

Alwyn *Conducts* Alwyn

Lyrita

Concerto
Grosso No. 2
Autumn Legend
Lyra Angelica

Osian Ellis

London
Philharmonic
Orchestra



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WILLIAM ALWYN (1905-1985)

	Concerto Grosso No. 2 in G for String Orchestra (1948)	(15'27")
1	1st Movement: Allegro moderato e vigoroso	(5'50")
2	2nd Movement: Adagio ed espressivo	(4'32")
3	3rd Movement: Vivace	(5'05")
4	Autumn Legend for Cor Anglais and String Orchestra (1954)	(12'18")
	'Lyra Angelica' Concerto for Harp and String Orchestra (1953-4)	(31'29")
5	1st Movement: Adagio	(8'25")
6	2nd Movement: Adagio ma non troppo	(7'22")
7	3rd Movement: Moderato	(9'15")
8	4th Movement: Allegro jubiloso-Andante con moto	(6'27")
		(59'17")

Osian Ellis, harp • Geoffrey Browne, cor anglais
London Philharmonic Orchestra
conducted by
William Alwyn

The above individual timings will normally each include two pauses, one before the beginning and one after the end of each work or movement .

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William Alwyn's career as a composer (and in the early days as an orchestral flautist) was launched in the 1920s, and his *Five Preludes* for orchestra were first performed by Sir Henry Wood at a Promenade Concert in 1927. Alwyn always remembered his debt to Sir Henry and in 1964 responded to a BBC commission for a new work for the Promenade Concert to mark the 20th anniversary of the death of Wood (on 19 August 1964) with his Third Concerto Grosso, inscribing the music "to the ever-living memory of Henry Wood". He remembered in his programme note: "throughout the years between the wars Sir Henry Wood was the focus of my musical world. I played in his orchestras and he performed my music".

During the 1930s, many other works followed, including a massive oratorio *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but not all of them were performed, and around the outbreak of war, Alwyn - now a successful composer in his mid-thirties - reconsidered his musical technique and disowned all his earlier music, feeling he had favoured harmonic richness instead of contrapuntal strength. He embraced neo-classicism as his salvation.

Among Alwyn's early music had been various short film scores, and during the war he wrote music for an increasing number of films, first impinging on the wider public with a wartime documentary, *Desert Victory*. His seventy feature films started with *Penn of Pennsylvania* in 1941 and by the late 1940s he had written music for some of the most well-known films of the day - including Carol Reed's *The Fallen Idol* and *Odd Man Out*. Others included *The Winslow Boy*, *The History of Mr. Polly* and *The Rocking Horse Winner*. His music for *The Seekers*, a story of nineteenth century settlers in New Zealand, featured the celebrated bass Inia Te Wiata.

Alwyn was also one of those composers to whom the BBC turned for specially commissioned music for radio features, of which he wrote over 30, starting during the war.

For thirty years, Alwyn was a professor of composition at the Royal Academy of Music, until 1955, but these films enabled Alwyn to put his later career on a sound financial footing, even if they also allowed a certain sort of critic to be dismissive, by association, of his more serious music in a period which did not value film music highly.

Alwyn's music is dominated by his five symphonies written in 1949, 1953, 1956, 1959 and 1972-3, and his two operas *Juan or the Libertine* (1965-71) and *Miss Julie* (1977). The Symphonies were particularly associated with Sir John Barbirolli who gave the first performance of No 1 at Cheltenham, and later Nos 2 and 4.

Alwyn was also active as an artist and as a writer. His celebrated autobiographical account of his life while writing his Third Symphony appeared in the journal *Adam* in 1968, while he published several volumes of his own poetry and produced an English translation of twentieth century French poetry. In 1972 came *Daphne - or the pursuit of beauty*, an essay-poem on the nature of the artist, from which we might select a brief quotation as a clue to his artistic credo:

The artist must...speak
in a language clear and unequivocal
eschewing devious ways and paths oblique.
The genuine artist cannot be content
To chatter to a few initiates,
his message is for all to understand
and realize, at least in part, his full intent.

The music recorded on this CD dates from a period of Alwyn's life characterised by intense creativity. It saw the completion of the first two symphonies, soon to be followed by two more to complete what he regarded as a cycle (the fifth came later). There was also the string quartet in D minor (in the 1930s he had written more than a dozen quartets later repudiated, this was the first in his post war style) and the *Fantasy-Waltzes* for piano, championed by John Ogdon, and written after a visit to Troldhaugen, Grieg's home near Bergen.

