The Surprising Breakthrough of Everyone's Third Symphony

by John Caps

It was distressing to hear, in the mid-1980s, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, the skittish, British, firebrand serial-composer, expressing a deep doubt just this side of despair over the future role and direction of Western music in general, and of his own music in particular: "At times I have the uneasy feeling that music took a terrific swerve and went terribly wrong in the 1950s. Leading up to that had been decades of indecision: whether to press ahead with the agenda of serial composing or try to adapt Stravinsky's influence. On the one hand, I was trained in serialism (as the first pupil of Pierre Boulez in Paris), but on the other, although I just love Stravinsky and can't imagine the world without him, I don't know what he led to except a lot of talented people imitating him. For me, now, free in any direction, there's no clear choice. So, what my music will be like next I don't know. It's an interesting feeling…But there's nothing more frightening than liberty…one of the reasons why I'm not writing at present."

Bennett's was a conundrum of style, function, and musical grammar that exactly paralleled the so-called 20th century crisis in classical music: whether to commit to the strict twelve-tone language of serial composition or surrender to any other siren song of composing like minimalism or collage or populism. Of course, Bennett, like his generation, had other musical interests to distract him during writer's block -- he scored films, he performed in jazz clubs -- so that, for him, the music never really stopped. But as an influential symphonist who still believed in long-form orchestral composing, he was anxious. His *Symphony No. 1* (1961), premiered by the Royal Philharmonic, had been a dazzling, colorful extroverted showpiece – expansive twelve-tone architecture with detailed row-manipulations infused with his own unique harmonic strains. Critics praised its craftsmanship and the way its dissonant vocabulary hosted a romantic heart, but then lay in wait for his *Symphony No. 2* (1967) to challenge what musical dialect he might champion next. Again, they praised his craft and structural engineering and the sheer breadth of his contrapuntal and harmonic finesse, but this time they pounced on what they deemed a certain anonymity in his writing, complaining that not even the dynamic highlight of piano apostrophes made the symphony memorable or the music personal. One judged his compositional voice to lie somewhere along the line of a "twelve-tone idiom filtering Walton through Berg" and therefore leading nowhere. Said the London Sunday Times, Bennett's second symphony was "short-breathed, jerky".

Not one to brood but neither one to confront and 'fix' things, Bennett's typical reaction to disapproval was to turn away. He wrote no new symphonies for the next twenty years, preferring chamber music and ballets and vocal repertoire, and, as in the earliest days, allowing film scoring to occupy him. He also launched that aforementioned side-career as a pianist in clubs and cafes, playing and even singing, pop tunes from the so-called Great American Songbook, first around London, then in Manhattan where he settled in1977. Maybe a growing sense of domestication in his personal life was responsible for the more settled sensibility in his composing: a marked tendency, while still writing serial music, to choose tone rows that had all sorts of tonal implications and, eventually, the willingness, soon the overriding desire, to choose a tonal key and write whole works "in tune". Although it might have been the aesthetic influence of all that sophisticated quixotic pop music or just the mellowing that comes with turning 50, in 1987 not out of the blue but out of a pattern we will see in other composers from every age, came the *Symphony No. 3*: intellectually rigorous as always, but now completely tonal, deeply personal, and even confessional. Even he was speaking of it as a breakthrough and as "my favorite work ever". But why then? Why such personal discovery in such a cast-off genre as the long-form orchestral symphony and why particularly the third time around and not with his fledgling first symphony or hopeful second?

It turns out that the breakthrough of third symphonies has been noted before, right from the earliest days when symphonic form was just coming into prominence. Certainly the symphony has always been one of the most searching of genres (second only to the string quartet?) for drawing out a composer's individual moral vision. Thus, in spite of any rumors of its obsolescence in music history,

the symphony always seems to remain an active and versatile expression of both the artist and its own times. Indeed, don't all of the progressive, eclectic, even chaotic forms that the symphony can assume prove its adaptability, its ongoing vitality? The history of Western music has given us a long line of evolving composers who've perceived the symphony in different ways, yet have used it to express the particular contexts of their life and times. And, interestingly, these individual composers often find themselves saving their most personal music for the third symphony.

This year, 2018, as orchestras across the country commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Leonard Bernstein's birth, they program his *Symphonic Dances from 'West Side Story',* his sober *'Jeremiah' Symphony No. 1* (featuring a soprano role), and his second symphony subtitled *The Age of Anxiety*, a jazzy spectacle for piano and orchestra. But notice now how many orchestras (Boston's finest included) are suddenly programming his thus far neglected, eccentric and personal *Symphony No. 3* subtitled *'Kaddish'* (the Hebraic prayer for mourning of the dead). Even more theatrical than its predecessors, this third symphony features orchestra, chorus and a declamatory speaker who addresses the Deity directly from the edge of the stage from a spoken script ("…Angry, wrinkled old majesty, I want to pray; I want to say kaddish; my own kaddish…"). Musically, it is a trendy 1960s blend of tunes, daring dissonance, eclectic references to other composers, heartfelt climaxes vying with melodramatic cries and whispers – above all, theatricality is the real god it addresses. Splashy as his previous symphonic works had been, they were usually fenced in by form and observance -symphonic form in the first symphony, the literary form of the W.H. Auden poem he was interpreting in the second. Now for some reason, Bernstein felt free to take his third symphony way out on the presidium into the hall, defy convention and be totally personal – embarrassing some (the *New Yorker*'s Alex Ross called its sentimentality "queasy") but at least having his own say. Yet, again, why save this level of confession for the third time around?

