

CARLO MARTELLI- A GIFTED MUSICIAN

by Paul Conway

Carlo Martelli was born in 1935 to an Italian father and an English mother. He showed a keen interest in music at a very early age: as a five year old schoolboy, he heard a teacher in assembly playing Schubert's "Marche Militaire" and became obsessed with the piece, wanting to hear it again and again. By the age of ten he became acquainted with Italian operas and soon after this discovered his unending love of the Orchestra by means of listening to Beethoven Symphonies (to this day, his favourite symphony is Schubert's "Great" C Major).

He had violin lessons and developed his orchestral score reading whilst beginning to compose pieces of his own. He first went to the Royal College of Music on September 21st 1949 at the age of 13 as a Junior Exhibitioner where he learned elementary harmony and studied composition under William Lloyd Webber. At this time he changed his instrument from violin to viola and has remained an enthusiastic and accomplished viola player to this day. Upon leaving school at 16, he became a full-time student at the RCM, where his composition teacher was Bernard Stevens. Whilst he was studying, he went along to the Proms every summer, trying not to miss a concert and being bowled over by the unique atmosphere he found there: so, he resolved to write a grand and opulent orchestral piece which he felt would be appreciated by the Prommers, tailor-made to their taste. Thus he came to write some orchestral works for massive forces, containing every grand gesture known to him at the time: works in this category include the Festival Overture (inspired by the Festival of Britain in 1951) and his First Symphony. Tragically, both these works are now lost and so the fruits of an important stage in the composer's development are therefore unavailable to us. Mrs Swann, a friend from the local music society (and stepmother of Donald Swann) sent his score of the Festival Overture to Edmund Rubbra who was so impressed with the work that he submitted it to the reading panel of the Society for the Promotion of New Music. His First Symphony was shown to George Dyson, a move which cemented rather than won his place as a full-time student at the RCM.

Paradoxically, it is not another orchestral Titan but a work in the rarefied field of chamber music that Carlo Martelli considers to be his "Opus 1": a String Quartet (1953), an amazingly accomplished work for a seventeen-year-old composer. Throughout the 1950s, he composed a string of impressive, well-crafted, original and lively works including the second String Quartet (1954), the Serenade for Strings (1955), the Second Symphony (1955-56), a Terzetto for two violins and viola (1956), Shredni Vashtar, a setting for narrator, boy soprano and orchestra of a story by Saki (1956), a Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Viola and Bassoon (1958) and a Fiesta Overture for orchestra (1959). All these early works bear the hallmarks of Carlo Martelli's distinctive style which marries an accomplished technique with an instantly appealing and communicative style. Of these many pieces from the 1950s, three stand out as being exceptionally important works, remarkably mature and deeply felt: the Second String Quartet, the Serenade for Strings and the Second Symphony - their subsequent neglect and resulting descent into obscurity sadly forms but one of the many examples of injustice in the recent history of British music.

The String Quartet no2 (op4) is a tightly-constructed, powerful piece and represents the composer in his most serious vein. In four movements and of about thirty minutes' duration, the Second Quartet manages to cover a wide range of emotions and effects within its compact frame. The first movement, a thrillingly scored Allegro non troppo begins in a halting, fragmentary way, gradually picking up the pieces and developing a driving momentum. Every line has something of interest, woven with great contrapuntal skill into the whole texture. There is tenderness here as well as vehemence, yet the overriding impression is one of intellectual strength, a bold and vigorous opening statement. The relationship between the following Vivace Scherzo and Trio and the slow movement, a Lento entitled "Lament" is a subtle and complex one. The pounding rhythms of the Scherzo fade to the sparser writing of the Trio whilst at the end of the Scherzo's Da Capo, the Lento begins and towards the

conclusion of this impassioned and restless movement, the Trio returns followed by the return of the pounding opening of the Scherzo returns to create a “movement within a movement” effect, an ear-catching touch which produces a profoundly disturbing effect in the listener, having experienced the depth of emotion generated by the “Lament”. (Incidentally, the second subject of the Scherzo contains a series of vehement repeated chords in the manner of guitar or mandolin strumming, one of the very few places in Martelli’s music where one is reminded of his Italian ancestry. The Finale is a series of finely-wrought variations, the initial theme presented *Andante sostenuto* but gathering pace and dynamism almost at once in the *Allegro non troppo* second variation. The movement continues to press forward inexorably until the last, coda-like variation marked *Presto possibile*, spins the piece towards a gravity-defying conclusion. The Quartet is not only exceptionally idiomatically written, with something of interest for each instrument, but its musicianship and mastery of the form shines out to the listener - this work demands to be heard.

