

# Henry Cotter NIXON

## COMPLETE ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

CONCERT OVERTURE NO. 3, JACTA EST ALEA

PALAMON AND ARCITE: SYMPHONIC POEM

ROMANCE FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA

Ana Török, violin  
Kodály Philharmonic Orchestra  
Paul Mann

# THE DISCOVERY OF HENRY COTTER NIXON

by David J. Brown

From 1976 until 1992 I was Secretary of The Havergal Brian Society, a role that necessarily entailed much correspondence with its members. The name of one, Anthony Nixon, was thus already familiar when we finally met at the 1991 HBS Annual General Meeting. Unexpectedly, he brought the conversation round to the topic of his grandfather who, he said, had been a composer and – the rather startling claim made more or less straightaway – author of the first British symphonic poem. To pronounce anything as ‘the first’ is always asking for trouble, particularly in a genre which is hard to define. The most likely candidate in this instance is Pierson’s *Macbeth* of 1859,<sup>1</sup> but Mr Nixon’s claim was in response to the then common attribution to William Wallace’s *The Passing of Beatrice*, composed in 1892: a good ten years earlier his grandfather, Henry Cotter Nixon, had composed *Palamon and Arcite*, based on John Dryden’s reworking of *The Knight’s Tale* from Chaucer.

Mr Nixon followed up our conversation by mailing me a photocopy of the manuscript full score. *Palamon and Arcite* proved to be no overture *manqué* or even a single-movement piece after the Lisztian model but a five-movement orchestral epic clearly dated, on its final page, 7 April 1882. A later parcel of photocopies showed it to be far from Nixon’s only orchestral work, although none had ever been published, and several apparently never performed. *Palamon and Arcite* had been played, though only once, in 1888 under its composer’s baton, as the main item in a tribute concert organised for him by the Hastings and St Leonards Orchestral Society, long now defunct, of which Nixon had been music director since 1876.

<sup>1</sup> The definitions become all the more important in this particular case: *Macbeth* was ‘the first symphonic poem by a British composer’, since Heinrich Hugo Pierson (formerly Henry Hugh Pearson (1815–73)) had lived in Germany since 1845. Pierson’s claim is reinforced by the fact that *Macbeth* had its first performance at Crystal Palace, South London, on 23 October 1875.

After his father (Henry Cotter's son) died in 1962, Anthony Nixon had assumed stewardship of the manuscripts and, as well as storing them carefully, had drafted a catalogue and done as much research as he could into his grandfather's life and career. In 1993 he wisely presented his archive to the Library of the Royal College of Music for permanent safe keeping. Two years later a BBC recording of *Palamon and Arcite* was scheduled, but for reasons unconnected with the music itself it was never completed.<sup>2</sup> Anthony Nixon and I continued to correspond intermittently, but late in 1998 he suffered a severe stroke, and the following year he died.

For years practicalities obstructed further headway with Nixon's orchestral music, but in April 2015 I took advantage of the time that retirement at last allowed and went through the manuscripts. A possible Toccata Classics recording of *Palamon and Arcite* had been discussed with Martin Anderson, and his suggestion of Paul Mann as both editor and conductor-designate kicked into gear the project to record not only the symphonic poem but all of Nixon's extant orchestral music.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of any contemporary correspondence, diaries or other narrative sources, the following brief account of the composer and his music is drawn very largely from the notes Anthony Nixon left, and an important article that he wrote about *Palamon and Arcite*.<sup>4</sup> His grandfather did merit a short entry in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* from its second (1904–10) to fifth (1954) editions, before vanishing

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Nixon, who attended the sessions, reported in a letter to me (dated 20 July 1995) that because of problems that Adrian Leaper and the BBC Concert Orchestra had had with the performing material for a work by Parry recorded in the morning, there was time in the remaining afternoon session to record only the second and third movements of *Palamon and Arcite*, which, so far as is known, were never edited and broadcast.

<sup>3</sup> Volume Two of this series (to be released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0373) will contain the Prelude to the operetta *The Witch of Esgrair* (c. 1892–93); the *Concert-Stück* for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 14 (1883); *May Day*; Scherzo for Orchestra, Op. 16 (1885); the 'Pizzicato for Strings', *Dance of the Sea Nymphs* (1889); and the Concert Overture No. 2, *Anima ed Fide* (1880s?). Volume Three (TOCC 0374) will present the Prelude to the 'operatic farce' *The Gay Typewriters* (1895–96); the Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra (1880s?); the Concert Overture No. 1, *Titania* (1880); the Overture to the dramatic cantata *Aslauga* (1890–93); the Gavotte in E flat (1880s?); and Nixon's last known orchestral work, the *Coronation March* (1902).

<sup>4</sup> "The First British Symphonic Poem: "Palamon and Arcite" by Henry Cotter Nixon (1842–1907); *The British Music Society Journal*, Vol. 19 (1997), pp. 3–9.

from the supposedly more comprehensive *New Grove* in its various incarnations from 1980 onwards. So, who was Henry Cotter Nixon, and what did he write?

