

NAXOS

Arthur
BLISS

Meditations on a Theme by John Blow
Metamorphic Variations

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
David Lloyd-Jones



Arthur Bliss (1891–1975)

Meditations on a Theme by John Blow • Metamorphic Variations

Nearly eighteen years separate the première of *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*, in December 1955 by its dedicatees, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Rudolph Schwarz, for whom it was commissioned by the Feeney Trust, and *Metamorphic Variations*, by the London Symphony Orchestra under Vernon Handley, at Fairfield Halls, Croydon, in April 1973. Each is the culmination of a distinct period in the composer's creative life, each is a creative partnership, a personal interpretation of variation principle with a second developmental strand to underlie the musical process, and neither turned out quite as he envisaged.

In his autobiography *As I Remember* Bliss wrote "If I were asked for a few works that represent my life's music, this [*Meditations*] would certainly be one of them"; few would argue. What changed the 'twenty-minute orchestral work' he agreed and planned in the summer of 1954 (which later emerged as *Discourse for Orchestra*) into this most eloquent and personal symphonic score was a chance combination of events. November 1953 saw his appointment as Master of the Queen's Musick, which he took to with enthusiasm and dedication; when, the following year, he received a copy of Volume VII of *Musica Britannica*, *Coronation Anthems with Strings* by John Blow, he was anxious to see what an illustrious predecessor in the post had achieved. If he was immediately fired by the noble tune in the orchestral sinfonia to *Psalms 23*, the text triggered something deep in his memory. As a serving officer in the Great War who faced death daily, Bliss attended countless comrades' funerals when the words, heard with numbing recurrence, became etched on his mind in a context of evil and ubiquitous death – not its shadow – but with the psalmist's message of hope, of salvation in the House of the Lord. The work is thus a double narrative, where the verses of text provide both structure and mood of each section, and Blow's mighty theme is deconstructed to provide core material which is developed, rather than simply subjected to variation, in

each respective musical passage. It is both personal odyssey and private tribute to a generation cut down in its youth, including his own brother, expressed with warmth, humanity and an objectivity of distance to give it power and durability. 'Warn' is not the only thing poets can now do – they can remember and they can hope, which is what this score does so eloquently.

It is a long time before we hear the tune. There are five *Meditations* preceded by an *Introduction* and followed by an *Interlude* and the *Finale*, each prefaced and characterized by references to lines of the psalm. The *Introduction* sets out the work's overall agenda of conflict between idyll and the menace, juxtaposing "*The Lord is my Shepherd*" (v.1) and "*I will fear no evil*" (v. 4). A tiny opening passage of ambiguous tonality to sow seeds of doubt before a pastoral variant on a fragment of Blow's theme, initially on oboe-as-shepherd's-pipe, alternates with agitated motifs suggestive of darker things, and developed in the *Interlude*. The psalmist, King David, was first shepherd-boy and later an unyielding warlord in a land where, then as now, war was ever close to the surface, but life had to go on. This leads straight into *Meditation I*, "*He leadeth me beside the still waters*" (v. 2), lightly scored, rippling and marked *Allegro moderato ma tranquillo*, in compound triple time: hope mingling with doubt. *Meditation II* "*Thy rod and staff they comfort me*" (v. 4) *Allegro deciso*, two-four time, is positive and emphatic. *Meditation III*, the scherzo, is simply called "*Lambs*"; its innocent, spring-like, joyful, dotted-rhythm theme drawing on several motif-cells from Blow's tune is scored with the lightest of hands. *Meditation IV* "*He restoreth my soul*" (v. 3) is a vigorous *Allegro* returning us to compound triple time; twelve- and nine- eight, with many oblique references to Blow buried in its figurations.

