

## National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland

The Radio Telefís Éireann Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1947 as part of the Radio and Television Service in Ireland. With its membership coming from France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Russia, it drew together a rich blend of European culture. Apart from its many symphony concerts, the orchestra came to world-wide attention with its participation in the famous Wexford Opera Festival, an event broadcast in many parts of the world. The orchestra now enjoys the facilities of a fine new concert hall in central Dublin where it performs with the world's leading conductors and soloists. In 1990 the RTE Symphony Orchestra was augmented and renamed the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, quickly establishing itself as one of Europe's most adventurous orchestras with programmes featuring many twentieth century compositions. The orchestra is now engaged in an extensive recording project for the Naxos and Marco Polo labels, recording music by Bruch, Nielsen, Tchaikovsky, Goldmark, Rachmaninov, Richard Strauss and Havergal Brian and works by Irish composers.

## Andrew Penny

Andrew Penny was born in Hull and initially studied the clarinet at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where he also worked as conductor of the Opera Unit. The newly established Rothschild Scholarship in conducting led to study with Sir Charles Groves and Timothy Reynish and work as assistant with Richard Hickox and Elgar Howarth. Winner of the prestigious Ricordi Prize, he achieved a major success with the Vaughan Williams opera *Riders to the Sea* at Sadlers Wells Theatre in London. Andrew Penny subsequently studied with Sir Edward Downes and made a number of radio recordings in Holland and Britain. He has conducted regularly for both the Naxos and Marco Polo CD labels, recording principally with the RTE Concert Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra in Dublin. There have been other recording engagements in Australia and in Kiev, while in Dublin he is recording a cycle of symphonies by Malcolm Arnold. His recordings have won considerable critical acclaim both in Europe and America.

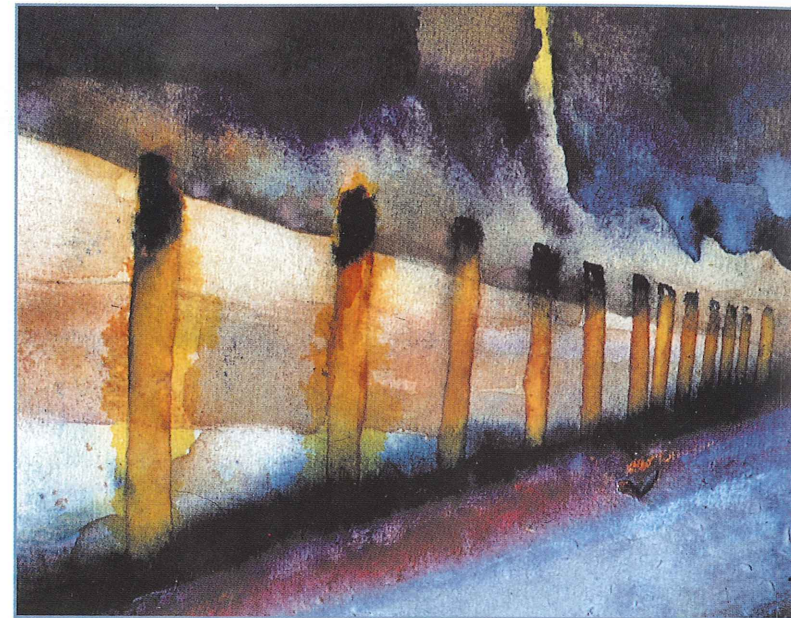


Sir Malcolm  
**ARNOLD**

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## Symphonies Nos. 7 and 8

National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland • Andrew Penny





## Malcolm Arnold (b. 1921) Symphonies Nos. 7 and 8

Malcolm Arnold was born in 1921 in Northampton, where his father was a well-to-do shoe manufacturer. There was music in the family, both from his father and from his mother, a descendant of a former Master of the Chapel Royal. Instead of the usual period at a public school, he was educated privately at home. As a twelve-year-old he found a new interest in the trumpet and in jazz after hearing Louis Armstrong, and three years later he was able to study the instrument in London under Ernest Hall, subsequently winning a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where his composition teacher was Gordon Jacob. Two years later he left the College to join the London Philharmonic Orchestra as second trumpet. Meanwhile he had won a composition prize for a one-movement string quartet. It was as an orchestral player that he was able to explore the wider orchestral repertoire, in particular the symphonies of Mahler.

Early in the 1939-45 war Arnold was a conscientious objector, in common with a number of other leading musicians. He was allowed to continue his work as an orchestral player, taking the position of first trumpet in the London Philharmonic in 1943. In the same year, however, he volunteered for military service, but was discharged after shooting himself in the foot, playing, thereafter, second trumpet to his teacher Ernest Hall in the BBC Symphony Orchestra and then rejoining the London Philharmonic, where he served as principal trumpet until 1948. During these years he had continued to work as a composer, with a

series of successful orchestral compositions, as well as a variety of chamber music. Since 1948 Malcolm Arnold has earned his living as a composer. In the 1960s he settled in Cornwall, where he became closely involved with the musical activities of the county. In 1972 he moved to Dublin, his home for the next five years, and then, in 1977, to Norfolk. Over the years his work has been much in demand for film scores, of which he has written some eighty. He has written concertos for an amazing variety of instruments, nine numbered symphonies, sinfoniettas, concert overtures and other orchestral works. His chamber music is equally varied and there is a set of works for solo wind and other instruments, aptly meeting the demands of competitive as of solo recital performance.

In style Malcolm Arnold has a command of popular idiom and this may have suggested to some an unfavourable identification with the world of light music. He is, in fact, a composer of considerable stature, technically assured, fluent and prolific, providing music that gives pleasure, but also music that may have a more sombre side, work that may be lyrical and tuneful, or even astringent and harsh in its revelations. Donald Mitchell has compared Arnold, illuminatingly, with Dickens, both of them great entertainers but both well aware of the human predicament, unsettlingly revealed, as he points out, in the remarkable series of symphonies.

