



Steve ELCOCK

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME THREE

SYMPHONY NO. 6, OP. 30, TYRANTS DESTROYED

SYMPHONY NO. 7, OP. 33

MANIC DANCING, OP. 25

Marina Kosterina, piano
Siberian Symphony Orchestra
Dmitry Vasiliev

STEVE ELCOCK, SYMPHONIST – VOLUME THREE

by Francis Pott

The Anglo-French composer Steve Elcock, now in his mid-sixties, has been known to introduce himself to concert audiences by telling them that he has never entered any competitions, has attracted no commissions and did not study with anybody. He did indeed grow up outside the musical mainstream. His website¹ offers ‘A few words about me’: ‘I am a self-taught composer of classical music. I was born in Chesterfield, England, in 1957, and moved to France in 1981, where I have lived ever since.’ He might have added that his only formal musical qualification is an A-Level in music, and that he had violin lessons when young, but that doesn’t appear to be important to him. Indeed, self-deprecation comes naturally to this modest and down-to-earth figure, but the tendency to define himself by what he is not may be partly the product of decades toiling in obscurity, away from the compositional rat-race and arts industry, beyond his native shores, fitting his creative life around a busy professional commitment working in language services for businesses. Elcock was already 56 when, in 2013, he sent some scores and sound-files to Martin Anderson at Toccata Classics, acting on the friendly recommendation of his fellow composer Robin Walker, and the process of his discovery began.² He had long since made the tacit assumption that nobody would be interested in his music, and so he used technology to produce the most realistic synthetic ‘performances’ of his music that he could. They were powerful enough to come as a revelation to Anderson, as they have been to a growing number of others since.³

¹ <https://steveelcock.fr>.

² Elcock describes that process in ‘Coming in from the Unknown’ (March 2016), posted on the Toccata blog at <https://toccataclassics.com/coming-in-from-the-unknown/>.

³ Now mostly available via his website, these electronic realisations remain a valuable introduction for the newcomer to Elcock’s work.

Just as Elcock may define himself in terms of what he is not, it may be helpful to new listeners to acknowledge areas of difference, as well as very generalised common ground, between him and other comparable figures. First, although it is natural to contextualise him by reference to other prolific British symphonists, notably Havergal Brian (1876–1972), Malcolm Arnold (1921–2006) and Robert Simpson (1921–97) in the generations before him, Elcock's powerful instinct for organically unfolding argument and symphonic logic aligns him in a general way with a number of Nordic composers. He is passionately enthusiastic about the symphonic legacy of the Swedish composer Allan Pettersson (1911–80) – as much of an outsider to the Swedish musical establishment as Elcock is to the British; it was the discovery of Pettersson's music in 1980 that impelled Elcock to start composing in earnest. Likewise, Elcock displays some intermittent kinship with the methods of the Danish Vagn Holmboe (1909–96) and those of his pupils, Ib Nørholm (1931–2019) and Per Nørgård (b. 1932). Pettersson combines an underlying linearity with eruptive dislocations and switchbacks, and it is possible to see in this some likeness to the symphonic procedures of Malcolm Arnold; but Arnold's intentions bear a less organic stamp, seeming more concerned with the specific and immediate unsettling effect of dramatic interruptions as they occur. In the work of the Scandinavian symphonists mentioned and in that of Elcock, serialism remains a part of the compositional arsenal, and yet it is deployed only intermittently and selectively, its effect all the more vivid for its co-existence with passages of tonal, sometimes stylistically retrospective, writing.

As with all truly original voices, the attempt to convey an adequate verbal impression of Elcock's musical language by reference to other composers is doomed to failure. Nonetheless, and whether coincidentally or not, there is also some common ground here with the driving, sometimes frenetic rhythmic energy of the American symphonist Peter Mennin (1923–83) and the visceral dramatic impact of orchestral music by the Czech Viktor Kalabis (1923–2006).

A distinguishing feature of Elcock's work is the clarity and economy of its scoring, which delineates the organic unfolding of ideas in a manner comparable with Robert Simpson's. Even so, Elcock deserves to be defined more by his differences from

Simpson than by areas of general kinship. Elcock's music frequently unleashes titanic elemental force, and yet it wears a human face. His musical arguments are rooted in human experience and behaviour, in man's inhumanity to man, or in an anarchy that is essentially terrestrial. Even the title of a work like his orchestral triptych *Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction* (Op. 20; 2013) acknowledges human agency and a pathos in the contemplation of human folly.

Elcock's First Symphony (Op. 6; 1995–96) originated as a concerto for clarinet and bassoon and was transformed into a symphony in 2001, with further revisions made to its orchestration in 2015, by which time his Fifth Symphony had already been completed. Elcock has described his Second (Op. 14; 2003) as 'an attempt to "nail" the classical symphony before moving onto other things'.⁴

He is happy to let a music-hall song lurch startlingly into life in the midst of a reinvention of the Beethovenian scherzo and trio (Symphony No. 2), or to walk the most disconcerting of tightropes between pawky humour and sardonic menace, as in the central scherzo movement, entitled 'Ostinato', of the Symphony No. 3 (Op. 16; 2005–10).⁵ These gestures are no mere theatrical device: the music-hall intrusion quickly gains traction and is absorbed into the advancing motivic fabric of the symphony. It is both unexpected at the time and, in hindsight, entirely inevitable.

