(A supplement to Bertrand Russell Society Newsletter #15, August 1977)

ON BERTRAND RUSSELL - AND A SYMPHONY

Some Personal Reflections by

GRAHAM WHETTAM

The score of Graham Whettam's SINFONIA CONTRA TIMORE - Symphony Against Fear - is prefaced by the following note:

> "The first performance of this symphony was given in the Town Hall, Birmingham, on February 25th, 1965, in the presence of Bertrand Russell, by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conductor Hugo Rignold.
>
> A previous performance, to have been given on March 7th 1964, had been cancelled by the Committee of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society in exception to the dedication.
>
> SINFONIA CONTRA TIMORE was first known as the composer's 4th Symphony, but is now the earliest acknowledged by him for public performance."

ON BERTRAND RUSSELL - AND A SYMPHONY

Some Personal Reflections by

Graham Whettam

I cannot exactly recall when I became aware of Bertrand Russell, although I do remember that I was reading some of his writings in the latter years of the second World War. I was about 17 years old, and the books included Sceptical Essays, In Praise of Idleness, and, I believe, The Conquest of Happiness. But nearly thirty years afterwards, it is difficult to say which of his books were the first to come into my hands.

It was at about this same time that Russell returned from the United States, as it happened bringing with him the manuscript of the History of Western Philosophy, and then his voice became very familiar through his many BBC broadcasts. It was not only his ideas which compelled attention, but his marvellous use of the English language, and the lucidity which this brought to his exposition of those ideas. My native language is an instrument which can be used with great subtlety; it has a very large vocabulary, and can be used in the expression of thoughts and arguments of an involved and complex kind without losing its natural flexibility. Russell possessed to an astonishing degree the ability to express his ideas in the simplest way: the logical beauty of what he said was enhanced by the beauty of his language. Years later, when he invited me to meet him, I was much impressed with the essential wholeness of the man; his thought and mode of expression were so much a reflection of the complete person that I could understand why he had been one of the great masters of the spoken word, and in broadcasting, where the voice alone must communicate everything.

In I948 the BBC inaugurated the Reith Lectures, and which are intended to give an opportunity to an eminent person to develop and express his thinking on a matter of public importance. The first of these annual Reith Lecturers was Bertrand Russell, and his theme Authority And The Individual. Russell was concerned with how we could combine that degree of initiative which is individually necessary for progress with the degree of social cohesion that is necessary for survival. In Russell's view, " the problem comes down to the fact that society should strive to obtain security and justice for human beings, and, also, progress. To obtain these it is necessary to separate cultural matters from the Establishment. " Whilst I wholeheartedly accepted the force and logic of this argument, I was only aged 20 at the time of Russell's Reith Lectures. Many years were to pass before I would find this so exemplified in my own experience, and, ironically, linked closely with the name of Russell. Listening to these broadcast lectures was a profound and formative experience, and has at various times caused me to have expectations of Russell's annual Reithian successors which have not been always realized.

Early in I948 I bought the History of Western Philosopy; I had read some philosophical books, of course, but found that this book, relating, as it does, the thinking of different philosophers to their times and social conditions, and to each other also, was of uniquely positive value for me. I remember reading and re-reading it for three months.

If, as an obvious philosophical layman, I have seemed to dwell too lengthily on Russell's writing and broadcasting, my purpose has been to show, through the benefit to my own non-musical thinking, the positive influence which he exerted, and which must have been of great benefit to men and women in many countries throughout the world.

Sinfonia Contra Timore

The first music to be written of what became my ~~Fourth~~ ~~Symphony~~ was intended as the opening of a music-drama. The subject matter is not really relevant, for the project was soon abandoned (and the associations attaching to this music also). This was in about I952. During the winter of I956-57, when I was living in the German Black Forest, I took this introductory music, altering only some details of scoring, and made it the introduction to a two-movement symphony; in that form, and to no lasting satisfaction, the work was completed on the last day of September I957. But this had been a period of considerable personal turmoil and difficulties for me, and this may have contributed to my later decision to start the entire work afresh. The second movement was abandoned completely, and the first part was re-written and re-thought from the end of the initial and somewhat forceful opening lento. In its present and final form, the work comprises three continuous and developing movements.

Early in I96I, two or three months after I had written my first Oboe Quartet for the Netherlands Oboe Quartet of Victor Swillens, this first movement was re-cast, partly due to the promptings of Sir Eugene Goossens, who had said that he would like some new orchestral work from me. A year previously I had dedicated my String Quartet to Goossens, who had himself been a violinist until injury to a finger obliged him to abandon string playing. In late August I96I he told me that he had a definite outlet for a new work, and urged me to complete the symphony. The central slow movement was thereupon written in the space of a fortnight at Ingatestone in Essex.

There had been much excitement that summer caused by the the public response to demonstrations arranged in London on ' Hiroshima Day ', and organised by the

Committee of 100, foremost amongst whom had been Bertrand Russell. As is well known, the demonstrations were against the use of nuclear weapons. It would appear that the British Government of the time had visions of the benefit which a nuclear war would bring to mankind: very ably demonstrating its own foolishness, 'Authority' caused certain individuals from among the organisers of these demonstrations to appear in court. These people were each sentenced to two months in gaol, but in the cases of Bertrand and Lady Russell, the sentence was reduced to one week for medical reasons. By this time Russell had been for over ten years the holder of the Order of Merit, the highest honour which Great Britain can bestow upon its citizens, as well as a Nobel prizewinner.