### **Henry Cotter Nixon's Life and Music**

Born on 17 May 1842, in Kennington, South London, Henry Cotter Nixon was the youngest of four surviving children (of thirteen) by Henry George Nixon (1796–1849), himself a composer, principally of church music, and organist, latterly at the Roman Catholic Southwark Cathedral.<sup>5</sup> In 1818 Henry George had married Caroline Melissa Danby, daughter of Sarah (1760–1861) and John Danby (1757–98), an organist and composer of glees; *inter alia* it may be noted that this was the same Sarah Danby who became mistress to the painter J. M. W. Turner after her husband's death.

The family's financial situation was always perilous, the more so after Henry George Nixon died in the last major cholera epidemic to hit London, but somehow the resources were found to send the teenaged Henry Cotter to Hull to study music. His teacher was a family friend, Dr Harry Deval, author of *The Art of Vocalization* and composer of an opera entitled *The Rival Clans*, produced in Newcastle in 1846.<sup>6</sup> Henry Cotter stayed with Deval for four years, in 1859 becoming organist at St Mary's Catholic Church in Hull. The following year he was back in London, at Nightingale Vale, Woolwich; this location lent its name to his earliest surviving work, the *Nightingale Quadrilles*, for which some orchestral parts remain – too incomplete, sadly, to have enabled reconstruction for this recording project.

The next decade found him living in Marylebone with his older sister Caroline and her husband, the architect Edward Buckton Lamb (no relation, so far as is known, to the Caroline Lamb (1785–1828) famous for her relationship with Lord Byron). Nixon became increasingly active in South London musical life as an organist, orchestral player (from 1862 a second violinist in the Sacred Harmonic Society Orchestra), organiser and conductor of concerts at Woolwich Town Hall, and as pianist made his debut in 1864

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Nixon donated also a collection of his great-grandfather's music, both manuscript and published, to the RCM Library; this archive awaits investigation.

<sup>6</sup> James D. Brown and Stephen S. Stratton, *British Musical Biography: A Dictionary of Musical Artists, Authors and Composers born in Britain and its Colonies*, Birmingham, 1897, p. 123.

at a concert of the Apollo Glee Society in London Bridge. He must already have been a performer of some accomplishment – his grandson notes<sup>7</sup> that before 1872 he played concertos by Spohr and Mendelssohn at St James's Hall.<sup>8</sup>

Almost all of Nixon's compositions from this time seem to have been songs (altogether he wrote around 50) and he included some in his Woolwich concerts. He continued to study, probably privately, with Smart,<sup>9</sup> Steggall<sup>10</sup> and Macfarren,<sup>11</sup> and became a Fellow (1867) and Council member (1868) of the Royal College of Organists. In May 1871 his three-movement Fantasia in E for Violin and Piano was performed in London by Henry Blagrove,<sup>12</sup> accompanied by Nixon himself – the first notable public airing of any of his works.

In 1872 he moved to Sussex – due to ill-health, according to Anthony Nixon<sup>13</sup> (London's air was then notoriously polluted and the contrast with the coast would have been stark) – where he became organist at St Mary Magdalen Church, St Leonards-on-Sea. He was active as a lecturer, tutored locally in piano, violin, singing and composition, and in due course established the Hastings and St Leonards College of Music. Meanwhile he had married – Alice Mary Woodward, in November 1873 – and in 1876 gained his BMus at Cambridge.<sup>14</sup> Most notably, in 1876 he was appointed conductor of the Hastings and St Leonards Orchestra, and over the next twelve years raised its standards

<sup>7</sup> 'The First British Symphonic Poem', *loc. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Opened in 1858 between the Quadrant in Regent Street and Piccadilly, and Vine Street and George Court, the 2000-seat St James's Hall was one of London's main concert venues. It was demolished in 1905.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Smart (1813–79): organist and composer, principally of organ music, songs and hymn tunes.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Steggall (1826–1905): professor of organ and harmony at the Royal Academy of Music, composer of hymn tunes, and an editor of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

<sup>11</sup> George Alexander Macfarren (1813–87): musicologist, professor (1837) and Principal (1876) of the Royal Academy of Music, and composer of nine symphonies and other orchestral works, cantatas, oratorios and some two dozen operettas and operas, including *Robin Hood* (1860, recorded complete on Naxos 8.660306).

<sup>12</sup> Henry Gamble Blagrove (1811–72): violin virtuoso who studied with Spohr and enjoyed a brilliant career as soloist, chamber musician and principal violin of several leading orchestras.

<sup>13</sup> 'The First British Symphonic Poem', *loc. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> The 176-page manuscript full score, dated 26 February–30 April 1875, of his degree composition, a cantata entitled *The Lord is King*, for SSAATBB soloists, mixed chorus and orchestra, survives in the collection at the RCM Library, apparently never performed.

and enlarged its strength from 40 to over 80 players, expanding the repertoire to include the full roster of Classical and early Romantic masters.

