

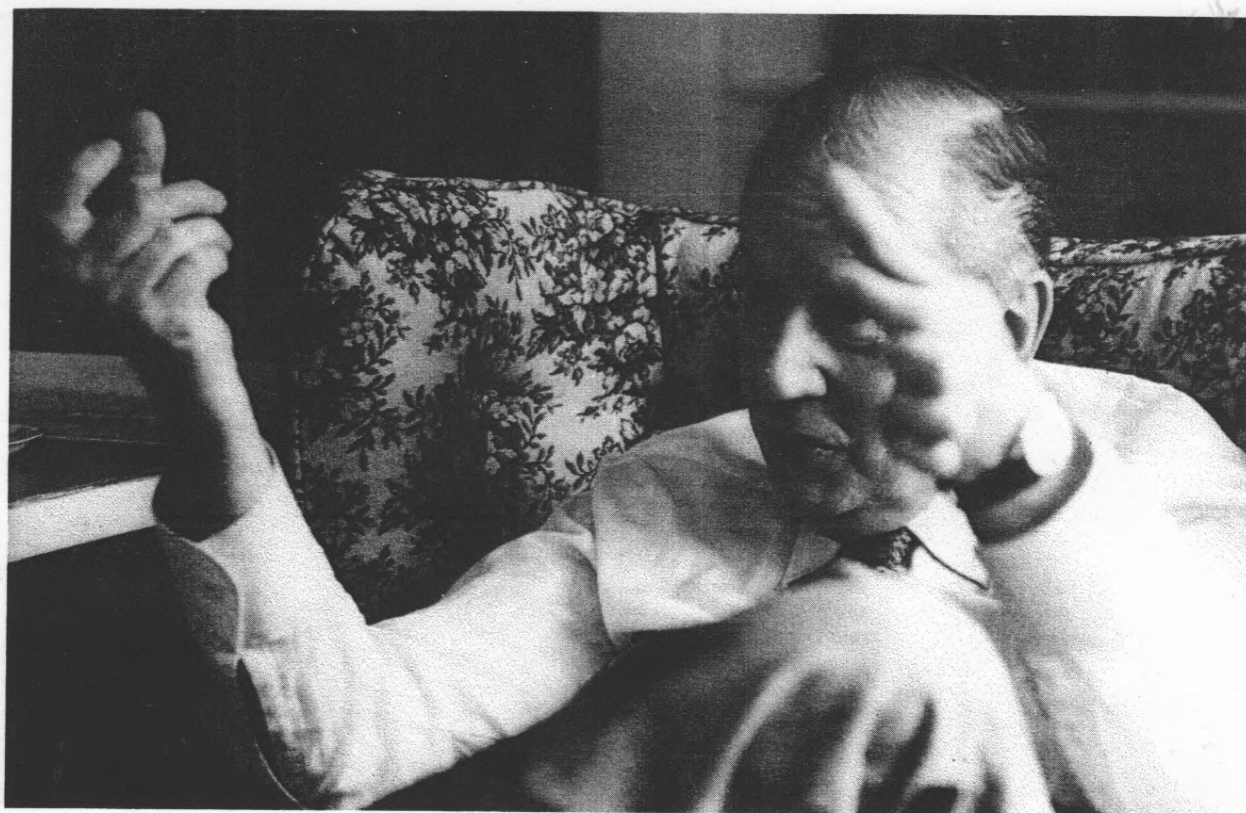
Malcom Arnold
England

Interview

‘A composer is a servant to the public.’
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Lance Bosman

Malcolm Arnold



“A Composer is a servant of the public”

Lance Bosman

Photos: GEORGE CLINTON

If Malcolm Arnold's music is appreciated for its directness and accessibility it is because it's intended to be so. This is not to suggest that his compositions are merely lightweight and elegant; for their attraction lies in outward lyricism frequently charged with inner tension and wholesome orchestration. However unselfconscious the tunes may seem, their apparent immediacy reveals little of the long deliberation behind them, sometimes taking years. Lines, structures, orchestral colouring are wrought in the mind's eye, refined to the last detail before one note is committed to paper.

It is Arnold's conviction that music should please and stimulate. He regards this as a social obligation on the composer, which he extends to other activities, including those in his local down the road, where he turns his hand to jazz piano. His love of jazz began before, and has continued with, his involvement in formal music. The indelible impression of the early jazz masters has filtered through Arnold's later orchestral writing in the *Second Clarinet Concerto*, written for Benny Goodman, in homage to Scott Joplin; the *Sixth Symphony* with its echoes of Charlie Parker's improvisations, and numerous film scores. But the strongest of these jazz influences is the guitar playing of Django Reinhardt, which inspired the blues movement of Arnold's *Guitar Concerto*.