Alwyn's natural predilection had always been for a species of romanticism informed by a highly developed technique and it was the conjunction of this neo-classical phase and his underlying personal impulse, his humanity, that led to his mature style. Thus, self-evidently, the concerti grossi, are neoclassical, but by the time of the second we can sense his romantic lyricism, particularly in the slow movement. The other two concertante works here are further expressions of this impulse. Later he developed a sort of serialism, though one essentially tonal and in fact derived from Indian modes.

As Alwyn wrote, "these three works are a profession of my firm belief in the inherent 'colour' of each instrument of the orchestra, hence my careful choice of instrumentation to suit the style of the music demanded by its subject matter, though, paradoxically, such choice itself dictates the style. To me a harp is a harp, a cor anglais a cor anglais, each with its own natural *timbre* and characteristics, the same characteristics which have roused similar emotions in the minds of all my great predecessors, characteristics which as yet have not been dulled or exhausted in the composer's palette. Creative invention is not necessarily enhanced by exploiting sounds that are normally foreign to the instrument's capabilities, indeed the orchestral palette is deprived of much of its essential colour by this very exploitation of eccentricities, the cor anglais loses its poignancy and the harp deteriorates into a circus exhibitionist." Alwyn, a painter himself underlined how profoundly he agreed with the great French painter Gustav Courbet when he wrote "All I have tried to do is to derive, from a complete knowledge of tradition, a reasoned sense of my own independence and individuality."

Alwyn's *First Concerto Grosso* was written in 1943 and was one of his first orchestral works after his change of style. At this period much of his time was spent in the film studio where Muir Matheson conducted a number of his scores and then introduced the Concert Suite from *Desert Victory* to the concert hall. It was timely therefore for Alwyn, with a real sense of gratitude, to inscribe the **Concerto Grosso No 2** "For Muir". The first performance

took place in London's Royal Albert Hall on 6 May 1950 when the London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, and the music was performed twice.

"The concerto grosso for strings" wrote Alwyn "is an exuberant and extrovert exploitation of the string medium in which a quartet of players acts as foil to the full symphonic body of strings".

The solo string quartet takes a lesser role though the first violin has a solo character, taken with confidence. Alwyn explains: "The title 'concerto' suggests neo-classical treatment, and the vigorous opening of the work and the *quasi-giga* tempo of the last movement amply bears this out". In his programme note for the first performance Alwyn confessed to "a broadly Handelian basis". However, he is rightly keen for us not to assume that this is merely pastiche: "But, as with my *Sonata alla Toccata* for piano, the term 'neo-classic' should be taken with a pinch of salt as it is not in my nature to inhibit romanticism by confining my music in a strict classical strait-jacket. Like my later *Sinfonietta for Strings* (1970), *Concerto Grosso No 2* is symphonic in construction and divides into the normal three contrasting movements of a symphony."

"The first movement opens with a bold subject stated on unison violins, a subject which makes abundant and sonorous use of the open G string. This is developed both rhythmically and contrapuntally, subsiding eventually into a tranquil and flowing second subject, first stated on the solo quartet, and then treated as a gentle coda to the first section of the movement. The development section begins quietly and reminiscently but soon becomes more agitated, building to a new and much more passionate theme at its climax then gradually sinking to a rhythmic anticipation (*pianissimo*) of the re-statement (*fortissimo*) of the initial subject which brings the movement to a close."

"The second movement seeks beauty in simplicity, and is introduced by a delicate chordal progression on the muted solo quartet which merges into a serene melody sung by the 1st violins (*con sordini*). After a brief interlude the theme returns this time embroidered with cadenza-like passages on the solo violin. The movement closes peacefully with the two violins of the solo quartet poised above the sustained and changing harmonies of the string orchestra."

"The third and final movement plunges into a vigorous gigue-like theme which is developed and continually transformed throughout the entire movement, both harmonically and rhythmically, until it finally and triumphantly bursts into a re-statement (*fortissimo*) of the initial subject of the first movement, accelerating to a climax but suddenly interrupted by the solo quartet quietly repeating the introductory progression heard at the beginning of the slow movement. The full orchestra breaks the spell and brings the work to an abrupt close."

