

## ARTHUR BUTTERWORTH 1923-2014

Paul Conway

Composer, conductor, performer and teacher, Arthur Butterworth was an all-round musician. He was born on 4 August 1923 in New Moston, Manchester and though the Yorkshire moors became his favoured muse, he never lost touch with his Lancashire roots as may be heard in pieces such as Mancunian Way, for wind band, Mancunians, for brass band and orchestra, or the orchestra curtain-raiser Mill Town – significantly, perhaps, these were all commissions with precisely defined specifications as to their subject matter, whereas most of his ‘moorland’ pieces, whether commissioned or not, were the result of a personal choice as to their character and descriptive content.

Although his first experience of music was as a choirboy, it was the sound of a brass band playing in a park which influenced his eventual preoccupation with all aspects of music-making. He soon joined the local St. Chad’s Church Brass Band, thereby initiating a lifelong involvement with brass, and later became a member of Culcheth Military Band at Newton Heath and Street Fold Methodist Band, Moston. He began to compose at the age of ten and this creative side of his personality was later encouraged by a school music master. In 1939, he was awarded the prestigious Alexander Owen Memorial Fund scholarship which set him on his path towards becoming a professional musician. One short-term consequence of this award was his admission to the ranks of the Besses o’ th’ Barn Band. In 1942, having just passed the BBCM examination in brass band conducting, he began war service in the British Army.

From 1947 to 1949 he studied composition with Richard Hall at the Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern College of Music), where he also received trumpet and conducting tuition. Disillusioned with lack of opportunities for orchestral playing at the RCM, he left college a year early to begin his professional career with the Scottish Orchestra, precursor to the present-day RNSO; here, he became an unofficial assistant conductor in addition to playing the trumpet. Six years later he returned to his native Manchester to join the Hallé Orchestra as trumpeter under Sir John Barbirolli. He left in 1962 to spend more time on composition and teaching. In 1964, he took up the post of permanent conductor of the Huddersfield Philharmonic Society, a position he held for thirty years. During this period he appeared as guest conductor with many other orchestras, especially the BBC Philharmonic, the BBC Scottish and BBC Concert Orchestras, with whom he performed several of his own works; recently he recorded a number of his most important large-scale pieces for the Dutton label with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

He was a prolific composer, producing over one hundred and fifty works for a variety of musical forces. His individual musical voice proved sufficiently flexible to encompass imposing large-scale orchestral pieces, intimate chamber and instrumental works and a significant body of writing for brass band. A practical musician, he wrote the majority of his work as the result of a commission, often by individual musicians confident of receiving a piece for their instrument or ensemble that was both idiomatic and challenging.

Butterworth maintained a fiercely independent approach to his craft, developing and honing a distinctive style for over sixty years. His first attempts at composition were heavily indebted to Hindemith and Vaughan Williams, with whom he briefly corresponded. In their different ways, the Suite for Strings (1948) and the Sinfonietta for orchestra (1949) show him attempting to shed these influences and flexing his symphonic muscles, but it was, arguably, not until the First Symphony (1957) that his own voice fully emerged. Premiered by Barbirolli and the Hallé at the 1957 Cheltenham Festival, this passionate and vivid depiction of the Highlands of Scotland was the culmination of Butterworth’s previous creative output and the work which put his name on the musical map.

Many other large-scale orchestral compositions were to follow, including six more symphonies (1965, 1979, 1986, 2003, 2006 and 2012) and concertos for bassoon, organ, violin, viola, cello, guitar and trumpet: of these, the very fine Viola Concerto of 1983 (recorded on Dutton CDLX 7212) is his most personal statement, whilst the inventive Guitar Concerto (2000) has a sultry, Latin flavour unusual from this habitually North-facing composer. The impressive First Piano Trio of 1983 (Dutton CDLX 7164), written at the behest of Sir John Manduell, is the jewel in the crown of his chamber music, proving his ability to adapt a naturally epic mode of expression for small-scale forces. A Moorland Symphony (1967) and Haworth Moor, for chorus and piano accompaniment (2000) are amongst the most notable works in his select vocal output.

Some of his most successful pieces in any genre were written for brass band, and they rank amongst the most challenging, both technically and musically, in the literature. His experienced ear as a trumpet player undoubtedly contributed to the international success of pieces such as Three Impressions for Brass, Odin, a brilliant and powerful symphony for brass (commissioned by Black Dyke in 1986 and selected as test piece for the National Championships of 1989) and Caliban, a 'scherzo malevolo' written for the Brighouse and Rastrick Band (1978). Other major works for the genre include the Passacaglia on a theme of Brahms, Paen and a stunning transcription of Brahms' Variations on a theme by Handel, Op.24 (spectacularly recorded by Black Dyke on the Doyen label: DOYCD 130). The composer's love of all aspects of the northlands: art, literature, landscape and culture was a constant inspiration and lies behind his most characteristic utterances such as A Dales Suite of 1965 (test piece for the National Youth Band Championships of 1972) and his popular orchestral piece, The Path Across the Moors (1959), a delicately evocative miniature tone poem he later arranged for brass band.

Arthur Butterworth was a composer who knew instinctively what he was trying to create, as proven by the individuality and integrity of his writing. His music is, to a large extent, a reflection of the man: unaffected, direct and honest and equipped with an expressive range from dark introspection to passionate declamation. I met him on several occasions over the last 15 years and will always remember his unfailing courtesy, patience and, perhaps above all, enthusiasm for life and nature. This predilection for the pastoral rather than the urban is apparent in his music. It is also notable that, whereas various landscapes served as starting points for his scores, human beings rarely, if ever, fuelled his creativity.

He was, I think, a more complex figure than commentators have so far grasped. His own, personally sanctioned, publicity made much of his music being a part of the English heritage as personified by Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Walton. Yet, apart from some very early pieces (such as the Romanza for horn and strings), which are clearly in thrall to his illustrious mentor, I hear far more of the influence of Sibelius, in terms of musical language, and Nielsen, as regards form and structure, in his writing. He will surely be remembered for his significant contribution to the brass band literature, though in truth he took a far more personal interest in the long-term fate of his orchestral music, for example, and would, I am sure, have rated the symphonies and concertos (and indeed both piano trios) as being of greater lasting value than the majority of his works for brass.

Arthur Butterworth died on 20 November 2014. He was 91.

History will decide, but, notwithstanding the fine qualities of the First and Fifth Symphonies and the Guitar and Cello Concertos, I wonder if the many pieces for small forces (and unusual forces at that e.g. the Saxhorn Sonata and Ancient Sourceries, for countertenor, recorder and harpsichord) have a greater chance of keeping his name alive in the musical world rather than the large-scale utterances. If so, this is something that I think would have pleased him, or at least he would soon have come round to deriving pleasure from this. He was, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, an intensely practical all-rounder who wrote music to be performed. His many instrumental and chamber scores were always fashioned with the players in mind and he lavished as much

attention to detail on a short piece for wind ensemble as on a major, full-length symphony. If his initial impulses were melodic, he had the natural symphonist's instinct for rigorous construction and constant development and this may be heard in all aspects of his art. Now that he is no longer with us, it is up to executants to explore and programme his unusually diverse and directly communicative output so that listeners can respond to it. Only in performance will this rewarding body of work truly come alive.

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