

DEREK BOURGEOIS, SOME SYMPHONIES

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I have chosen some of the later symphonies of Derek Bourgeois to briefly comment on. Of course, the value judgments are my own. I am not writing for the academics but for the ordinary music lover.

As it will be appreciated not every work is outstanding. In fact, some of his symphonies in the numbers 50 to 60 are disappointing. He was a tonal composer noted for melody and rich orchestration but also for eccentricity at times.

Symphony no 114, Op 386, is tragic, sad or sardonic. The last two of the four movement are an intermezzo and foreshadowing his cancer.

Symphony no 113, Op 385, has as a first movement which a light hearted jolly mood for the most part and then takes on a more serious mood. It is ABA form and is humourous and might suggest a hornpipe. The second movement is pensive sometimes sinister and occasionally dramatic. The pensive theme has many colourful appearances and is strangely beautiful. The third movement has a military feel and has an infectious rhythm with the Dies Irae theme briefly at one point.

The finale restores order in a gentle way.

Symphony no 112, Op 383, has a thoughtful moderate opening movement with brief powerful interjections then follows a jaunty scherzo with another attractive simple melody with a folk song feel. The slow movement is melodic with yet another simple theme with some rich and sumptuous music.

The finale is robust but, at one stage, develops into a waltz like sequence which is predictable.

Symphony no 111, Op 382, The Nelson is in three movements. The first is a jolly allegro with a simple melody treated so well that it does not sound banal. 111 is often called after Admiral Nelson who had one arm, one leg and one eye.

Symphony no 110, Op 380, The Controlled Accelerando, one movement, 23 minutes, a strong sinewy piece. The title speaks for itself. It is exciting.

Symphony no 109, Op 378, is a lighthearted work with a first movement reminiscent of I'll be your sweetheart appearing in various guises. The second movement is akin to a sea shanty or a highland reel. The third movement is of average tempo with another beguiling theme and some exquisite orchestration and the usual meticulous development of which this composer is so adept and proficient. The finale abounds in melody which is varied and never boring repetition.

Symphony no 108, Op 377, is in four movements lasting about 33 minutes. The opening movement is both serious, humorous and hugely engaging. The thematic material is memorable and its scherzo like character is infectious. The conventional coda is a little surprising. The slow movement is often both beautiful and colourful with much to admire. There follows an off beat scherzo-like movement with stunning orchestration. The varied theme holds the interest. The finale is attractive and begins in a gentle thoughtful mode before it is eventually, to some degree, let loose.

Symphony no 107, Op 376, is probably Derek's favourite symphony of the late ones. The first movement is invigorating and the second movement, about eight minutes in, suffers, in my opinion, from Elgarian style and pomposity. The scherzo restores order with Derek's style of melodic originality and thematic development. The finale is very successful full of invention and lasting appeal.

Symphony no 106, Op 375, is in four movements lasting about 35 minutes. It begins with a moderate movement, serious in nature and having a personal drama complete with some hammer blows. The music becomes agitated as an allegro and there are some violent eruptions as the drama unfolds. I admire the composer's control of the orchestra. The moderato music resumes with the occasional volcanic eruptions. The contrast in this music makes for satisfying listening. The movement ends quietly. An exuberant scherzo follows strikingly orchestrated with instantly likeable material. A folk song like theme appears as a contrast to the exuberance which makes a welcome return. The slow movement is thoughtful and often very tender and touching. I notice how well he uses the harp as indeed all the instruments of the orchestra. The music takes on a grandeur which is inspiring but not self seeking or sycophantic. The finale takes a little while to come to the boil. There is a choral like theme and then the music becomes somewhat tongue in cheek but it meanders a bit. The choral theme returns as does other material.

The Symphony no 105, Op 374, entitled Symphony of classical forms being a sonata, passacaglia on serial themes, minuet and scherzo and variations and fugue. Derek was not keen on serial music or strictly atonal music. The sonata is very impressive indeed. The passacaglia on serial themes does not belong here. It is a hybrid and of a different breed. It is not aurally off putting but the composer's lack of sympathy seems apparent. It is not serial music and serial music is not classical ! The Minuet and scherzo fares better but the minuet sounds more like a waltz as opposed to a classical minuet. The scherzo buzzes along and the waltz (sorry,minuet) returns. The final works well in the main but, at one time, there is waltz sequence, a form noted for its predictability and unoriginality. Other variations are far, far better. The short fugue is successfully realised. The composer said that he enjoyed this symphony.