The Third Symphony follows the example of the First by including a passacaglia, though no longer as a conventionally placed slow movement: here, the unfinished business of a compressed first movement and the aforementioned 'Ostinato' is balanced in length by an escalating passacaglia finale.

Of the half-hour Fourth Symphony (Op. 19; 2012–13) Elcock comments that the work is

a recycling plant for dodecaphonic waste. Change-ringing series spit out unwanted semitones and these are left hanging in the air like so much pollution. A fragment of

⁴ Unless stated otherwise, the comments from Steve Elcock quoted here are all taken from an exchange of e-mails in February–September 2020 and over a period of months in 2021, in preparation for the writing of this essay.

⁵ Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0400, together with *Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction* (2013) and *Festive Overture*, Op. 7 (1997), released in 2017.

chorale, a half-remembered line from a carol, a short descending phrase on the cor anglais: these are the building blocks of this one-movement work. Of its title, I will only say that you must make of it what you can.⁶

The title to which Elcock alludes is ‘A golden rose fallen from the flat sea of time’. The work itself is highly enigmatic, generating lean, astringent *ostinato* passages in its fast music, kaleidoscopic but alienating dreamscapes in the slow material and a memorably eerie massed but desynchronised string *glissando* upwards towards the final chord. The ‘distorting mirror’ quality here is reminiscent of the disfigured, worm-in-the-apple triumphalism at the end of Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony.

Whereas Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4 turned their backs on the Classical symphonic concept ‘nailed’ in No. 2, in the Fifth Symphony (Op. 21; 2014) Elcock directed his attention to Beethoven, this time making overt reference to a ‘Fifth’ which has remained one of the cornerstones of the symphonic repertoire ever since its first performance in December 1808. Elcock was struck by the tonal ambivalence of the opening of that earlier Fifth Symphony. Of its opening, he commented: ‘C minor is only one of several possible keys: on the strength of the first two bars alone, the symphony could equally well be in B flat, in E flat or in G minor. I asked myself, “what if Beethoven’s Fifth were in G minor?”’⁷ His idea was consequently to start and ultimately finish his own Fifth in G, but to locate much of the intervening symphonic argument in the neighbourhood of C. In doing so, he was reversing the plan of Nielsen’s First Symphony (1892), designated as being ‘in G minor’, but beginning and ending on an unrepentant chord of C major, its surging optimism tempered ultimately by the unresolved tonal ambivalence that serves as its fulcrum.

As Elcock wryly puts it: ‘Many symphonies begin with a slow introduction to a fast movement, but I think I have achieved the dubious distinction of writing the first first movement that has a fast introduction to a slow movement.’⁸ This slow movement is far from terse or truncated, and yet the unassuaged sorrow of its closing stages signals a

⁶ <https://steveelcock.fr>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ E-mail from Steve Elcock to the author, dated 19 January 2020.

long road ahead. With the benefit of hindsight, one sees later that both the first and the second movements of Elcock's conception are suddenly halted in their tracks, and that this repeated, implacable denial of headlong onward momentum serves cumulatively to 'tighten the spring' which is released finally with explosive pent-up energy in the opening bars of the finale.

Elcock speaks of the prolonged G minor chord that ends the initial *Allegro* as 'paralysed with fear', though this moment is soon followed by a more positive, aspiring idea (*Moderato*) from the cellos and cor anglais. But then, he writes, 'as it rises, it starts to leak round the edges till it spreads like a stain over the score.' It is worth emphasising not only the point being made here, but also the terms in which the composer does so: Elcock sees the players in the orchestra as the *dramatis personae* of the whole human tragicomedy. The gestures and processes permeating his symphonic thinking arise directly from images of the human condition and of fallible, fractured humanity, and it is therefore entirely natural for him verbally to articulate sequences of musical events in terms of misbehaviour, misadventure or things going wantonly, sometimes uncontrollably, awry. 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made', said Kant, and here, as elsewhere in his output, Elcock aims paradoxically at the perfect representation of an inherently imperfect world.

Symphony No. 6, Op. 30 (2017)

Elcock's Sixth may again remind one of Nielsen – this time his Fifth Symphony (1922), where immense variety is packed into two movements – slow followed by fast. Elcock's Sixth Symphony bears the subtitle 'Tyrants Destroyed', for which no explanation is provided in the score. His comment on the subtitle of Symphony No. 4 comes to mind again: 'you must make of it what you can.' It is characteristic of Elcock that terms such as 'tyrants' may refer as much to the character and agency of purely musical processes and events as to the geopolitical landscape of the times in which we live. The music is therefore best approached on its own intrinsic, abstract terms, with any moral lessons identified only after repeated listening has yielded up its potential for human analogy.

Symphony No. 6 is scored for a standard orchestra, but with the exclusion of harp and the addition of piccolo, bass clarinet and contrabassoon to the woodwind section. Extensive and expressive use is made of a large array of percussion which requires five players and, in the second movement, features the unusual inclusion of a steel plate. Otherwise known as a ‘bell plate’, this instrument produces a metallic clanking sound, usually of indeterminate pitch.

