941.

# THE AMBIGUITY OF 'MEASURE FOR MEASURE'

## I.

IT is probably true to say that *Measure for Measure* is that play of Shakespeare's which has caused most readers the greatest sense of strain and mental discomfort. 'More labour than elegance' was Dr. Johnson's way of expressing his sense of something forced in 'the grave scenes' (he found 'the light or comic part . . . very natural and pleasing'), whilst to Coleridge the whole play was 'painful,' and even, a few years later, 'hateful, though Shakespearean throughout.' The most obvious reason for this discomfort is to be found in the conflicting attitudes towards the main characters that seem to be forced upon us, and it is easy to list questions of personal conduct for which it is impossible to find a simple answer. (What, to take one example, are we to think of Isabella? Is she the embodiment of a chaste serenity, or is she, like Angelo, an illustration of the frosty lack of sympathy of a self-regarding puritanism?) Hazlitt's explanation of the painful impression created by the play, that 'our sympathies are repulsed and defeated in all directions,' is, however, only part of the truth. It is not merely that the play is a comedy, so that the 'general system of cross-purposes between the feelings of the different characters and the sympathy of the reader' can be in part attributed to the needs of the plot—complication, suspense and a conventionally happy ending; the strain and conflict goes much deeper than that, being in fact embedded in the themes of which the characters are made the mouthpiece.

Like many other Elizabethan plays, *Measure for Measure* has an obvious relation to the old Moralities. It is too lively and dramatic—too Elizabethan—to be considered merely as a homiletic debate, but it turns, in its own way, on certain moral problems, the nature of which is indicated by the recurrent use of the words 'scope,' 'liberty' and 'restraint.' What, Shakespeare seems to ask, is the relation between natural impulse and individual