Symphony no 103, Op 372, is entitled The Swiss Roll and one movement is entitled Reichenbach Falls of Sherlock Holmes fame. The first movement is called Vierwaldstattersee, by Lake Lucerne, then Time will Tell, the Reichenbach Falls and, finally, The North Face of the Eigers. The first movement is a joy. Time will tell sounds a little more Austrian than Swiss but I may be wrong! The altercation between Holmes and Moriarty with train whistle, sinister sounds and the sound of the cascade The drama unfolds. The finale is majestic as befits this impressive mountain although danger or challenge is not far away.

Symphony no. 102, Op 376, has a classy first movement and then an engaging scherzo which may hint at a pizzicato polka but there are contrasts. The slow movement is profound and fascinating. The finale is strong and compelling. This is a fine symphony.

Symphony no 101, The Sundial, which is a clock, of course. Haydn's Symphony no 101 is entitled The Clock, hence the connection. It is Derek's Op 369, and is in three movements lasting about 37 minutes. The first movement is coherent, melodious and well developed and again his contrapuntal skills are evident. The middle movement at first displays the ticking of the clock with great effect. Derek is very skilful at effects. The build-up is very well conceived and controlled. The finale is also coherent.

Symphony no 100, Opus 368, is in four movements lasting 36 minutes and is a landmark. While his Symphony no 1 dates from 1968, from symphony no 8 to symphony no 100 constitutes 92 symphonies composed in 12 years. This symphony has an introduction and an allegro which is strong and never feeble. A slow movement follows often with an ethereal beauty and a steady tread. It is a choice movement. The controlled build up is impressive. It evolves naturally as usual, and is not a sudden explosion. As is his custom in all his movements, he uses his themes making them memorable, a wise move. The scherzo is fun and may suggest a highland reel. The finale is satisfying.

Symphony no 99, Op 366, is in four movements lasting about 29 minutes. The second movement is entitled March and has the following rubric, There is still plenty of good music to be written in C major, said Schoenberg. This symphony does not qualify, writes Derek. The first movement is a joy, full of melody and rhythmic vitality and with a sense of fun. It is very exciting. The march is sarcastic and amusing. A brief duet for violin and piano is gloriously tongue in cheek. The slow movement is fugal in style. The final captures the character of the opening movement and is occasionally violent which adds to its interest.

Symphony no 97 in one movement, Op 364, is an extended work of about 36 minutes often powerful and, indeed, lyrical. Whether this vast one movement work may be questioned by some.

Symphony no 96, Op 363, is in four movements lasting 31 minutes. The first movement is more delicately orchestrated than usual and makes for clarity. As usual, the music is melodious and appealing.

Symphony no 94, Opus 360, is entitled The Predictable and is akin to Haydn's Surprise Symphony. Derek's symphony starts with a few surprises before calming down. Of special interest is the joyous good natured finale.

Symphony no 93, Opus 359, is in four movements lasting half an hour. The opening movement is choice and full of characteristics maintaining interest. After a poignant slow movement, with contrasting variations of a quicker tempo, there follows a bustling scherzo, felicitous and charming without being banal. There are some delicious moments. The fun is infectious. The finale is also exuberant and hugely enjoyable.

Symphony no 92, Op 357, is in two big movements lasting about 40 minutes. It is on a grand scale and contains much fine music but like Symphony no 97, I am not convinced that these lengthy movements work. I think most people would prefer separate self-contained movements

Symphony no 91, Op 356, is a truly splendid work of 39 minutes. The leisurely opening movement has a glorious theme and is immaculately orchestrated. The scherzo is well set, fascinating and memorable. The slow movement has some mouth-watering harmonies, the product of obvious skill and original mind. The music is often deeply felt without sentimentality. The finale is an affirmation of life, full of confidence. There are moments of extended repose but the welcome drama is not far away. The music is somewhat leisurely. We finish with a fugue, with some intriguing sound effects.