Elcock has described the first of the two movements of his Sixth Symphony as ‘a sonata form without development [section]’.⁹ It begins [1] as the contemporary reinvention of a Baroque sarabande movement; and, although making no appearance in the printed score, the term ‘Sarabanda’ [*sic*] has been used by the composer in accompanying notes.¹⁰ Elcock’s choice of ‘Sarabanda’ is rhythmically vindicated at the outset. Emerging cobweb-like from an initial tam-tam (large gong) tremolo, the sonority of three solo cellos communicates disconsolate listlessness, an impression heightened by downward progression and by restriction of the instruments to a narrow ‘pocket’ of pitch (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1



Expansion of the opening idea comes eventually in the form of a rhythmic canon, with *tutti* violas (likewise divided into three parts) following *tutti* cellos a beat distant. A consequence of this process is that the alternating rhythmic stasis and movement of the respective groups interlock to provide the organic basis for more continuous flow, so that a dotted rhythm soon begins to gain traction by fusing the alternations of two groups into the single thread already attempted by the violas on their own.

⁹ E-mail from Steve Elcock to the author, dated 12 October 2021.

¹⁰ E-mail from Steve Elcock to the author, dated 3 September 2020.

This procedure, prefigured by rhythmic echoes from the timpani in the opening bars, begins to be heard from clarinets, now moving upwards; until then, the music has remained almost entirely confined to the strings and in no hurry to expand. Within a short space, Elcock affords a glimpse of more rapid momentum (a fleeting glimmer of arabesques from the clarinets over the continuing funereal progress), moments of stasis in which the dotted rhythm shrinks back to a mere whisper from timpani and bass drum, and, as a secondary subject, a harmonically expanding string threnody in which archaisms evocative of the Baroque sarabande are ingeniously blended with the modern consequences of their extension beyond Baroque limits ¹² (Ex. 2).

Ex. 2



The mastery in this writing lies in its making perfect organic sense at the time, as an unfolding process, while covertly laying out the separate raw ingredients of later argument. The yearning quality of the prominent rising major seventh of the secondary subject places it poignantly at odds with the airless confinement of the narrow pitch-ranges in the music that has preceded it. Countering this aspiration, a pendant to the second subject occurs when the music reaches a point of string-dominated paralysis, at its quietest dynamic so far. Elcock has referred to this pendant as the ‘closing subject’ and emphasises its prefiguring of the chorale-like material which will end the Symphony (Ex. 3). It also grows directly out of Ex. 2.

Ex. 3



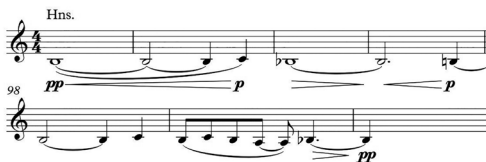
A bridge from the slow first movement to the faster second is suggested when trombones intrude with a grotesque parody of the sarabande rhythm. This moment is in effect the onset of the recapitulation, though subtly disguised by changed instrumentation. Fragmentation and discussion of the rhythm continue against an ashen string *ostinato* which suggests a hushed snare drum. The strings regain a more pitch-directed role, but remain subservient to the unfolding discourse of sustained notes dominated by the woodwinds. The music seems to be vanishing upwards into the ether – but it is ruptured by an explosive orchestral *tutti* which silences restatement of the secondary subject, reaching its apex in a series of savage chords. Here, brutal repression of the continuity of the music co-exists with offbeat accents, which deny the ‘anchored’ courtly rhythms their provision of the only vestige of stability in the music thus far. The dramatic outburst subsides into resumed restatement of the secondary theme and then of its pendant. At the close of the movement, an air of abiding tension is derived not only from harmonic inconclusiveness but also from the foregoing pathos, which seems to focus on the oppressed and not (yet) the overthrown oppressor.

From a thematic point of view the second movement [13] is best understood with a brief examination of its rhythmic and pitch-based components. Some listeners might sense a kinship here with the storm music from Benjamin Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes* (1945). There is indeed some common ground in both the motivic content and the masterly handling of fluctuating mood through textural contrast, but Elcock’s ideas are played out across a wider canvas and are expansively organic rather than compactly episodic.

Emerging from the dark lowest regions of the string section and now featuring three solo double basses, the Sixth Symphony’s second movement assembles itself from a pair of inchoate fragments: a rising semitone figure, heard both as ‘short-long’ and long-short’, with the two versions overlapping each other; and a descending, ‘throwaway’ pair of semitones. Gradually, the patterns acquire agogic extensions in the form of preliminary running notes, and at the same time the spectrum of pitches widens. Soon the rising semitone figure begins to repeat itself, one whole tone lower each time, thus forming a restless chromatic chain which reinstates the airlessly claustrophobic quality

characterising much of the first movement. Elcock draws attention particularly to this emerging motif (Ex. 4), taken up initially by the horns.

Ex. 4



The passage in which Ex. 4 features is significant for two reasons: first, the syncopated rhythm at its end provides raw material for much that ensues in the motivically imitative central development of this movement; second, the rhythmic component is separable from the pitch-based one, to the extent that the semitonal figure can acquire any number of rhythmic forms and, conversely, the rhythmic 'tail' can attach itself to any mutation of the actual pitches shown above, including an inversion of the pattern.

