

NAXOS

Havergal **BRIAN**

Symphonies Nos. 6, 28, 29 and 31

New Russia State Symphony Orchestra

Alexander Walker



Havergal Brian (1876-1972)

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When Havergal Brian completed his *Symphony No. 6* in 1948 at the age of 72, few people, least of all the composer himself, could have imagined it to be an upbeat to an outpouring of late creativity almost without parallel in musical history. During the following twenty years, Brian composed not only a further 26 symphonies, but four operas and a number of other orchestral works. The achievement is all the more remarkable considering that, for much of his creative life, Brian worked in isolation with little hope of hearing his music performed.

Things had not always been that way. In the early years of the twentieth century, as an adventurous and original composer, encouraged by the likes of Elgar, Beecham and Henry Wood, Brian had tasted public success. Things started to go wrong professionally just before the Great War and after 1918 what momentum he had initially established proved impossible to regain and he plunged into professional obscurity and personal penury. A journalistic career eventually put desperately needed food on the table for his large family, while composing became a solitary, mainly nocturnal, preoccupation in which he ploughed a lonely musical furrow of uncompromising individuality. Only in the 1950s, thanks to the advocacy of Robert Simpson, the composer and BBC music producer, did Brian's music begin to receive renewed exposure through concerts and broadcasts and, doubtless encouraged by this attention, Brian's creative 'Indian summer' began.

Brian's first four symphonies are on a very large scale, particularly *No. 1*, the immense *Gothic Symphony* (1919-27) [Naxos 8.557418-19], after which, beginning with the austere lyrical *Fifth Symphony*, *Wine of Summer* (1937) for baritone voice and orchestra, a radical pairing-down of material becomes increasingly apparent. This tendency towards compression though was a long-cherished ideal. Brian once claimed that the inspiration for the *Gothic Symphony* came to him in a flash, such that he would have wished to express its totality in a single musical gesture of a few seconds' duration. That

statement goes some way to explaining how, as well as writing the largest symphony ever performed, Brian was also able to compose one of the shortest (the nine-minute *No. 22* of 1964 [Naxos 8.572833]). In this context, the twenty-minute *Sixth Symphony* is a crucial work, marking the first purely instrumental manifestation of the allusive, impacted syntax that consistently underpins his late style. This 'Sinfonia Tragica' (originally unnumbered until Brian came to renumber his early symphonies, dropping the withdrawn original *Symphony No. 1* and slotting this one in as *No. 6*) began life as the orchestral prelude to an opera he planned on J.M. Synge's play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The opera never came to fruition, but the prelude – both a 'Sinfonia' in the sense in which it applied to the overture in Baroque opera and a true one-movement symphony in the mould of Sibelius's *Seventh* – remains one of Brian's most potent and compelling scores and one of the best introductions to his unique sound-world.

With the greatest possible economy, the opening instantly evokes a nocturnal ride through a wild, haunted, landscape. Mysterious trumpet fanfares, flecks of colour from the harp and tam-tam, and keening low flutes all add to the understated menace of this compressed and apparently fragmentary opening 'movement'. At length the steady tread of harps and low pizzicato strings supports the gradual unfolding in the violins of a noble, yet austere, almost chaste, melody. This processional moves to the woodwind, punctuated by hymn-like strings, before the melody returns, this time in warmer harmonies and richer colours, before being abruptly shut off in typically Brianic style. A steadily climbing, strikingly dissonant, passage of woodwind polyphony dissolves into a long cello melody supported by rippling harp arpeggios. Drums and cymbals mark a change in mood and the long-anticipated catastrophe finally erupts in a ferocious climax, with baleful horns howling above a violently rhythmic accompaniment from the full orchestra. A diversion into lighter *scherzando* music offers momentary relief before the dark forces seem to gather and swoop once again.

A lamenting cor anglais heralds a return of the earlier funereal tread, leading to an ambiguous major/minor cadence, snuffed out at the last by a soft gong stroke.

Single-movement structures of the kind explored in *Symphony No. 6* were to become a constant fascination for Brian over the coming two decades: *Symphonies Nos. 8, 10, 12-17, 24 and 31* are all one-movement works. By contrast, others seek to re-engage with aspects of classical symphonic writing; in the cases of *Symphonies Nos. 28 and 29* both works idiosyncratically re-imagine the four-movement classical symphony. These two symphonies (and *No. 30* also) were composed in 1967 when Brian was 91 years old, respectively bearing dedications to Robert Simpson and to the sculptor Robert Thomas, whose bronze bust of the composer can be seen on the cover of the present recording. *Symphony No. 28*, received its première in a 1973 studio broadcast by the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by no less a figure than Leopold Stokowski, himself 91 years old at the time. In the event though, Stokowski's bizarre interpretation distorted the work to such an extent that one could reasonably describe the present recording, the first time the work has been played since that première, as its first real performance. The work that is now revealed may well count as one of Brian's most extraordinary late creations.