No less consummately constructed and inventively scored, though altogether more genial and relaxed in mood is the *Serenade for Strings* (op5). The airy, wide-open spaces of the initial theme of the opening *Allegro moderato* sound Coplandesque but the creator of the *Second String Quartet* is clearly in evidence in the scoring and imaginatively deployed forces of this attractive and rewarding piece. Alternation of *arco* and *pizzicato* playing, harmonics, swiftly changing dynamics, trills, glissandi, *divisi* and solo writing serves notice of the rich orchestral palette created by the composer (all this by page three of the score) Yet the movement is concise and pithy with no lingering over its more sumptuously scored passages. The solemn, ritualistic slow movement, marked *Quasi una preghiera* (like a prayer) is an *Andante lamentoso* with an important solo role allocated to the viola (it is clear that this is Martelli’s instrument, so often does it shine out in his compositions, not least in the *Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Viola and Bassoon*). The vital rhythms of a *Tarantella* inform the Scherzo-like third movement; the ‘celli assume the role of soloists in parts of the more relaxed Trio. As in the *Quartet no2*, Martelli employs variation form in the Finale of the *Serenade*. Unlike the Finale of the earlier work, which gathers momentum like a wound-up machine let loose, the *Allegretto* marking of the *Serenade’s* Finale holds good throughout the entire movement and the work ends in beautifully judged fading lights, the texture having been paired down to solo lines supported by gossamer muted sustained chords, the piece topped off by a *pizzicato* pluck from the lower strings. This fine work is at least as attractive as examples in the genre by Elgar and Berkeley and its continuing absence from the concert halls is depriving the concert-going public of an appealing and satisfying work which presents the opposite end of the spectrum from the Boulez and Stockhausen soundworld of the 1950s.

The *Second Symphony* (op6) was completed when the composer was only twenty years old: a remarkable achievement given the technical skill, superb manipulation of large orchestral forces and melodic invention on display. Originally planned as a one-movement work, when Martelli showed the *Symphony* to Malcolm Arnold, the older composer advised him to add more movements to it: this Martelli did, supplying a terse, austere first movement, virtually monothematic along the lines of Beethoven’s Fifth. The lighter-scored second movement eases the tension before the gripping nineteen-minute Finale with its sinister insistent timpani rhythm. Perhaps the work does provide evidence of Martelli’s interest in Nielsen’s symphonies and in particular Shostakovich’s then recently-completed Tenth, but the voice is a distinctive and original one and it combines the gripping intensity and rigour of the *Quartet no2* with the graceful lyricism of the *Serenade*. Again, this piece cries out for performance: I can think of no more suitable venue than the Royal Albert Hall where its almost tangible power, intellectual rigour and Romantic sensibility should guarantee the ovation it richly deserves - thus, despite the tragic loss of the *First Symphony*, I do feel the composer has provided an archetypal “Prom” work after all.

Upon leaving the RCM, Martelli became a professional viola player: he played in the RPO under Beecham and also performed with the LSO, including amongst the concerts he appeared in the premiere of Vaughan Williams’ *Ninth Symphony*. When the LSO was rehearsing the *RVW London Symphony*, the aged composer complimented Martelli on his playing of the solo viola part in the second movement.

In fact, RVW took a keen interest in the compositions of the young Martelli and attended the premieres of the two Quartets. RVW was also reported to have been most impressed with the Martelli Second Symphony when he heard one of the broadcasts of the work on the radio.

Carlo had been interested in film music from an early age and developed this side of his talent by his friendship with the composer Gerard Schurmann: throughout the 1960s his main output was in this field. He wrote film scores for "Catacombs" (1964), "Witchcraft" (1964), "Do You Know This Voice?" (1964), "The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb" (1964), "The Murder Game" (1966), "'Who Killed the Cat?" (1967), "Them" (1967), "Slave Girls" (1967) and "It" (1967). Both "Slave Girls" and the Mummy film were made by the Hammer film company and it seems somehow appropriate that Martelli should have written for this particular company since his surname means "hammers" in Italian and the Music Supervisor at Hammer at this time was a man called Phil Martell. Martelli's first Hammer score, "The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb" (a video of which is still available coupled with another Hammer film "The Revenge of Frankenstein" - Columbia Tristar home Video VHS CVRP 178) is a splendid example of pseudo-Egyptian mood painting; the powerful music to the opening and closing credits sequence stands up perfectly well on its own and is in fact available on a CD compilation from Silva records imaginatively entitled "Horror!" in a performance by the Westminster Philharmonic under Kenneth Alwyn - it is somewhat sad that at present this is the only piece of music by Carlo Martelli available on CD. The composer himself played the tambourine in the recording sessions of the soundtrack to the belly-dancing sequence in the film, a reminder that he taught himself percussion at the RCM (the percussion also plays an important part in the Finale of the Second Symphony). Martelli's second Hammer film, "Slave Girls" was less successful at the time but has since acquired something like cult status in the thirty years since its initial release. Most of the other films Carlo Martelli wrote for were produced by an American company anxious to cash in on the success of the British horror film at the time in the wake of Hammer and the subsequent rise of other companies such as Amicus and Tigon. His final film, "It", starred Roddy Macdowell and was a mildly-effective remake of the classic German silent film "Der Golem", despite the presence of a monster which resembled an ambulating tree trunk.