Alongside all this activity, Nixon's growth as a composer continued. An organ sonata appeared in 1876, and three years later he completed his large-scale Piano Trio No. 1 in C, which bears the sub-title *Sub Judice* ('awaiting judgment').<sup>15</sup> (Nixon was fond of these Latin tags as titles, although their significance is now mostly lost.) For the Trio favourable judgment rapidly followed: it won the gold medal in the Chamber Music Competition organised in 1880 by Trinity College (itself founded only three years earlier). On 18 December 1880 Nixon had his orchestral debut: *Titania*, the first of three Concert Overtures and his earliest surviving orchestral score, was conducted by Sir Frederick Hymen Cowen in the last of four concerts he mounted that year in St James's Hall. Though ten years younger than Nixon, Cowen was already an established British composer, his cantatas and symphonies performed and an opera staged by the Carl Rosa Company. The principal attraction at this concert was the premiere of Cowen's own Third Symphony, the *Scandinavian*, which went on to become his most successful work and held a place in the repertoire for some years. *The Musical Times* naturally devoted most of its coverage to the symphony, with only a brief note of headmasterly disdain for

an Overture, 'Titania', by Mr H. C. Nixon, a provincial professor [...]. Mr Nixon's work is of a peculiar character, and shows more natural capacity than acquired art. The composer should carefully study the best models, and try his skill again.<sup>16</sup>

One can only guess what best models the 'provincial professor' drew upon for *Palamon and Arcite* [3]–[7], the extraordinarily ambitious composition that Nixon completed only sixteen months later. In October 1888, before its one-and-only performance prior to this recording, *The Hastings News* published an article describing the action depicted in the first two movements (no follow-up article on the remainder seems to have appeared), but there is no surviving correspondence, diary record or

<sup>15</sup> Recorded by the London Piano Trio on Guild GMCD 7392.

<sup>16</sup> 'Saturday Orchestral Concerts', *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 22, No. 455, 1 January 1881, pp. 22–23.

other commentary to throw light upon what drove the concept and writing of the work. All that remains is the imposing manuscript full score itself. There it is clearly designated ‘symphonic poem’, although it seems to be *sui generis* in British music of the time, its subject the sort of thing normally tackled by Victorian composers as a dramatic cantata, rather than a purely orchestral work lasting almost 50 minutes. For more-or-less contemporary parallels, one has to look abroad to such works as *Scheherazade*, Strauss’ *Aus Italien*, or Goldmark’s *Rustic Wedding Symphony*.

*Palamon and Arcite* wasn’t Nixon’s only large-scale production from this period. His five-movement Cello Sonata *Uno animo* was completed in 1881 and duly won that year’s Trinity College Chamber Music Competition, with a performance following at St Leonards. The 1880s, indeed, proved to be his most productive decade as a composer. In his St Leonards concerts Nixon often took the solo role in concertos – by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Hummel and Weber – but on two occasions at least, in 1884 and 1888, he played his own *Concert-Stück* [*sic*] for piano and orchestra, Op. 14, a twenty-minute work, virtually a single-movement piano concerto, which had been completed in April 1883. In 1884 he wrote a full-scale four-movement String Quartet, Op. 15; and his expansive and very Mendelssohnian *May Day* scherzo for orchestra, Op. 16, was duly performed at St Leonards in 1885. A Romance in G for Violin and Orchestra [2] was produced at St Leonards in 1889, as was the brief ‘Pizzicato for Strings’ *Dance of the Sea Nymphs*.

Other works which probably also originated in the 1880s but are undated include his Concert Overtures No. 2, *Animo et Fide*, and No. 3, *Jacta est alea* [1], a Gavotte in E flat that survived only as an almost-complete set of orchestral parts, a ‘Second’ Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra (no trace remains of any First Fantasia) extant only as a reduction for violin and piano,<sup>17</sup> a Second Piano Trio labelled *Ex post facto*, a wind quintet, and a quintet for piano, violin, clarinet, horn and cello that runs to 113 pages of manuscript score. It may well be that none of these was ever performed. Also awaiting exploration, in addition to the solo songs already mentioned, are a few single movement chamber

<sup>17</sup> It has been orchestrated for this recording project by Paul Mann.

works, some solo-violin studies, a small quantity of pieces for solo organ and rather more short piano pieces, a handful of brief unaccompanied sacred choral works, and some part-songs and madrigals, some of which were published.

The 1888 performance of *Palamon and Arcite* was reported as being highly successful,<sup>18</sup> but thereafter Nixon's public career seems to have faded. For unknown reasons he left St Leonards and moved back to London at some time between 1889 and 1891. No further performances of any of his orchestral works are known to have taken place, and although he continued to produce songs and small-scale solo piano and violin pieces, his main creative energies in the 1890s switched to large-scale choral-orchestral works and music theatre. An intended five-act opera, *Osmond*, seems not to have got beyond the stage of plot outline and libretto, but *The Witch of Esgair*, a 'romantic operetta' in thirteen numbers, was completed in both vocal and full score. Neither is dated, but the evidence of an address on the manuscripts shows it to belong to the early 1890s.

The dramatic cantata *Aslauga* for soloists, chorus and orchestra was also finished, though with a gap of nearly three years between completion of the vocal score (at Broadstairs, in August 1890) and the creation of the orchestral score (in February–July 1893). With twenty numbers, and the full score extending to 346 manuscript pages, *Aslauga* would fill most or possibly even all of a concert. Anthony Nixon mentions<sup>19</sup> that excerpts from it were performed in Bermondsey in February 1895, but no corroborative evidence has as yet come to light.

