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**Sir Malcolm
ARNOLD**

Symphony No. 9

**National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland
Andrew Penny**



Malcolm Arnold (b. 1921)

Symphony No. 9, Op. 128

On Monday 20th January 1992, in Studio 7 at BBC Manchester, the BBC Philharmonic gave the first performance of the *Symphony No. 9, Opus 128*, by Sir Malcolm Arnold. The composer himself, aged seventy and not in the best of health, was present for the occasion. The new Symphony was the sole work in the concert, and the conductor was Sir Charles Groves, a long-time friend of Malcolm Arnold and champion of his music.

Shortly before that concert, Malcolm Arnold had celebrated his 70th birthday. He was born in 1921 in Northampton – birthplace incidentally of Edmund Rubbra and William Alwyn, two other fine composers of our century. There was music in his family, but nothing to indicate the prodigious talent that was soon to emerge. At the age of sixteen he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music where he became a pupil of the legendary trumpeter Ernest Hall, and since he had also shown a youthful bent towards composition, he pursued his composing studies with Gordon Jacob. The ravages of war meant that he was offered an orchestral post even before he had graduated. Arnold played with the London Philharmonic on and off until 1948, when the award of the Mendelssohn scholarship meant he could finally devote himself full-time to what he now knew to be his true métier: composing.

It was a composer that Sir Malcolm has left an indelible mark. If most people think of his film scores – *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Whistle Down the Wind*, *Hobson's Choice* – there are literally a hundred others as well – this is because he proved to have a natural flair for the medium, and seized his opportunities gratefully. In the Fifties and Sixties, he was leading a double life, however, writing music of all sorts to commission, for friends, or even just for fun. With the exception of grand opera there was no medium to which he did not contribute: concertos, ballets, chamber music, band pieces (brass and military), educational works, even a Nativity Masque. And at the core of his output are

nine superlative symphonies, each one highly individual, different from its predecessor. They are the heart of Arnold the composer and Arnold the man.

Arnold's *Ninth Symphony* had had a somewhat tortuous history, in which BBC Manchester played a not insignificant part. The idea of a Manchester première went back to before the *Eighth Symphony* of 1979, when David Ellis, then Head of Music North, asked the composer (after he had conducted the orchestra at a concert) if he would write his next symphony for them. Malcolm Arnold agreed, but explained that No. 8 was already promised to a Foundation – and an orchestra – in the United States of America. David Ellis therefore arranged for the *Ninth* to be commissioned for European Music Year, 1985. Fate then intervened, in the form of the composer's breakdown and long period of ill-health. The symphony was not ready in time: and London, seeing the deadline and an important occasion missed, withdrew the funding.

The *Ninth Symphony* was eventually completed, by then several years behind schedule, on 5th September 1986, at Wymondham in Norfolk. Embarrassment then ensued, as first the BBC – where there had been a change of management, both in Manchester and in London – and Arnold's then publisher, Faber Music, took fright at the score, which was radically different from the composer's previous symphonies. The BBC's original commission was still not renewed. Sir Charles Groves meanwhile conducted a run-through of the symphony for the composer's benefit in early 1988 in Greenwich, by the Orchestra of the National Centre for Orchestral Studies (now disbanded). Sir Charles believed in the piece, and at his insistence efforts to secure a first professional and public performance elsewhere continued, without success. It was not until the showing of a film about Malcolm Arnold in the 'Omnibus' series of BBC-1's, timed to co-incide with his seventieth birthday, that the tide began to turn. The film included Arnold conducting the closing pages of the symphony. When Sir Malcolm Arnold came to Manchester to hear the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras perform several of his earlier symphonies as part of an Arnold-Haydn Celebration in November, 1991, in which Sir Charles conducted a memorable account of the *Seventh*, a happy combination of circumstances led to

the eventual unveiling of the new symphony on a very cold Manchester night in January the following year: over five years having elapsed since its completion.

Ever since Beethoven, writing a *Ninth Symphony* has been for a composer something akin to climbing Mount Everest – the summation of a lifetime’s achievement. In addition there has come to be something fatalistic about the very idea of a *Ninth Symphony*. To take two nearer examples, Bruckner died before he could complete what would have been the longest of his symphonies, while Mahler’s Ninth was written in the shadow of his fatal illness. Shostakovich – much admired by Malcolm Arnold – was so over-awed by the burden of this musical tradition that he deliberately stood it on its head and wrote a lightweight piece. Arnold himself has admitted to being daunted by the weight of musical history; not surprising when we discover that it was written after a five-year period when the composer had, in his own words, “been through hell”.

