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CLASSICS

Symphonies Nos. 8 & 9
CHRISTOPHER GUNNING

BBC National Orchestra of Wales
Kenneth Woods *conductor*

CHRISTOPHER GUNNING

SYMPHONIES 8 & 9

Symphony 8

1	I	[11.28]
2	II	[9.36]
3	III	[8.18]

Symphony No. 9

4	I	[11.39]
5	II	[7.00]
6	III	[10.22]
7	IV	[9.08]

Total timings: [1.07.33]

BBC NATIONAL ORCHESTRA OF WALES
KENNETH WOODS, CONDUCTOR

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CHRISTOPHER GUNNING:

SYMPHONIES 8 & 9

“To me narrative in music is almost everything” said Christopher Gunning in an interview in 2014, a few months before he commenced work on his Eighth Symphony. “I believe that my music can tell stories”. His own story is unique in British music; an aspiring classical composer who made a career in film and television before emerging in retirement as a symphonist of striking originality and power. Perhaps William Alwyn (1905-1985) – who used the income from his film scores to subsidise his ambitions as a symphonist – comes closest. But few British composers since Vaughan Williams have achieved anything quite like the extraordinary “third act” of Gunning’s career: the thirteen symphonies that he completed between his 57th birthday and his death in March 2023 at the age of 78.

Christopher Gunning was born in Cheltenham but raised in Hendon, North London. His father Alexis was a pianist and composer, his mother Janet was a gifted pianist, and Christopher took to the upright piano in his parents’ home from an early age. “Composing always seemed to be second nature to me” he recalled. “I used to invent pieces at the piano long before I could read music. In my

teen years I spent hours and hours listening to everything from Miles Davis and Charlie Parker to the pop music of the day and Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg”. At the Guildhall School of Music he studied with a master-symphonist - Edmund Rubbra - and a true musical polymath, the late Richard Rodney Bennett, who took him on as an assistant.

By his mid-twenties Gunning was composing original scores for documentary films and working as arranger and orchestrator for artists as varied as Dudley Moore, Cilla Black, Shirley Bassey and Mel Tormé. Meanwhile, the music that he wrote for a series of classic TV commercials still evokes the 1970s; at least, for those who were there. Martini (*It’s The Right One*) and Black Magic chocolates were among the brands defined by Gunning’s inimitable melodic flair. From there, it was a natural transition into TV and movies, and in what he half-jokingly called his “middle period” Gunning’s music for (among others) *Agatha Christie’s Poirot*, *La Vie en Rose*, *When the Whales Came*, *Wild Africa* and the BBC’s *Middlemarch* won him a string of BAFTA and Ivor Novello awards, and even more nominations.

And then, three years shy of his 60th birthday, Gunning completed his first symphony, and then

kept writing symphonies: thirteen in total, all created between 2001 and 2023 by a composer who might reasonably have been expected to retire to his home in Croxley Green to walk his dog Sasha and tend his garden. In addition to his symphonies, Gunning composed chamber music, a concert paraphrase of one of his best-loved TV scores (Poirot Variants – 2002) and concertos for saxophone (1998), piano (2001), oboe (2009), clarinet (2009), flute (2010), guitar (2011) and cello (2013) as well as two violin concertos (2012 and 2015). In 2014, asked about his change of direction, Gunning explained that:

I've spent the greater part of my career writing music for the media. I decided roughly 10 to 15 years ago that I was going to change course, but what I was actually doing was returning to my first love which is...I suppose we have to call it "serious classical music". I actually set out at the age of 20 to be England's next symphonist and kind-of got sidetracked. There are demands in writing concert music that one never comes anywhere near while writing film scores (the reverse is also true, incidentally) - the demands of writing a piece that holds your attention over an extended span.

What I've been keen to do in my symphonies is to compose music that is relatively easy to follow,

so it does have themes and it does have motifs. Although on the face of it these are personal symphonies they're more than that. Other people are going to listen to them and they're going to find personal things too and that, of course, is one of the wonderful things about music - which is that you can't help but communicate with other people. As a composer I view that as my job.

Gunning completed his 8th and 9th symphonies in February 2015 and January 2016 respectively - a critical juncture in his symphonic development. Later in 2016, he completed his single-movement Symphony No.10, which he regarded as a creative breakthrough (Kenneth Woods believes that he considered it his finest symphony). The experience prompted him to undertake a thorough revision of his Symphony No.2 (2003), a process that he might have extended to his other early symphonies, had he lived to do so.