Anthony Nixon dates the vocal score of another, somewhat less extensive, cantata, *Apollo*, to 1895,<sup>20</sup> though there is no confirmation from the manuscript itself. The full score was left incomplete part-way through the eighth of its twelve numbers, and here the address on the score points to a date after 1897. Even more intriguing, and unfinished,

<sup>18</sup> 'The First British Symphonic Poem', *loc. cit.*, p. 7: 'Family accounts were that the concert was a great success. Indeed this was the verdict of all the correspondents who covered the event. [...] inside the Royal Concert Hall, the prodigiously long concert was received with the greatest enthusiasm. [...] it was *Palamon and Arcite* that was the centre of attention. This piece went very well indeed, the audience apparently seeking an encore of the last movement.'

<sup>19</sup> 'Henry Cotter Nixon: Addresses, career and appointments, and notes', unpublished note, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

is *The Gay Typewriters* – the startling title of an ‘operatic farce’ in two acts (in Anthony Nixon’s words, ‘not homosexual word-processing machines but jolly secretaries’<sup>21</sup>). Once again an entire vocal score exists, dated 19 December 1895 at the end, but this time the composer seems to have gone straight on to preparing the full score, as the last of its 519 pages bears the date 26 June 1896. Sadly, however, the work of orchestration got no further than half-way through the ten-minute self-contained Prelude; thereafter the score peters out into vocal lines with no elaboration to the accompaniment. One can only speculate on both the impetus behind *The Gay Typewriters* and why what looks to be a rather Sullivanesque conception was abandoned; certainly its Prelude is ear-catchingly tuneful in its realisation by Paul Mann, as are the similarly self-contained Overture to *Aslauga* and Prelude to *The Witch of Esgair*. (*Apollo* has no independent orchestral prelude.)

Creatively, almost nothing seems to have survived from the last ten years or so of Nixon’s life. The frustrating lack of documentation means that one can only speculate as to whether this want of further compositions can be assigned to the effect of domestic tragedy (Alice died from breast cancer in September 1895, and the couple’s thirteen-year-old son Henry had succumbed to diphtheria three years earlier), lack of performance opportunities or to other factors. His last extant work for orchestra was a *Coronation March*, dated 14 May 1902 on the piano score. This time the full score was barely begun: it peters out after only nineteen bars of music, and the orchestration has been completed by Paul Mann based on the extant fragment.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Letter to the author, 30 May 1991.

<sup>22</sup> The coronation of Edward VII and Alexandra had been scheduled for 26 June 1902 but when Edward was taken ill, it was postponed until 9 August. It seems reasonable to assume that Nixon’s stimulus was indeed this particular coronation, but his history of interrupted compositions suggests that the delay had little or no role in the abandonment of this particular score. In 1901 The Worshipful Company of Musicians had announced a competition for a Coronation March to celebrate the forthcoming royal wedding, but as the competition was closed and the entries judged by 21 January 1902, Nixon’s work could not have been in direct response to this stimulus.

Henry Cotter Nixon died on Christmas Day 1907 of cancer of the prostate and ‘exhaustion,’<sup>23</sup> with his one surviving son, Conrad Malcolm – Anthony Nixon’s father, then 21 – at his side.

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## THE ORCHESTRAL MUSIC OF HENRY COTTER NIXON, VOLUME ONE

by Paul Mann

Posterity has not, on the whole, been kind to composers who were content to write in the musical languages inherited from their more illustrious colleagues, and Henry Cotter Nixon – for all his technical sophistication, meticulous craftsmanship and instant appeal – is an obvious case in point. Although the listener will readily identify the ghosts of Mendelssohn and Schumann, and also, at times, those of Brahms, Weber, and, occasionally, even of Verdi or Sullivan in Nixon’s writing, underneath the accumulated dust of more than a century of complete neglect there is a freshness and a vitality that entirely vindicates his rescue from oblivion, and transcends mere academic curiosity.

Most of the works in this three-album series are being heard for the very first time, the others, those performed during their composer’s lifetime, have not been heard since then. Breathing life back into this music has involved a long process of collating and editing the manuscripts, not all of them very well preserved, and

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Nixon, ‘Henry Cotter Nixon: Addresses’, *loc. cit.*, p. 1.

creating new performance material especially for the recordings. In some cases, the pieces turned out to be incomplete, either compositionally or in their instrumentation, and had to be reconstructed from their partial sources. Some proved so fragmentary as to preclude reconstruction altogether. Even the completed works are blighted by the kind of errors and inconsistencies that would surely have been ironed out had they not remained unperformed, even in Nixon's own lifetime. Few facts can be established about his compositional process, but it is sad to catch a glimpse into what must at times have been a demoralising emotional world, in which he simply abandoned the orchestration of pieces that he realised would not be performed. In editing, reconstructing and now finally conducting Henry Cotter Nixon, so long after even he gave up on his music, a circle has been closed: if the likes of Mendelssohn and Schumann were his ghosts, he has become mine.

The **Concert Overture No. 3 (*Jacta est Alea*)** [1] is one of those works that appears not to have been performed at the time of its composition. The exact date is unknown, but seems likely to have been sometime during the 1880s. The manuscript is full of errors, and no orchestral parts survive. But the music is Nixon at his very best, bursting with ideas, not all of them as resolutely conventional as they might at first appear.