Presently staying at Northampton, his hometown, Malcolm beckoned us through a door held at bay by a large volume on Béla Bartók. Looking well for his 61 years, he was at first reticent to expound on his

compositional technique, but soon warmed to the subject tingeing the gathering haze of tobacco smoke with a touch of verbal colour. At first outlining his wider objectives, it became clear that Arnold's consideration for society in general is specified in a particular aim; its enjoyment of his music.

“Music can provoke and make people think; but you can do it easily, and far better, in a simple way. It's no good making a mass of sound which you don't understand yourself, and expect other people to follow it. You've got to understand it clearly yourself. I mean, we had a marvellous experience last night, jazz down at the pub; and the audience — they could have kept the place open till five in the morning!

I hope I make my music widely accepted; music should uplift rather than depress. It should be concise and if possible, optimistic; you don't want to send people away from concerts feeling miserable, they should go away elated. The awful thing about the Festival Hall and the Barbican is that by the time the concert's over and you've perhaps gone back to meet the players, the bars are all bloody well closed. From the moment the last note dies away, you can't stand around and chat over a drink. There are no pubs in the Barbican; it's a bloody desert! Ever since the Festival Hall opened in 1951, when they played my overture *The Smoke* in a London programme, it's been the same — not even a cup of coffee. I used to have an apartment just round the back of the Albert Hall, so we could go there to talk, but for the public the sound of the

last note is a cultural "time gentlemen please". I feel sure an extension would be granted, perhaps until two in the morning, particularly at weekends".

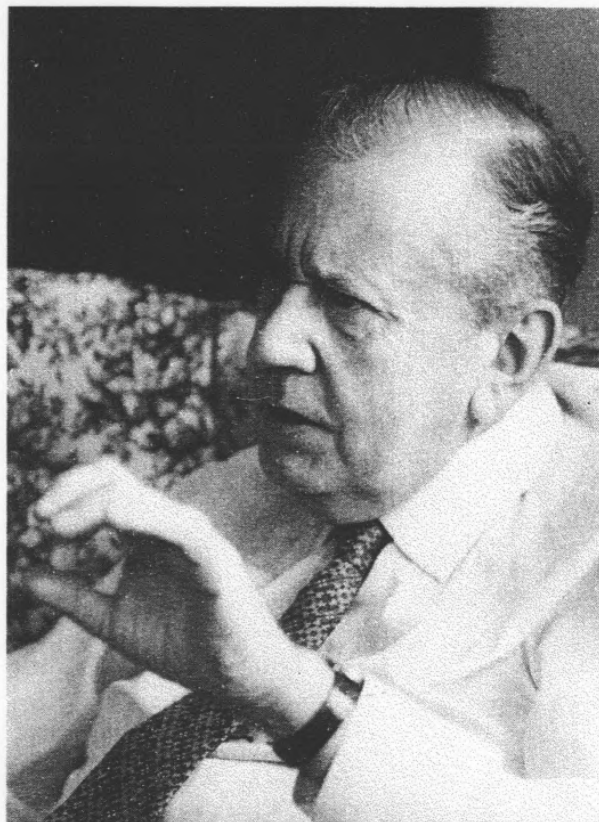
To date, after wide experience in performing, composing and conducting, Malcolm Arnold has over 122 published works to his credit. Born in 1921, he entered the Royal College of Music in 1938 to study trumpet, followed by a residence with the L.P.O. playing principal trumpet, he then joined the army. By 1950 his reputation as a composer was firmly established and elevated with a stream of commissions. Arnold's compositional style, its popular elements and absence of recondition, lends itself readily to film music, which amounts now to over 80 scores. Best known is that for *Bridge over the River Kwai* for which he received an Oscar; and *Inn of the Sixth Happiness* bringing the Ivor Novello Award.

As a measure of control over his film music, Arnold was canny enough to secure its performing rights. Moreover, he has his own publishing company for band and popular pieces, *Whistle Down the Wind* and *Lola's Theme* from Trapeze which reached No.1 in America. In recognition of his service to music, he received a Doctorate, Exeter University in 1969 and a C.B.E. in 1970. In addition to these is a recent accolade, Doctorate of Durham University. Yet in all Arnold's reminiscing of a life concerned for Society, having encountered all levels of it, these laurels seem as though incidentally acquired.