But the 8th and 9th symphonies stand as a pairing in their own right: each scored for a moderately-sized orchestra (the 8th has only one trumpet and no lower brass, while the 9th adds a second trumpet, a harp, and a small percussion section) and both grappling, in Gunning's highly individual way, with the legacy of classical symphonic form. The 8th grows organically from its opening

material (which returns, transformed, at the end of the symphony's arc), but its formal lineage is classical. A sonata-form first movement and a *finale* that has something of the character of a *scherzo* frame the central slow movement – an overcast idyll, coloured by the contrasting songs of the flute and the cor anglais.

The 9th is on a larger scale, though it shares a family mood – open skies, forward movement and a definite but very personal air of the pastoral - with the 8th. It moves through a sonata-form first movement, a tense shadowy *scherzo* and a melancholy slow movement to a finale whose energetic motor rhythms and soaring lyricism build to an optimistic (if unexpected) conclusion. This is not a self-consciously monumental Ninth Symphony in the sense of Beethoven; Mahler or Bruckner: Gunning's creative energy never flagged, and ideas for one symphony seem to have rushed upon him even while he was working on another. The composer offered no explanation – biographical or otherwise – for these two symphonies, which he never heard performed. But he was very clear about the spirit in which they were created.

Certainly there's a strong narrative [but] I do think with certain exceptions music does not behave at

its best when it's trying to be specific. It's much better when it's dealing with emotions; and general emotions, at that. I believe this piece has a strong emotional flavour but if you try and untangle the story you're going to end up with your own story - and to me, that is absolutely perfect.

KENNETH WOODS TALKS ABOUT CHRISTOPHER GUNNING'S SYMPHONIES NOS.8 AND 9

When you recorded Gunning's 2nd, 10th and 12th symphonies, you worked closely with the composer. Did he offer any insights into the 8th and 9th?

KW: Sadly, I know very little about the circumstances of these particular symphonies because I didn't have the chance to discuss them with him. My sense is that this was a period where he was finding more of a structural sense of what he wanted to be doing. There's a lot of confidence in these two symphonies. Chris was very self-critical in certain ways, but he also had a real sense that this was not dilly-dallying for him. He really felt that he had something important to say in the medium of the symphony.

Unlike much contemporary music, the scores of both symphonies seem very economical – not necessarily what one would expect from a composer who was accustomed to film and TV budgets.

KW: Yes, I love that about him - there's none of that needing to prove one's worth by how many obscure percussion instruments you're asking for. There's none of that; nothing that's difficult for difficulty's sake, though some of his melodic writing is actually very tricky to pull off! But it's the symphony orchestra as we all know it and he gives the musicians a chance to do what they do best, which is to contribute. You never quite know what makes a recording session work well, but the orchestra seemed particularly enthusiastic and energised for the 8th and 9th symphonies.

Do you sense any particular influences in Gunning's music? Did he see himself as part of a tradition?

KW: He was very keenly aware of being an English composer, but he didn't just want to be English in that post-Vaughan Williams sense. I think the listener senses lots and lots of melody in his music, but there are also 12-tone rows, there's lots of work with motivic cells. He was very keen

that it should have that kind of craft, and also that the voice was still very much his own. I mean, you can tell it's the guy who wrote the Martini commercials. There's something about the way he writes a melody.

What do the 8th and 9th symphonies tell us about Gunning the symphonist?

KW: They're very complementary of each other: you can hear that they come from a similar moment, a little bit like Beethoven Seven and Eight. There's a confidence; and a security about the idea of writing a melodic lyrical symphony that is of our time. You sense that he's becoming more and more comfortable with the friction between a very rigorous Germanic motivic approach and something that's filmic and full of melody. He's saying, "Actually that's not a problem for me - I can knit these together very successfully". And so in both scores there's a lot of wonderful, rich, intellectual underpinning, and it's gorgeous to listen to.

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KENNETH WOODS

Hailed by Gramophone Magazine as "a symphonic conductor of stature", Kenneth Woods was appointed Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the English Symphony Orchestra in 2013, and has quickly built up an impressive and acclaimed body of work and recordings with them. Woods also serves as Artistic Director of both the Colorado MahlerFest – the only US organisation other than the New York Philharmonic to receive the International Gustav Mahler Society's Gold Medal – and (since 2017) the founding Artistic Director of The Elgar Festival in Worcester. Woods has conducted the National Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia and the English Chamber Orchestra, and has made numerous broadcasts for BBC Radio 3, National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He has appeared on the stages of some of the world's leading music festivals, such as Aspen, Scotia and Lucerne.