The music is both organic and monolithic, subsuming its central development of motifs into a series of waves which build and then drop back to resume their steady escalation. The central passage [14] becomes progressively fugal, owing to imitative proliferation of the quaver pendant ending Ex. 4. Domination by the strings serves to highlight the structural balance achieved between this music and the threnody in the first movement. In due course, without deviation of tempo, there is a return of the ominous repeated semiquavers and inchoate, displaced rhythmic fragments which were a defining feature of the opening section of the movement [15]. Here it is worth mentioning Elcock's avowed admiration for the music of Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959), whose *Double Concerto for Piano, Timpani and Two String Orchestras* is fleetingly echoed; the Concerto was completed days before the Munich Agreement of September 1938

ceded the Sudeten territory of Martinů's native Czechoslovakia to Germany. Oblique evocation of past tyranny may be unconscious on Elcock's part, but it is nonetheless apt.

The final section of Elcock's second movement escalates until the material of Ex. 3 recurs in chorale-like form. As in the early stages of the work, Elcock demonstrates a fine ear for the subtle melding of idioms, allowing conscious cadential archaisms to show through the fabric of the music and impose a kind of fractured but determined tonality on the hitherto fugitive and restless discourse. The quasi-modal approach towards the thunderous final cadence onto D may evoke a few of the starker moments from Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, and yet the fugal processes deployed by Elcock are both more organic in their evolution and more intensively multi-layered; the overarching intention is soberly unnerving, in contrast with the satirically ambivalent knife-edge of hollow triumphalism of the Shostakovich.

Symphony No. 7, Op. 33 (2020)

The official numerical chronology of composers' works sometimes obscures events by ironing them out into a manageably linear succession, even if the simultaneous gestation of two or more pieces may really have been a less tidy affair. Writing of his Seventh Symphony in September 2020, Elcock told how

I had got as far with [Symphony] no. 8 as having written its last movement (but none of the others), when I 'realised' that 8 couldn't follow immediately after 6, but needed something more modest in between. I've no idea why I thought that; it just seemed right. So I thought (still think) of 7 as a 'smaller' symphony than the others and I wanted to reflect this in the scoring. One effect that I think turned out quite well is leaving the tuba out of the equation till fully halfway through the symphony, and the percussion until still later.

That's not the end of the story, though: Elcock subsequently realised that his pre-existent String Quartet No. 2 demanded repurposing and reinstrumentation as a symphony; and the symphony which it became was numbered as Eight; and so the references made in the above quotation to 'No. 8' became applicable to what has since emerged as No. 9. At the time of writing, that work is still in progress.

Elcock's comments are interesting for a number of reasons. First (*pace* what is ending up as Symphony No. 9), a finale may come into being before any 'preceding' movements. Second, there is the intriguing *ex ore* evidence of a composer viewing his canon of symphonies as an integrated sequence. How far is this a question of how things look to posterity, when a superficial critical overview may simply note the general character of individual works in relation to those coming before and after them? Alternatively, to what extent is the listener to experience and understand these symphonies as a lived succession: an emotional and psychological journey on the composer's part, which stands to be misrepresented and misunderstood by hearing the works in the 'wrong' order?

The entire issue suggests that there may be no simple 'yes or no' answer to whether a composer 'through-composes' (starts at the beginning and writes the music from beginning to end of a work or section), or whether he or she assembles 'landmarks' or destinations and then works towards, around and between them. Both approaches are common. It may be wise also to mistrust ostensible 'evidence' of one or other 'method': I once asked Elcock's friend and fellow symphonist John Pickard whether the high degree of cogent organisation in his own Fifth Symphony (on which he was at that point guest-lecturing at the University of West London, where I teach) suggested a non-sequential assembling of components rather than a 'through-composing' approach. It was a surprise to be told in response that a high proportion of through-composing took place, and that 'the whole time, I'm asking myself about what comes next: "what would be natural, what would be *natural*?"'.

Elcock's Seventh Symphony is scored for a smaller complement than its predecessor. A double woodwind section is augmented only by piccolo, which in time-honoured tradition alternates with second flute in the hands of a single player. Percussion this time requires only two players. Again, there is no harp part. Even so, the relative modesty of the scoring does not signal a diminutive work. Cast as a monolithic structure, the Seventh Symphony includes turbulent paragraphs that yield nothing to parallel passages in Symphony No. 6. Their impact is due in part to the exceptional transparency and clarity with which Elcock aligns instrumentation and texture.

Symphony No. 7 opens [1] with a characteristic flurry of short-lived movement (Ex. 5), comparable with the opening to the Fourth Symphony of Sibelius in its immediate transportation of the listener to a particular musical landscape, while withholding any clue to the pattern or navigation of future events.

Ex. 5



Soon a more continuous momentum is established by means of an idea which both climbs sequentially and articulates descending four-note patterns. The 'short-long' alternation in these groupings puts them continually at odds with the underlying pulse of the music, lending the proceedings an air of elusive fretfulness (Ex. 6).

