

Steve ELCOCK

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

FESTIVE OVERTURE, OP. 7 CHOSES RENVERSES PAR LE TEMPS OU LA DESTRUCTION, OP. 20 SYMPHONY NO. 3, OP. 16

> Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra Paul Mann

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

by Steve Elcock

I was born in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, in 1957 and studied at the local grammar school, where I obtained an A Level in music and learnt the violin up to grade 7. These are my only musical qualifications: as a composer I am otherwise self-taught. I began writing around age fifteen and have continued to do so ever since. In 1981 I moved to France, where I work in language services for companies. For a period of about ten years, I conducted the local amateur symphony orchestra, which played some of my early compositions.

In 2009 my short orchestral piece *Hammering* came to the attention of an old friend with whom I had all but lost touch. Mike George is a producer at the BBC and he was able to get the work performed in a BBC Philharmonic studio concert in Manchester (subsequently broadcast), conducted by James MacMillan. Although I was now 52, this was the first professional performance of any of my pieces.

At that concert I met the composer Robin Walker¹ and began an e-mail correspondence with him. He was very enthusiastic about my music and one day suggested I might send some scores and mock-ups to Martin Anderson at Toccata Classics. In June 2013, not believing for an instant that it would do any good, I plucked up enough courage to do so, posting him the Third and Fourth Symphonies and the symphonic poem *Wreck*. As I expected, there was no reaction throughout the summer months. And then in late August I received the following e-mail from Martin:

Your scores have been sitting at my elbow for what I thought was a week or two, waiting for my deadlines to let up for long enough to clear the desk and read and listen. Finally, I

¹ Four orchestral works by Robin Walker – the two symphonic poems *The Stone Maker* (1995) and *The Stone King: Symphonic Poem* (2005), the funeral march *Great Rock is Dead* (2007) and the Prelude to the opera *Odysseus on Ogygia* (2011) – are recorded on Toccata Classics Tocc 0283, with the Novava Rossiva Symphony Orchestra contected by Alexander Walker.

thought, I must find the time – and am deeply embarrassed to discover that our last contact was in June. My apologies, then: I didn't realise I had left you that long without a reaction. Anyway, I have now just sat down with the scores and the MIDI realisations and I am blown away by the quality of what I have just heard. All three works are astonishingly good, and the symphonies in particular are, not to put too fine a point on it, fucking terrific. It has to be some of the best orchestral music written by a British composer [...] in the past half-century.

Martin quickly followed up his first e-mail with another:

I've since found your website and listened to all the material there, too. It reinforces my earlier reaction. That music of this quality can have gone under the radar for so long is difficult to believe [...].

The immediate result of Martin's enthusiasm was a request from a friend of his, David Conway, founder and director of the 'Indian Summer of Music' festival in Levoča, Slovakia, to perform my string quartet *The Girl from Marseille* in October 2014, which duly happened. It was followed the year after with a performance of another work for string quartet, *The Cage of Opprobrium*, written especially for Levoča. The longerterm result has been that, from knowing absolutely no one in the world of music, I have now made a number of acquaintances (some of whom I am proud to call friends), all thanks to Martin. My music has found an enthusiastic response from composers David Matthews, David Hackbridge Johnson, Robin Walker and Michael Csányi-Wills, composer-academics John Pickard and Francis Pott, writer on music Anthony Phillips, music-historian David Conway, musicologist Paul Rapoport, and conductors Mark Eager, Paul Mann and Dmitry Vasilyev.

I dedicated *Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction* to Paul Mann, for his inestimable help in bringing my works to performance. The Third Symphony is dedicated to Mike George, who was the first link in the chain that ultimately brought my music to the attention of Martin Anderson. The first symphony I wrote after meeting Martin, my Fifth, is dedicated to him as a small measure of my thanks for bringing my music to the attention of the public.

