



Havergal
BRIAN

Symphonies Nos. 7 and 16

The Tinker's Wedding: Overture

**New Russia State
Symphony Orchestra**

Alexander Walker



Havergal Brian (1876–1972)

The Tinker's Wedding: Overture • Symphony No. 7 in C major • Symphony No. 16

Although Havergal Brian's reputation firmly rests on the 32 symphonies he wrote between 1919 and 1968, there is ample evidence that the composer himself considered his main ambitions and accomplishments to lie in the field of musical drama. Writing to Granville Bantock in 1918, Brian asserted: 'I shall never write anything but opera in the future – all my instrumental work will spring from some operatic scheme.' Forty years, twelve symphonies, a huge 'lyric drama' and five operas later, it seems that not much had changed. Writing to Harold Truscott in 1958, Brian said: 'Most of my symphonies are a growth from poetry or the [sic] drama.'

Although largely self-educated, Brian was extremely well read and his literary tastes, at least as they informed his songs, choral works and operas, reveal, with occasional lapses, a high level of critical discernment. Nor were they confined to the English language. Brian had taught himself German, French and Italian and two of his operas, *Turandot* (1950–51) and *Faust* (1955–56), set Schiller and Goethe in the original German. Elsewhere, Shakespeare, Shelley, Blake, Herrick and Keats were among the poets he repeatedly set, and his final opera *Agamemnon* (1957) is based on *Aeschylus*.

Brian's 1918 letter to Bantock also expressed a desire to set to music the Irish playwright J.M. Synge (1871–1909). Although a direct musical setting never emerged, in 1948 Brian produced two Synge-based orchestral works: *Sinfonia Tragica*, inspired by *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, and the *Overture to The Tinker's Wedding*, based on Synge's eponymous comedy.

Brian's lively and witty overture makes an appealing introduction to the composer's later style. Though relatively uncomplicated in its musical material, the sudden disjunctions in the musical flow are highly characteristic, undermining the otherwise straightforward sonata form structure of the whole piece, as well as providing moments of mischievous comic contrast. The orchestral writing, meanwhile, is every bit as quirkily virtuosic as that of any of his symphonies.

The Tinker's Wedding was among the very few later Brian works that did not have to wait long for a performance. In 1949 it was played through in a rehearsal by the BBC Scottish Orchestra conducted by Eric Warr, and in 1950 and 1951 it received broadcast performances by the same forces.

Following the completion in 1944 of his vast setting of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a work over which he had laboured for seven years, Brian had composed nothing new for over three years. Then in 1948, the floodgates opened again. Not only did he complete the two Synge-based works, but also his *Symphony No. 7*, all in the space of one year. Unlike *The Tinker's Wedding* though, the symphony had to wait until 1968 for a performance, which was finally given in a BBC broadcast by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Harry Newstone.

After completing his first four symphonies, Brian's conception of symphonic writing began to change, with huge structures being replaced by much more concise ones. At around 40 minutes in length, the *Seventh* is the last of his really big symphonies, but it nevertheless treats its material succinctly and the orchestral forces required are no longer outsize, but those of a standard symphony orchestra, plus a fourth trumpet and additional percussionists.

Late in life, Brian was explicit about the symphony's literary inspiration. Goethe was a lifelong obsession: *Faust* had already been a fundamental inspiration behind the *Gothic Symphony* (1919–27) and was to become the basis of Brian's fourth opera. Writing to Malcolm MacDonald late in life, Brian described the *Seventh* as:

'an English Symphony on a German subject much as Hamlet is an English play on a Danish subject ... [it] came into existence after my reading Goethe's Autobiography ... and that part which dealt with his life in Strassburg [sic] as a Law student – his love for the Cathedral and other loves. Life was full and

exciting for him. All the more strange when once he left Strassburg for Weimar where he lived all his life, he never returned to Strassburg – hence "Once upon a time".'

Brian alludes here to the title he gave to the *Epilogue* finale and implicitly draws attention to the nostalgic character of much of the music, especially from the third movement onwards. Brian never visited France (or Germany for that matter), so the nostalgic element seems to be deeply embedded in his reading of Goethe or perhaps, yet more deeply, in reminiscences that have nothing to do with Goethe and Strassburg at all, but with his own English background, for, as several writers have remarked, much of the *Seventh Symphony* is profoundly English in character. Moreover, as the nostalgic element becomes more prominent, so the music tends to become increasingly dark and troubled, as though the memories that the music seems to evoke are not entirely happy ones.