There is an odd angularity and tonal ambiguity about the hushed opening string unison (*Andante*) that immediately suggests Brahms, but it would be difficult to find anything else in the piece that does. In the course of these fourteen minutes, Nixon manipulates the sonata form in far more maverick a manner than would have met with Brahms' approval. Twice the woodwinds answer the tense, sparse strings with their own richly harmonised responses, and the violins try their opening unison once more, this time decorated by a solo clarinet, and again elaborated by the wind section alone. Tentatively, the cellos and basses try out the themes they have just heard from their woodwind colleagues, while the other strings weave accompanying lines delicately above them. It is in this state of gentle uncertainty that the introduction comes to rest.

Nixon's Latin subtitle seems borne out by what follows, a tautly decisive, vigorously determined die-casting first subject (*Allegro*), based on the hesitant opening bars, but

now remaining resolute until the woodwinds, keen to reassert the supremacy they established in the introduction, lead off on a brilliantly virtuosic transition, attended by playful *pizzicati*. Soon the strings take their own flamboyant lead, culminating in three *fortissimo* statements of their hushed opening bar from the introduction.

Occasionally, for all his compositional good behaviour, Nixon does something truly unexpected, and here he surprises by beginning the second-subject group of a work in D major in the somewhat iconoclastic key of the flattened leading-note (C major), which would have earned him a roundly slapped wrist from any composition teacher taking Brahms as a model. Even more delightfully, the second-subject group proceeds in a state of amiable and, in due course, downright frivolous good humour, with more scintillating writing for the winds.

The *bonhomie* is dramatically swept aside by the curiously brief development section, a stormy minor-key sequence in which recollections of the genial second subject are overpowered by a forceful *crescendo* and the early onset of the recapitulation, which proceeds entirely regularly, including the ‘wrong key’ second-subject group.

For the coda, the metre changes unexpectedly into  $\frac{3}{4}$  and Nixon transforms his delicate second subject into a propulsive figure, which gathers momentum towards a brilliant uprush in the strings (with what is perhaps an accidental suggestion of Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmilla* Overture). The die is cast with a final *fortissimo* unison in which all doubts are joyously dispelled.

A possible inspiration for the *Romance for Violin and Orchestra* [2] is Beethoven’s *Romance* No. 1 Op. 40, in the same key of G major, although he is not otherwise a composer who seems to have cast much of a shadow over Nixon’s music. Although there are a number of surface reminiscences, and the works are of similar duration, they are not connected by any deeper structural similarities. Beethoven’s *Romance* is a rondo; Nixon’s is a kind of sonata without development. Perhaps another reason that Nixon’s sympathies seem to have lain so naturally with the early Romantics is that his facility for melody was stronger than his interest in the Beethovenian technique of developing short, highly charged motifs, a general characteristic of his music which is especially evident

here. The violin was Nixon's own instrument and he writes for it with natural fluency and warm affection, so that even the moments of more overt virtuosity seem integrated into the whole. This sureness of touch extends to the extremely refined orchestration, which seems to surround the soloist in a naturally warm luminescence.<sup>1</sup> It would have been difficult for Nixon to write for the violin without tipping his hat to Mendelssohn's Concerto, and he does so in the more rhythmically charged second subject, with which it shares the key of E minor. The ensuing sequence in E major basks still more openly in Mendelssohn's reflected glow. There is a brief moment of drama in the transition back to the reprise, which is recapitulated just before the coda, but the work otherwise unfolds in an unbroken stream of romantic lyricism, ending with a rapturous coda.

It is perhaps significant that, at least in his orchestral works, Nixon seems on the whole to have avoided too many established forms. Rather than concertos, he wrote violin Romances and Fantasies, and a single-movement so-called *Concert-Stück* for piano and orchestra; and although he wrote three large-scale overtures, his approach to sonata-form was at times quite individual, as the Concert Overture No. 3 shows. In this context, it seems natural that Nixon's orchestral *magnum opus* is not a four-movement symphony, but a five-movement symphonic poem, and one which entirely avoids sonata structures in the strictest sense, taking as its starting point one of the weightiest of literary sources, in the true Romantic tradition. *Palamon and Arcite* (1882) is based on John Dryden's poetic re-telling, first published in 1700, of Chaucer's *A Knight's Tale* (from *The Canterbury Tales*). Nixon prefaces each of the five movements with sometimes quite extensive passages from the poem, and the music closely follows its narrative.

Briefly, the story, which Dryden retains unchanged from Chaucer, concerns four principal characters: the two cousins Palamon and Arcite, the princess Emily (or Emilie, as Nixon calls her), and her stepfather, King Theseus. After being found unconscious following a battle, Palamon and Arcite have been imprisoned by Theseus, and are being held in a dungeon. Looking through the bars of his cell, Palamon spots Emily gathering

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<sup>1</sup> The full score is lost (if indeed it ever existed) and was therefore newly reconstructed for this recording from the surviving orchestral parts.

flowers in the garden and falls instantly in love. Unfortunately, Arcite also notices her, and so begins the story of their rivalrous attempts to woo her.