To discuss the topic these days, one has to get past skepticism of there being a symphonic genre at all. That, of course, is another debate full of cliché. In a recent "Standpoint Magazine," composer/musicologist Sir James Macmillan had a hard time even defining what constitutes a symphony anymore. He asks, "Can just anything be a symphony now?" and he compares the Russian composer Galina Ustvolskaya's contemporary fifth symphony, a ten-minute work for five players and a narrator, with Hector Berlioz's 1830 *Symphonie Fantastique* which claimed to be a symphony but then followed an internal scenario like a ballet. Shostakovich also had other things in mind than "pure" music when he named his various symphonies for events in Russian history. Mahler likewise gave specific narratives to much of his early music. Although he still called them symphonies, he freighted them with the narrative equivalence of epic poems. Was this the new face of symphonic music or just *wannabe* Music Drama?

For the symphony as a musical form, surely the first signs of liberalization and personalization date from somewhere around 1804, when Beethoven's daily excitable moods of impatience and indignation compelled him to broaden and deepen symphonic rhetoric for all time in - what else? - his *Symphony No.3*, the 'Eroica'. Indeed, in the wake of that music, the symphony itself was to become, as Macmillan put it, "an imposing legacy (from which) some composers turn away in terror…while others (are just sucked in)." And, again, notice it: with his first symphony and even unto two, the composer is still experimenting. But that third try, it seems, is everyone's *Eroica* – heroic for some; intimate, confessional, cathartic for all.

And the matter is not bound to the extremes of Beethoven. How many more recent, more colloquial composers have found the same – can we call it – phenomenon? For a while in the middle of the 20th century, Aaron Copland talked more often and strongly about *his* third symphony than about any of his other works. He had recast his 1924 organ concertante as a *Symphony No. 1* (brass and saxes replacing organ) calling it his "modernist take" on the contemporary work of men like Hindemith and Honegger. Critics commented on Copland's complex but clear, accessible writing and how it established a kind of Americana harmonic (built on 4ths and 5ths) which seemed distinctive. His

simpler and self-titled *Short Symphony No. 2* (1932-3) seemed even more accommodating to that emerging American spirit: the trail tunes of the western states, the kicky rhythms and the rural back road (or urban back alley) origins of jazz. Soon he found himself following that same line, but using it for the folk-themed ballets of choreographers like Martha Graham. And so began his tremendously productive period of composing Americana classics -- the perpetually audience-pleasing dance scores: *Rodeo*; *Billy the Kid*; *Appalachian Spring* – then songs on texts by Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, e.e. cummings – then film scores for *The Red Pony* or *Of Mice and Men*, all of which made his name pridefully synonymous with America and, somewhat reluctantly, with pops concerts.

What would it take for Copland to clear the air of such vernacular works – that is, to prove his aegis as an internationally serious composer while not denying or in any way chastising the popularity of his pre-war work? Copland's *Symphony No. 3* (1946) seemed both to sustain a post-war vision of America and to graduate from it by tackling a major formal orchestral score ("I did aim purposely for the grand gesture…") unallied to any stage or screen directions or nationalistic borders. Its themes were long-lined; its musical architecture was built on four huge blocks of aggressive orchestration: a triumphal arch opening, then a scherzo and trio, a flute tune and variation allowing the melodic Copland to sing, and a powerful D-major climax all woven into whole cloth to be sure the listener would experience it all as a symphony, not a suite or partita or pastiche. Here was Copland's major bid towards a personal sound through a traditional form, all driven by the vision of post-war New Deal optimism – "useful art" for the working masses but seriously personal. Why, he even quoted his own *Fanfare for the Common Man* (from 1942) and built the symphony's grand finale on it. But it was purposefully pure music, personally pressed and meant to establish his serious credentials after that run of pop success. And there was something about the timing of -- the career position of -- a third symphony that made this for him the vehicle of discovery, of declaration.

Along with his own natural evolution, Copland may have been equally inspired by the recent 1938 success of a confident, optimistic, temporarily famous *Symphony No. 3* by a professor from Oklahoma, (Le)Roy Harris which became, for a while, everyone's ideal concert-pleaser, the "savior" of the modern symphony. Harris's symphony incorporated forward-looking orchestral textures and conservative, even patriotic, themes singing of wide, wide territory and ambition. and it had sprung from the heart and heartland of the country rather than from the usual classical aristocracy of Europe. There are those now who say that Harris, in turn, had picked up on a somewhat pentatonic, hymn-like theme in Copland's organ symphony and made it a major feature of his own but, at the time, the Harris *Third* seemed to be the big patriotic symphony people had been waiting for, "an all-American hymn-dance for orchestra," in the words of the New Yorker's Alex Ross, "in which the strings declaim orations in broad open-ended lines, brass chant, and whoop like cowboys in the galleries, and timpani stamp out strong beats in the middle of the bar…Such big-shouldered sound met everyone's expectations of what a true blue American symphony should be." Harris's *Symphony No. 1* (1937) had been more ambitious – a choral symphony using Walt Whitman poems as text and intending "to explore the human spirit from trials and tears to ultimate faith in mankind". His second, the "romantic symphony" (channeling the success of Howard Hanson's romantic symphony of 1930?) was only mildly received. The Harris *Third*, though, was greeted as a classic and helped draw attention to a wider domestic repertoire. Purists panned the simplicity of Harris's architecture, though all enjoyed his flexibility among attractive thematic ideas. It was only that, as Copland had said, Harris "seldom was able to shape a piece so that it made sense from beginning to end and seemed logical and inevitable". In other words, he wrote effective bits but couldn't for posterity justify a whole symphony. Also, the work's sudden conclusion seemed arbitrary to everyone. It closed with a thud.