There was, of course, an enormous public outcry against the imprisonment of these peaceful people, including a great demonstration in Trafalgar Square. My own response was to write to Lord Russell at Brixton gaol offering him the dedication of the symphony I was writing in the following terms:

> " Dedicated to Bertrand Russell, and all other people who suffer imprisonment or other injustice for the expression of their beliefs, or the convenience of politicians and bureaucracies."

Although this dedication subsequently caused people who apparently thought of themselves as bureaucrats to act in ways which were not intended for my benefit, I have always been very glad that it stands at the head of my score, and have indeed at various times been much heartened by it.

Sinfonia Contra Timore

The Fourth Symphony was not completed for several months more, the closing pages being finished to my great relief on May 7th 1962. In less than two weeks the symphony's dedicatee became ninety years old: in a little over a month the friend who had encouraged me to complete this score, and who had hoped to conduct the première - Eugene Goossens - was dead. He had been ill for over half a year, but had

latterly seemed to be recovering, and I believe that he did not know how near to death he was.

I remember vivdly the celebration party for Russell's Ninetieth Birthday at London's Royal Festival Hall. There was music played by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Colin Davis, and including symphonies by Mozart and Stravinsky: messages were read from many parts of the world. Besides men and women eminent in various branches of the Sciences and the Arts, leading statesmen or governments from many countries had sent telegrams, with the notable exception of the Government of Great Britain. I think that Russell's acknowledgement of this celebration said admirably in words what those present could see vibrating through his person. After expressing his deeply-felt thanks he continued:

> "I have a very simple creed; that life and joy and beauty are better than dusty death, and I think that when we listen to such music as we heard today, we must all of us feel that the capacity to produce such music, and the capacity to hear such music, is a thing worth preserving and should not be thrown away in foolish squabbles. You may say it's a simple creed, but I think everything important is simple indeed. I've found that creed sufficient, and I should think that a great many of you wpuld also find it sufficient, or else you would hardly be here."

I remember leaving the hall suffused with the mixed feelings of joy that I had dedicated my new work to this man, and of inadequacy before the greatness of such simplicity.

Among the conductors whom I greatly admire is Sir Charles Groves, until recently [redacted] conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. This is among the oldest of the extant concert-giving bodies and orchestras in England, having been active since 1840. On receiving a copy of the score of my new symphony, Groves promptly reserved the premiere for Liverpool, and the date was fixed for March 7th 1964. Unfortunately, however, I was denied the pleasure of hearing my work in

the accoustically excellent Philharmonic Hall. The Committee of the Liverpool Philharmonic eventually decided that the dedication made the symphony 'unsuitable' for inclusion in its programmes, and so a symphony by a composer who was safely sailing down the River Styx was substituted. This had no dedication, and was therefore found to be appropriate for Liverpool.

Curiously, in the following season the Liverpool Philharmonic included a work of mine which is dedicated " to those who, like Benvenuto Cellini, have great love and zest for life ". I have yet to meet a man who exuded more love and zest for life than Bertrand Russell: and so, even if unintentionally, I feel that Liverpool honoured him in the end.

The symphony's première was delayed for one season, for the following year an opportunity arose with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, whose conductor was then Hugo Rignold. There was a generous allowance of rehearsal time, and the performance was indeed admirable, one of the best performed orchestral premières which fortune has given me. The symphony is by no means an easy piece to perform, and particularly on account of the rhythmic writing which demands extreme precision and confidence on the part of the conductor, and extremely disciplined playing from the orchestra, who at times must perform with great flexibility and expressiveness. There is a great contrast btween the regular triple and strongly marked rhythms of the scherzo-like first movement, and the irregular and even more strongly accentuated rhythms of the central part of the slow movement and also of the finale, particularly the closing pages which surge forward with much energy. These things also contrast greatly with the quality of playing required for the long violin melody of the slow movement, or the quiet slow flute solo in the finale.

The première at Birmingham on February 25th 1965 is also memorable for me on account of the pleasure which I shared with my wife in having Bertrand and Edith Russell as our guests at the performance, and on account of the warmth of the reception which I received from the public. Most vividly I recall Russell, then aged 92, holding my arm as I took him up the stairs and along the corridor to the part of the hall where we were sitting. The love and respect in which people held him I had seen on previous occasions; but to see the people in the corridor move back and stand waiting for my companion to pass moved me deeply. It was a unanimous gesture. Earlier that day I had been asked to meet the press with Russell at his hotel. One of these gentlemen, and whom I had met on previous occasions, reminded Russell of having interviewed him at his home in North Wales, and seven years earlier, of the questions which had been put, the answers given , and asked whether Earl Russell still subscribed to those views. The ninety-two year old philosopher pointed out that his answers had in certain respects been distinctly different from what had just been alleged. Afterwards the journalist produced his shorthand notes of seven years before: Russell's memory had been impeccable.