The D minor first movement, 'The Battle' (*Allegro moderato*) [3] depicts the events leading up to the cousins' imprisonment. Above the brooding opening bars Nixon writes 'The camp, the night preceding the battle', and sets the scene with skill and economy, with a sense of dark foreboding in low horns, and smoke rising from a campfire in the form of meandering counterpoint in the strings. A *crescendo* leads to more decisive music, and a brass chorale, which comes to be associated later in the work with the authority of the King. The brooding soon returns (this time marked by Nixon 'The sighing of the wind in anticipation of the approaching battle') and, like a cinematic dream-sequence, the scene cross-fades into warmly lyrical music in the more distant key of G major ('a soldier's dream of home'), which leads to an impassioned climax and a return to the opening music ('preparing for battle'). The battle duly erupts, and it is at this point that a kinship becomes apparent with the overture to Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, which begins in the same key and, in much the same way, culminating in the chorus' *fortissimo* cry of 'Hilf, Herr' ('Help, Lord').

But whatever might have inspired it, Nixon's battle music is genuinely gripping, and leads to a return of the brass chorale as the King commands calm, and the turmoil gradually abates. The movement ends quietly, but with a sense of profound unease, and as the music of the opening returns, Nixon ingeniously shows that now the smoke comes not from a campfire, but from the wreckage of the battlefield.

The opening bars of the second movement ('Emilie', *Allegretto*) [4] set the scene of Palamon's and Arcite's imprisonment, and begin in a state of stasis, with heavy repeated notes, and a laboriously rising figure, as if reaching towards the light. A lengthy episode unfolds as the two men recount to each other the events following the battle. In a touch of inspired orchestral tone-painting, their brotherly bond (Dryden describes them as 'brothers in arms') is sealed by a splendidly noble (and perilously difficult) passage for the quartet of horns, covering the entire range of their register.

The process of the war I read off tall  
New Theban conquer'd, and how Orestes fell  
And when the golden-haired Coma reign'd  
That conquer'd Thebes he pitch'd upon the plain  
The night arriv'd, on the day return'd  
The country silent, and the harvest lay waste  
And left the plowmen to mow the dead,  
Without order to sow and reap the seed  
There in a heap of flesh he bury'd the dead  
The peaceful thoughts they found beneath a load oppress'd

*Palamon and Arcite*  
Symphonic Poem  
H.C. Nixon  
No. 1. The Battle.

Of midnight fate, whom first to death they sent,  
The trophies of their strength, a bloody instrument  
That more sufficient arms and likely use  
Dishonor'd in battle, with, and without them  
From these their duty across the armies led,  
And with both coron'd in, the crown of Great  
When, victors of Orestes' line, and crown'd with care,  
He in the city and in presence of the war,  
Trophies of Mars, and conquer'd to the  
Advantage, shew'd a triumph death to die.

*Allegro Moderato*

Hautbois  
Flute  
Clarinete  
in Bb  
Fagotti  
Violini  
in G  
Violini  
in D  
Violoncelli  
in C  
Bassi

*Allegro Moderato*

Violini  
in G  
Violini  
in D  
Violoncelli  
in C  
Bassi

*Allegro Moderato*

Violini  
in G  
Violini  
in D  
Violoncelli  
in C  
Bassi

*Allegro Moderato*

Violini  
in G  
Violini  
in D  
Violoncelli  
in C  
Bassi

The first page of *Palamon and Arcite*, with the quotations from Dryden pasted into place at the top (courtesy of the Royal College of Music)

This opening sequence is brought to an end by a brief woodwind recollection of the 'dream of home' from the first movement and, as Palamon looks out through the bars of the cell, he sees Emilie for the first time.

Scarce had he seen, but seized with sudden smart,  
Stung to the quick, he felt it at his heart;  
Struck blind with overpowering light he stood,  
Then started back amazed, and cried aloud.

Nixon vividly depicts Dryden's lines with a shimmering *tremolando* in the strings, accompanying a new clarinet theme representing Emilie herself and which will shortly come to overwhelm the music. With a sudden *crescendo*, there is a passionate outburst in the strings, and a further statement of the clarinet theme. The whole sequence has a recitative-like theatricality as Arcite, hastening to help his friend, also sees Emilie:

[...] While yet he spoke,  
Arcite on Emily had fixed his look:  
The fatal dart a ready passage found,  
And deep within his heart infix'd the wound:  
So that if Palamon were wounded sore,  
Arcite was hurt as much as he, or more:

An ardent passage follows, with palpitating horns attending Emilie's clarinet theme, and there is a return to the opening music, as if the two men, once again in the depths of their prison cell, are doing their best to forget her, but the romantic melody soon reaches an apotheosis of almost Tchaikovskian intensity, and Nixon adorns it with the splendour of the whole orchestra.

A recapitulation begins, but the music is now drastically shortened, leading much more swiftly to the horn quartet which now has a new element, a solo flute which serves to disrupt the cousins' previously unbreakable bond of brotherhood with a distracting feminine allure. (In a special touch, Nixon then introduces a second flute, as if there

are now two idealised versions of Emilie competing within the two men's respective imaginations.) The movement ends with a quotation of the 'sighing of the wind in anticipation of the approaching battle' from the first movement, as if to show that Palamon and Arcite are now about to embark upon a very different kind of conflict, and the movement ends in hushed apprehension.