Those intrigued by the Harris success were soon praising the new third symphony of William Schuman and comparing the two Americans – Schuman being another Depression-era composer, considered more accomplished, at least more polished, than Harris (though he had studied under Harris from 1936-38). In Schuman's hands the first two movements of his *Symphony No. 3* were tied together into a penetrating seven-minute passacaglia joined to a seven-minute fugue, then came a rather sorrowful

chorale against ten minutes of string textures with muted brass commentary, all concluding in a shining eight minute toccata. Again, it was the essence of American optimism though more mature than Harris and, one felt, more lasting. Both symphonies exploited active brass writing (in impulsive galloping figures) almost like Western movie scores, and neither was shy about driving home its enthusiasms with violent timpani solos, not just providing punctuation in the climaxes but seeming to suggest that gun-play was as much a part of the American saga as trail songs and coyote calls. None of this comparison supposes that Copland leaned on Harris for content but, ducking that whole debate, it is safe to say now that the very genre of the symphony was being revitalized in this process and, strange to tell, these were all third symphonies at issue. For a while, the Americans were a surprising carrier of that ideal.

But of course, the same grappling with form and perspective, the personal versus the aesthetic, was occurring all the while just as vigorously in faraway places. One leading warrior in the fray was Igor Stravinsky although he was only flirting with established symphonic form, writing his choral *Symphony of Psalms* in 1930 and a short *Symphony in C* in 1940, symphonies in name only. Setting aside his nine-minute *Symphonies for Wind Instruments* from1920 (and the plural there drives us even further away from any formal symphonic label) makes his *Symphony in Three Movements* of that same Copland breakout year 1946 Stravinsky's official third symphony. Not only was it impiously bitten through with the jagged jazz rhythms but it incorporated almost concertante roles for solo piano and harp – all anti-symphonic elements. Of course, Stravinsky had always been an amalgamator of styles and sources – taking Russian folk elements and mixing at once modern and primitive influences to form his own unique tone of voice. Musically, his third symphony was both a revelation and a pronouncement of currency: child of the new impatient eclecticism. But for Stravinsky, wasn't this a personal declaration too: expressive of his own exile from Mother Russia and of the loss of his late mentor, the choreographer Diaghilev? One thing surely absent from this new music was the bold student confidence of his pre-war years. Everything after Stravinsky's third symphony was speculative for him, all uncharted territory: an opera for TV, memorial pieces for Aldous Huxley and JFK, then (a blasphemy to his followers) his conversion from reigning neoclassicism to the enemy camp of serial music. For many observers, Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* became a last nod toward the conventional recognizable symphony (some still claim it has the conventional four movements in disguise); but for the composer himself it seemed just another personal revolution such as we have been watching here in the history of everyone's third symphony.

What about history, then? Not every third symphony can be a breakthrough, can it? Joseph Haydn finished his *Symphony No. 3 in G-major* in 1762 during the season just following his appointment as Kapellmeister for the Esterhazy Court. After two try-out symphonies, Haydn's third *was* a kind of personal experiment: it was his first to have four movements and it contained a trick: in the minuet section he constructed a canon between high and low voices offset by one bar -- a device he liked so well, he would repeat it in his more famous 23rd symphony. But it would hardly be called a breakthrough. It was his first "hit", though, and its success certainly boosted his reputation as he started his new job.

In those days, the symphony as a musical form was a shorter, more formulaic affair (Haydn wrote 25 more of them in the next three years and eventually wrote one hundred and four) and so less likely to be the cause of any real breakthrough – that is, until W. A. Mozart contributed to the cause.

All of nine years old as he produced *his* third symphony in 1765, Mozart seemed to feel especially personal towards this music, though it's somewhat hard to discuss. Long since, we have learned that the Mozart numbered symphonies *No. 2 in Bb* (K17) and *No. 3 in Eb* (K18) are actually the work of another laboring composer of that time, Carl Friedrich Abel whose career the young Wolfgang was studying. The score sheets we have in Mozart's own hand of K18 are the result of his having copied-out Abel's music as a student exercise (though Mozart substituted clarinets for the oboe parts). That means that Mozart's actual third symphony is the one we know as his *Symphony No. 5 in Bb major*

K22. This was composed during a season of serious illness and hardship for the Mozart family. Both Wolfgang and his father were struck with angina on their concert travels between London and Rotterdam. Soon his sister would die of typhus and Wolfgang would contract it as well. The family stayed on in the Hague for six months while the boy recovered and there he set about composing his third symphony -- the number 5 -- three movements: a rousing allegro for horns, oboes, and strings, then a solemn inward-looking Andante (haunted by his sister's death?) in a favorite Haydn key of G-minor, and then a broad finale defiantly carrying on with life, borrowing a theme from a keyboard concerto by Bach whom he had met the previous year. Was this, then, Mozart's first personal symphony, musically expressing his hope of returning health, perhaps also his first realization that the music he was being asked to write on commission could contain personal, if still childish perspectives?

