
NAXOS
Havergal
BRIAN
Symphonies Nos. 8, 21 and 26
New Russia State Symphony Orchestra
Alexander Walker

Havergal Brian (1876–1972)

Symphonies Nos. 8, 21 and 26

Each of the three symphonies on this recording marks an important milestone on the long journey of Havergal Brian's music to wide public recognition. *Symphony No. 8* was the first of Brian's symphonies to be performed, *Symphony No. 21* the first to be commercially recorded (along with *No. 10*, by the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra in 1972) and *Symphony No. 26* is the last of Brian's 32 symphonies to have achieved a commercial recording. The three works also demonstrate the breadth of Brian's symphonic approach, from the unique one-movement structure of *No. 8*, via the Classically proportioned *No. 21*, to the quirkily reimagined Classicism of *No. 26*.

William Havergal Brian (1876–1972) was born into a working-class family in Staffordshire, England. He had little formal education and was self-taught as a composer, yet from an early age he was possessed by the desire to write music, a desire that was quickened by an early encounter with the music of Elgar, and later by meeting the man himself. Elgar briefly acted as something of a mentor and in the decade before the Great War, Brian started to make a name for himself, his music being taken up by some of the major conductors of the day. Personal and professional crises engulfed him just before the Great War and the war itself finished off what was left of his professional career. Brian subsequently supported himself and his large family through a series of menial jobs, writing music all the while, though with little immediate prospect of it being heard.

Brian came late to symphony writing – he was already 51 by the time he completed his first, the immense *Gothic Symphony* (1919–27). Three very large symphonies followed over the next six years, after which Brian's conception of the symphony began to change radically. Gigantic musical architecture was replaced by compression and concision and, with few exceptions, the remaining 28 symphonies last no more than about 20 minutes each, usually written for fairly standard large orchestras, but always with greatly enlarged percussion sections.

Several of the symphonies seem to organise themselves into groups and Brian himself is known to have described *Nos. 8*, *9* and *10* (1949–54) as 'brothers' – though their composition was punctuated by writing two full-scale operas: *Turandot* (1950–51) and *The Cenci* (1951–52). *Symphony No. 8* was sketched between 25 January and 27 March 1949, the full score being completed on 17 May 1949. Shortly after writing the symphony Brian alluded to a curious literary inspiration – Goethe's macabre ballad *Die Braut von Korinth* – as well as a scarcely less startling musical one:

> It is not illustration: if it were it would be a symphonic poem. And although it is not even a first cousin of Classical sonata form, I consider that in structure it is as firmly based as Bach's great fugue in B flat minor from the '48, which may remotely have influenced my work – we don't know.

Four years after the symphony's completion and having found its way to the BBC Music Library, it was the score that the BBC music producer Robert Simpson (himself soon to become an admired symphonist) opened by chance. Simpson was instantly impressed and he arranged for the work to be broadcast. The symphony was played twice, on 1 and 2 February 1954 (these were the days when all studio broadcasts were live), by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. Brian was 78 years old and it was the first of his symphonies that he had heard; performances of several others soon followed, as did the remarkable – and surely not coincidental – late harvest of 21 symphonies composed after the age of 80.

One can see why Simpson was immediately struck: the opening of *No. 8* is unlike any other. A strange nocturnal march, scored for alternating muted euphonium and muted tuba, underpinned by three side drums playing without snares, barely establishes itself before it is cut off and replaced by a soft bare fifth in the low strings. As if from the depths of the earth, muted horns intone two interlocking rising fifths and an upward semitone, confirming the minor mode of the prevailing B flat tonality, before the march resumes. Again, it is abruptly cut off and the horns and strings return, this time against a descending scale in the piano. From these seemingly immutable elements, Brian builds a one-movement structure in which almost every dimension can be traced back to the opening, however oblique the development may at first seem. Of particular importance is the repeated rhythm of the opening march: a long note followed by two short ones. Much of the subsequent music is somehow related to that figure – often by increasing the short notes from two to three.