"I started the trumpet at an early age, wanting to play like Louis Armstrong. I was interested in jazz more than serious music; Beethoven came later; Delius and Stravinsky introduced me to serious music. After college, for eight years, I was principal trumpet but I got so fed-up sitting on my arse playing Beethoven and the classics night after night, that I felt I'd do better in one of the Forces. I tried the navy but I was much older than the other recruits — they were 17-18, I was 22. I then tried the paratroopers but was too old and too slow. By Christ, I'll never forget those days with the paratroopers, they nearly killed me. I had given up the L.P.O. to be posted into the Brass Band. I refused to blow — to play! I said I must get out, back to the L.P.O. because that's more use than playing cornet solos. So I pinched five rounds of ammunition and went into the bar, put three biscuits over my foot and shot myself through the left foot. The band was such a waste of time; I did all the training which didn't do any good. I didn't go down for a self-inflicted wound because the war was over then. They stopped me ten days pay, that's all. But I was glad I did it."

Jazz, relished long before his contact with classical music, endures as a potent element in Arnold's compositions. In the sonatas, particularly, spiky rhythms, melodies with a touch of humour and the occasional wound-up note reveal his debt to the idiom. "I try to play jazz on the piano, I used to accompany and improvise, always aiming to keep the melodic shape. If you get too far away and into the modern material of the last ten years, well it's only what composers were doing in 1913; it's only a hark-back, there's nothing avant-garde about it. The jazz I know, I often evoke it in film music. If it's wanted in the score — incidental jazz or Dixieland or whatever for piano, bluesy piano — I always write it myself. I followed jazz into modern Charlie Parker, but that's old-hat now; but some of it will live, Fats Waller, Jerome Kern and the one for all time, Reinhardt."

Circumscribing traditional phrasing, exact repetition and working to standard forms, Arnold's melodies are, nonetheless given imaginative breadth with vigorous harmony. Identified with the former 20th Century English generation of composers, is his music also basically diatonic and modal? "I have been told that. I believe in diatonic music, tonal music, but in fact I use the bloody lot, all aspects and written atonal music, I use my own style



of course — I don't ape Schoenberg. If you've got a 12-note system, that tells where the next note goes to, you don't have to hear or sing it. It's a very easy way if you run out of ideas".

Ideas not only germinate in Arnold's mind, they reach full realisation there before seeing light of day. Themes, harmony and instrumental textures of a prospective work are mentally thought out, refined to the final note. It seems remarkable that the prescribed melody when heard later or even traced on paper, shouldn't sometimes dictate a course other than that envisaged. "I never write it down until I've got the whole thing in my head; and that has applied to 123 published works. When I write, it's the whole movement out; the only stop is to rest my hand. Melodic qualities, that's what I go on; a good theme that's singable. By thinking of it, you think of the whole composition, the texture, before putting a note to paper. The time I take ruminating over a work varies. I intended to write *Cornish Dances* for 15 years, then eventually got around to doing it; and it didn't develop in stages, I visualised the whole plan."

Then to what extent during the thought-process is consideration given to a particular instrument's peculiarities? Past experience of wind instruments provides a mental fund of idea for compositions employing them. But what of the guitar, its expressive potential, timbres and its limitations? "Julian Bream recommends to composers the Villa Lobos studies, the music and the scores. I did this, but it still means having a go yourself. I mean, I couldn't have written my guitar concerto without trying the instrument out."

In memoriam Django Reinhardt and written at Julian Bream's request, the concerto is interesting not in being strikingly progressive, but because of its unusual merging of styles. In true sonata form, the first movement, modally based and folklike, sets-into-contrast its first subject a perky melody, with the second more lyrical and paced, before duly combining them in development. Introducing the blues movement, slurs from a forlorn sounding clarinet are heard against the murmur of the guitar which with its

opening statement veering from tonic to dominant, suggests the makings of a 12-bar. Diverted from this, the guitar then breaks suddenly into a faster pulse, only to return to its former tempo, now supported by slurred strings. Sudden switches of tempo are continued throughout the movement, giving the impression of a rhythmic change from four to three time, through the drive of blues triplets. The last movement is folklike again with all the lilt and character of a gigue. "I wrote the concerto really in memory of Reinhardt. It was first performed years ago by Julian at the Aldburgh Festival and the record he made of it is still in print, the same I conducted. He took about 12 takes over that slow movement but plays it marvellously. Yes, from those Villa Lobos studies I learned the range of textures and peculiarities of the guitar but I learned much more from the Reinhardt records. In the Concerto I used as many open strings as possible to give the texture resonance. The first phrase has open notes G and D underneath to give this, and then to that you have a light accompaniment. As I'm a great lover of Reinhardt, a girl from Canada sent me a lot of tapes with him playing and I gave them to Julian. By the way, have you heard Julian do 'Buddy Can You Spare a Dime?', he sings and plays that well. There is another recording of that concerto by John Williams (CBS 76715) and if I wrote another it would be for him for I've known him since he was 14. He's left-wing in politics, which incidental I am too, and he's a very modest man, especially in the light of his superb finger technique".