"*In green pastures*" (v.2) might have prefaced '*Lambs*' but Bliss allocates it to *Meditation V*, *Larghetto*; in ABA form and more summery than spring-like it brings back the airy texture of the

scherzo's cascading harp and woodwind figures in the outer sections and develops the *Introduction's* 'shepherd's pipe' motif in the central *Andante tranquillo* to end equivocally. An increasingly agitated figure forms a bridge passage to the *Interlude* "Through the valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4), *Molto agitato*, an interlude in a spiritual, not structural, durational or musical sense: we are after all passing *through* the valley. It is dramatic, rhythmically jagged with much use of a large percussion section till it modulates from dark to light, from fear to hope, from death to (after-)life arriving, without a break "In the house of the Lord" (v.6), the destination of a musical, textual, spiritual journey. The *Finale*, successively meditation, summation/celebration and epilogue, begins *Moderato e deciso* with a substantial variation on the penultimate bar of Blow's theme before the full tune previously heard fleetingly, fragmented, truncated or obliquely implied by harmony, bursts out in full for the first time, *Maestoso* in glorious E major, accompanied by shards of its developmental past, then giving way to an ever more tranquil close where sheep-bells take us back to the landscape of the opening, now with no suggestion of death or evil.

Tension and relaxation, and resolution of often violent confrontation are features of major Bliss scores from *A Colour Symphony* onwards; overt drama in stage works such as *Checkmate* or pure musical conflict in the string quartets or *Meditations*, but nowhere more than in *Metamorphic Variations*, which is remarkable considering it was written in his eighties and nine years after he decided to 'hang up his pen': *The Golden Cantata* (1963) would be his final real piece. 'My ability to concentrate is now less' he wrote, 'my joy in writing music on the wane' and for six years he kept it up; only tiny official scores for royal occasions and tinier favours for friends. The knowledge of the sheer stamina and concentration needed to turn ideas into pieces and the fear of losing the energy to see them through, of slipping into automatic pilot or producing second-rate work is a worry shared by many ageing composers. Elgar is one example, Walton another. By 1974 it was a different story: 'I'm not old enough to have reached serenity in

my music' he said in an interview. What coaxed him back to the composing desk to write the song-cycle *Angels of the Mind*, with no commission or performance in prospect was fascination with the poetry of Kathleen Raine and friendship with its author. The damage done, requests began dropping through his letter-box and so began a succession of remarkable late scores. It was not music that he had tired of, but the joyless treadmill of commissioning, whereafter he wrote nothing that was not stimulated by a specific fascination or friendship to give him inspiration and impetus to overcome his concern. Bliss's remedy, short-term contrast, mid-term development and long-term accumulation with stunning moments turns necessity into strength, and is brilliant. With each constituent a small (if detailed) job, 'ability to concentrate' over long spans ceases to be a factor. It demands greater creative invention but ideas were never a problem for Bliss and are not here.

The creative partner of *Metamorphic Variations* was long-time friend George Dannatt (1915-2009), fine original artist whose canvasses provided the theme, a perceptive reviewer and music analyst whose input helped Bliss solve at least one problem. It was at his Wiltshire house where the Blisses often stayed while the work was abroad that Arthur saw the triptych *Tantris*, a work in progress exploring the interrelation of Tristan, Isolde and the fatal goblet, all interdependent, each borrowing or transforming material from the others. They (and the lingering memory of a youthful passion for Wagner) sparked an idea not only for a piece but how it might be done, a work based on three elements where motifs are subject to minute change and variation, the narrative into chapters which reveal all only when heard complete but individually exploit enormous dynamic and expressive range to provide a high degree of unity but maximum variety of colour, texture, and thus interest to ear and mind. It has strong overall developmental logic and purpose. Progress was rapid and only six months after starting, a manuscript score went to George and Ann Dannatt in the autumn of 1972. It comprised an opening statement and fifteen sections, at forty minutes his largest abstract orchestral concert work, his most inventive, subtly structured and

virtuosically scored. Not bad for an octogenarian

It was then called *Variations*, its title at the première and the next performance under Charles Groves in Liverpool. Bliss having considered '*Transformations*' among others before settling on *Variations* grudgingly, as the treatment is more organic, stealthy, progressive and complete than that word implies. Dannatt suggested metamorphoses but it was Trudy (Lady) Bliss, keen amateur geologist, who saw parallels between the slow metamorphosis of rocks and the crystalline results of Bliss's process of motivic treatment; we must thank her for the title. If it suggests something unremittingly rocklike, the actuality is rather different. It is a work of extremes, of enormous power, passion and violence balanced by gentleness, whimsy and straight bravura, with scoring ranging from the massively saturated to utmost delicacy.