While *No. 8* is one of Brian's most gripping symphonies it is also one of the most difficult to describe. Its progress is unpredictable and bears no resemblance to any pre-existing musical form. The initial opposition of trudging forward motion and profound contemplation plays out across the entire symphony and the first few minutes are concerned with alternating different types of music, each seemingly intent on frustrating the progress of the others. The resulting structural tension, imparting an intense feeling of expectation, eventually yields to a typically Brianic moment where the music seems to become completely becalmed, as if it has withdrawn to a private and inaccessible inner world. From this inertia emerges an eerie canon for three bassoons, based on the rising horn fifths from the opening, leading to the next section.

A fierce confrontation ensues between a militaristic development of the opening march and a gloriously lyrical melody. The melody grows and swells to a climax of almost Straussian ardour, before being suddenly shut off. The music now calms to reveal the still centre of the work – a delicate version of the melody in the violins, marked 'almost nothing, make it sound far away', against crystalline piano, harp and glockenspiel.

There follow two passacaglias, the first an extraordinary piece of sonic invention full of softly swirling strings, chattering wind figurations and mysterious rustlings and clickings in the percussion. The repeated bass line is derived from the symphony's opening rhythm, now in reverse: short notes preceding the long one. As the tonality of the repeated bass line is progressively ratcheted upward, so is the tension and volume, until a climax is abruptly halted to leave a kind of 'aftershock' where distorted fragments of passacaglia theme are passed around the orchestra. A second climax and two cello recitatives, punctuated by sharp chords in the full orchestra, lead into the second passacaglia. Here, the theme is more mellifluous, focussing on the rising semitone of the horn call near the start of the work, which in this new context creates an ambiguity between minor and major. The stately progress of the succeeding variations builds on that tension moving inexorably to a climax of huge power, reinforced by organ pedals, and once again cut off at its height. The final bars return to the mystery of the opening. The march rhythm has disappeared, but the quiet bare fifth remains, first in wind then in wide-spaced strings. The descending scale returns, a solo cor anglais offers a brief glimpse of light, before darkness falls. The rising horn call is answered with a dissonance in muted trombones and the music is extinguished with a *pianissimo* tam-tam stroke.

The quiet final tam-tam stroke almost became a musical signature of Brian's around the time of *No. 8*; he also used it to end symphonies *No. 6* (1947), *No. 7* (1948) (here, with a bell too) and *No. 12* (1957). His use of the gesture may have had overtly operatic associations (it also ends the *Preludio Tragico* to the opera *The Cenci*). It is notable that the two decades between 1937 and 1957, while yielding eight symphonies, were concerned above all with composing musical dramas. Brian wrote no fewer than five of them during this time. In addition to the those mentioned earlier, he completed the vast setting of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1937–44), and the operas *Faust* (1955–56) and *Agamemnon* (1957) – a total of some eleven and a half hours of dramatic music, compared to just over three hours of symphonic music. Brian's dramatic output is still imperfectly understood; at the time of writing, only *The Tigers, The Cenci* and *Agamemnon* have been performed complete and none at all have been staged. Nevertheless, it is clear that once Brian stopped writing operas altogether and concentrated almost exclusively on symphonies, his musical language changed, becoming even tougher, less impressionistic, less mystical in character and more concentrated in its material, driven by a preoccupation with contrapuntal discourse and clear formal outlines.

The five single movement symphonies (*Nos. 13–17*) composed between 1959 and 1961 are in some respects

transitional, even experimental, works chronicling Brian's search for a new type of symphonic discourse. Thereafter, most of the symphonies seek new ways of engaging with Classical models. *Nos. 18*, *19* and *20* are all three movement pieces, but *Symphony No. 21*, by some distance the longest of the later symphonies, returns to a four-movement design for the first time since *No. 7*.

Among various misconceptions about Brian is the notion that he composed one work after another in an unending stream – a sort of 'automatic writing'. While it is true that he often worked very quickly and often produced works in groups, there were also periods when he stopped composing altogether. Between finishing *Symphony No. 20* at the end of May 1962 and the summer of 1963 Brian wrote no new music at all, describing himself as 'lying fallow'. Brian began work on *No. 21* sometime in July, finishing the short score draft on 31 August 1963. The full score seems to have been finished around the beginning of November. In later life, Brian habitually wrote out a complete second copy of his full scores; in this particular case (and quite inexplicably) he actually made three copies.