A further layer of interpretation is possible. By the time he wrote this symphony, a mere three years after the end of the Second World War, Brian, the lifelong and passionate lover of German culture, must have been painfully aware of the atrocities that had been committed in the name of the nation he so admired. The blow to his confidence in a culture that had so profoundly nourished his own work was surely immense. In that respect he was far from being alone among his countrymen: Brian's idol, Elgar, had experienced a similar shock during and after the First World War. Perhaps at some level the *Seventh Symphony* represents a coming to terms with the reality of a glorious cultural legacy that now seemed so disastrously sullied. Perhaps this accounts for the curious combination of nostalgia and violent repudiation that seems fundamental to later portions of this emotionally complex work.

The symphony opens with a splendid fanfare for trumpets and percussion, setting the tone for the first movement's festive and optimistic character. At the centre though, the music seems to withdraw into a hushed and reflective inner world, far removed from the bustle of the movement's outer sections.

The second movement begins by extending the festive atmosphere of the first, but almost immediately the ebullient tapestry of sound shreds into disruptive dissonance, to be replaced by nervously scurrying woodwind solos. These conflicting types of music form the basis of an expanding A–B–A–B–A structure, where A becomes increasingly clangorous and ceremonial, and B increasingly dance-like and raucous (including, at one point, a wonderful evocation of a passing brass band), before the whole vision vanishes amid the tolling of bells.

With the third – and longest – movement, the mood decisively changes. After a lonely introduction in which rustling lower strings underpin a remote solo horn theme, a delicate *scherzo* gets underway. It is strange music, full of dense shadows and mysterious half-lights, and it turns out to be the start of another A–B–A–B–A structure, in which A (the *scherzo*) becomes gradually more substantial and assertive, and B is a trio section, featuring an important theme first heard on a solo flute and later, in the trio's return, in a gloriously harmonised version for clarinets, bassoons and horns. The final return of the *scherzo* reaches an abrupt climax, whereupon the second half of the movement begins. This is the symphony's first extended section of slow music, expanding lyrically upon the trio theme in a passage of great contrapuntal elaboration. As the texture winds down, the mood darkens and, with shocking suddenness, a violent storm is unleashed, ripping the slow movement's main theme into whirling fragments. The storm subsides as suddenly as it had appeared and, in the movement's extended coda, a solo violin soars ecstatically as if against a clear blue sky.

The finale, marked *Epilogue: 'Once upon a time' (Moderato)*, is far more than a simple coda, for it contains some of the darkest and most questioning music in the entire symphony. Supporting the whole structure is a dogged march rhythm, announced by the horns at the very opening. Though determined in character, the rhythm is by no means funereal. Instead it has a sense of purposeful forward momentum and a flexibility of character which enables it to sustain a wide range of textures and moods. Sometimes it disappears entirely,

but its influence is rarely absent for long. The movement's progress traverses two ferocious climaxes, the second of which comes near the end and seems to distil a lifetime's frustration in a bitter and savage outburst. The music sinks down and a tragic, or at least resigned, ending seems inevitable. But Brian, the least self-pitying of composers, has a surprise in store: the very last chord brings back the bell sound from the end of the second movement in a glowingly-scored A major triad. Nostalgia, bitterness and resignation are banished; instead a new and unexpected vista seems to have suddenly opened, filled with new hopes, new challenges and new opportunities.

Symphony No. 16 belongs to a group of five symphonies (Nos. 13–17) that Brian wrote in the space of just 15 months between November 1959 and January 1961. This creative outburst followed a two-and-a-half-year hiatus in which Brian wrote no music at all and the return to composition seems to have triggered in the octogenarian composer a taste for experimentation. All five symphonies are highly original single movement structures and, as might be expected of experimental works, their individual artistic success varies. *No. 16* is perhaps the most impressive of the group and an undoubted pinnacle among Brian's later works. The achievement is all the more astounding considering that not only was Brian 84 years old when he wrote the symphony, but that he still had another 16 symphonies and four other orchestral works ahead of him.

Brian composed the work between June and July 1960, finishing the full score on 8 August. The dates are potentially revealing, because in later life Brian had a habit of 'lying fallow' compositionally during the summer months. That he was moved to break the habit here suggests a level of compulsion, borne out in the intensity of the music; indeed, Brian referred to the composition of the work as an 'obsession'.

Almost nothing is known about the motivations behind this savage, fearless music, except that, in a letter to the composer Robert Simpson, Brian mentioned that at the time of the work's composition he had been re-reading Herodotus's account of the heroic defeat of the Greeks by the Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae. Quite how the

account became translated into music one can only speculate, since, with characteristic obliqueness, Brian's remark was made in reference to his next symphony, commenting only that that particular work did not have a literary origin. Nevertheless, *No. 16* is notable not only for its frequently aggressive and martial character, but, more indefinitely, for its mysterious aura, as though the music were peering through the mists of time to glimpse a brutal antiquity.