Outside of the musical narrative, Arcite has been released from jail because he shares a mutual friend with King Theseus who was able to intercede on his behalf, but the price of his freedom has been to leave Athens, thus keeping him safely out of Emily's way. He becomes convinced that Palamon, although still in jail, is more fortunate than he, because at least he is still able to see Emily through the bars of his cell every day.

Nixon's third movement ('The Dream', *Andante*) [5] depicts the dream of Arcite in which Hermes tells him to return to Athens, where 'fate appoints an end to all thy woe'. He accepts the challenge, even if it should result in his own death, determining that 'death is my desire/Since in Emilia's sight I shall expire'.

Nixon's dream music, as might perhaps be expected, initially comes very close to Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both in the key of E major and in the delicate wind chorale with which it begins, but soon goes beyond anything the older composer might have conceived. Indeed, it contains some of Nixon's most chromatically impassioned music, reaching a peak of sensuality which at times approaches the territory of Richard Strauss, whose earliest tone-poems were not far around the corner. The movement also poses a challenge to any orchestra, with its passages of treacherous wind-intonation and exposed high-wire violin-writing which make one wonder at the direction Nixon's music might have taken if he had enjoyed more acceptance and written another large-scale work of this kind.

As the third movement ends, Palamon has meanwhile escaped from prison, taking shelter in a grove of trees close to the royal palace. Arcite, having acquired a job as Emilie's manservant in the royal household, goes walking in the same grove and recognises Palamon. They argue, and challenge each other to a duel.

Nixon depicts this part of the story ('Encounter and Combat' - *Allegro moderato*) [6] with a degree of understatement, beginning with an easy-going, rather Schumannesque

episode in  $\frac{9}{8}$  time portraying Palamon's deceptively bucolic shelter under the trees; Arcite ambles into view and somewhat insensitively speaks to Palamon of his – still unrequited – love for Emilie. There is a brief reprise, this time in the solo oboe, of her melody from the second movement, but just as the music touches upon their old conversation in the prison cell, anger erupts (*Allegro agitato*) and they begin to fight. A violent combat ensues, ironically in D minor, the same key as the first-movement battle music, but is halted by the King, who has seen the commotion and orders them to stop. After a brief further scuffle and another, more insistent command, the scene cinematically crossfades (with Nixon alchemically transforming a trumpet into a solo oboe) and actually becomes the same music that signalled the end of hostilities in the first movement. The remarkable thing is that there is nothing in Chaucer or Dryden to suggest the ironic parallels between the wars waged in the first movement and the rather more personal conflict between Palamon and Arcite. Nixon draws the analogy in purely musical terms, and does so by the most economical of means. The opening music is briefly recapitulated, and the scene is set for the finale.

The King has decreed that Palamon and Arcite must return in a year's time, each with a hundred knights, to fight an epic joust, the winner of which will take Emilie's hand in marriage. The occasion takes place on the grandest possible scale, and the fighting is fierce. Palamon is captured and Arcite is declared the winner. But, as he is celebrating, there is an earthquake and his horse trips, sending him headfirst to the ground. Before dying from his injuries, with his last breath and with Emilie and Palamon at his bedside, he praises his rival:

Nor holds this earth a more deserving knight  
For virtue, valour, and for noble blood,  
Truth, honour, all that is comprised in good;  
So help me Heaven, in all the world in none  
So worthy to be loved as Palamon.

Nixon's depiction of 'The Tournament' (*Allegro*) [7] is a tour-de-force of orchestral virtuosity. Horns and oboes throw down the gauntlet, so to speak, as if from opposite sides of the stadium, and the orchestra erupts in a display of argumentative energy, much of the music driven by disruptively hemiolic rhythms. With a sequence of wildly rushing scales in the violins, the horse throws Arcite, and the strings take up a funereal dotted rhythm; reminiscences of Emilie's theme haunt the clarinets and a solo horn. Arcite breathes his last as the horns die away.

There is a brief recapitulation, again heralded by the horns and oboes, but all suggestions of violence are now quickly swept away, first by a breathless *stretto* (*Più presto*) and then by a vividly cinematic jump-cut, in which Nixon presents a final vision of Emilie and Palamon together, with her melody heard for a final time on the solo oboe, attended, as he had first seen her in the second movement, by pulsating horns. A concluding *stretto* (*Presto*), which calls for a final burst of virtuosity from the strings, brings the whole epic saga to a wild and exhilarating conclusion.

It would be too easy to dismiss *Palamon and Arcite* as a faded curio, a sepia-tinted postcard from a bygone era. Its power resides in its very lack of ostentation, achieving all its effects and consistently engaging the listener over the best part of fifty minutes with a more modest orchestra than to be found in any of the Brahms symphonies. Nixon's imagination may not have been a particularly original one, but it is difficult to think of another composer of the time who could have written such a work in quite the same way.

**Ana Török** began studying the violin at the age of four in Baia Mare, her native town, in north-western Romania and, beginning in 1996, she continued and completed her high-school studies in Târgu-Mureș. She was also a student of Tibor Varga and Viktor Pikaizen at the École Supérieure de Musique de Sion in Switzerland. Later, she took her higher-education and master's qualifications at the Gheorghe Dima Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca, in Victoria Nicolae's violin class.