By historical standards it would not be long - thirty-nine years – before Mozart's contributions would widen the scope and power of the symphonic genre itself into, some would say, the greatest symphony of all: Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3* the "*Eroica*" of 1804 -- a musical breakout if ever there was one.

The turbulent times during which Beethoven forged his third are well known. The years immediately preceding had seen crises enough: his suicidal depression over steadily worsening deafness and his powerless infatuation with the cousin of a noble patron (to whom he would dedicate his *Moonlight Sonata).* But these were productive times, too – after all, he was steadily employed during all of this by the ever-faithful Prince Lichnowsky, and he produced two symphonies, six sonatas, the *Piano Concerto No. 3* and the opera, *Fidelio*. The latter would not find real success till 1822, however, and the two symphonies were considered distractedly Haydnesque. Audiences, it seemed, much preferred his new ballet score, *Creatures of Prometheus,* more in keeping with a new political spirit of change and reveille in the air as Napoleon began his military prosecutions across France, portraying himself as defender of the common man. *Prometheus* enjoyed ten repeat performances from 1801 to 1803 and Beethoven, freshened with that energy and hungry for insurrection, longed to write something to encompass the whole restless, disruptive, ambitious spirit abroad that season: new music to rock the rooms of the power elite and perhaps disturb lazy lay listeners. His third symphony would make nostalgia of all past work. In it he would portray both the high ideals and low alarms of the day. He would even borrow the heroic rhetoric of his *Prometheus* music, re-using its main theme in the new symphony's finale. This was the defiant Beethoven, eager to tackle tyranny, deafness, fate, romantic rejection, and the isolation born of all that.

The sheer size of Beethoven's third was unprecedented – valiantly larger than life and full of discord. The middle of the first movement boasted a long development section that is a veritable essay on Beethoven's idea of heroism. The second movement vacillated between major and minor and, marked funereal, expressed a noble pathos. The third sported three horns playing through a confident scherzo while the fourth and final movement, usually the sharpest and quickest in symphonies of that day, was full and weighty, made up of variations and fugues based on that *Prometheus* theme.

Well known is the composer's late act of dedicating this monumental symphony to his admiration of the heroic ideals embodied in Napoleon's anti-government campaign, then his great dismay when that hero/warrior for democracy reacted to newfound fame and adulation by crowning himself emperor of France. How was this not hubris and a re-imposition of imperial rule, a betrayal of all the revolution had stood for? "Then he is nothing but an ordinary man," Beethoven railed. "His ambition has made him the greatest of tyrants," and he famously scratched out Napoleon's name from the symphony score's title page and said that we should now consider this music to "honor the general spirit and theory of heroism" since apparently no human hero could be trusted. It is triumphant music, but heroic unto itself. Pure symphonic form still seemed the best way to approach themes like heroism but not until Beethoven's third could he fully personalize the hero within. Maybe his simply reaching the age of 35 had something to do with his breakthrough here – now that his energies were full, his experience ripe and raw, and his message urgent. The specific herald that his third symphony represents can be seen by noting the symphony he wrote to follow it: his fourth was scored in a

decidedly modest 18th century manner, Mozartian in tone; thirty-five minutes long as opposed to the hour he had reserved for his third.

Now for the next eighty years, the whole symphonic repertoire in Western music – even if we restrict the discussion to just third symphonies – proceeded only by comparison with Beethoven's third. From 1815, Schubert's third wilfully expanded beyond his own norms in emulation of *Eroica*; Schumann unsuccessfully inflated his own 1851 *Third* to Beethoven-standards; even Bruckner's 1873 *Third* which took pains to quote Wagner, benefited from Beethoven's permission to rhapsodize romantically while erecting huge classical structures. It all looked backward to Beethoven. Only the young Mendelssohn ignored the German heroic tradition altogether, taking more circumspect inspiration from his own personal hiking trip to the Scottish Highlands for his third symphony (at least this Opus 56 was the third symphony he had begun, though its composing was delayed so that it's actually the fifth that he completed: 1829 vs. 1841). Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 3* (1875) also seemed to reject the heroic idiom, attempting instead a sensual opulence and uncharacteristic optimism (his only major key symphony) – practically a divertimento in mood and more of a breakdown than a breakthrough.