CRAFTSMANSHIP AND RAW EMOTION: STEVE ELCOCK'S SYMPHONIC WORKS

by Paul Mann

'Such is the spell of your emotional world,' wrote Liszt of Schubert, 'that it very nearly blinds us to the greatness of your craftsmanship.' By the same token, the most remarkable thing about the music of Steve Elcock is that its compositional integrity, meticulous craftsmanship and inexorable symphonic logic can all too easily pass unnoticed under the sheer force of its emotional impact. Indeed, if, as has often been suggested, there has been a crisis of communication in contemporary 'classical' music, it seems entirely to have passed him by.

My first contact with Steve Elcock's music came when Martin Anderson sent me a few full scores along with the composer's MIDI computer realisations. Even listening through the vagaries of a virtual orchestra, it was immediately apparent that this was something special, an impression that was reinforced when I discovered the backstory. Here was a composer, already in his late fifties, who had been writing music all his life but, except on a handful of rare occasions, had not heard any of it played. For anyone under those circumstances to have continued to produce music with such sureness of touch and possessed of so much uncompromising emotional fearlessness was, to say the least, unusual.

Steve's music is an immersive experience, as I hope the present recording demonstrates. The two major works heard here inhabit an emotional world to which it is impossible to remain indifferent. Like a film director or novelist, the composer takes his audience by the hand (or, in his case, at times grabs it by the throat) and does not let go until the final notes have died away.

¹ Letter to Sigmund Lebert, dated 2 December 1868, as Liszt was preparing his instructive edition of Schubert's piano music (cf. Franz Liszts Briefe, ed. La Mara, Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, Vol. 1, 1893, p. 133), as paraphrased by Alfred Brendel in 'Schubert's Piano Sonatas, 1822–28', Music, Sense and Nonsense, The Robson Press, London, 2015, p. 141.

The Third Symphony was composed between 2005 and 2010 and is a vast canvas generated, as with all true symphonies, from the smallest of motivic ideas, in this case, an altercation between two chromatically adjacent notes, B flat and C flat. Most of the considerable drama of the music can be traced to this essential conflict.

The first movement (*Allegro*) Degins by alternating in quick succession two completely contrasting musical ideas. The composer says that the opening theme came to him while walking on a beach in Brittany. It must have been a fairly bracing day, because the brass snarl out a biting, aggressive, rhythmically unstable march, constantly underpinned by the two conflicting tonalities. But within 30 seconds they are silenced by *pppp* divided strings, with music that is both completely static and constantly shifting. The score instructs the musicians to play on the threshold of audibility, and the resulting texture provides the disquieting backdrop for a new idea played in the lowest register of the alto flute. Although the music has a lyrical quality, it is without warmth, as if dehumanised.

This equally short episode is, in its turn, brutally interrupted by a cymbal clash and the return of the brass march, now developed with ferocious energy by the rest of the orchestra. The music drives relentlessly forward, less metrically unstable than before, but far more aggressive, culminating in a four-bar solo outburst from the timpani.

The static music returns, but the alto flute is now joined by flute, oboe and clarinet *soli* in canonic imitation, and it is here that the music seems to develop a human face, with a degree of warmth infiltrating the lyricism. But it will not be allowed to do so easily; twice the music attempts a *crescendo*: the first is abortive and the second is merely silenced. The flute and clarinet then vary the alto flute tune over nervous trills in the strings and for the first time the music blossoms a little, reaching some kind of culmination, but quickly turning sour and erupting with renewed violence.

The horns recall the opening march with a new variant, while the rest of the brass pile in with imitative recollections of their own. Woodwinds at the top of their register compete with screaming violins (an Elcock trademark) and the rhythmic energy is

intensified further in a perilously virtuosic passage of closely argued, tightly interlocking counterpoint.

A stand-off ensues between sharply syncopated violins and aggressive offbeat chords in the trombones and percussion. A shrieking climax is threatened but averted (for now) by a brief silence and a new section in which the horns take over the syncopations and the violins seem to recall their previous static music, but this time slithering around in a contorted, piercing, increasingly desperate *fortissimo*. A parodistic 'walking bass' propels the music forward towards a terrifying descent, punctuated by a tam-tam stroke, into the darkest lower regions of the orchestra.

