

## The Quarterly Review

Culture, current affairs, geopolitics

### ENDNOTES, APRIL 2021

Posted on [March 27, 2021](#) by [leslie](#)



Monet, landscape on the Île Saint Martin

## ENDNOTES, April 2021

**In this edition: Robin Holloway and Peter Seabourne, Piano Trios, Symphonies by Robert Simpson, reviewed by Stuart Millson**

**Met Stars in Concert, soprano Sonya Yoncheva, streamed from the Baroque library at the Schussenried Cloister, Ulm, Germany, 27th February 2021, reviewed by Leslie Jones**

Peter Seabourne's *Piano Trio* of 2018, newly recorded by the Sheva label, is an impressive, challenging, yet ultimately tonal piece of contemporary music – a work of bright, open soundscape, a piece that sits perfectly alongside the music of his teacher, Robin Holloway, whose *Piano Trio* (2017) also makes a thrilling addition to this new CD. The mysterious solo violin which opens the first movement (first of a series of undivided movements) grips the listener with its noble, distant beauty. The destiny of these two composers seems somehow intertwined, as if they had founded their own 'school'.

Peter Seabourne began life as a modernist but a moment of re-evaluation and redirection led him to return from the world of the tone-shattering avant-garde to the sound-world of Britten, Tippett and Daniel Jones (the prolific mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh composer of string quartets) thence to the studio and composing-room of Robin Holloway and that region of modern music, always connected to the continuum of a recognisable Englishness. Accessible and atmospheric, Seabourne's trio abandons complicated markings, for movements that are clearly, simply described. The third movement is just 'Tender and poignant', a sense of memory and of love beneath an alabaster sky, with the third movement, 'Fast, joyous, dancing', the composer explaining:

‘A coda sees the reappearance of the lyrical passage from the scherzo, transformed (transfigured even) into a majestic hymn. The dance resumes and everyone scampers off over the hill.’

Robin Holloway, by his own admission in the sleeve notes, had ‘a struggle with the [piano trio] medium’ and the composer quotes the great works of Beethoven, the ‘Ghost’ and ‘Archduke’ trios, as if he were attempting, physically, to conquer those far-off summits. But to my ear, he need only *look* in the direction of Beethoven: his music – at times, a *lachrymae* – giving the impression of a natural, instinctive, flow; a restraint and inwardness; deep thoughts and musings, rather than an unresolved, soul-destroying struggle.

The sound-quality of the recordings of the two Trios and Holloway’s meditative 15-minute song-cycle, for speaker, piano trio and percussion, entitled *Moments of Vision*, is complemented by the enchantment of the artwork of the cover, taken from a painting *Spring in the Valley* by the late Mrs. Marcelle Seabourne, an English impressionist. In the song-cycle, there are references to birds – to robins and swallows – and a tense, charged, prickling theme announces the presence of bees, as they begin to swarm in the warmth of the day – the air full of ‘vibrations of beauty’ – a moment in Nature which somehow manifests itself throughout the whole disc.

From Lyrity Records, comes an important centenary release of the music of British symphonist Robert Simpson (1921-1977). Simpson served for many years as a BBC music producer and often expressed reservations about the avant-garde and its young luminaries, referring to the work of one important composer of the 1960s as being little more than ‘crushed-out Schoenberg’, with the musician in question being unable to identify correctly even the time-length of his own work (an annoying failure if you are trying to plan programme lengths). Simpson was a great champion of composers such as Havergal Brian and Carl Nielsen and it has often been remarked how similar in ethos Simpson’s symphonies are to those of Nielsen. We can judge for ourselves, thanks to Lyrity’s presentation of two vintage live recordings from the Royal Festival Hall: the *Symphony No. 5*, of 1972 and Simpson’s 33-minute-long *Symphony No. 6*, in two parts, of 1977.

A young Andrew Davis on the Festival Hall podium in 1973 unleashes the forces of the Fifth with the London Symphony Orchestra and here it really does seem as if the Simpson *Fifth Symphony* echoes that tempestuous and tumultuous ‘Nielsen 5’. Overwhelming in its massive, granite-like force, the mountainous forms of the music and the intricate boiling energies within it make for a compelling listening experience, with the LSO at the height of its power. Charles Groves and the London Philharmonic take to the stage in a 1980 performance of the *Sixth Symphony* – the Sixth, to some extent, offering again echoes of Nielsen, the work having a more introspective side to its character yet still providing great unity and power.

Listeners will also learn much from the interesting sleeve notes of this issue, written by the Chairman of the Robert Simpson Society, Jürgen Schaarwächter, who describes an episode in 1972 when Simpson went to an Indian restaurant with the great Havergal Brian, who led a surprisingly ordinary life in his old age on the South Coast. Taken ill at this meeting, Simpson suffered a period of incapacity, in which he determined to map out new compositions. Like Nielsen’s ‘inextinguishable’ music, Simpson sought the secret of the life-force. His symphonies testify to a life of artistic principle, self-discipline and resolution.

*Editorial note*; dedicated to the memory of Mrs Marcelle Seabourne, artist

*CD details: Peter Seabourne and Robin Holloway, Avant Piano Trio, Sheva Contemporary, SH271, with Benjamin Harris, speaker, Peter Britton, percussion. Simpson, Symphonies No. 5 and 6. LSO/Davis and LPO/Groves. Lyrity, SRCD 389.*

**Stuart Millson is the Classical Music Editor of *The Quarterly Review***