The modest Johannes Brahms candidly and constantly admitted his outright fear of the Beethovenian influence. His *Symphony No. 1* with its grand gallant gestures and anthem-like themes was sometimes called "Beethoven's Tenth" while his second in reaction was all light relief in D-major, glowing with serenity alternating with positive energy, closing with a decisive flourish. Brahms was at his most confident then. He produced his popular violin concerto the next year (1878); his mature piano concerto *Opus 83* in 1881. After those and other successes, he seems to have felt more freedom to compose in his own personal tone of voice, not pressured by precedents so that, by 1883, he was able to write so close-to-the-heart in - what else? - a *Symphony No. 3 in F-major*. In contrast to his earlier works, this third is self-conscious, clear and pure in form. Maybe the first theme of his opening movement is redolent of the Schumann *Third Symphony* and the second movement's theme is just simple and folk-like, but the Allegretto is Brahms's most heartfelt: first heard on cello, then passing through a trio section before returning on French horn. The more animated egress slowly falls away into peaceful agreeable resolution; even giving up ghostly hints of the symphony's opening melody. So there are all of Brahms's existing moods and methods and transitions in one representative work. Such emotional generosity revealed in his third symphony, then, seems exhausted and denied to Brahms's fourth (1885) which critics have always called a "psychological work". His third stands alone.

So again, here are these third symphonies: personal breakthroughs for some; for others, as the 20th century began, breakdowns of order. The intemperate Gustav Mahler, already loading his first two symphonies with symbols and subtitles, wrote a whole pictorial scenario to go with his gargantuan *Symphony No. 3* (1902) -- a work whose musical eclecticism and literal referencing actually work against any musicological sense of balance and order. The Mahler *Third* was his last to impose so specific an extra-musical narrative onto a score – in this case a "story" set amongst natural phenomena, hoping to evoke, if not indeed illustrate, the lives of forest animals and the rural feral night. Of course, the sheer size and drama of the scoring was "visual" enough to practically achieve transubstantiation: requiring two choirs, soloists, offstage drums, a huge orchestra and the stamina of all to stage the work for one hundred minutes. Mahler's first symphony had been consciously heroic (he initially dubbed it "The Titan" when it was still in its "symphonic poem" form); his second consciously transcendent with spiritual aspirations (he dubbed it "The Resurrection"). Now the third: here was nature's bounty -- six 'chapters' opening with French horns like Brahms while quoting the first ten notes of Beethoven's last quartet. But then it featured a parade of jostling styles: classical, popular, gypsy, Viennese, military band, funereal, and onomatopoeic sounds mimicking the forest inhabitants. It was a theater piece submitted as a symphony, perhaps wanting to be operatic like the music dramas he was always conducting but never willing to write for himself. Mahler's fourth, thereafter, would abandon the whole conceit of representational music in favor of a vaguer Bohemian landscape - or rather the atmosphere above it. Of course, Mahler would switch back and forth between theatrical and

transcendental works for the rest of his life, consciously thwarting tradition, indulging the nonconformity his *Third Symphony* had celebrated.

Even more visual was the 1904 *Third Symphony* of Charles Ives, unashamedly stuffed with extra-musical references and exhortations – half philosophical tract; half New England recipe book. Composed for chamber orchestra, Ives's third was also known as *The Camp Meeting,* attaching quaint Americana subtitles to its three movements: "Old Folks Gatherin'", "Children's Day," and "Communion". Again, the musical style was eclectic, including war songs, backwoods beats and dances – all on an erstwhile classical grid made of complex modern harmonies and meters. Ives bragged that Mahler had seen the score and was intending to perform it in Europe, but no proof was offered. The short twenty-minute duration and the eccentric demeanor of the score augur against such a promise from the grandiose Viennese conductor who would certainly have been immune to any such corny local curiosities.

In the wake of mavericks like Ives, reactionary composers, critics and audiences feared for their aesthetic lives: What was or was not a symphony? In France, Camille Saint-Saens's contemporary symphony, while solidly classical in tone, became controversial by giving a showy role to pipe organ throughout, the composer having coveted some sort of showcase for the instrument and finally feeling the freedom to offer it up in the guise of his *Symphony No. 3*. Jean Sibelius likewise used his *Third Symphony* as an experiment, turning away from the muscular nationalistic tone of his previous two symphonies to become downright amorphous, formless and contemplative.

Blinking past those turn-of-the-century composers, we can spot the Nielsen third (1911) known as *Sinfonia Espansiva*, his only symphony with vocal parts added (soprano and baritone in the second movement) and the Vaughan Williams third (1922) which seems to continue his pastoral traditions at first but actually wanders off into some strange war-torn music instead, lyrical but moody, irrespective of traditional form, anti-pastoral rather a blasted pasture. Prokofiev's *Third Symphony* (1929) also rebelled against conventional development, being largely an adaptation of his favorite opera, *The Fiery Angel*, while cadging quotations from Beethoven and Chopin.

Third symphonies continued to be especially confessional of composers' private strengths, weaknesses and trials. Shostakovich's *Third*, subtitled *First of May* from 1928, brought out some of his most uncomfortable political music – high-modern in style but full of bombast and propaganda. Dvořák's *Third*, was his only symphony in three movements, missing a scherzo, and although it was begun in 1872, several details of the music's origins, like dates and other data, have been lost or purposely scratched out from the existing manuscript. And he kept revising it until, say, 1889, suggesting a struggle as with no other his works. Compare Albert Roussel's 1930 *Third*, then, which seems an expression of new faith in the future of his century and of the symphony itself, defying the mood of the Great Depression, with the new vigor of an eclectic blend of neo-classicism, melodrama and even what would become Stravinskian rhythmic freedom in its romp of a finale.