Ex. 6



sonorities have about them a whiff of the Italian Baroque, and one brief passage in B flat major comes momentarily close to Elgarian territory. Yet the volcanic dimension of this music is soon made clear in a masterly transformation from gentle sorrow to disfiguring violence, and a turbulent *Allegro moderato* [2] establishes what will be the predominant rhythmic pulse for the rest of the Symphony. Elcock's e-mails confirmed that much of the material derives from the ideas already specified – but he was about two-thirds of the way through the work before he realised that what he calls a 'simple runic tune' (declaimed *ff* by the horn section) was the source of the opening motif of the work. He acknowledges how 'The fact that I didn't learn this until I had been struggling with the piece for some time has made this one of the harder symphonies to write. The solution came to me (and I admit it somewhat shamefacedly) in a dream.' Elcock's comments on the dream are of such pertinent interest as to require extensive quotation:

I was standing on some stairs and listening to some powerful choral music by Bruckner. It was nothing actually by him, but the power and majesty were unmistakable. When I woke up, I didn't remember the music, but only the words that were sung. These were 'And I loved her all the days of my life': a most unlikely text for Bruckner to set, but then he was almost certainly a victim of unrequited love, so perhaps not so unlikely. And so I wrote the music that went with the words. [...] Knowing that Bruckner is said to have dreamed the opening of his own Seventh, but played on a viola, I thought that all this was quite appropriate and right.¹¹

The words in the dream stand for the sense of loss and regret that comes of unrequited love, where one party cannot forget or let go of a love that has died out in the other party. This is an archetype that has haunted me since my late teens. It gives the clue to the stopping-and-starting, heartbroken nature of the closing pages of the symphony, and indeed much else in my output.¹²

The *Allegro moderato* hints at transitory shards and splinters of Brucknerian thought, building both upon the opening ideas of the work and, in its more tranquil

¹¹ <https://steveelcock.fr>.

¹² E-mail from Steve Elcock, dated 3 September 2020.

secondary material, on the quasi-Elgarian wistfulness mentioned earlier. Here the continuation of restless rhythmic cells across the slower surface of sustained string textures suggests the fractured nature of dreams which elude waking recollection or, in the harsh light of day, no longer make the sense that they appeared to make earlier. One might liken the overlay of woodwind chattering to the mundane preoccupations with the present, perpetually drowning out the sorrowfully insistent undertow of memory. This idea is plausible, since Elcock is a self-confessed insomniac who has used other works to explore the nature of dreams or the uncertain, sometimes crowded no-man's-land between sleep and wakefulness.

Soon the polarity of the slow and fast 'musics' is changed: the sustained strings pass their material to massed brass and take up the role previously undertaken by the woodwind. A stormy passage subsides into subdued unease, from which a new rhythmic variant of the descending four-note groups begins to emerge. This process dissipates as the central stages of the Symphony are reached and a disconsolate *Largamente* section ensues [3]. Expectation of an extended slow movement is created, but this would-be fulcrum of the music is brutally cut off by an angry return of the *Allegro* [4], escalating into an *Agitato* [5], which is in effect a melting pot for all the motifs and variants generated thus far. In this process the timpani play a prominent and disruptive role, as does the recent rhythmic variant of the descending four-note pattern. Quasi-fugal imitation is deployed, as if in a vain effort to impose rational order on the proceedings and prevent outright anarchy. What will become the disconsolate 'dream-song' of the closing stages of the work assumes ever more prominence, both as brass declamations and as woodwind echoes. This titanic music remains at or near boiling point for an implausibly long period, while sacrificing neither logical direction nor the threat of yet more catastrophic escalation. Finally, it descends from the summit, exposing again the rhythmically dislocated pattern first encountered as Ex. 6 [6]. Volcanic aftershocks persist, but at length the music subsides into unsettled darkness. A strikingly scored passage for plucked upper strings, wood-block and triangle underlines the sense of collapse into numbed incoherence. Finally, a descending lone bassoon articulates the

four-note group one more time, and from these ashes arises at last the ‘dream-song’ [7] (Ex. 7).

Ex. 7



In structural and textural terms, the song balances the string threnody heard in the opening stages of the work; but, as Elcock has been happy to emphasise, his symphonic terrain is ‘a difficult land. Here things miscarry’.¹³ Accordingly, the dream-song soon regresses into a mere inchoate wisp, obsessively repeating the same opening as if in an attempt to draw the remainder back within reach of memory. This opening proves to be an echo of the ‘simple runic tune’ that the composer described earlier. Again, ‘white noise’ intrudes across the surface of the music, this time in the form of conflicting, stratospheric violin harmonics rather than the earlier woodwind rhythmic distractions. The fruitless attempts of the song at reiteration are punctuated by echoes of the descending four-note pattern, expiring in a succession of different but equally inconclusive harmonic possibilities. Ultimately, even the grounding of the song in the key of E minor forsakes it, and the music tails off tangentially in mid-air, as if losing the will to exist. In its disfigured, doomed beauty, as also in its matching of effect to intention, this consciously thwarted conclusion is as perfectly judged as any in the broad canon of symphonic music.

¹³ Edwin Muir, from the opening line of the poem ‘The Difficult Land’, *Edwin Muir Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, London, 1989, p. 237.