Elements, the slow opening, presents the building blocks; an oboe theme, which might be the musical equivalent of Dannatt's Tristan/Tantris figure as its first pair of notes, throws a sly glance at the long opening tune in Act III of Wagner's opera (other references are embedded throughout), the second a two-bar phrase for horns, the third, after a pause, a note cluster built up by woodwind and horns. A succession of bare octaves overlapping the first two, of no seeming importance, gains significance later. Business begins in earnest with three continuous sections concentrating largely but not exclusively on the first element. *Ballet* draws on the theme in lilting waltz time and is linked by a harp figure to the rhythmically vigorous *Assertion* with its prominent side-drum. This is followed by *Speculation*, a succession of hushed tremolando chords with tiny hints of fragments of the first element and ending *niente*.

The next group, five sections, increasingly uses the second element; *Interjections* (*Andante sostenuto*) though uses a first theme variant on trumpet, with asides from other instruments and laced with cadenza-like figures. *Scherzo I* is fast with a slower middle section, and concludes with a solo viola reference to the theme that goes straight into *Contemplation*, a rather magical,

elusive section where the octave figure, spread through upper winds and harp, flanks a central climax based on the second element. The brilliant *Polonaise*, complete with castanets, is a masterly combination of shock and logic; shock because it is the last thing you expect and introduces a subversive, frivolous element that utterly wrongfoots you; logic because it both provides material for and is a total contrast to the next section, making what comes all the more potent. *Funeral Processions*, solemn, heavily scored and disturbing, most reflects the dark colours, profound sombre mood, subtle transformation of material, strength and raw power of Dannatt's triptych and is the emotional, dramatic and structural summit of the work.

After a pause a little self-contained triptych, almost an entr'acte: the central panel, a brief *Scherzo (II)* ending *Larghetto* with the third 'cluster' element coming obviously into play is flanked by two delicately scored concertante sections exposing a succession of solisti against tutti, first *Cool Interlude* pairing viola and cello soli with stand-out parts for flute, clarinet and bassoon, ending with a violin cadenza; finally *Duet*, a more florid affair for violin and cello soli against harp, celesta and strings with an ending that muses on half-remembered material of *Contemplation* and the octave figure.

The final tableau, theoretically two sections, is effectively a summation/coda, *Affirmation* (to balance the opening *Elements*) preceded by a tiny canonic brass fanfare *Dedication*, 'to George and Ann Dannatt in token of a long and cherished friendship' on their initials G-D and A-D, so continuing the duetting idea which is now explained. *Affirmation*, the longest section of the entire work, ties up the loose ends. It begins in Bliss's broadest ceremonial style with the oboe theme, and revues the entire thematic content in a sort of grand round-up before destabilising and disintegrating to leave the exposed oboe to end this massive odyssey almost as it began.

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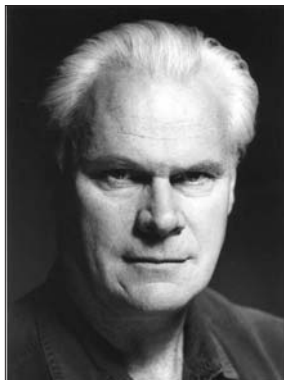
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1893, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra has worked with many famous composers, conductors and musicians including Elgar, Sibelius, Holst, Stravinsky, Vaughan Williams and Thomas Beecham; and more recently with Michael Tippett, John Tavener and Peter Maxwell Davies. Principal conductors since the founder Sir Dan Godfrey have included Charles Groves, Constantin Silvestri, Andrew Litton, Marin Alsop and now the dynamic young Ukrainian, Kirill Karabits. The BSO has toured worldwide, performing at Carnegie Hall, New York, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Musikverein, and Berlin Philharmonie, as well as regular British appearances at the Royal Festival Hall and Royal Albert Hall in London, the Symphony Hall in Birmingham and the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. The BSO is known internationally through over three hundred recordings, and continues to release numerous CDs each year with Naxos. Recent critically acclaimed recordings have included CDs of Bernstein, Bartók, Sibelius, Glass, Adams and Elgar, and three discs featuring arrangements of Mussorgsky, Bach and Wagner by Stokowski were nominated for GRAMMY awards in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