Keith Anderson

The perspective afforded by time has shown just how cohesive and coherent a cycle Malcolm Arnold's nine numbered symphonies are, though that sense of follow-through could not have been apparent to even the composer's most devoted listeners when they were first performed. This is especially true of the last four symphonies, which seem almost quixotic in mood and emotional contrast.

After the oblique and unsettling fusion between classical and jazz elements in the *Sixth Symphony*, Arnold took until 1973 to complete its successor. Largely written at Sir William Walton's home on the Italian island of Ischia, the work was first performed in London in May the following year. The dedication, "To Katherine, Robert and Edward", Arnold's children, would hardly merit comment were it not for the character of the score, which has the most extreme emotional aura of any of his works. Whether or not the dedication conceals a deeper personal intent is something on which to ponder.

Lacerating strings and pounding brass set the unremitting tone of the first movement, the opening idea more a diverse sequence of motifs, than a theme as such. A plangent melody introduced by lower strings, passing to woodwind and solo horn, provides only marginal respite. The opening music returns briefly, before the second theme receives more sustained and inward treatment. The central development proceeds ominously, no less intense for its restrained dynamic level. At length, a bizarre ragtime march comes to the fore, sparking off a full reprise, in which the earlier unison chords on brass and tam-tam punctuate the stridency at key moments. The emotional climax is reached with the heartfelt return of the string theme, movingly pointing up the human vulnerability behind the militaristic aggression. Inevitably, the latter returns

to bring the movement full-circle; three brutal strokes on a cow-bell adding to the grim finality.

The second movement is among Arnold's most searching orchestral conceptions. Musing woodwind introduce a valedictory trombone theme, recalling Shostakovich in its angular plaintiveness (the latter's *Fifteenth Symphony*, completed only two years before Arnold's work, has such a theme in its slow movement). The response of the strings, muted and austere, is pared down to motivic and harmonic essentials, opening-out expressively only when it takes up the woodwind material. Two trumpets sound hauntingly over the landscape, and an ominous motion on tom-toms begins to develop; at first unobtrusively, then gaining steadily in prominence as the music feels its way uncertainly. The trombone theme is passed between solo brass and strings, before the tom-toms launch the massive climax: a piercing succession of discords, three cow-bell strokes, and the woodwind theme declaimed in impassioned tones and in rhythmic unison by the whole orchestra. Finally, a bassoon soliloquy leads the music down into the depths of the lower strings.

The finale returns in part to the mood of the opening movement. A purposefully-striding theme on strings and woodwind, offset by sardonic interjections from brass, is succeeded by a more pensive idea on flute and oboe, then lower strings and trumpet. The music gradually retreats almost beyond earshot, before Celtic traditional music suddenly strikes up - at first discreetly on harp and woodwind, then brazenly in a graphic evocation of an Irish folk-band. The main material returns to steer the movement to a seemingly tragic conclusion, but the return of the cow-bell provokes a wholly unexpected outcome - two massive unison chords and three tonic chords which end the symphony, if not in triumph, at least in a mood of hard-won

defiance.

The *Eighth Symphony*, written in 1978 and first performed by the Albany Symphony Orchestra the following May, is less explicit but perhaps even more unsettling in tone than its predecessor. A possible key to its character is the Irish marching tune of the opening movement, a rare instance of Arnold re-using earlier material, in this case, from the score to Jack Gold's 1969 film *The Reckoning*.

The composer had lived in the Irish Republic since the mid-1970s, and the oddly distorted character of this music suggests a parallel between the troubled history of the Irish people, and his personal circumstances at the time - soon to collapse into a seven-year period of virtual musical silence.

The opening *Allegro* begins with a glowering discord and martial music that suggests that the mood of the *Seventh Symphony* is to be continued and intensified. As the aggression falls away, the jejune marching tune is heard on piccolo and harp, against a backdrop of softly dissonant strings. The initial material returns, replete with fragmentary but menacing tattoo gestures on drums, before the marching tune returns in fuller, more sombre harmonization on strings. A solo trumpet takes it up, to evocate effect, over the original string discord, before the movement steers back starkly into the opening material. At length, over a faint rhythm on timpani and side-drum, bassoon then clarinet musequizzically on the marching theme. Its recessionary character is made clear when, after a brief but tender string passage, the theme returns in its original scoring - with a final resounding tam-tam stroke to confirm the equivocal nature of its inspiration.

The *Andantino* eschews the graphic emotional intensity of its symphonic predecessor for a directly elegiac expression. Oboe and upper strings denote the muted introspection, before horns and lower strings unwind the melodic line to a greater degree. A solo bassoon now takes up the thread, as do horn and tuba in a strange but evocative discourse with harp and timpani. Muted strings and carillon-like tuned percussion create a rather surreal mood, as solo brass sound out ominously the texture. A brief climax is provoked, before the movement ends in a mood of hushed regret.

The *Vivace* opens with a perky woodwind idea of startlingly upbeat character, reminiscent of Arnold's lighter orchestral pieces, though a pensive theme on woodwind and upper strings links unmistakably with the opening movement. Its second appearance is as an intensive string *fugato* with more than a nod to Shostakovich, a contrast the more pronounced when the opening theme returns in the cocktail-lounge guise of tuned percussion. The pensive theme reappears, this time as a spare-textured canon for woodwind then brass, before the bassoon steals in with the final reappearance of the opening theme, its sudden outburst in the full orchestra leading to the no-nonsense close of the symphony. As so often in Arnold's later music, however, the certainty of that conclusion, indeed the actual emotional character of what is being concluded, is left for the listener to judge.

Richard Whitehouse