During the nineteen fifties Alwyn started collecting Pre-Raphaelite paintings, then at their lowest ebb, and in particular he made a specialism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose poem *The Blessed Damozel* has inspired so many composers, from Debussy to Edgar Bainton and Cyril Scott, to Ernest Farrar and Julius Harrison, Patrick Hadley and

Armstrong Gibbs - indeed it was a regular subject for British composers of Alwyn's early years. All these settings were vocal, but in Alwyn's hands, the cor anglais is voice enough to enable him to capture the Pre-Raphaelite mood. As he wrote: "The walls of my studio were hung with his pictures and, when I was composing, I often experienced the eerie sensation that Rossetti himself was with me in my room. Rossetti was 'the onlie begetter' of my **Autumn Legend** for cor anglais and string orchestra, and the score is headed with this quotation from *The Blessed Damozel*:

'Surely she leaned o'er me - her hair
Fell all about my face . . .
Nothing: the Autumn fall of leaves
the whole year sets apace.'

"The music needs no formal analysis: it is a free improvisation arising spontaneously from the poet's words," said Alwyn. "Unashamedly romantic *Autumn Legend* is my own very personal tribute to the memory of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poet who inspired Debussy, the painter extolled by Delacroix."

The music was first performed at the Cheltenham Festival on 22 July 1955 when the cor anglais was played by Roger Winfield with the Halle Orchestra conducted by Barbirolli. It shared the programme with Brian Easdale's *Concerto Lirico*, a piano concerto on Indian themes, which must have emphasised the personality of the Alwyn. Its agreeable wistfulness may have suggested kinship with its distinguished predecessors, particularly Sibelius's *The Swan of Tuonela*, and a critic at the time remarked how it "might even be imagined returning to Karelia where the shepherd's pipe still echoes, or where the black river of Tuonela still flows in the geographically unlikely distance under one of Debussy's cloudy skies".

Just as *Autumn Legend* was inspired by both painting and poetry, so Alwyn's concerto for harp and strings looked to the metaphysical poets, a fertile source of inspiration for British composers throughout the twentieth century. Alwyn prefaces each movement with an appropriate quotation which is illuminated by the music that follows. He wrote: "**Lyra Angelica** ('Angel's Songs') was inspired by my intense love of the 17th-century English metaphysical poets, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, John Donne and Thomas Traherne, of whom Giles Fletcher is probably the least known today although his masterpiece, the epic poem *Christ's Victorie and Triumph* (1610) was the direct inspiration of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. My concerto for harp and strings is a cycle of four elegiac movements, each illustrating a quotation from Fletcher's text:

- 1 (*Adagio*) 'I looke for angel's songs, and hear him crie'
- 2 (*Adagio, ma non troppo*) 'Ah! who was He such pretious perills found?'
- 3 (*Moderato*) 'And yet, how can I let Thee singing goe.
When men incens'd with hate Thy death forset?'
- 4 (*Allegro giubiloso-Andante con moto*) 'How can such joy as this want words
to speake?'

“In my interpretation of these lines I have tried to capture in musical terms the sensuous imagery and mystical fervour of the poem as a whole”, wrote Alwyn, and as one critic remarked “experimental dissonance is well-nigh out of the question with a combination of harp and strings”. Alwyn went on: “The concerto is of symphonic proportions but free and harp-sodic in style. A detailed analysis of its complex construction in this case is inappropriate as it might tend to distract the listener from the rapt mood I have tried to sustain by interweaving the solo harp and strings into a continuous web of luminous sound.”

It is worth adding that this is a work on a considerable scale, by a composer who is not afraid of having his violins in octaves and whose string writing gives the work a backbone of virile melody; he can draw the big line with confidence and is not afraid of a dramatic gesture. It is also of note for the endlessly resourceful textures of the string writing. Towards the end of the fourth movement the long flowing tune from the first returns marked to be played a little faster than in the first movement and creating a note of resolution, even of triumph.

Lyra Angelica had its premiere on the first night of London’s Promenade Concerts in July 1954 when the harpist was Sidonie Goossens with the strings of the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent.

As we listen to this music the words of the late Hugh Ottaway’s assessment of Alwyn in a memorable radio talk come to mind: “How directly this music communicates. How warm its eloquence. How free from an esoteric pretentiousness.”

LEWIS FOREMAN

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