If Martelli wrote a series of impressive masterpieces in the 1950s and the 1960s were characterised by a string of effective and lucrative film scores, the 1970s saw a period of silence for Carlo Martelli. Discouraged by the "Glock years" at the BBC during which a number of his scores which had previously been taken up with enthusiasm were swiftly returned to the composer on account of their lack of serialism and "progressive" techniques, Martelli gave up composing altogether - a tragic situation but not a unique one, there being plenty of examples of other talented composers who subsequently gave up composition when they realised their accessible style did not fit the inflexible policies of the Musical Establishment. At this dark time, Martelli spoke of himself as someone who "used to be a composer", a phrase which puzzled his friends but sounds chilling to anyone who has heard the fine works of this natural, highly talented artist. He took to occasional ghost-writing and orchestration for other composers, something which brought him money and for which he wrote a substantial amount of original material, his aptitude for producing rich and exciting scores standing him in good stead. Fortunately, he found himself drawn back into composition under his own name when he was asked to play in a chamber group at one of the Pizza Express chains. He began to arrange pieces for the string quartet, found his innate gifts as an arranger (already obvious from the rich scoring of his own concert works and film scores) undimmed and began to write his own quite lengthy introductions to the arrangements, producing original material of great charm and distinction.

By the early 1980s, Martelli was writing original music for orchestra again, of a "light" nature, his inherent ability as a lyricist and melodist (perhaps owing something to his Italian blood or his trips to the Italian operas as a boy) shining through such works as "Persiflage" (1983) and "Aubade" (1984). He sent his new scores to the post-Glock BBC who accepted his scores immediately and thus such works as those mentioned above were performed and broadcast by the BBC Concert Orchestra. All these "light" pieces are quite delightful and constitute tuneful compositions of a very high order. The title for "Persiflage" (meaning "little piece of fluff") came from a TV programme on William Walton

where the aged composer described his “Facade” as “a little bit of Persiflage”). The second subject of this heart-warmingly upbeat and cheerful work resembles nothing less than the theme tune of “Tom and Jerry”. Expertly scored and beguiling the ear, both this piece and “Aubade” deserve wider dissemination through live performances and recordings.

His arrangements for string quartet, which he started about 1980, have been immensely successful and rightly so, for they bespeak a musician with an innate understanding of the nature and possibilities of string writing and a unique ability to create entertaining and ear-catching sounds. Works which Martelli has arranged for string quartet include much Broadway and Hollywood material from the 1920s to the 1950s, British and American light orchestral (genre) pieces, many “pop” songs and works of all kinds by composers such as Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Chopin, Chabrier, Strauss, Sullivan and Rossini; he has even arranged some Beethoven Symphonies for string quartet. All his skilful arrangements zip along on a current of compositional skill and technical virtuosity. There are over 250 titles in this series and many are available from the publishers Broadbent and Dunn Ltd.

Within the last ten years, Carlo Martelli has completed two operas. He finished “A Monkey’s Paw” in March 1990 but began the work in the 1950s and worked on it intermittently throughout the intervening three decades - thus, it has a fair claim to being his most personal score. Based on a short story by W. W. Jacobs, the opera was written out of the composer’s enthusiasm for the tale and not to a commission with the inevitable consequence that it has never been performed (in its original version, it was one of the scores the BBC rejected in the early 1960s, along with the Fiesta Overture). In 1992, Shropshire County Council commissioned a children’s opera from him, which he called “The Curse of Christopher Columbus”, an appropriate subject matter in the 500th anniversary year of the discovery of America.

Most recently he has written a Prelude and Fugue for 18 Violas (1993) for the National Youth Orchestra, another demonstration of his talents as an arranger and tone painter within restricted resources (a gift which came in useful when producing film scores to very limited budgets). The Prelude and Fugue shows his love for and skill in writing for his own instrument remains undiminished.

Fortunately, there is some good news to end this summary of a career of varied fortunes but unswerving quality. There is a projected CD release of the Second Symphony coupled with the Serenade for Strings - the conductor is Jose Serebrier and the recording company is Dinamek. The Serenade has already been recorded (with the Philharmonia) to the composer’s complete satisfaction and the Symphony sessions are set for the beginning of August, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra doing the honours. As for the other works, some tapes exist in the possession of the composer and any interest in performances of his works will be duly welcomed by him - his publishers are Lengnick and they possess scores from most periods of his compositional life. Should you wish to meet him, he plays with his own highly professional chamber group at the Soho restaurant Kettner’s most Sunday evenings so if you get the chance, do go and listen to a great Symphonist, Opera and Quartet writer serenading you as you tuck in to your meal.

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