

George Lloyd Symphony 6

There follows below an article I wrote about this symphony for British Music News in March 2012.

Last year I had the immense privilege of conducting the English première of George Lloyd's very fine cello concerto. In May this year I will conduct Lloyd's sixth symphony - the first performance of one of his symphonies in London for something like 20 years. Next year I plan to perform one of his longer symphonies (possibly the 4th or 5th), and I'm working on a longer term project to resurrect his opera John Socman. I recently wrote about the cello concerto in BM News and would now like to share with you some thoughts on the 6th symphony.

Last September I spent three wonderful days in the Cumbrian rain - well not literally in the rain, you understand, but inside William Lloyd's farmhouse. George's nephew William owns all of George's scores and many other items belonging to his uncle, and has housed them in a beautiful library which forms a part of his farmhouse. I was given free access to all the materials and a complete set of CDs of George's music. Whilst the rain hammered down I blew off the dust, listened to CDs, played on George's piano and violin, and looked at scores of a number of unperformed works. I even had a moment to write a Lloyd-inspired theme for an overture I was working on at the time! I was able to see the scores which George himself conducted from, many of which contained the composer's hand-written notes. On departure, William presented me with one of Lloyd's batons - I shall use it to conduct the 6th symphony in May.

The more I get to know Lloyd's music, the more I find it extraordinary that it is so rarely performed. I suspect I may soon have conducted more Lloyd than any other living conductor. That is quite bizarre. My purpose here, however, is not to lament this situation but rather to give some insights into the wonderfully tuneful, terse, and tremendously enjoyable sixth symphony.

Before going any further, I recommend that you listen to the piece. It is available on CD for around £12, coupled with the 10th symphony and the 'John Socman' overture. I don't think you can get it as a download. I am quite confident that you will think it money well spent. And after doing that, you should get out your diary and make a date to come and hear it live on 26th May in St John's Church, Waterloo, London, played by Philharmonia Britannica. Come and say 'hello' at the end of the performance!

Whilst chatting with some musicians in an amateur orchestra recently, I was surprised to find that one of them knew Lloyd's 6th Symphony. Then I remembered that Classic FM have aired the slow movement a good number of times, and it has become the most broadcast of all Lloyd's works. It is not hard to see why. That movement is deliciously simple, interweaving two singing melodies and displaying that wonderful skill so prevalent in Mozart and Schubert of combining a beautiful melody with melancholic depth. But before talking any more about the music itself, let's look at the historical origin of the 6th symphony. For this I am particularly indebted to William Lloyd, who has supplied me with his own programme notes on the piece.

George Lloyd completed his sixth symphony in 1956. His 4th and 5th symphonies (1946 and 1948) had been completed in Switzerland whilst his wife nursed him back to health from the shellshock he suffered in the Second World War. Both symphonies are large scale works. The 4th is an emotive and haunting piece with Lloyd struggling to come to terms with the torpedoing of his ship, HMS Trinidad, on an Arctic convoy in 1942. The 5th shows a brighter tone as he started to emerge from the shadows. On returning to this country he was commissioned to write an opera for the Festival of Britain in 1951 along with Britten and Vaughan Williams. The resulting opera 'John Socman' was plagued with problems. After hearing a shambolic performance, Lloyd vowed that he would never set foot in an opera house again - a resolution he was to keep for over 20 years.

By 1956, Lloyd established a market garden in Dorset, growing carnations which he sent off to Covent Garden market every day. His diary notes that it was hard physical work and that the only way he had the time and energy to compose was to rise at 5.30am and put in a couple of hours at his scores before starting work on the business.

These factors certainly contributed to his explicit desire to write something concise, bright and lively, with a minimum of development. There is an interesting note in the file for the first performance on 12th October 1980 with the BBC Philharmonic under Ted Downes. The text is crossed out and heavily revised, but Lloyd kept the original:

"It is 25 years since I wrote this symphony, and this is the first performance. I tried once or twice to have No 6 played in the late 1950s, but I was told it was a worthless work because it had no contemporary significance. At that time 'significance' meant swimming along with the tide, and no one seemed to understand that it was just as legitimate for a composer to react against the current trends as to go with them, or even that a composer can write what they like, which is what I did with this symphony. Perhaps I was naïve to think that I could try and forget the horrors of this world by escaping into the simplicity and happiness of a private fairyland. "

Here we are face-to-face with two contrasting but complimentary sides to Lloyd's composition. In the 4th symphony he was very much confronting the 'horrors of this world' but in the 6th, ten years later, he takes delight in writing happy and carefree music.

After its 1980 première, the 6th symphony was played at the Proms in 1981, a last minute addition to the programme by Edward Downes after a commissioned composer failed to deliver a score on time. Lloyd used to point out the irony that his first and only Promenade concert happened by accident! As far as I can ascertain, it has subsequently been played by the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra in 1983, the Slaithwaite Philharmonic early in the 1980s, the BBC Philharmonic in 1988 (just before they recorded it on CD), and the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra, Maryland, USA, in 1996. Waterloo in 2012 may well be the sixth ever performance.

What of the music itself? Words can't really do music justice, so I again urge you to listen to the symphony.

Despite the lightness of the piece (in contrast with the preceding two symphonies) it is still scored for an orchestra with triple winds. The use of the various sections of the orchestra is, however, quite different - Lloyd employs considerable restraint and circumspection in an almost Ravelian manner.

The symphony begins with bright and upbeat unison staccato chords. They are slightly syncopated, giving an extra little bit of jauntiness. The violins then launch into a laid back and slight cheeky tune. The general mood is of elfin lightness, of scampering through the woods playing games, and this is aided by the fact that there are over 3 minutes of music at the one fast tempo. The sun is out and hardly a cloud crosses the sky. In a model moment of restraint the movement ends softly, perfectly foreshadowing the following movement.

You may feel you have already heard the haunting F minor melody that opens the second movement. I'm not suggesting by this that you will have heard it on Classic FM, although this is entirely possible, but rather that it is one of those inevitable and satisfying tunes which the listener feels they must have heard before. It is beautifully proportioned, like a simple English folk song, combining nostalgia and nobility. The cor anglais plaintively sings a second melody, and then plunges into the only truly dark moments of the symphony over painful low-lying wind chords with stopped horns. Continuous upward triplets in the woodwinds propel the movement towards its conclusion, where the cor anglais resolves its earlier angst, yet ends on a yearning upwards appoggiatura which the harp is left to resolve. A marvellous movement of just 65 bars length.

In the final movement we return to another version of the games being played in the first movement. There is a sense of the fun of the fair, and although there are moments when you wonder if there are clouds approaching, the fun and games are never far away. Notable are the swirling and lightning fast demands on the flute section. The piece accelerates to a joyful and powerful close.

It is worth quoting Paul Conway, from his survey of Lloyd's 12 symphonies on MusicWeb International (<http://www.musicweb-international.com/lloyd/index.htm>), where he says: "George Lloyd's Sixth Symphony is a model of formal perfection and emotional restraint ... by any standards a fine symphonic achievement ... [the 2nd movement] is the perfect introduction to George Lloyd's individual sound-world, encapsulating its rare brand of resilience without acrimony and a courageous message of hope for all who listen with open ears."

As a postscript I would like to put on record that the performance of Lloyd's 6th symphony this May (as with the cello concerto last year) has been made possible by a donation by a private individual who knew George Lloyd. What a fantastic thing to do. Should you be interested in contributing towards a revival of Lloyd's opera John Socman in 2014 - an expensive venture - I would love to hear from you!