There were other composers, though, for whom all that eclecticism, manifesting itself as the wandering attention span of the new century, seemed to cripple them. A case in point is when Rachmaninoff said of his *Third Symphony*: "I did not need the fingers of one hand to count the fans of that music." So lush and gushing had been the conclusion of his *Second Symphony* that audiences in 1936 were expecting just such luxury in his *Third*. He revised and resubmitted it trying to meet those expectations until 1938 when the final version was played. His *Symphony No. 1* had been a disaster. Some said Glazunov, the conductor that night, was drunk, but anyway the premiere performance went badly in 1897. He felt humiliated, went into therapy, and left Russia for good in 1918 to tour as a piano recitalist. Only a few works followed his exile to America. A second symphony relied on unison strings and simple tunes as though chastised and cautious. The Rachmaninoff *Symphony No. 3* can be said, then, to represent his searching for a new direction. After a dreamlike opening, it shifts impulsively to a playful feeling, then a passage of rose-garden simplicity, then a

Hollywood-ish theme – all with a randomness that critics decried and the public, inarticulate but uncomfortable, rejected. Again, traditional symphonic form was in abeyance, but no convincing substitute found.

Still, Europe in turmoil had a fierce focusing effect on certain composers. Symphonies from that clique were more like war dispatches from a world on fire. The Bohemian Bohislav Martinů ventured his *Third Symphony* in 1944, just as he learned of the assassination in Prague of a Nazi military commander and of the retaliatory violence that then obliterated so many of the rural villages where he'd been raised. He fled to America along with so many others and there, ill-at-ease and homesick, he found the first two movements of a ringing *Symphony No. 3* – its ten-minute finale was finished by June 1944. He claimed to be thinking of Beethoven and the triumph of heroism over adversity, and yet Martinů's third symphony was not just about courage but specifically about the trials of war and the exile of the artist during political strife. There is a good deal of rhythmic drive in the scoring; more urgent theme-making and more consorting with dissonance here than ever before in Martinů's vocabulary – all driven by the newly convicted concentration of a composer who has discovered himself and what he needs to be doing, even so far from home. There are a few baroque energies here and a springing rhythmic confidence, but also some brutal harmonies indicative of his pro-Czech sympathies under attack before he reaches the symphony's warning climax. After that, there would be no more hesitant periods in Martinů's productivity: he had used his third symphony to clear his spirit.

Arthur Honegger, the French/Swiss composer of oratorios (*Le Roi David*) and tone poems (*Pacific 231*), likewise reserved his most personal complaints for his most formal works – three string quartets and five symphonies. *Symphony No. 1* (1930) was brash and difficult with much experimentation and polyphony through dense, even thick sonorities. Then eleven years passed before he tried the symphonic form again, this time (1941) exploring the acuity, brilliance and subtlety of a strings-only orchestra in three crisp movements characterized by both powerful syncopated counterpoint and soul-searching lamentation – Honegger's personal wartime reaction to seeing his beloved Paris occupied by the marauding Nazi machine. Introspective to the depths, that second symphony clung to the key of D but kept being drawn away by new griefs. But if that music was "about" the personal perspective of living the war years, Honegger's *Symphony No. 3* (1945-6) would be his cry of outrage at warfare itself – the first movement being a violent relentless *allegro marcato* of widely spaced intervals stomping over an atonal foundation with brusque accented figures that rather demonize the march, then a secondary, atonal theme along with its own inversion, plodding down to a dirge-like coda. Honegger called his middle Adagio movement a "sorrowful meditation…What turbulence that movement cost me!" – a pure twelve-minute lament hovering around the key of E, full of inventive counter themes, redolent of any particular society's sufferings in combat and cataclysms, the enemy being ambitious and organized, all defenses paralyzed. The symphony's finale revisits that conflict more desperately, the whole orchestra landing lastly on six slammed chords, as if shouting out the syllables *dona nobis pacem*. Then an unexpectedly calm, ethereal largo (F#-minor to C#-minor) commences, as though a dream-vision of peace has descended over the battlefield. It is the composer's most humane plea, yet delivered in the midst of his most aggressively and personally argued orchestral work, his longest symphony and, in a sense, his own last statement on that combination of pessimism and wishful thinking which *was* Honegger. Tellingly, his next symphony, the fourth, was a sigh of exhaustion – an idyllic pastoral tribute to his vacation home in Basle.

But post-war western music could not decide whether to follow that forgiving, lyrical tone, or press the case of the war-torn conscience, delving into more tortured atonal tunnels, or perhaps sign up for the Copland/Harris ideal of capitalism's promises and optimism, tonal purity and national pride. Thus, indecisive, 1950s classical music spun on a casino-wheel of chance encounters, betting on the influences of various genres like folk music, jazz idioms, popular music and, of course, the pursuit of avant garde styles like collage, the next generation of serialism, the new generation of minimalism, etc.

A few of the composers who offered third symphonies during the 1950s were Roger Sessions, William Grant Still, and the ever-daring Hans Werner Henze.