Manic Dancing, Op. 25 (2015)

This dazzling work, a concerto in all but name, sits midway between Elcock's Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6, but has little in common with either. *Manic Dancing* as a whole adopts an outwardly conventional fast-slow-fast arrangement of three sections, each about five minutes in length, while also implying Classical first-movement sonata structure expanded and spread across the entire piece, to the extent that elements of recapitulation in the last 'movement' balance their earlier appearances in the first. Playing continuously, the work proclaims its dance-like quality without inviting actual dance in response: anyone attempting such a thing would fairly quickly sprain an ankle, owing to the continual cross-rhythms and, in many of the more lyrical passages, a sense of the Romantic tradition disfigured or overlaid by competing other 'musics' from a more recent past. In its indefatigable energy *Manic Dancing* bears comparison with Peter Mennin's frenetic Piano Concerto (1958).

Manic Dancing begins [8] at full tilt, as if the listener had opened a door and stumbled upon a performance already in progress. Disparate rhythmic patterns from the woodwind and strings produce an iridescent texture again comparable with music by Martinů, although, this time, in sunnier mood. Elcock's piano part is initially chordal and serves to anchor the volatility around it, setting out terms for a work that fluctuates freely between 'sinfonia concertante' equality and overt solo pyrotechnics. Typically of Elcock, the textural *mélange* of materials heard at the very opening is also a seedbed for ideas and motifs to be explored later on. Weightless chordal displacements from bassoons and bass clarinet, for example, lay the ground for much ensuing rhythmic character.

A hectic opening paragraph soon launches the pianist's first solo statement. Its content anticipates a passage towards the end of the central slow section, featuring murky chord clusters in the bass register of the piano, which Elcock has described as 'frightening' and which afforded him particular satisfaction. Other salient features include a gently syncopated, sequentially ascending idea, heard first from the strings and then taken up in more *sostenuto* form by the soloist (Ex. 8); also, following immediately on from this idea, a succession of piano-solo chordal punctuations above a 'walking' bass

(Ex. 9); when first heard, these piano figurations occur in dialogue with the woodwind section, but ultimately they will encompass the entire orchestra and provide the rousing conclusion to the piece.

Ex. 8



Ex. 9



The slow central section of *Manic Dancing* opens [9] with a spectral string presence and dense chordal fragments from the piano, punctuated by wood-block and tambourine. Dreamlike phantasmagoria alternates with relative impatience from the soloist, who appears reluctant to let go of the momentum from the first section. Soon, however, a soulful clarinet solo weaves its way through a detritus of competing musical elements from the piano and other areas of the orchestra. From this tortuous navigation an unexpected snatch of string elegy emerges, but the discontinuity of dream states permeates this music, and few elements persist for long – except that a dotted four-note

scale from the clarinet solo has snagged in the collective mind of the orchestra and has been making repeated appearances on different instruments, including a fleeting solo turn for the tuba. The ‘frightening’ episode described by Elcock leads startlingly to a quasi-Brucknerian climax, which then launches the third and final section [10].

In Elcock’s gleeful words, the closing stages of the work become ‘*totally manic*’.¹⁴ As I have mentioned, this conclusion arises from revisiting a solo passage from quite early in the first section. When Ex. 8 is reprised during the final section of the work, it has abruptly travelled back in time to mimic a C major Classical sonatina complete with ‘Alberti bass’. Elcock theatrically requests that it be played ‘preferably by a pianist wearing an eighteenth-century wig, on a harpsichord, while the real soloist pretends to play it on the piano’.¹⁵ Like the *disiecta membra* of the slow middle section, the harpsichord episode soon passes, left behind in the onward whirl of recurring ideas, the continuing organic development of which bears the stamp of Elcock’s mastery in symphonic structuring. Progressively the music is dominated by variants of Ex. 9, with brass now augmenting the kinetic force of the jazz-like rhythmic dislocations. Unashamedly becoming a riotous mass ‘jam session’, *Manic Dancing* finally nods back towards its Classical high jinks on the harpsichord by contriving a conventional perfect cadence into sunlit D major – only to blow a raspberry at tradition by making a re-approach in which an intruding blast of C major debunks the expected obviousness before D wins out on the finishing line.

Francis Pott is Professor of Composition at the London College of Music in the University of West London. He is recognised particularly for his sacred choral and organ music, which has been performed and broadcast in over 40 countries, published by five major houses and released worldwide on a growing number of albums. His website can be found at www.francispott.com.

¹⁴ E-mail from Steve Elcock to the author, dated 3 September 2020.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* An unavoidably visual conceit, this idea finds a parallel in the Violin Concerto No. 4 (1984) by Alfred Schnittke (1934–98), during the second movement of which the soloist is instructed to perform a mimed *cadenza visuelle*. Like *Manic Dancing*, the Schnittke Concerto also includes an orchestral harpsichord.

Marina Kosterina, born in Omsk, began her studies there, attending its music school and then its music college. In 2006 she graduated from the Gnesin Russian Academy in Moscow, having studied in the specialist piano class of Grigory Gordon. She then spent three more years there, in the class of Vladimir Tropp, and after her graduation in 2009, she joined the staff of the Academy, teaching in the Special Piano Department. During this period, she made a number of contributions to international academic conferences. She left the Academy in 2014, following her appointment as piano soloist of the Siberian Symphony Orchestra (or the Omsk Philharmonic, as it is known domestically).