After the première I particularly recall Earl Russell's wishing that he could have written music, and could have had such an array of musicians and instruments to make the sounds which he had written. I think that he derived much pleasure from the concerted activity and high accomplishment of the orchestra. Later, whilst we were waiting for a car to collect him, he told some delightfully witty tales, though I found his tendency to ask such things as whether I remembered some curious action of King George V in 1914 a trifle

disconcerting, for I was not brought into this world until 1927. I remember asking whether he had met many composers and Russell replied "Only Vaughan Williams: and that was in 1909."

The première of my symphony was a concert occasion, and contrary to what often happens, was not broadcast or apparently even mentioned in the appropriate BBC programmes. After the Liverpool incident, the work had been found to lack sufficient merit for broadcasting, and the BBC would not allow the work's inclusion in its programmes. My wife, quite by chance, heard a BBC radio programme in which the Birmingham concert was previewed, and called me to listen. 'Concert Calendar' dealt with the Brahms Second Piano Concerto, in which Vladimir Ashkenazy was to be the soloist, and with Richard Strauss's Don Juan, a recorded excerpt from which filled in the last two or three minutes of the programme. The preview refrained from mentioning that the concert also included a symphony which would be receiving its world-première. Curiously a gentleman called Frank Gillard, and enjoying the title of Director of Sound Broadcasting, subsequently wrote to me from the BBC explaining that those responsible for the programme had not known about the symphony. Apparently they had not noticed those sections of the press releases referring to the symphony, nor the ample coverage which had already been given to the work by both the national and regional newspapers, as well as the musical magazines. Mr Gillard's position did not seem to be as sound as his title might have implied: the Establishment, at least in the shape of our BBC, did not view the work of one individual kindly.

There was some controversy in the English newspapers, for I had claimed that my symphony had been effectively banned from broadcasting in my own country. Various distinguished people made known their concern, including two former British Ministers, Mr Edward Heath and Sir Edward Boyle, both of whom were then sitting on the Opposition front bench at Westminster. Prime Minister Wilson informed me that whilst of course no

British Government may interfere in a matter of BBC programme content - a fact sometimes not sufficiently appreciated in other countries who themselves have government-controlled radio services - one of his Ministers had written to the BBC acquainting them with the strength of my views. A year or more later, some time for face-saving having passed, it appeared that a degree of merit in the symphony had at last been perceived, for I was advised that a BBC-sponsored performance was contemplated. This period of contemplation proved to be of considerable duration, but this may have been to allow for the discovery of even more merit than had been at first suspected. After some three years the music was recorded by the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by the Cuban-born Alberto Bolet: the broadcast was scheduled for a date in February 1970, only two days short of the fifth anniversary of the concert première.

One morning, about two weeks before this broadcast, I was asked to take a telephone call from one of our leading national newspapers, THE GUARDIAN. It appeared that the BBC had sent out publicity about my symphony, and I was asked for some comments about Russell, and for some reminiscence of him at the concert première. After this call I resumed my work until lunchtime when I turned on the radio for the news. Bertrand Russell was dead.

****

A postscript must be added, for the forgoing is essentially the content of an article written in 1972 as the basis for an interview with me to be heard on Netherlands Radio, and preceding an eloquent performance of Sinfonia Contra Timore conducted by Hubert Soudant. His recording was subsequently transmitted in West Germany, when Soudant was a prize-winner in the Herbert von Karajan conductors' competition in Berlin, and was also heard in Britain in a BBC 'Composer's Portrait'. This had happy consequences, for the BBC then commissioned

the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under its conductor Sir Charles Groves to make another radio recording. The wheel had almost turned full circle: 'almost', for the circle was closed in January 1977 when my most recent symphony, Sinfonia Intrepida, was given its world première by that same orchestra and conductor in the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

Sinfonia Contra Timore, my 'Russell' Symphony, has not yet been performed outside of Europe, although it has been heard in that continent's Eastern half. Some time ago I was a guest in East Germany, when GDR Radio mounted a 'Produktion' by the Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra under the admirable Jena conductor, Günther Blumhagen. We were given this first-class orchestra for five daily sessions of four hours each - twenty hours in all to rehearse and record a twenty-seven minute work! A very high standard was intended, and was achieved, and no composer could have been happier than I was at the end of those recording sessions. It transpired that a Produktion is GDR Radio's most distinguished treatment for a musical work. The resultant tape is available to radio stations internationally, should they wish to transmit it, and if the producers are happy enough with the quality of the recording, it could be available on disc, assuming that a record company wished to issue it.

Unless its composer is at the height of a world-wide reputation, a symphony written for an orchestra of almost a hundred players may expect comparatively infrequent performance in its early years. There was even a time when circumstances seemed to conspire against Sinfonia Contra Timore being performed at all. But there has never been a time for me when its dedication has been less than a source of joy, and also a sense of privelege. Among my particular treasured possessions is a photograph taken an hour or so before the symphony's first performance: Bertrand Russell, my score upon his knee, was humbly asking what it all meant, and how it worked - asking with the simplicity of the creed which I have quoted.