Symphony no. 90, Opus 355, is in five movements lasting about 45 minutes. The first movement is very exciting akin to stunning circus performances. The scherzo buzzes along and the slow movement is full of feeling, rich in content with a choice melody. Then follows an engaging light hearted movement and a finale.

Symphony no 88, Opus 353, is in four movements lasting about 35 minutes. A leisurely opening movement gives way to a slow movement with a memorable theme. The scherzo is bold with contrasts and the use of unison in the main theme is noted. The grandiose final pages of the scherzo are pompous. The finale is slow, ponderous and sedated. I do not think it works.

Symphony no 86, Op350, is in four movements lasting 45 minutes. The opening movement is angular and concludes with an Elgarian pomposity. The slow movement fares better with much to interest the listener and often has a typical and effective Bourgeois punctuation. The third movement with a theme as a horn solo copied by the wind. The music is developed successfully and there are moments of repose. The final begins gently but with a lively style. The music builds up into a scintillating piece. a strong element of fun and unexpected sound effects appear. It is great fun in the main but pomposity returns.

Symphony no 85, Op 348, is in four movements lasting 36 minutes and dates from 2003. There is a most attractive first movement, sometimes very fast, a robust scherzo, a very pleasing slow movement and a vigorous finale.

Symphony no 84, Op 344, is in four movements lasting 36 minutes, The first movement is basically gentle with a definite beauty. The scherzo is well punctuated and resembles a mild whirlwind. The slow movement is good but a little long.. The finale seems to have an oriental flavour and, at times, is somewhat shrill particularly at the beginning of the movement. It settles down to be conventional and leisurely until the orient reappears.

Symphony no 82a and 82b, Op 341, both in one movement lasting 23 minutes and 16 minutes respectively based on the same material but the material is treated in separate ways. It is based on Stephen Kings' books *The Desperation* and *The Regulators*, the second published under his pseudonym, Richard Bachman, using identical characters but the stories are very different from each other. 82a is basically romantic whereas 82b is not. In a concert, they would benefit from another work to be played between them, or to be performed in different concerts.

Symphony no 80, Opus 339, dates from 2012 and is in four movements lasting 38 minutes. The opening movement is perky and rather fascinating.

Symphony no 79, Opus 379, has a gorgeous first movement. The second movement reminds you of the song *Mademoiselle* from *Armentiers*. The slow movement is followed by a lively finale. There are four movements lasting about 36 minutes.

Symphony no 78, Op 336, is in four movements lasting 45 minutes. The first movement is noted for its sarcasm or tongue in cheek approach. The whole work is in this vein with outbursts and often elephantine violence. It lacks coherence.

Symphony no 76, Opus 334, is in four movements lasting 37 minutes. It is basically lighthearted and enjoyable.

Symphony no 75, Opus 326, is in four movements lasting 40 minutes and can best be described as a lot of fun.

Symphony no 73, Opus 323, is in four movements and last 37 minutes and is in classic coherent design with much to admire.

Symphony no 72, opus 322, is in four movements and lasts about 26 minutes and is entitled *The Ghost*. The first movement is fascinating with eerie effects particularly from the six percussionists. The second movement introduces the *Dues Irae* theme followed by a corny waltz episode as if a dance of death,. The slow movement is full of interest and the finale has some gorgeous discords as if by Edgar Allan Poe before gentle melodic lines appear and there is a flippant theme in the percussion department and arresting chords and interruptions. Here is striking original music. What other composer deserves such an accolade?

Symphony no 70, Opus 319, is a splendid four movement work lasting 41 minutes. Unfortunately my copy had the scherzo damaged. The opening movement is arresting, vibrant and has a controlled excitement, not an easy achievement. Melody is evident reminding me of the unfair complaints about Derek's music being too melodic. The other unfair criticism that his music often displays laughter but as the composer said, *We need laughter*. He was a humorist and sometimes a gruff joker. There are contrasts in this movement which enhances it. The use of counterpoint is another excellent trade mark of this highly gifted composer. The rhythmic vitality is also noteworthy as usual. My difficulty with the slow movement is that it is annoying but what I do

detect is its poignancy and its simple but effective melody. The finale starts gently before it breaks into gorgeous sunshine, a powerful and thrilling experience.