No. 16 is also one of Brian's most thoroughly radical works. Formally, it bears no relationship to any previous symphonic model; harmonically, it contains some of Brian's most complex and dissonant harmonic constructions and, tonally, it resists clear definition until, literally, the final chord. The orchestra is extremely large, including quadruple woodwind, six horns, four trumpets and ten percussionists, and is deployed with striking virtuosity, often in wild flights of colouristic fantasy.

As with Sibelius's single-movement *Seventh Symphony*, any attempt to construe this music in terms of conventional symphonic design is as impossible as it is pointless. Instead, it is the continual growth and transformation of the basic material that gives the work its form and substance. Some pointers, however, will guide the listener through the structure.

The symphony begins in a state of uneasy calm. Over a soft chord, a solo oboe explores a flickering, hesitant, almost improvisatory figure, from which almost all of the symphony's material ultimately derives. As the theme is taken up and continually transformed, first by the other woodwind principals, then in the bass of the orchestra, the tension gradually mounts, leading to the second main section. This *Allegro moderato* is tough contrapuntal music which culminates in a vehement uproar, reminiscent of some of the terrifying climaxes is Brian's *Symphony No. 4 'Das Siegeslied'*. There follows an extended section which the writer Malcolm MacDonald characterised as a kind of 'anti-passacaglia': a regular six beat 'ground' overlaid by variations of fantastically imaginative character – except that the actual pitches of the 'ground' refuse to conform to any repeating pattern – instead they are continually morphing into new shapes.

Only the plodding rhythm remains constant, and even that sometimes switches from a six to a seven-beat pattern.

After a climax, the texture abruptly switches to the glacial sound of celesta and harp, and three oboes and a cor anglais intoning a plangent transformation of the work's opening above quietly tolling timpani. A passage of glowing polyphony in strings and winds leads to the only real moment of punctuation in the symphony, a (highly provisional) A major cadence in the strings, before a rapid and bizarre fugue strikes up in four bassoons, spreading quickly through the rest of the orchestra. A slower 'trio' section offers brief respite, before the fugue sets off again leading to a fierce climax.

The final section is slow, at first ruminative, then leading into a dramatic coda whose gradual ratcheting up of dissonance and intensity culminates in a wild outburst from the full orchestra and an extraordinary closing gesture: four grinding discords, a slowly climbing scale and an audacious final harmonic sidestep that manages to be both startling and utterly inevitable. It is a tremendous conclusion to a tremendous symphony, one that Brian never lived to hear – the work was premiered the year after his death by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Myer Fredman.

John Pickard

New Russia State Symphony Orchestra

Artistic Director and Chief Conductor: Yuri Bashmet



Photo: Oleg Nachinkin, Varvara Weymarn

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, the United Kingdom, 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 premieres of contemporary works.

www.nros.ru

Alexander Walker



Photo: Erik Berg

Alexander Walker's career has taken him all over the world. He is highly regarded for his interpretations of 19th- and 20th-century music from Central and Eastern Europe, and he has introduced British music to many audiences unfamiliar with it, throughout Europe and elsewhere. In 2017 the Elgar Society awarded him with the Elgar Medal for the work he has done to champion the composer's music. 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, Musica Viva, the New Russia State Symphony Orchestra, the George Enescu Philharmonic and the Belgrade Philharmonic, as well as many other orchestras throughout Europe. He has conducted at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, touring with the Royal Ballet to the United States, at the Bolshoi 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 conducted the first ever production of an opera by Britten in Turkey for Istanbul State Opera.

www.alexanderwalker.org

Havergal Brian's late creativity is almost unparalleled in musical history – in the last two decades of his life he wrote 25 symphonies. *No. 7*, the last of his truly large-scale symphonies, was inspired by Goethe's autobiographical account of his time as a student in Strasbourg. *Symphony No. 16* is a tough single-movement work, evoking Ancient Greece and the savagery of the Persian Wars. In bright contrast *The Tinker's Wedding* is a sparkling comedy overture based on the play by J.M. Synge.



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The Tinker's Wedding: Overture (1948)	8:02
① Allegro vivace giocoso – Meno allegro ma tranquillo – Allegro vivace giocoso	
Symphony No. 7 in C major (1948)	38:22
② I. Allegro moderato	8:30
③ II. Allegro moderato ma maestoso	6:42
④ III. Adagio – Allegro moderato – Adagio	13:51
⑤ IV. Epilogue: 'Once upon a time' (Moderato)	9:08
⑥ Symphony No. 16 (1960)	15:19

New Russia State Symphony Orchestra

Nikolai Savchenko, Violin solo ④–⑤

Alexander Walker

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