Malcolm Arnold’s *Ninth Symphony* has four movements. First comes an *Allegro* in three time: a departure from previous models, in that it is not really dramatic, as in earlier Arnold symphonies. If anything it is rather naïve in character, the themes being not so much developed as given a wide variety of different orchestral colourings. The only real climax is saved for the end of the movement, where the tempo slows, while pitch and dynamics increase almost to breaking point. One of the most disturbing features of the *Ninth* for performers and critics alike is the amount of straightforward (or sometimes not so straightforward) repetition in the symphony, and there is also much unison writing for the instruments. The second movement is memorable: a gentle, pastoral-like *Allegretto* in nine-eight time, with much of the writing in just two or three parts, and based on a haunting melancholy tune that resembles a folk-like carol. The third movement is a noisy two-four piece marked *giubiloso* and not unlike many another breezy Arnold scherzo, with much prominent and tricky writing for the wind, particularly the brass, and full of characteristic Arnold clashes and dissonances within a tonal context.

It is with the finale that the balance of the whole *Ninth Symphony* changes. It takes almost as long as the other three movements put together, and it is not the usual Malcolm Arnold quick symphonic finale, but a huge *Adagio* slow movement – just like the anguished adagio finale of Mahler's *Ninth*. The composer himself, in an interview, did not deny the parallel. However, the emotional feel is different from Mahler, and is peculiar to Malcolm Arnold: there is for example none of Mahler's frenzy. Yet, almost throughout, the movement is bleak and intense, spare and grief-stricken; like a gigantic funeral march it forsakes dramatic contrasts for the sake of an unbroken continuity of atmosphere: until the final bars, that is, which form a radiant resolution on to D major. Without that chord, the surrender to nihilism and despair would be total.

In purely musical terms the material of this finale is often very simple, haunted throughout by the falling phrase of the opening; but at the same time it is extremely demanding, both on the players in terms of sheer concentration, and on the listener, in terms of its emotional journey. The symphony is dedicated to the man who has looked after Malcolm Arnold since his illness, and who was also present for the first performance: Anthony John Day. If there is a note of finality about the symphony – which Malcolm Arnold once said he regards as the highest form of musical composition – then it is intentional: it may well be the last that Arnold writes. There is no doubt that he meant every note of it, and that it makes uncomfortable listening, and that it is very different from its predecessors. But it exists, and as the work of a master composer it demands to be heard – to enable it to be studied, absorbed and finally learned from. Arnold's *Ninth* has a message for us all.

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National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland

The RTE Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1947 as part of the Radio and Television service in Ireland. With its membership coming from France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Russia, it drew together a rich blend of European culture. Apart from its many symphony concerts, the orchestra came to world-wide attention with its participation in the famous Wexford Opera Festival, an event broadcast in many parts of the world. The orchestra now enjoys the facilities of a fine new concert hall in central Dublin where it performs with the world's leading conductors and soloists. In 1990 the RTE Symphony Orchestra was augmented and renamed the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, quickly establishing itself as one of Europe's most adventurous orchestras with programmes featuring many twentieth century compositions. The orchestra has now embarked upon an extensive recording project for the Naxos and Marco Polo labels and will record music by Nielsen, Tchaikovsky, Goldmark, Rachmaninov, Brian and Scriabin.

Andrew Penny

Andrew Penny was born in Hull and initially studied the clarinet at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where he also worked as conductor of the Opera Unit. The newly established Rothschild Scholarship in Conducting led to study with Sir Charles Groves and Timothy Reynish and work as assistant with Richard Hickox and Elgar Howarth. Winner of the prestigious Ricordi Prize, he achieved a major success with the Vaughan Williams opera *Riders to the Sea* at Sadlers Wells Theatre in London. Andrew Penny subsequently studied with Sir Edward Downes and made a number of radio recordings in Holland and Britain. He has conducted regularly for both the Naxos and Marco Polo CD labels, recording principally with the RTE Concert Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra in Dublin. There have been other recording engagements in Australia and in Kiev, while in Dublin there is a planned cycle of Symphonies by Malcolm Arnold. His recordings have won considerable critical acclaim both in Europe and America.



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STEREO

Playing
Time:
57'34"

Sir Malcolm
ARNOLD
(b. 1921)

Recorded
in the
presence of the composer

National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland
Andrew Penny

Symphony No. 9

- | | | |
|----------|---|----------------|
| 1 | Vivace | (8:33) |
| 2 | Allegretto | (8:35) |
| 3 | Giubiloso | (6:40) |
| 4 | Lento | (23:10) |
| 5 | Sir Malcolm Arnold in conversation with
Andrew Penny | (10:35) |

Recorded at the National Concert Hall, Dublin,
on 11th and 12th September, 1995.
Producer & Engineer: Chris Craker
Music Notes: Piers Burton-Page

Cover Painting by Maria Luisa Marino



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