The violas now kick-start a tautly rhythmic new section, in which a quiet, expressive line in muted trombone and trumpet, later taken over by the piccolo and eerie violin harmonics, is combined with brusque interjections in the tuba and an ironic recollection in the clarinets of the opening march theme, as if trying to provoke a conventional recapitulation. The movement is now heading towards its crisis. The violins try to add eloquence, but it quickly becomes a lurid grimace, and harsh chords from the brass punctuate their increasingly desperate dialogue with the violas.

The entire orchestra lands ff on a unison E flat and seems to splinter on impact, the five string-groups dividing into no fewer than eighteen separate parts, and the resulting texture seems made of dense quicksand. Trumpets and horns hurl out, in canon and with maximum brutality, the frail alto-flute solo from the beginning of the Symphony. The emotional high point of the music is now reached fff, with a deeply expressive line in the upper strings but which is once again deformed, and all the violins are left sliding incoherently between two semitones at the bottom of their register, as if staring at an open wound.

A brief resurgence of energy recalls the opening march for a final time, leading to a sudden increase in tempo for the brief and aggressive coda, based entirely on fragments of the march theme. The movement comes to an end with an intense and sustained fusion of two conflicting notes, which is abruptly torn off leaving only the clearing smoke of a suspended cymbal.

Out of the resulting silence, the percussion, together with divided violins and nastily *sul ponticello* violas, quietly set up the rhythmic framework in which a small army of bassoons (the Symphony, unusually, calls for four of them, including a contrabassoon), will begin what the composer describes, accurately enough, as an 'irritating' ostinato, attended by malicious sneers from two solo double basses 2. Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the grimness of the irony and black humour with which this entire movement is so highly charged. The rhythmic drive hardly relents; all is taut with nervous energy and barely contained ferocity.

At its dark, sarcastic heart the movement boasts what Elcock calls an 'embarrassingly banal' theme, which is again first heard in the bassoons, this time against a richly detailed accompaniment of divided strings. It is punctuated by a brief cadence figure, syncopated like a big-band cliché, which seems to serve both as part of the 'banal' theme and as an attempt to silence it. But its progress is not easily arrested, and it is taken up by a succession of instrumental factions with ever-increasing grotesquerie, like a hall of mirrors in a Hitchcock movie. It is heard first in the oboes with clarinets, and then by a trio of trumpets (with sickly-sweet accompaniment from the violins and squirming quasi glissando clarinets), next in 'fife and drums' style, with piccolo, flutes, rattling xylophone and muted toy trumpet, and finally those perennial orchestral comedians, the trombones, are given a go. But by now the cadence motif is cutting the tune off after only a few bars, and a bell is peremptorily sounded, as if trying to put a stop to it all.

The cadence motif is now incessantly repeated, in an effort to banish the banality for good, and as it collapses down through the orchestra, the rhythmic momentum comes to rest for the only time in the movement. The strings briefly find a strange oasis of lyricism, but any thought that the mood may be about to change is quickly dispelled by a solo violin which has a last cheeky shot at the 'banal' theme before setting off a full recapitulation, which begins with the rather bizarre instrumental combination of string quartet, muted trombones and tambourine.

This time, as the climax is reached, the tempo suddenly presses forward and all hell breaks loose. The timpani pound out the ostinato theme, attended by violent tam-tam strokes, and a series of hideously contorted phrases on divided violins and woodwinds.

The horns, meanwhile, rear up like wild animals, bellowing out fragments of the banal theme. A xylophone adds to the brittle texture, and the movement ends with a brass augmentation of the theme, which only now reveals its true emotional origins, weighed down by tragedy.

The Passacaglia finale 3 follows without a pause, and crowns the Symphony with a movement of enormous richness and complexity, the product of a truly prodigious compositional imagination. Cast in two parts, and lasting almost twenty minutes, it is as long as the first two movements put together, and although it retains a single tempo and metre throughout, the demands on conductor and orchestra alike are extreme. What is more, all previous elements of sarcasm, irony and humour are banished from the Symphony, which will now play out as an epic tragedy.

