

ALAN BUSH'S PIANO CONCERTO – A SUITABLE CASE FOR FAIR TREATMENT?

by Paul Conway

Among the many neglected English works of this century due for re-evaluation, high on most music lovers' list must come the Piano Concerto by Alan Bush. Not only is the work unavailable on CD, like all Bush's major orchestral works, including the four Symphonies, but it is apparently unrecorded (if any BMS members know of a recording, do please write to the Editor!)

The Piano Concerto is Bush's opus 18. It was completed on December 22nd 1937 and thus predates his First Symphony by over two and a half years. It is scored for a large orchestra: three flutes (the first doubling piccolo), two oboes, cor anglais, E flat clarinet, two B flat clarinets, two bassoons, double bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two tenor trombones, bass trombone, bass tuba, timpani percussion (triangle, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, tambourine and gong) and strings with solo piano in all four movements and solo baritone and male voice chorus in the last movement only. Cast in four substantial movements, the work is on a massive scale and lasts about 57 minutes in performance, of which it has received disappointingly few. John Amis recalled in a special "Mining the Archive" marking the death of Alan Bush (broadcast on Radio 3 on 22/12/95) that at the world premiere performance in March 1938, when the composer played the work with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult, the conductor was so disturbed by what he regarded as the frankly "Left Wing" sentiments of Randall Swingler's text in the last movement that, after the work had finished, occasioning an enthusiastic reponse, he insisted the orchestra played "God Save the Queen", cutting the applause short! Michael Tippett, also present at this premiere, described it as a "remarkable occasion".

The first movement is marked "Con moto moderato ma deciso" and begins with the moto perpetuo idea which constitutes the first subject introduced by the piano at the outset, accompanied by pizzicato chords from the strings. This theme is then taken up by the upper strings. One of the major characteristics of Bush's works of this period (i.e. before the 1950s) is their tightly constructed nature - the initial motifs presented at the outset are subsequently worked out throughout the rest of the piece. Such is the case with Dialectic for String Quartet (1929) and the first movement of the First Symphony of 1940.

Even the more restrained cantabile sections of the first movement of the Piano Concerto which provide the necessary relief from the whirring first subject are clearly derived from the opening material and there is scarcely a page which is not concerned with the working out of the initial theme. The writing for piano is frequently highly virtuosic and reminds us of the composer's gifts as a pianist.

In the second movement, a Scherzo marked "Con vivicata, ma non troppo allegro", the main material is again given by the piano at the start: a nervy, staccato theme which involves hand crossing, its alternating time signature helps to create an atmosphere of a shifting, mercurial world where anything might happen. The opening theme builds in volume and tension, incorporating splendid passages of bravura playing (one passage is marked "brillante"). The theme is then transformed into cascading arpeggio figures in the upper regions of the keyboard and seems to become a wild, stratospheric ostinato like a musical box gone out of control. A dry, throwaway pizzicato plop ends this highly unpredictable movement.

The "Grave" slow movement emerges from the depths of the orchestra - bassoons, double bassoons, 'celli and basses rising up to be joined by first violins in their lowest register, continuing on their lowest string (G). The strings have a hushed passage to themselves and it is some time before the soloist joins in with a rippling theme floated in the right hand replete with sextuplets. Even here, Bush cannot resist a flourish in the solo part. Throughout the movement, the soloist has a clutch of cadenza-like passages.

The virtuosic writing for piano even extends to a quiet accompanying figure whilst the clarinets indulge in a molto cantabile passage. This accompanying figure takes on the character of another moto perpetuo. Sonorous broken chords on the piano, increasingly intense and insistent herald the arrival of the Finale "Allegro vigoroso ma non troppo", which follows without a break.

This last movement begins with an undulating, swinging theme not dissimilar in mood to that of the first movement, though here the strings introduce the main material, the piano commenting upon it afterwards. After much virtuosic piano writing, a final arpeggiated flourish in sextuplets marked “brillante” and a lengthy forte bass drum roll signals the entry of the male voice chorus, with their first line (“Friends, we would speak a little of this performance”) spoken, not sung, a magical effect and one guaranteed to capture and hold the listener’s attention. The chorus then joins in singing the words and at the line “you have heard the piano vaunting its brilliance”, the piano soloist obligingly enters with a legato triplet ostinato over which the chorus continues. The baritone soloist alternates with the chorus, sharing the text which, though perhaps not quite as radical as Adrian Boult imagined nonetheless warns listeners of the dangers of society and how to overcome these dangers, including a damning indictment of the leaders of Capitalism and Imperialism along the way. The music grows impassioned, mirroring the text in fire and passion whilst the final pages leave the last word to the orchestra and pianist “a tempo definitivo”.

Alan Bush’s Piano Concerto is conceived on the grandest of scales and in a determinedly virtuosic style (the massive five-movement, seventy-minute Busoni Piano Concerto with Choral Finale (1904) acted as an inspiration, the composer telling his friend Michael Tippett in the mid-1930s that he wanted to write a work on the scale of the Busoni work, complete with choral Finale). The tremendous sweep of the writing should not make us lose sight of the careful working out of the thematic material evident in each of the four movements. The writing for orchestra throughout the work is telling and restrained whilst tutti are employed sparingly and with taste. The pianist has a Herculean task to perform but the many testing passages are not mere hollow pyrotechnics but grow naturally out of the musical narrative. All four movements have tremendous sweep and style, generating nervous, pulsating rhythms which drive the Concerto ever onward to its magnificent Finale. It is this inexorable drive, coupled with a formidable intellectual grip on the material which combines to create the illusion that this is a much shorter work than its hour duration.

Randall Swingler’s words are far from subtle but their impassioned and at times ferocious nature certainly complements the urgency of Bush’s writing in this work so that the last movement works as a fitting climax to the Concerto as a whole, feeling like a natural culmination of the preceding emotional drama rather than a choral Finale arbitrarily tacked on to the end of the work. In any case, in view of the year it was written, there are extra-musical considerations such as aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Nazism to be accounted for when judging the text.

The effect of this magnificent work in performance would be considerable, given a pianist capable of meeting the intellectual as well as the technical demands of the Concerto and a conductor aware of and indeed sympathetic to the extra-musical sensibilities aroused by the music and text. Rumours of recordings of the work have surfaced from time to time and it is to be hoped that a company such as Marco Polo, Chandos or CPO will present us with a new performance on disc so that this important work may be enjoyed by all who love English music in general and Alan Bush’s work (from his most interesting period, in my opinion) in particular. As Swingler’s words have it, “Music is the mind-changer, the life-giver”: it is my hope that this revolutionary work, impassioned and gripped with conviction and zeal will soon receive its due both in the concert hall and in the recording studio.

Anyone interested in hiring the score of the Bush Piano Concerto should contact Erica Jeal, Promotions Manager, Stainer & Bell Ltd, PO Box 110, Victoria House, 23, Gruneisen Road, Finchley, London N3 1DZ (Tel: 0181 343 3303, Fax: 0181 343 3024, e-mail: post@stainer.demon.co.uk)

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