She has given recitals, appeared as concerto soloist and performed in chamber music at The National Opera Center of Opera America and the Baruch Center of Performing Arts, both in New York, the Rachmaninov Hall of the Moscow State Conservatoire, the Grand Hall of the Gnesin Russian Academy, the Russian State Museum of Fine Arts and the Russian National Museum of Music, all in Moscow. She has made concerto appearances with the philharmonic orchestras of Magnitogorsk, Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Tula and Vologda, and has also performed in Germany, Italy and Poland.

Marina Kosterina's career has been distinguished by successes in a number of competitions, both at home in Russia and abroad: she is the recipient of first prize in the St Petersburg International competition in 1996; diplomas in the First International Russian Season Competition in Yekaterinburg in 2005 and in the Twelfth Maria Yudina International Competition in St Petersburg in 2011; third prize in the Eleventh International 'Muzika be sienų' ('Music without Limits') Competition in Lithuania, also in 2011; first prizes in the International Piano Competition 'A. Scriabin' in 2012, held that year in Paris, and in the International Competition in Memory of Franz Schubert in Moscow a year later; second prizes in the International Rachmaninov Competition in Madrid in 2013 and in the Alion Baltic International Music Competition in Tallinn in 2016; the 'Best Interpretation Award' at the Third George Gershwin International Music Competition in New York in 2017 and, most recently, in 2018, first prize in the Triumph Music Festival International Competition in Philadelphia.



Dmitry Vasiliev, the artistic director and principal conductor of the Siberian Symphony Orchestra, was born in 1972 in the city of Bolshoi Kamen in the Russian Far East. He graduated from the Rostov State Conservatoire and then took a postgraduate course under the guidance of Alexander Skulsky at the Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire. He also participated in master-classes given by Alexander Vedernikov and Vladimir Ziva in Moscow.

He has since been active throughout Russia. In 1997, at the age of 24, he set up the Tambov Symphony Orchestra in Tambov, south of Moscow, which he led as artistic director and chief conductor until 2005. While in Tambov he was artistic director of the International Rachmaninov Festival, the Tambov Musicians' Festival and the Musical Province Festival. In 2003 he was awarded a diploma in the Fourth International Prokofiev Competition in St Petersburg. In 2003–5 he held the position of guest chief conductor of the Sochi Symphony Orchestra.

Since 2005 he has been principal conductor of the Siberian Symphony Orchestra in Omsk, where, from 2008, he has been an artistic director of the Biennale New Music Festival. In June 2009 he took the Siberian Symphony Orchestra to Moscow to participate in the Fourth Festival of World Symphony Orchestras. Since then, the SSO under his direction has toured many times to Moscow (the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall), St Petersburg (the Mariinsky Theatre) and other cities in Russia, Austria, Italy and China.

In Moscow he has conducted the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia, the 'Evgeny Svetlanov' State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. He has also conducted other Russian orchestras, including the St Petersburg State Capella, the Nizhny Novgorod Philharmonic, Rostov Philharmonic, Ulyanovsk Philharmonic, Voronezh Philharmonic, Caucasus Mineral Waters Philharmonic, Belgorod Philharmonic, Petrozavodsk Philharmonic, Tomsk Philharmonic and the Khabarovsk Philharmonic. Internationally, he has appeared in France, Italy, Poland, Israel (with the Israel Symphony Orchestra) and South Korea.



The soloists with whom he has appeared include the cellist Mischa Maisky, the pianists Boris Berezovsky, Marc-André Hamelin, Freddy Kempf, Denis Matsuev, Nikolai Petrov, Daniil Trifonov and Eliso Virsaladze, the violinists Pierre Amoyal, Sayaka Shoji and Vadim Repin, the trumpeter Sergei Nakariakov and the soprano Hibla Gerzmava.

Among the world premieres Dmitry Vasiliev has to his credit are works by Mikhail Bronner, Sofia Gubaidulina, Ilya Heifets, Alemdar Karamanov, Ephraim Podgaitz, Tolib Shakhidi, Andrey Tikhomirov and Mieczysław Weinberg. His Russian premieres include music by John Adams, Woldemar Bargiel, John Corigliano, Karl Jenkins, Christopher Rouse, Charles Villiers Stanford, Alexander Tchaikovsky, Eduard Tubin and Benjamin Yusupov.

The labels with which he has recorded include Toccata Classics, Antes Edition and ArtBeat Music. In the online Sinfini magazine, Norman Lebrecht selected the Vasiliev/SSO recording of Weinberg's Symphony No. 21 and *Polish Tunes* (Toccata Classics TOCC 0193) as his Album of the Week, writing that 'The Siberian Symphony Orchestra, [and] conductor Dmitry Vasiliev, play as if their lives depend on it and the sound in the Omsk Philharmonic Hall is immaculate'.
www.conductorvasiliev.com

The **Siberian Symphony Orchestra** (SSO) is one of the largest Russian orchestras. It was founded in 1966 at the instigation of the conductor Simon Cogan, who remained at its helm for more than ten years. From the outset, it attracted talented graduates from the Leningrad, Novosibirsk and Ural Conservatoires, institutions with well-deserved reputations for producing dynamic and highly professional musicians. For many years the Siberian Symphony Orchestra (which is known domestically as the Omsk Philharmonic) toured the cities of the former Soviet Union, giving concerts in Moscow and Leningrad, Krasnoyarsk and Chita in central and eastern Russia, the cities along the Volga, Riga in Latvia, Kiev in Ukraine, Minsk in Belarus and Almaty in Kazakhstan. From 1975 the Orchestra participated in the contemporary-music festivals organised by the Union of Composers of the USSR, performing works by prominent composers, including Khachaturian, Khrennikov and Shchedrin.