The passacaglia theme is subject to a bewildering array of variations, set within a structural framework which would be ingenious even if the resulting music were not so vital and immediately engaging. The first part of the movement is organised so that eight bars of loud music are answered by eight bars of quiet music, then seven bars of loud music by nine bars of soft music, six loud and ten quiet, and so on, until a passage of total stasis is reached. At this halfway point, the second part of the movement begins, working its way towards an overwhelming peroration.

Elcock deploys every trick in the book in these variations, including inversion, diminution, augmentation and even, at one extraordinary moment, presenting the passacaglia theme in five different metrical configurations simultaneously. The brass also clearly refer back to their first-movement march theme, which now somehow seems such a long time ago, in another universe. It is followed by one of the weirdest passages in the movement, where the passacaglia theme is rattled out in miniaturised form by the xylophone, combined with strange noises from the tam-tam (scraped around its edge with a triangle beater) and a high muted horn. The final *coup de théâtre* of the first part of the movement comes in the form of a sweetly lyrical string quintet, gradually and relentlessly obliterated by an oncoming percussion section.

The two pivotal notes of the work, B flat and C flat, are now sounded together fff and held, the score instructs, 'for as long as possible as is consistent with the wind players having breath left to complete the phrase ...'.

The moment of stasis is now reached as the music dissolves into a series of *pianissimo* trills, with the strings divided into nineteen parts. (It is a moment which reminds this conductor, at least, of Shostakovich's similarly vivid depiction of fear, towards the end of the second movement of his Eleventh Symphony.) The trills are in fact picking out the passacaglia theme, and were it not for the lack of resolution and strong sense of tension, one might think the Symphony were about to come to a quiet close.

But this is only the halfway point. The divided violas twitch between those two conflicting tonalities of B flat and C flat, and each group of bars is punctuated by rapid scales which also derive from the passacaglia theme. As this section gathers momentum, the music reaches what the composer describes as 'the one extra-musical event in the symphony'. He explains:

I had seen a film about the Swiss traveller-writer Nicolas Bouvier, who visited the Kalash people in a region high up between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These admirable people appeared to have largely resisted any attempt to convert them to religion. In one sequence of the film we are shown a choir of Kalash passing a long sustained note from one singer to the next along the line of singers. Before the note had reached the end, another note a semitone higher (or so it seemed to me) was begun and similarly passed along the line. I have deliberately not looked at the film again, and this impression may be totally wrong, but it served to bring the final impetus to the symphony: from here on, the notes C flat or B flat are never absent, overlapping from instrument to instrument as the music grows in power.²

The energy builds in an ever-increasing display of orchestral and compositional virtuosity, and although the tempo has not changed since the beginning of the

² Composer's note, autumn 2016.

movement, the increase in activity within the beats gives a sense of the music now racing along at full tilt.

Finally, a peroration is reached, and with it the return of the opening bars, followed by a climactic brass paean throughout which the strings are grinding out the conflicting B flats and C flats. Just when a glorious technicolour ending seems assured, those two notes are crunched together one final time, and a precipitous descent all the way down through the orchestra lands with the utmost force unequivocally on C flat which, at this very last moment, seems to have gained the upper hand. But it has to fight for this victory, reiterating itself with increasing desperation in the final three bars, against both the prevailing metre and a final anguished cry of despair from the rest of the orchestra.

Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction ('Things knocked down by time or destruction') is a more recent work, dating from 2013. Here I may tell a personal story. In September 2016, Steve very kindly invited me to his beautiful home in the centre of France, where we spent a few days eating some wonderful food (Steve is a fine cook as well), drinking rather too much of the local wine and playing with his four lovely cats. We also found time to do a bit of work, and in particular to listen to some more of his music. One of the pieces he played me then was Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction, and although another work had already been slated for the recording, as soon as I heard this piece, I knew it had to be included. It's fair to say that it had an enormous impact on me, which has not dimmed during the past few months of preparing the performance on this recording.

As musicians, we can at least depend on the impermeability of the great music which sustains us and which time cannot erode. 'But what', this work seems to ask, 'if that were not the case?' The first of the three panels in Steve Elcock's symphonic triptych ('colonnes brisées' – 'broken columns') 4 takes the F sharp minor Prelude No. 14 from Book 2 of Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*, and subjects it to a process of gradual decay and destruction akin to dropping the music into a beaker of hydrochloric acid.