Under Kenneth Woods' leadership, the English Symphony Orchestra has gained widespread recognition as one of the most innovative and



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influential orchestras in the UK. The first of Woods' many acclaimed ESO albums was volume one in the Complete Piano Concertos of Ernst Krenek, selected by The Times as one of their "Best Recordings of 2016." His recording of Fraser's Elgar orchestrations for Avie was a Classic FM Disc of the Month. The ESO's Nimbus Alliance recording of Kenneth's orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet in A Major was chosen as one of the 10 Best Classical CDs of 2018 by The Arts Desk. In 2016 Woods and the ESO launched their 21st Century Symphony Project, an ambitious multi-year effort to commission, premiere and record nine new symphonies by leading composers, with the triumphant premiere of Philip Sawyers' Third Symphony at Sinfonia Smith Square. In 2018,

the Project continued with the premiere of David Matthews' Ninth Symphony, selected by The Spectator as one of the Top Ten Classical Events of the year, followed in 2019 by Matthew Taylor's Fifth Symphony, hailed by ClassicalSource as "a masterpiece" at its premiere.
kennethwoods.net

BBC NATIONAL ORCHESTRA OF WALES

For over 90 years, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales (BBC NOW), the only professional symphony orchestra in Wales, has played an integral part in the cultural landscape of the country, occupying a distinctive role as both a

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Part of BBC Cymru Wales and supported by the Arts Council of Wales, BBC NOW performs a busy schedule of live concerts and broadcasts, working with acclaimed conductors and soloists from across the world, including their Principal Conductor, the award-winning Ryan Bancroft.

The orchestra is committed to working in partnership with community groups and charities and takes music out of the concert hall and into settings such as schools and hospitals to enable



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others to experience and be empowered by music. It undertakes workshops, concerts and side-by-side performances to inspire and encourage the next generation of performers, composers and arts leaders, and welcomes thousands of young people and community members annually through its outreach and education projects.

BBC NOW performs annually at the BBC Proms and biennially at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition, and its concerts can be heard regularly across the BBC: on Radio 3, Radio Wales

and Radio Cymru. On screen, music performed by BBC NOW can be heard widely across the BBC and other global channels, including the soundtrack and theme tune for Doctor Who, Planet Earth III, Prehistoric Planet, The Pact and Children in Need.

Based at BBC Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff Bay, BBC NOW utilises a state-of-the-art recording studio with a camera system for livestreams and TV broadcasts to bring BBC NOW's music to a broader audience across Wales and the world.
www.bbc.co.uk/bbcnow

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 Terry Porteus
 Carmel Barber
 Rebecca Totterdell
 Emilie Godden
 Anna Cleworth
 Juan Gonzalez
 Peter Povey
 Gary George-Veale
 Amy Fletcher
 Catherine Fox

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 Ros Butler
 Sheila Smith
 Vickie Ringguth
 Joseph Williams
 Katherine Miller
 Beverley Wescott
 Roussanka Karatchivieva
 Lydia Caines
 Ilze Abola
 Michael Topping

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 Tetsuumi Nagata
 Peter Taylor
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 Catherine Palmer
 Daíre Roberts
 Lowri Thomas
 Lydia Abell
 Anna Growsn

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Raphael Lang
 Sandy Bartai
 Alicja Kozak
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 Keith Hewitt
 Kathryn Graham
 Rachel Ford

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David Stark
 Christopher Wescott
 Thea Sayer
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Matthew Featherstone
Lindsey Ellis

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Lindsey Ellis

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Emily Pailthorpe
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Isaac Prince
Lenny Sayers

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Dominic Tyler
David Buckland

Contrabassoon
David Buckland

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Tim Thorpe
Meilyr Hughes
Neil Shewan
Craig MacDonald
Tom Taffinder

Trumpets
Philippe Schartz
Rob Johnston

Timpani
Steve Barnard

Percussion
Phil Hughes

Harp
Bethan Semmens



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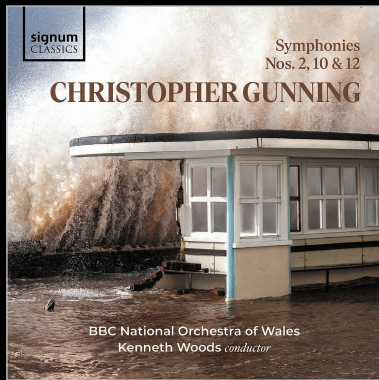
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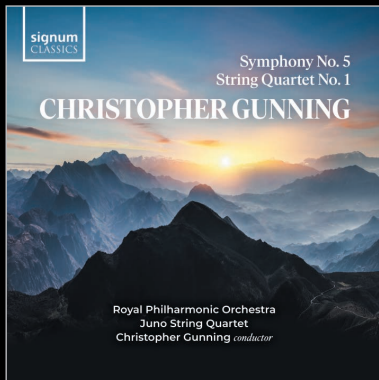
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