Half Centennial: Revisiting Anthony Milner's Chamber Symphony

Anthony Milner is often regarded as a composer of music largely inspired by the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, his musical achievement was far wider, with a fair number of 'absolute' works, including the present Chamber Symphony, op.24 (1968).

Milner was born in Bristol on 13 May 1925 into a devout Christian family. After schooling at the Benedictine-run Douai School in Berkshire, he studied at the Royal College of Music with Herbert Fryer and R.O. Morris. There were further lessons from the émigré composer Mátyás Seiber. Much of Milner's career was spent teaching: at Morley College, where he befriended Michael Tippet, the extra-mural department of music at London University, King's College, Goldsmith College and the Royal College of Music. Milner had a strong transatlantic connection with appointments at Loyola University and the University of Western Ontario. Anthony Milner died in Spain on 22 September 2002.

The Chamber Symphony was composed during 1967/68. As the title implies, it was scored for a small orchestra with no trumpets, trombones or percussion. Other works written around this time included the *Festival Te Deum* commissioned by the Leicestershire Schools Music Festival as well as several anthems.

The first performance of the Chamber Symphony was given on 31 March 1968 in the Woodford Green Town Hall during the final concert of the Woodford Music Society season. The New Cantata Orchestra of London was conducted by James Stobart. Dominic Gill reviewing the concert for *The Financial Times* (1 April 1968) wrote that 'the Chamber Symphony is a short work, barely 15 minutes long…its three movements are in no sense avant-garde; the music is mild, serious, honest and straightforward, not overtly derivative – though one senses a kind of compromise between Vaughan Williams and the second Viennese school. It is lyrical: not the harsh lyricism of Schoenberg's [two] 'Kammersymphonie', but something more childlike and comfortable.' Whether Schoenberg's 'exemplars' would be regarded as 'harsh lyricism' in 2018 is a matter of opinion. These (Schoenberg) are well-constructed works that are dynamic and often quite beautiful. It is also unfair to accuse Milner's Chamber Symphony of being 'childlike.' The work is mature, well-constructed and masterfully orchestrated. Although, I do concede that there is a charming innocence about much of this music, especially in the final movement.

Gill (op.cit.) describes the progress of the music: 'The first movement is a good-humoured allegro, developed from the material in the opening bars, followed by a denser – and lonely – 'adagio', in which the orchestral playing several times obscured what must have been a high point – as, for example, the rather beautiful horn figuration taken up by the flute that slides wistfully to the oboe at the movement's end. The final 'allegro' is a virtuoso rondo, rhythmically the most interesting of the three, with some Stravinskian textures that work up to a strong climax.' The *Financial Times* review concludes by suggesting that 'the orchestra…barely held it together. Judgment will have to wait for a much more definitive performance.'

The New Cantata Orchestra of London and James Stobart gave at least one other performance of the Chamber Symphony. This was on 25 April 1968 at the St Pancras Town Hall, Euston Road, London in a Redcliffe Concert of British Music. There is a short review of this concert in the *Daily Telegraph* (26 April 1968) 'I.A.' began by noting that the concert had some unfamiliar music. It opened with Haydn's Symphony No.83 'The Hen', which is hardly the best-known (37 current recordings compared to 94 for the Symphony No.94 'Surprise Symphony'). This was followed by Alan Rawsthorne's accomplished Divertimento for chamber orchestra (1961-62) and Francis Routh's Violin Concerto. This latter work was receiving its premiere: the soloist was Yfrah Neaman. The final work in the concert was the first 'London' performance of Milner's Chamber Symphony.

I.A. wrote that Milner's work was in 'another class' to the 'meander[ing]' Routh. He thinks that in the Symphony 'sometimes...the outer movements seem to be musicians' music, not lyrical enough to take flight, but then by contrast, the middle, slow movement did just that, with woodwind weavings and a

memorable free-ranging horn tune.' Milner's score 'showed skilled planning, writing and imagining.' It seems that the New Cantata Orchestra of London and James Stobart had sorted out some of the gremlins present in the Woodford premiere. I.A. writes that the 'woodwind and brass (horns) were equal to the demands made on them' but the 'string playing made one want to hear this work again, with a virtuoso body like the English Chamber Orchestra.'

Writing about the same concert, Ernest Chapman (*London Musical Events,* 23 June 1968) suggested that the Chamber Symphony was '... expertly written with a slow movement notable for its sustained melodic impulse. The outer movements, while always keeping the ball in play, could have done with more of this poetic element.'

The looked-for definitive account *probably* came with a Radio Three broadcast made on 28 October 1983 by the Northern Sinfonia, conducted by Howard Williams. It was the work's first, and possibly last, broadcast performance. Listening to this recording on YouTube, reveals a Symphony that is approachable, satisfying and, in my opinion, an important addition to the symphonic repertoire of the 1960s. The 'adagio' is quite simply gorgeous. As such, I feel that there should be a modern reading of this work made available, or at least a remastered issue of the 1983 broadcast.

Finally, Paul Conway (*MusicWeb International* 3 February 2003) has written that '…the Chamber Symphony of 1968…whose cool spikily expressionist style is articulated by an ensemble of modest proportions…is characterised by pungent rhythms and idiomatic solo woodwind writing.' This pithily sums up the Symphony's impact. Milner was never afraid to make use of expanded tonality, as in this present Chamber Symphony. On the other hand, he was adept at intensifying this apparent limitation to his requirements, and produce work that is always fresh, vibrant and satisfying. He was never a 'slave' to the prevailing avant-garde.

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