The procedure is simple: a broken chord is outlined by strings, crotales and glockenspiel, and the solo harpsichord, after prowling its way up the keyboard with a few menacing tritones, plays a fragment of the Bach in its original form. An ominous brass

chorale follows, and then the process is repeated. Each time a few more of Bach's notes are missing, until a shrieking scale descends through the entire woodwind section, which lands on a powerful chord in the brass, timpani and bass drum. There are, in all, five of these hammer blows and between each of them the harpsichord continues to dismantle the Bach until all that is left are a few disembodied notes. And then, as the double basses die away, there is nothing left of it at all.

The second movement ('moulins de dieu' – 'mills of god') $\boxed{5}$ is among the most complex music on this recording. Using a scheme involving such rarely used metres as $^{20}_{22}$ $^{15}_{22}$, $^{10}_{3}$ $^{15}_{34}$ and $^{15}_{8}$, the mill-wheels slowly begin to turn, first in the depths of the divided double basses, and finally spreading throughout the orchestra. As the momentum increases, an impassioned cello melody is revealed, which in turn gives way to a truly cinematic image of the mechanism spinning in all its magnificent, capricious, malevolent glory, until the great wall of sound is suddenly silenced.

The third panel ('dernier homme debout' – 'last man standing') [6] is a slow rondo, alternating passages of tremendous power and violence with music of quiet sorrow, regret and profound resignation. Just as a recapitulation begins to form, the music is invaded by what Elcock describes as 'a piece of anti-matter', a rock groove hammered out in 4/4 against the 3/4 of the rest of the orchestra. There seems no way back from this catastrophe, and indeed the final pages of the work are devastating. The harpsichord from the first movement makes a most unwelcome return, now reduced to playing a trite accompaniment to all that the 'last man standing' has to offer: a vulgar waltz tune, heard first in the viola (directed to be played without vibrato or expression), and transferred in turn to the cello and finally to the double bass. The other strings, meanwhile, are directed to choose notes at random, *pizzicato*, creating an effect of post-apocalyptic fallout that, as the composer says, 'drifts down through the orchestra, forcing the music into the depths where it dies, fouled up by junk'.

The Festive Overture 7 is by far the earliest of the three works on this disc, composed in 1997 for the Floralies Flower Festival in Bourg-en-Bresse, in eastern France, northeast of Lyons, and first performed there the following year by an amateur orchestra.

An uncomplicatedly joyful showpiece, it belies its modest Brahms-sized orchestra with a good deal of colour and no little instrumental virtuosity.

Cast in a straightforward sonata form, it begins with a brassy introduction, as if pretending to be something 'important' by an Elgar or a Walton, but leading instead to a light, airily rhythmic *Allegro*. By skittishly flitting in and out of sometimes not very closely related tonalities, and playing ingenious games with the metre, Elcock high-spiritedly and good-naturedly keeps the musicians on their toes.

The second theme is indeed a touch Elgarian, and although a little darker in tone, barely disturbs the untroubled mood. The closing section returns to the opening fanfares, which this time are rendered less formidable by being played in the faster tempo of the main allegro, and the coda features those same fanfares magnificently deployed in canon throughout the whole orchestra, followed by a roof-raising *Presto* conclusion.

Paul Mann is a regular guest-conductor with many orchestras throughout Europe, the USA, Australia and the Far East. His work as chief conductor of the Odense Symphony Orchestra in Denmark achieved considerable critical success, particularly in the symphonies of Beethoven, Elgar, Mahler, Schumann and Shostakovich; with the Odense orchestra he also made numerous recordings of a wide range of repertoire, for such labels as Bridge, DaCapo and EMI.