At first acquaintance, *No. 21* seems more relaxed than its immediate neighbours; it is certainly more expansive in scale and it has been suggested that in the work Brian was nostalgically engaging with the 'English pastoral' tradition. It is certainly true that his correspondence with Robert Simpson around the time of its composition often refers to the past, notably: 'the landscapes of my youth remain concealed in me unconsciously – my music must be full of it'. But behind the apparent geniality lies a world of considerable emotional complexity. The first movement, beginning with an innocuous plucked chord and a slow introduction in the woodwind, soon takes off in a driving *Allegro*, full of vigorous invention. A calm clarinet solo appears to serve the function of a second subject in a sonata form exposition, but although the music then moves into an energetic development, one searches in vain for anything resembling a recapitulation. Instead we have a continuous stream of inventive development, until the final five bars, marked *Adagio*, bring this comparatively brief movement (barely more than one sixth of the work's total duration) to a majestic close.

The slow movement probes altogether deeper emotions: a striking sense of innocence irretrievably lost. At first serenely lyrical, and featuring one of Brian's most ravishing violin solos, the music gradually moves into a darker, more troubled landscape, building, through a magnificently inventive span, to an impassioned climax. With contrasting scoring, but scarcely any reduction in intensity, the music presses on, through jagged outbursts from the brass, to a second climax and an elegiac, yet strangely uneasy coda, underpinned by tolling timpani, foreshadowing the symphony's conclusion.

In bright contrast, the third movement – more intermezzo than *scherzo* – explores less complex thoughts. A robust triple-time opening section contrasts with a playful duple-time Trio section, followed by a brief reprise of the opening. Only in the passionate nine-bar coda does Brian suggest that this untroubled world must also pass, and indeed that it may have already done so.

The finale is by far the longest movement. It begins with a distant horn fanfare, answered by strings and a delicate oboe solo. The music plunges into a lively *Allegro*, full of good humour and dominated by a memorable theme, which proves to be the basis of a loose variation form; loose in the sense that it also contains episodes that are not derived from the theme. The most substantial such episode comes in the middle, where the opening fanfare is recalled, this time answered by a distant trumpet. The movement also alludes to sonata form in the way that the earlier *Allegro* is reprised, but events do not unfold quite as expected. Towards the close, a mood of solemnity comes to prevail and the final bars with their slamming full orchestra chords and timpani concussions end this rich, emotionally ambiguous symphony with more of a question mark than a full stop.

The first performance of *Symphony No. 21* was given in January 1969 by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Edward Downes at a Maida Vale studio recording, which Brian attended. Three years earlier, the year he turned 90, there had been a spate of performances of his works, including a Proms performance of *Symphony No. 12* and the professional premiere of the *Gothic Symphony* in October, which brought the composer considerable celebrity. Brian worked on *Symphony No. 26* during the first half of that year, but never lived to hear it performed; the work had to wait until 1976, his centenary year, for its first performances, first by the North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra and then by the New Philharmonia Orchestra under Vernon Handley.

While the symphony as a whole has something of the character of a divertimento, the first movement is substantial and, by late Brian standards, quite expansive. It begins in full spate, as if the work had already started and the listener had arrived late. A sonata form begins to unfold, with a fine lyrical second subject, followed by a lively development and swaggering recapitulation. But where one would expect the second subject to be reprised Brian substitutes a new development that is certainly derived from the original second subject but in no sense quotes it.

The sketch for the symphony clearly indicates a work in three movements. The full score dispenses with the numbering for the third movement and there is no double bar at the end of the second, so he clearly saw the two as being connected. Nevertheless, they clearly have separate identities. The second starts as a kind of minuet, moving through a series of episodes with no particular sense of direction. The mood is playful and inconsequential, though with outbursts of aggression. A delicately scored coda featuring a flute solo leads directly into the finale.

The last movement is a *rondo* structure in which the robust and cheerful opening theme recurs twice in a clearly recognisable way and a third time in a more allusive form. In between come contrasting episodes, one featuring a particularly elaborate violin solo. The mood remains playful. Only at the end do the clouds darken: the tonic key of the symphony (F) is destabilised by swirling figuration in A minor (with prominent G sharp leading-note) and in a sudden angry gesture the music plunges towards the key of C and the work abruptly ends, as though its 90-year-old creator had grown impatient with trivialities and was anxious to move on to more serious matters. It is perhaps significant that his next symphony was to explore the same key of C (minor) and would be a very serious work indeed.