Symphony no 68, Opus 316, is in two versions. 316a is the wind band version while opus 316 is the orchestral version. What this shows is the exceptional skill in transferring an orchestral score into a successful version for wind band, that version is called The Tower of Babel because 'bands like titles'.

Symphony no 67, Opus 315, The Tuneful is in four movements lasting 36 minutes, does not appeal to me at all. It is cheap music and the long waltz like movement is awful. It could drive a man to drink or to the end of the pier.

Symphony no 66, Opus 311, is in one movement lasting 29 minutes and dates from 2013. It seems to me to be a sarcastic piece and quirky,

Symphony no 64, Opus 305, has some usual eccentric trade marks but many fine moments including a delightful scherzo but with strange interruptions. The slow movement is good. It dates from 2011, is in four movements lasting 36 minutes. Derek admitted that writing so many symphonies was eccentric and some of the musical texts were of that eccentric order.

Symphony no 63, Opus 303, is in four movements lasting 38 minutes. The first movement has some drama but is mainly the repetition of a simple melody. The slow movement has an interruption of a scherzo style episode. A real scherzo follows with a notable brass solo which reappears. There are woodwind cascades and some triumphant music but the felicitous Mendelssohnian scherzo has the last word. The finale is fun and may have an oriental or Middle East feel about it and develops into another melodious essay with humour never far away, before the oriental/Middle East music returns.

Symphony no. 61, Opus 300, is in four movements and lasts about 38 minutes. It is a very fine work and, for once, Derek employs a strong timpani part adding to the drama and excitement There are passages of great beauty particularly in the slow and beautiful music in the finale...wonderful music.

Symphony no 58, Opus 296 is in one movement lasting 22 minutes and may be the most eccentric of all his symphonies both in context and sound.

Symphony no 57, Opus 294, is in four movements lasting about 35 minutes and dates from 2010. Often the gentler side of Derek' s music is evident and shows his predilection for sound effects, There is a lot to admire and savour but the music shows a dependability on an unchanging style.

Symphony no 52, Opus 287, is in four movements lasting 38 minutes. It is called The Halfway as it is halfway to Haydn's 104 numbered symphonies. It is predominately a gentle symphony with a slow movement reminding us of Rock a bye baby, a children's lullaby. The finale has a short robust start but develops slow and gentle music again.

Symphony no 51 is said to be in A flat minor whereas Derek seldom used key signatures. This is opus 266 and lasts for 28 minutes. The opening movement is a delight and what follows varies from lyricism to a sort of fun night club music as in Latin America. The calm is restored at the end. It is a highly attractive score.

Symphony no 49,Opus 289, is in four movements lasting 45 minutes. Its opening movement begins with a gentle chorale like theme before becoming dramatic but it holds its interest. The coda is impressive,The scherzo is fun and recalls the chorale like theme. The slow movement has some lovely effects and a few sarcastic ones. The main theme makes a brief appearance. The finale is jolly and does not seem to fit in with the rest of the work.

Symphony no 30, Op 241

I am including this symphony for personal reasons.

This impressive symphony dates from 2006 and is the composer's Op 241. To date he has written 115 symphonies

Like Edmund Rubbra, Derek does not plan a symphony out thoroughly but it grows out of an idea or ideas and is akin to a journey of discovery.

With this work, the composer wanted to write a symphony which would be derived from a motto theme. In this case, it is the opening motif on the solo timpani which pervades the whole work.

The work is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, piano, celeste and strings.

It is set in four movements and the approximate timings are given for each movement

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|------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Moderato - allegro vivace | 15.39 |
| 2. Presto | 9.37 |
| 3. Adagio molto | 21.20 |
| 4. Allegro con fuoco | 15.31 |

Therefore it lasts about 62 minutes.

The second movement is type of rondo and the finale is a large rondo structure with several themes. The timpani figure brings the work to a powerful close.

The slow movement uses the motto theme with several contrasting themes and includes a central violent climax.

The work is tonal and presents no aural problems whatsoever but the symphony is not banal or lacking in originality.

The several themes are well integrated and make for welcome contrasts. The work is never tedious.

The composer dedicated this work to me.

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