Increasingly suspicious of the modern motives of classical art music (i.e. innovation for its own sake), contemporary composers seemed to return to a Haydnesque concept: three short movements – twenty minutes at most – in a colloquial or homiletic style. The Westphalia-born Henze was initially most famous for theatrical genres like opera (*The Magic Theater*; *The Stag King*) or the choreographic essay (*Ballet Variations*), but at the crux of his career were his ten symphonies. By the late 1940s Henze had wearied of both his avant garde reputation and of the political climate of his native Germany. The one main work with which he made his escape, heading for the soft sun of Italy, indeed the catalyst for his doing so, was his *Symphony No. 3* (1951). It's a quick, clean, twenty-minute piece that he labelled "an imaginary ballet". Still the theatrical composer at heart, he saw it in his own mind as a myth-play: three movements titled "Invoe of Apollo," "Dithyramb moderato," and "Conjuring Dance" – and he infused it with a wholly new sense of lyricism and rhythmic freedom that was becoming personal to him: his desire for change, to move, to break free. The orchestration was colorful; the mood-making in the invocation section had the naïve wonder of a fairy tale, while the tension and jitteriness (darting solo piano figures) of the finale had a sense of anticipation, the unpredictability of myth. As Henze's third symphony celebrated that still-unsure brink of discovery, it remains a transitional work for him, a bridge to a new place as yet unvisited – another third symphony surprise.

Meanwhile, 1960s Henze echoed with a new emphasis on lyricism and his own irrepressible eclecticism. Returning to the example of that cultural sponge Leonard Bernstein, he played into that eclectic decade by absorbing "all forms of formlessness" in *his* third symphony wherein a scroll of quasi-tuneful, quasi-serial passages unrolled like an unabashed stage show. Again, here was a symphony in name only. But for his *Third* to have focused on a speaker was not so much the multi-media breakthrough he hoped for but rather a distraction from the solid long-form composing many had been hoping he might settle into and which, most felt, was overdue in concert music. Instead, 1960s symphonic writing always seemed to need to couch itself as something else: as theater, as screen soundtrack, as anything but a sit-down concert symphony. British movie composer Alan Rawsthorne's third symphony (1964) combined a Hollywood-like loyalty to single themes with his more studied and personal voice that tended toward some tonally elusive harmony, sophisticated counterpoint, dislocated bass lines, etc. To shun multi-media and humble oneself by defaulting to pure music, where nothing but your ideas and your talents are exposed, would have been both a resolutely nostalgic retreat and a courageous step forwards.

One who struggled mightily to find the humblest strain of pure music through which to face the future, was Estonian avant garde composer Arvo Pärt – indeed he stopped writing altogether for eight years in the throes of writer's block. Like the reclusive monks he physically resembled, Pärt used his enforced sabbatical to study ancient texts for clues to forgotten modes and forms, thinking they might lead to something new. In his first two symphonies, Pärt had felt the need to build towering atonal edifices to make his orchestra sound relevant, engaged, contemporary. Yet he could sense those structures swaying in the wind, not exactly unbalanced but somehow propped up rather than solidly founded. By 1970 he had still not resolved the problem, but his *Symphony No. 3* would prove an important brink-work – not a breakthrough but a vague vision of his city of the future. Expansive but fragmentary, it prefigured the compositional direction he would pursue thereafter: the gradual discovery he was making of an archaic but fundamental system of composing that divided all music neatly into two component parts – scale and triad. New works he composed in this method seemed to have both the solidity of classic music and the freshness of modern minimalism without its limitations. He called this concept of composing "tintinnabulation" because its basic modes and triads naturally produced a chiming sonority (like a string of small incremental bells), consonant and reverberant. With its launch date circa 1976, a whole new path for at least one branch of classical music was opened and a whole

new audience took notice. Discs of each new "tintinn" work by Pärt sold like pop music (and, indeed, some said the music's simple tunefulness sounded like pop). At any rate, although Pärt was not yet committed to the new system of tintinnabulation, by the 1971 premiere of his *Symphony No. 3,* he seemed to be seeking in that music some softening counsel from the ancient sages he was studying in order to face the weird 1970s with some measure of rediscovered wisdom and grace.

In a sense, the eventual commercial popularity of Pärt's tintinn music was just a fluke, almost a misunderstanding on the public's part, because they were receiving it as if it were an intentional "comfort," a "rescue at last" from the scary modern doubts of contemporary composing when it was really far more modern and full of doubt than they ever realized – avant garde in the truest sense, for all its tonal sympathies.