From 1978 the SSO was directed by the conductor Viktor Tietz, under whose leadership it achieved artistic maturity and developed a wide repertoire, winning first prize at the All-Russian Competition of Symphony Orchestras in 1984. From 1992 to 2004 the chief conductor of the Orchestra was Evgeny Shestakov. Since 1994 the Orchestra has regularly toured abroad and in 1996 it was awarded the title of 'Academic' – an honour in Russia.

Over the years the Orchestra has also worked with such distinguished conductors as Veronika Dudarova, Karl Eliasberg, Arnold Katz, Aram Khachaturian, Fuat Mansurov, Nathan

Rakhlin and Abram Stasevich. The soloists with whom the SSO has appeared include the pianists Dmitri Bashkirov, Lazar Berman, Peter Donohoe, Denis Matsuev, Mikhail Pletnev, Grigory Sokolov and Eliso Virsaladze, the violinists Pierre Amoyal, Viktor Pikayzen and Viktor Tretyakov, the cellists Natalia Gutman, Mstislav Rostropovich and Daniil Shafran and the singers Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Alexander Vedernikov.

Dmitry Vasiliev has been the principal conductor of the Orchestra since 2005. Under his direction the repertoire of the SSO has expanded and now includes not only the classics but also contemporary music, jazz, rock, musicals and film soundtracks, and it participates in a wide variety of innovative projects, ranging from festivals of contemporary classical music to the World and European ballroom dancing championships. In 2009 the SSO took part in the Fourth Festival of World Symphony Orchestras, held in the Hall of Columns in Moscow, and in April 2010 it became a member of the Forum of the Symphony Orchestras of Russia in Yekaterinburg. In recent years the Orchestra has also toured in Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ukraine and the USA.

The last decade has been a period of growth for the SSO. Its large repertoire ranges from the symphonic classics to works by composers of the 21st century. The composition of the orchestra is in line with European standards, boasting more than 100 experienced, highly professional musicians. The discography of the SSO includes the four symphonies of the Danish composer Victor Bendix on Danacord and the Orchestral Suites Nos. 1 and 2 by Vissarion Shebalin (rocc 0136), the first of its now ten recordings for Toccata Classics (all conducted by Dmitry Vasiliev), which was followed by albums of music by Woldemar Bargiel (his Symphony in C major and the *Overture to Prometheus*, *Overture to a Tragedy* and *Overture to Medea* on rocc 0277), two albums of the music of Mieczysław Weinberg (*Polish Tunes* and Symphony No. 21 on rocc 0193, and *Six Ballet Scenes: Choreographic Symphony* and Symphony No. 22 on rocc 0313) and Philip Spratley (*Cargoes*, *A Helpston Fantasia* and Symphony No. 3 on rocc 0194). The 400th recording in the Toccata Classics catalogue (rocc 0500) was made by the SSO under Dmitry Vasiliev: the First Symphony and the symphonic poem *Vaterland* by the Austrian late-Romantic Julius Bittner, a release which met with universal enthusiasm around the world (one customer review commenting that 'Dmitry Vasiliev and the Siberian Symphony Orchestra do Bittner's music credit [...] they seem to capture the essence of the style in these performances'). Most recently, Toccata Classics issued recordings of Shebalin's Orchestral Suites Nos. 3 and 4 and his *Ballet Suite* (rocc 0164), Steve Elcock's Fifth Symphony, accompanied by two shorter works (rocc 0445), and the Third and Seventh Symphonies by Alexander Tchaikovsky (rocc 0587).



Recorded on 21–23 June (Symphonies Nos. 6 and 7) and 24–25 June 2021 (*Manic Dancing*)
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STEVE ELCOCK Orchestral Music, Volume Three

Symphony No. 7, Op. 33 (2020)	27:41
1 <i>Adagio</i> –	5:16
2 <i>Allegro moderato</i> –	6:42
3 <i>Largamente</i> –	1:56
4 <i>Subito allegro moderato</i> –	0:38
5 <i>Agitato</i> –	5:01
6 <i>Adagio</i> –	2:46
7 <i>A tempo (andante)</i>	5:22
Manic Dancing, Op. 25 (2015)	15:59
8 <i>Allegro commodo</i> –	5:12
9 <i>Largo</i> –	5:58
10 <i>Tempo primo</i>	4:49
Symphony No. 6, Op. 30, <i>Tyrants Destroyed</i> (2017)	32:12
11 I <i>Molto moderato</i> –	4:36
12 Letter C (bar 65)	12:05
13 II <i>Allegro</i> –	7:32
14 Letter N (bar 229) –	3:16
15 Letter T (bar 325)	4:43

Marina Kosterina, piano 8–10

Siberian Symphony Orchestra

Dmitry Vasiliev, conductor

TT 75:54

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