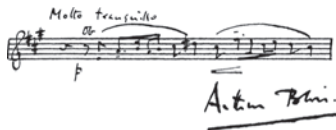


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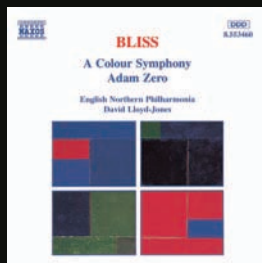
David Lloyd-Jones



David Lloyd-Jones began his career in 1959 on the music staff of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, followed by conducting engagements for orchestral and choral concerts, opera, broadcasts and television studio opera productions. He has appeared at the Royal Opera House, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera and the Wexford, Cheltenham, Edinburgh and Leeds Festivals, and with the major British orchestras. In 1972 he was appointed Assistant Music Director at English National Opera, and there conducted an extensive repertory. In 1978 he founded a new opera company, Opera North, with its orchestra, the English Northern Philharmonia, of which he became Artistic Director and Principal Conductor. During twelve seasons with the company he conducted fifty different new productions, with numerous orchestral concerts, and festival appearances in France and Germany. He has made many successful recordings, and has an extensive career in the concert-hall and opera-house that takes him to leading musical centres throughout the world. His highly acclaimed cycle of Bax's symphonies and tone poems for Naxos (*The Gramophone Award*) was completed in the autumn of 2003. In 2007 he was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society.



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Scored for a large orchestra, including an extensive percussion section, Sir Arthur Bliss's *Metamorphic Variations* dates from the end of his creative life. Inspired by the triptych *Tantris* painted by Bliss's long-time friend, the late George Dannatt, it is a work of extremes, of enormous power, passion and violence balanced by gentleness, whimsy and delicacy. *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* is one of Bliss's most eloquent and personal scores, a private tribute to a generation cut down in its youth, including his own brother, during World War I.

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(1891–1975)

Meditations on a Theme by John Blow 33:46

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|---|------|--|------|
| 1 Introduction: 'The Lord is my Shepherd' 'I will fear no evil' | 7:29 | 5 Meditation IV: 'He restoreth my soul' | 2:30 |
| 2 Meditation I: 'He leadeth me beside the still waters' | 3:27 | 6 Meditation V: 'In green pastures' | 4:52 |
| 3 Meditation II: 'Thy rod and staff they comfort me' | 2:53 | 7 Interlude: 'Through the valley of the shadow of death' | 3:58 |
| 4 Meditation III: Lambs | 2:34 | 8 Finale: 'In the house of the Lord' | 6:04 |

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| 9 Elements | 3:39 | 16 Polonaise | 3:45 |
| 10 Ballet | 1:34 | 17 Funeral Processions | 4:07 |
| 11 Assertion | 2:16 | 18 Cool Interlude | 2:57 |
| 12 Speculation | 1:48 | 19 Scherzo II | 1:45 |
| 13 Interjections | 3:59 | 20 Duet | 2:20 |
| 14 Scherzo I | 2:52 | 21 Dedicated to G.D. and A.D. | 0:52 |
| 15 Contemplation | 2:25 | 22 Affirmation | 4:31 |

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra • David Lloyd-Jones

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Cover Picture: *Study for 'Parsifal', 1970 (part of Tantris)* by George Dannatt (1915–2009)
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