Of Arnold's other guitar music, *Serenade* (1955) also recorded by John Williams (CBS 76634), is romantically inclined, the guitar taking the prominent line supported by a string ensemble. Composed as a single movement and developed from one theme, this piece differs in construction from the solo *Fantasy for Guitar* (1970). Several short movements with various forms and textures bear no thematic connection apart from the Prelude and Postlude framing them. "Instead of calling them sonatas I write single movements, about 7 or 8 short ones, preferring the term Fantasies. I've written one for harp, one for flute, oboe, clarinet, for every wind instrument. That for guitar was written for Julian Bream. The other forms I like, well, one is the chaconne. I think the first person to use it in recent times was Alan Rawsthorne in his 1st Piano Concerto. In this the chaconne goes up a semitone per cycle. It ends on a tierce de picardie which takes you up a semitone each time. It has 7-bar phrases, the eighth, taking the picardie with its raised semitone. The harmonic implication is always the same: One chord per bar, the variations are always within the contact of that chord, against accented appoggiaturas causing a clash, notes held through and they never resolve. I apply this technique in the second movement of my 3rd Symphony."

What spurs or inspires composition? Reinhardt and various performers have been the motivating force behind particular works and formative musical education must

have had a permanent bearing on later technical and thought patterns. Less tangible are the influences such as moods engendered by other writers' music in which that composer finds empathy and so wishes to recreate: The somnolence of Delius, or even of the subjects he conveyed. "I think the love of nature, the love of people, these inspire me. I love Delius; he was the only man who got successfully away from tonality, who wanted to create a permanent state of orgasm, a state of half-awake, of bliss. I used to conduct a lot of his music 'On Hearing the First Cuckoo' and *Summernight on the River*'. I remember a particular concert where we had those and Benny Goodman playing Mozart and my 2nd Clarinet Concerto."

"To teach composition I would start with strict 16th century counterpoint in the modes, and let free work run parallel with that. Formal harmony, 18th century, wouldn't come into it; that comes naturally. All music should be counterpoint. Vertical combinations, I would think come naturally; you get them all in *musica ficta*; in the 16th century you've got all the harmonic freedom. From modal counterpoint, e.g. Bach, you can take on tonal counterpoint. If you want then, there's a lot of non-existent chords like the 6ths, the Italian, the Neopolitan 6th; the only thing about the Neopolitan 6th is that the Beatles used it a lot."

The consistency of Malcolm Arnold's music has defied the passage of time. Its appeal, the language, remains as straightforward as ever. We might think that in transcending youthful blatency and the sophistication of maturity, his style would gradually transform, its message become obscured by subtlety and new projections; but for him, music serves a purpose, an objective he consistently keeps in sight. "Increasing economy, that's what one aims at; pare your music down with a knife. Otherwise, I think my music has become more involved with society. I believe a language has been forged. I like to think people can appreciate my style whether I play it; sing it, even standing on my head it's understandable. I don't have to compromise my style because it's natural. I can entertain playing the piano and singing in the pub."

"Henze, music of commitment to prompt awareness, that's a load of nonsense! Music can only express itself. It can inspire — you take certain tunes like 'Land of Hope and Glory'. The words aren't much cop, but the tune — whatever your political views are, you'll join in with the whole-body of the hall singing. I've an aversion to music that's introspective, too inward looking. You can describe my quartets in anyway, but not as introspective. If you're too complex, people haven't the time to sit down and work it out. There are not enough hours in the day, even for



what you want to do, let along listening to the innermost thoughts of a stranger. And that's why I think music should try to say things in words of one syllable."

"All art should be acceptable to everyone. You can state me as being dogmatic there. I think that serious composers who try to be high-faluting are a thorn in the side. If you're

a composer, you are a servant of the public, and you can never get out of that. It's a very frightening thing because you can never rest in your life's work; you've always got to go on and give more. If I had known that, I would have stopped when I was 40, because if you go on it must be forever.

Guitar Concierto Op.67 Malcolm Arnold. 2nd movement, Lento, from B.

Handwritten musical score for the 2nd movement, Lento, of the Guitar Concierto Op.67 by Malcolm Arnold. The score is written on ten staves, organized into five systems of two staves each. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings (e.g., *ff*, *f*, *mp*). The score is marked with section letters B, C, and D in boxes. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score concludes with a double bar line and a final dynamic marking of *ff*.