He first came to international attention as winner of the first prize in the 1998 Donatella Flick Conducting Competition, as a result of which he was also appointed assistant conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. He made his LSO debut shortly afterwards, and subsequently collaborated regularly



Photo: Xiaowei Liu

with the Orchestra, both in the concert hall and the recording studio. Special projects with the LSO included the Duke Ellington Centenary Concert at the Barbican Hall with Wynton Marsalis, and a famous collaboration with the legendary rock group Deep Purple in two widely acclaimed performances of Jon Lord's Concerto for Group and Orchestra at the Royal

Albert Hall, the live DVD and CD of which remain international best sellers. Among his more recent recordings is the first-ever studio account of Lord's Concerto, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, in collaboration with Jon Lord himself and a star-studded cast of soloists, and the live recording of *Celebrating Jon Lord*, a special concert which took place at the Royal Albert Hall in April 2014 with an all-star cast paying tribute to the late composer.

This is his eighth recording for Toccata Classics. The first featured the orchestral music of Leif Solberg (TOCC 0260) and the second, third and fourth (TOCC 0262, 0263 and 0299) presented the complete orchestral music of Charles O'Brien, recorded from Paul Mann's own editions, newly created for the purpose. His fifth was the first volume in a remarkable series of new works for string orchestra, *Music For My Love* (TOCC 0333), featuring music by Brahms (arranged by Ragnar Söderlind), Maddalena Casulana (arr. Colin Matthews), Brett Dean, Steve Elcock, Andrew Ford, Robin Holloway, Mihkel Kerem, Jon Lord (arr. Paul Mann), John Pickard, Poul Ruders and Ragnar Söderlind himself. A first volume of his recording of the complete orchestral music of the hitherto undiscovered English Romantic Henry Cotter Nixon (1842–1907), with the Kodály Philharmonic Orchestra, Debrecen, Hungary, was recently released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0373, and Volumes Two and Three (TOCC 0373 and 0374) are in preparation. Most recently, he recorded the first volume in a series of the orchestral music of David Hackbridge Johnson (TOCC 0393), and a recording of the music of the Karlsruhe composer Josef Schelb is in preparation.

The **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra** is the oldest continuing professional symphony orchestra in Britain, its origins dating back to 1840, when the Liverpool Philharmonic, as it was then, was founded by a group of Liverpool music-lovers.

Vasily Petrenko was appointed Principal Conductor of the Orchestra in September 2006 and in September 2009 became Chief Conductor. Now in its tenth year, his dynamic music partnership with the Orchestra has attracted world-wide acclaim and drawn new audiences, including many young people, to live classical music. Petrenko joins a distinguished line of musicians who have led the Orchestra during its illustrious history, including Max Bruch, Sir Charles Hallé, Sir Henry Wood, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir John Pritchard, Sir Charles Groves, Walter Weller, David Atherton, Marek Janowski, Libor Pešek, Petr Altrichter and Gerard Schwarz.

The Orchestra gives over sixty concerts each season in its home, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, and in recent seasons has given premiere performances of major works by Stewart Copeland, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Ludovico Einaudi, James Horner, Karl Jenkins, Sir James MacMillan, Nico Muhly, Michael Nyman, Sir John Tavener and Michael Torke.

Recent additions to the Orchestra's recordings catalogue include Elgar's First Symphony, Rachmaninov's complete piano concertos and three symphonies, and Tchaikovsky's Symphonies Nos. 1, 2 and 5. The recording of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, part of a complete cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies, was the *Gramophone* Awards 'Orchestral Recording of the Year' in 2011.

The Orchestra also performs widely throughout the UK and internationally, most recently touring to China, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Spain, Germany, Romania, the Czech Republic and Japan.

Its website can be found at www.liverpoolphil.com.





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Steve Elcock

Steve Elcock's website can be found at steveelcock.fr.

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STEVE ELCOCK Orchestral Music, Volume One

Symphony No. 3, Op. 16 (2005–10) 1 Allegro 2 I Ostinato (Allegro moderato) – 3 III Passacaglia (Tempo di sarabande)	36:56 9:21 9:55 17:40
Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction, Op. 20 (2013) 4 colonnes brisées – 5 moulins de dieu – 6 III dernier homme debout	24:13 5:43 8:18 10:12
7 Festive Overture, Op. 7 (1997)	11:07
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra James Clark, leader	TT 72:16

Richard Casey, harpsichord 4 6 Paul Mann, conductor

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