Brian initially referred to the symphony as a 'divertimento', eventually settling on the title 'Sinfonia in C minor' (unusually, the same key as its predecessor). Both titles may have significance: the work certainly starts out in 'divertimento' mood, though as we shall see, that mood is swept away as the piece goes on and 'Sinfonia' is a term Brian seems to have reserved for variously unorthodox or experimental works (among them, *Nos. 6, 22, 23 and 30*). The four brief movements essentially run without a break, the third and fourth being seamlessly connected.

The opening movement is perky and fleet-footed, with relatively little of the heavy bass-line tread so characteristic of Brian. Scraps of melody are tossed around in a continuous development of ideas. Only occasionally does an eerie sonority here or a mysterious texture there offer a glimpse of the deeper, darker waters

that lie ahead and only at the very end, as the tempo slows and a strange swirling chord progression engulfs the music, shutting off further development, do we sense that this 'divertimento' may not be quite what it seems.

The second movement's opening has something of the character of a minuet. Though less carefree than its predecessor, the lyricism of the opening clarinet figure lends a homely, almost nostalgic feeling to the music, a feeling that is gradually undermined as the movement proceeds and more disturbing forces come into play.

If the later stretches of the second movement sound brittle and harsh, the opening of the next comes as blessed relief with the gradual unfolding of a long and beautiful string melody. Once again though, the comforting mood is eroded, as increasingly tense harmony, angular counterpoint and what is in this context the strange and alien sound of the vibraphone – a sort of aural 'smear' across the musical landscape – serve to ratchet the tension ever closer to breaking-point.

At the moment of greatest intensity the finale bursts out in all its swaggering, fanfare-laden brutality. Here, in addition to eleven percussionists, Brian demands an extra three trumpets, taking the total to six players. A central section builds in excitement over a sustained pedal-note in the bass before broadening into a grand peroration of quite remarkable savagery. At its height, the music is suddenly shut off and a quiet cadence, like an insouciant shrug of the shoulders, brings this astonishing and disturbing symphony to a close.

It seems scarcely credible that, upon completing *No. 28* in mid-May 1967, the 91-year old composer then finished the first draft of *Symphony No. 29* by 1st June, with the full orchestral score following by the end of July, but such was Brian's creative energy in these last years. The new symphony is perhaps Brian's most lyrical late work, pursuing in a more emotionally expansive way the warm-hearted and generous impulses that *No. 28* had intermittently revealed and ruthlessly shut down. Almost double the length of its predecessor, *No. 29* also comes closer than its predecessor had to the classical four movement model, though once again, the movements play without a break.

The symphony opens with a sweeping slow introduction of celebratory splendour, leading to the main part of the movement, a lively and energetic *Allegro* full of boisterous good humour. A central lyrical passage begins in simple two-part imitative counterpoint (such a texture being unusual in Brian's work), before opening out into more elaborate polyphony. A varied recapitulation of the opening *Allegro* leads not so much to an ending as a cessation of activity, leading the ear directly into the slow movement.

In contrast with the opening movement's expansiveness, this movement is relatively brief, but emotionally wide ranging. It progresses through a calm, lyrical opening paragraph initiated by a tune in the solo oboe, through a graceful central section exploring alternating phrases in solo woodwind (and at one point solo violin, doubled by flute) to a return of the oboe tune and a fully scored, rather martial development. Once again, the conclusion is attenuated, leading directly to the next movement.

This movement is a playful *Scherzo*, delicately scored and omitting heavy brass and all but the gentlest percussion sounds. At the centre stands a genuine *Trio*, in the sense that the opening really uses only three instruments (a clarinet and two bassoons). Later, when strings join in, the contrapuntal texture retains its three distinct strands. A more fully scored return to the *Scherzo*, soon winds down in preparation for the *Finale*.

Here we encounter a return to the celebratory mood of the first movement, now amplified in both character and volume by full brass and percussion. As the movement progresses, more disquieting material undermines the music's confidence until it becomes evident that any expectations of a triumphalist peroration will be confounded. Instead the music dissolves into a mysterious coda, filled with the rich sonority of low woodwind and multi-divided strings, eventually cadencing

onto a glowing chord of E flat major – a conclusion that is as magical as it is concise.

If the end of *No. 29* has something of a valedictory atmosphere, the mood did not extend to Brian's creativity; between this symphony and the eventual cessation of Brian's creative work in late 1968 (mainly due to failing eyesight) lay three more symphonies and the orchestral 'Legend', *Ave atque vale*. *No. 30* was to prove an even wilder work than *No. 28* had been, but *Symphony No. 31* is a very different affair. Brian composed it in the early months of 1968, and it is one of his most poised late creations. Cast in a single movement of barely thirteen minutes' length, the symphony is a free polyphonic fantasia, based on the simplest material: a descending four note scale. Throughout the opening paragraph that leads to the first main climax, there is barely a bar in which the scale, either in its original descending form or turned upside down, cannot be clearly heard somewhere in the texture.

The following section, dominated at first by wind instruments, treats the material more freely, until a lyrical passage for strings concentrates on the scale in its rising form. Robust development follows, in which the scale takes on a new guise, with a dotted rhythmic figure applied to it. Skittering semiquaver movement follows the outline of the scale and brings a *scherzando* mood to bear on the material, while a gentle violin solo reflects on the lyrical dimension of the work. And so the music continues: sometimes delicate, sometimes uproarious, always developing its material in ingenious and unexpected ways. At length, a mood of seriousness comes to bear, from which the music slowly climbs to a grandly scored conclusion, that scrap of a scale with which the work began now striding confidently downwards through the bass of the orchestra.