Since 2008 she has been first concert-master of the Transylvania State Philharmonic Orchestra of Cluj-Napoca, and concert-master also of the Romanian National Youth Orchestra. Awarded several chamber or solo performance awards – Jeunesses Musicales, Bucharest, in 2001, the Sigismund Toduță Competition, Cluj-Napoca, in 2003, the 2003 and 2004 editions of the Performance Competition organised by the Romanian Mozart Society, Cluj-Napoca – Ana has acquired fame also as soloist, performing with the Brașov, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Satu Mare, Sibiu and Târgu Mureș Philharmonics.

She is a founding member of the Arcadia Quartet, with which she has performed since 2006. Winning the International Chamber Music Competition Hamburg in 2009, the International Wigmore Hall London String Quartet Competition in 2012 and the Osaka International Chamber Music Competition in 2014, the Arcadia Quartet is rapidly establishing itself as one of the most exciting string quartets of their generation.

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

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



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recording studio. Special projects with the LSO included the Duke Ellington Centenary Concert at the Barbican Hall with Wynton Marsalis, and a famous collaboration with the legendary rock group Deep Purple in two widely acclaimed performances of Jon Lord's *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* at the Royal Albert Hall, the live DVD and CD of which remain international bestsellers. Among his more recent recordings is the first-ever studio account of Lord's Concerto, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, in collaboration with Jon Lord himself and a star-studded cast of soloists, and the live recording of *Celebrating Jon Lord*, a special concert which took place at the Royal Albert Hall in April 2014 with an all-star cast paying tribute to the late composer.

This is his fifth recording for Toccata Classics. The first featured the orchestral music of Leif Solberg (TOCC 0260) and the second and third (TOCC 0262 and 0263) presented the first volumes in his three-disc survey of the complete orchestral music of the Scottish Romantic Charles O'Brien (1882–1968). His fourth was the first volume in a remarkable series of new works for string orchestra, *Music For My Love* (TOCC 0333), featuring music by Brahms (arranged by Ragnar Söderlind), Maddalena Casulana (arr. Colin Matthews), Brett Dean, Steve Elcock, Andrew Ford, Robin Holloway, Mihkel Kerem, Jon Lord (arr. Paul Mann), John Pickard, Poul Ruders and Ragnar Söderlind himself. Paul Mann's further recordings of the complete orchestral music of Henry Cotter Nixon (1842–1907), also with the Kodály Philharmonic Orchestra, are in preparation (TOCC 0373 and 0374).

The **Kodály Philharmonic Debrecen** is the official orchestra of the town of Debrecen in eastern Hungary, bearing this name since autumn 2011 – when Zoltán Kodály's widow, Sarolta Péczely, gave her permission for her husband's name to be used; the sponsor of the Orchestra is the Municipality of Debrecen. The Orchestra gave its first concert in 1923 and it soon became the leading Hungarian orchestra outside Budapest. Over the years the Orchestra has been led by leading Hungarian conductors like János Ferencsik, Zoltán Kocsis, János Kovács, András Ligeti, Ádám Medveczky and Tamás Vásáry, as well as by several famous international figures, among them Karel Ančerl, Charles Dutoit, Lamberto Gardelli, Kobayashi Ken-Ichiro and Carlo Zecchi. The roster of musicians with whom the Orchestra has worked naturally includes many Hungarians, like Gergely Bogányi, Annie Fischer, Jenő Jandó, Zoltán Kocsis, Miklós Perényi and Dezső Ránki; those visiting from abroad have included Martha Argerich, Lazar Berman, Gideon Kremer, Igor Oistrakh, György Sándor and Sándor Végh. The orchestra has been invited to a number of European festivals – in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy,

Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Switzerland – as well as to Morocco and South Korea.

Dániel Somogyi-Tóth has been the general and artistic director since October 2011. He is also the director of the institute which undertakes the co-ordination and development of the complete provision of classical music in Debrecen. The Orchestra naturally perform Hungarian composers, contemporary ones included, but also participates in pop-music productions. The repertoire of course includes the compositions of Zoltán Kodály; and since the Orchestra is unique in Hungary in its co-operation with a choir of the standard of the Kodály Choir Debrecen, an important further element of the repertoire is the performance of oratorios.





Recorded on 22 and 26–29 June 2016 in the Pásti Synagogue, Debrecen, Hungary  
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Producer: Paul Mann

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To the memory of the composer's grandson, Anthony Nixon (1925–99)

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

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# HENRY COTTER NIXON

## Complete Orchestral Music, Volume One

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| 1 | <b>Concert Overture No. 3, <i>Jacta est Alea</i></b> (after 1880)<br><i>Andante – Allegro</i>        | <b>13:30</b> |
| 2 | <b>Romance for Violin and Orchestra</b> (c. 1889; reconstructed 2016 by Paul Mann)<br><i>Andante</i> | <b>9:57</b>  |
|   | <b><i>Palamon and Arcite: Symphonic Poem</i></b> (1882)  | <b>47:54</b> |
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**Ana Török, violin** 2  
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