John Pickard

New Russia State Symphony Orchestra

Artistic Director and Chief Conductor: Yuri Bashmet

Photo: Oleg Nachinkin, Varvara Weymarn

The Novaya Rossiya (New Russia) State Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1990. In 2002 Yuri Bashmet became its director, opening a new chapter in its history and bringing his own inimitable manner of interpretation, whereby each concert evokes the feeling that the music is being created anew. Appearing with the orchestra have been soloists and conductors of the highest international distinction. Novaya Rossiya is a frequent guest at festivals in Russia and abroad, including the Moscow Easter Festival, the Alfred Schnittke Festival in Moscow, the Besançon Festival in France, the Elba Isola Musicale d'Europa in Italy, the Athens Festival in Greece and the Festival of Russian Art in Essen, Germany. Since 2008 the orchestra has taken part in the annual Bashmet Winter Music Festival in Sochi, and the International Yuri Bashmet Music Festival in Yaroslavl and Minsk. The orchestra regularly plays a subscription series under the auspices of the Moscow Philharmonic Association, with varied programmes aimed at both adult and younger listeners. It has often toured abroad, notably to Finland, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Greece, Switzerland, Austria, Bulgaria, Holland, Spain, Japan, India and Turkey. It also tours at home. The orchestra boasts a wide repertoire and frequently gives premieres of contemporary works. www.nros.ru

Alexander Walker


Photo: Erik Berg

Alexander Walker's career has taken him all over the world. He is highly regarded for his interpretations of 19th- and 20th-century music from Central and Eastern Europe, and he has introduced British music to many audiences unfamiliar with it, throughout Europe and elsewhere. In 2017 the Elgar Society awarded him with the Elgar Medal for the work he has done to champion the composer's music. In the UK he works regularly as a guest conductor with many major orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, City of London Sinfonia and the English Chamber Orchestra. International engagements include frequent appearances with the Russian State Symphony Orchestra, Musica Viva, New Russia State Symphony Orchestra, George Enescu Philharmonic and the Belgrade Philharmonic, as well as many other orchestras throughout Europe. He has conducted at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, touring with the Royal Ballet to the United States, at the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Theatres in Russia, and in South Korea, Japan and Singapore. He has been music director for productions for the Norwegian and Finnish National Operas and conducted the first ever production of an opera by Britten in Turkey for Istanbul State Opera.

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**The Havergal Brian Society would like to dedicate this issue,
which finally completes the commercial recording of all thirty-two of Brian's symphonies,
to the memory of his daughter, Jean Furnivall (1923–2017),
for her support and encouragement of the work of the Society over many years.**

Each of the three symphonies on this recording represents a significant milestone in Havergal Brian's long musical journey, and each demonstrates the breadth of his symphonic approach. *No. 8* was the first of Brian's symphonies to be performed and is one of his most gripping and unpredictable, full of sonic invention. Behind the more apparently genial and expansive *No. 21* lies profound emotional complexity, while *No. 26* embodies elements of a divertimento though it retains disquieting outbursts. *Gramophone* wrote of the previous Brian recording by these forces (8.573408): 'The New Russia State Symphony Orchestra do the music proud.' This issue completes the commercial recording of all 32 of Brian's symphonies.

Havergal Brian Society

Havergal BRIAN
(1876–1972)

1	**Symphony No. 8 in B flat minor (1949)**	**23:20**
	Symphony No. 21 in E flat major (1963)	**29:19**
2	I. Adagio – Allegro e con anima	6:04
3	II. Adagio cantabile e sostenuto	7:19
4	III. Vivace	4:25
5	IV. Allegro con fuoco	11:31
	Symphony No. 26 (1966)*	**17:48**
6	I. Allegro risoluto	7:19
7	II. Allegro moderato e grazioso – Giocoso	5:09
8	III. Allegro assai	5:20

*World Première Recording

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Alexander Walker

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