John Pickard

New Russia State Symphony Orchestra

Artistic Director and Chief Conductor: Yuri Bashmet

The Novaya Rossiya (New Russia) State Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1990. In 2002 Yuri Bashmet became its director, opening a new chapter in its history and bringing his own inimitable manner of interpretation, whereby each concert evokes the feeling that the music is being created anew. Appearing with the orchestra have been soloists and conductors of the highest international distinction. Novaya Rossiya is a frequent guest at festivals in Russia and abroad, including the Moscow Easter Festival, the Alfred Schnittke Festival in Moscow, the Besançon Festival in France, the Elba Isola Musicale d'Europa in Italy, the Athens Festival in Greece and the Festival of Russian Art in Essen, Germany. Since 2008 the orchestra has taken part in the annual Bashmet Winter Music Festival in Sochi, and the International Yuri Bashmet Music Festival in Yaroslavl and Minsk. The orchestra regularly plays a subscription series under the auspices of the Moscow Philharmonic Association, with varied programmes aimed at both adult and younger listeners. It has often toured abroad, notably to Finland, France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Greece, Switzerland, Austria, Bulgaria, Holland, Spain, Japan, India and Turkey. It also tours at home. The orchestra boasts a wide repertoire and frequently gives premières of contemporary works.



Photo: Oleg Nachinkin, Varvara Weymann

Alexander Walker

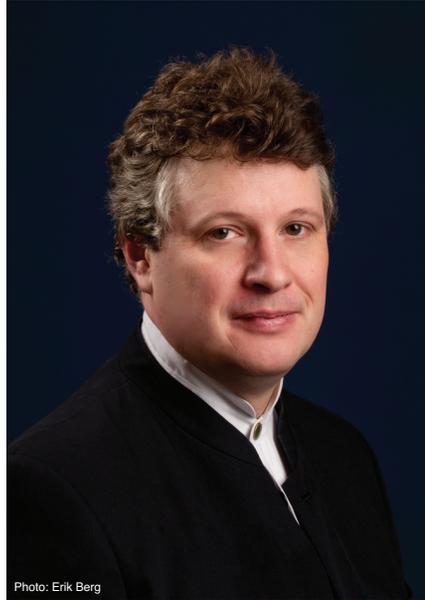


Photo: Erik Berg

Alexander Walker's career has taken him all over the world. He is highly regarded for his interpretations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music from Central and Eastern Europe, and he has introduced British music to many audiences unfamiliar with it, throughout Europe and elsewhere. In the UK he works regularly as a guest conductor with many major orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, City of London Sinfonia and the English Chamber Orchestra. International engagements include frequent appearances with the Russian State Symphony Orchestra, New Russia State Symphony Orchestra, George Enescu Philharmonic and the Belgrade Philharmonic, as well as orchestras throughout Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Denmark, Finland, Romania, the Balkans and Turkey. He has conducted at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, touring with the Royal Ballet to the Metropolitan Opera, Kennedy Centre and elsewhere in the United States, at the Bolshoy and Mariinsky Theatres in Russia, and in South Korea, Japan and Singapore. He has been Music Director for productions for the Norwegian and Finnish National Operas and elsewhere. He conducted the first ever production of an opera by Britten in Turkey for Istanbul State Opera.

Havergal Brian's extraordinary late creativity is almost unparalleled in musical history. Between the completion of *Symphony No. 6* in 1948 and the end of his compositional life two decades later he wrote 26 symphonies. *No. 6* marks a crucial point in his adoption of more concise forms and economy of expression in its single-movement span, a process taken even further in the brief but free polyphonic fantasia of *No. 31*. In *Symphonies Nos. 28* and *29* Brian turned to the classical four-movement model but one which is wholly and idiosyncratically re-imagined. The intensity and even savagery of *No. 28* is balanced by *No. 29*, Brian's most lyrical late work.



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| 1 | Symphony No. 6 'Sinfonia Tragica' (1948) | 19:53 |
| | Symphony No. 28 (Sinfonia in C minor) (1967)* | 14:00 |
| 2 | Moderato – | 2:58 |
| 3 | Grazioso e leggiero – | 3:28 |
| 4 | Andante espressivo – | 3:45 |
| 5 | Allegro vivo | 3:49 |
| | Symphony No. 29 in E flat major (1967)* | 23:02 |
| 6 | Adagio – Allegro – | 9:00 |
| 7 | Lento cantabile sempre – | 4:22 |
| 8 | Allegretto grazioso – | 4:13 |
| 9 | Adagio – Allegro molto – Adagio | 5:27 |
| 10 | Symphony No. 31 (in one movement) (1968) | 12:56 |

***WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS**

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Cover: Bust of Havergal Brian by Welsh sculptor Robert Thomas, the dedicatee of *Symphony No. 29*
(Photo courtesy of the Havergal Brian Society)