In that same year, a similar best-seller anomaly would come from the Polish avant garde composer Henryk Gorecki, when his *Symphony No. 3* likewise suddenly began to sell on disc – more than a million copies by 1992. This was certainly Gorecki's breakthrough into the ranks of celebrity but again -- a misunderstanding? He had subtitled his work a "symphony of sorrowful songs" and in keeping with the extra-musical rather than pure-music trend of those days, he hung its three movements on a narrative – this time referencing the WWII Holocaust abstracted into an alternately moody and mourning threnody for orchestra and soprano. The thirty-minute first movement draws for its text on a 15th Century lament of the Virgin Mary for her doomed son; fully five minutes are spent there at the beginning in a static murmuring of the low strings before the full string section is admitted, only then rising in conviction, in grieving, on Mary's behalf. At the half point, soprano enters *sostenuto tranquil ma cantabile*, reflecting on the harshness of destiny. The second, ten-minute movement (*lento-largo*) is also harmonically stoic, its soprano text taken from words supposedly scrawled on a Nazi-camp latrine wall by a teenage prisoner. Two see-sawing chords support a single arpeggio for the third movement (*lento*) whose text this time tells a modern tale of a mother searching for her child during the political uprising in Silesia.

Until his "sorrowful songs," Gorecki had written only a few orchestral works and they had been described as having "a cold bucket of ice water poured over your head" – i.e. both chilling and immobilizing in effect. Now his third symphony made a break: combining the austerity of his past voice and the dogged simplicity, clarity and tonal fundamentalism of the current minimalist school, applied to those three maternal texts and drawing that unforeseen public response, not just because the music was surface-simple and tonal but because people sensed it was personal. Even if half that adoring audience used this music without thought to coast and dream under its uniform canopy of sound, maybe the other half halfway understood the source of its actual sorrow and for them the music had real impact. It had taken Gorecki till a third symphony to connect with his audience like that, blending traditional tonality (even incorporating the mournful funeral dirge from Chopin's *Mazurka #4 in A-mino*r, Op. 17) with an immediacy of his own.

Another Pole to use traditional Western music modes while deflecting them to his own purposes, was Witold Lutoslawski. He reached his *Third Symphony* in 1983, opening it with four bold E's by the whole orchestra (reminiscent of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* aggressiveness?). After Gorecki's deceptively formless third, Lutoslawski reasserted the importance of form and logic in order to address what he called "the psychology of the listener". His half hour piece, therefore, proceeded like an argument or lecture pointing us away from, then back to (from slightly different angles each time) those opening E's. Three episodes made up the first movement: each episode (for strings/winds/brass and a piano/harp/percussion combo) gaining in weight and consequence but also in subtlety. The second movement was the main pillar of the symphony – a sonata-allegro made of two thematic groups – the first referring to those repeated E's again and the second full of varied forms of the previous material highlighted by graphic instrumental gestures like slurring trombones and pizzicato strings. The long slow epilogue to the second movement could almost be regarded as a third movement but provided instead a natural conclusion: an intensified Adagio which, we should have known, closed the symphony

firmly by restating those same four opening E's. Lutoslawski's third certainly stressed the importance of form and legacy but also the individual perspective. Only when critics badgered him as to any personal agenda in the music – the way many contemporary works referenced their environs – did he concede: "I should feel myself honored to have expressed here something that could have relevance to the events lived through (martial law declared in December 1981 in Poland) not only by me personally but also by other people." Not until his *Third Symphony* did the composer sound so determinate or even admit to personal disclosures**…**

…Which brings us back to the career of Richard Rodney Bennett, where we began. Where does a late 20th Century composer find a more lyrical, readily personal sound after decades of academic composition? Apparently the experience of being touted as one of Britain's finest composers did not hit home to Bennett – something personal still eluded him. Critics diagnosed a missing quality of conviction if not genuine investment in his serial concert music: it was perfection and dazzling in technique but perhaps over-thought. One observer thought he sensed lyricism wanting to surface: "…I suspect that Mr. Bennett may be deliberately and constantly choking back a strong streak of simple tuneful romanticism…" It was even once said of him that his last symphony was "a masterly exercise rather than a work of art impelled by expressive needs". Youth, preoccupied with accomplishment, competition and progress, can miss altogether the value of simpler, more direct, more personal art. Not until the age of fifty, then, was Richard Bennett able to combine that late-acquired wisdom and discretion into a single sincere, truth-speaking, self-revealing work: his 1987 *Symphony No. 3* where all feeling breaks loose. Without intending to contrast so-called "emotional tonal music" with the "dry intellect of serial music," we can intuit that there was something in Bennett connecting the comforts of composing in traditional form and harmony to his own personal search for stability and positive morale in daily life. It had always been true, even as he grappled with the twelve-tone lessons of Pierre Boulez and his own youthful crusading ambition in the avant garde, that his personal brand of serialism, crafted with such care and originality, had been quasi-tonal all along – or as a biographer Anthony Meredith put it, Bennett had always been interested in "developing the melodic possibilities and harmonic potential of the tone row." But this *Third Symphony* was different, a sluice gate that "marked an important stylistic advance – a more tonal, a very personal neo-tonality…rhapsodic style".

Instead of the formal symphonic plan of statement/variation/development, Bennett's *Third* provided a number of motifs and progressions, then mingling them with subtle complexity. Yet the overall feel was fluid, in the cold clear water of F# that flows through the whole symphony. The first movement used two emotional arcs, piano leading the way, then softened through oboe and English horn solos. Muted strings accompanied piano and winds in a more speculative second movement down to a consonant but not quite tranquil conclusion, again in F#. This time, critics noted the "intense sadness" of the symphony's third movement Adagio, the composer seeming comfortable now for the first time in his career with this kind of lyrical confession. Then came "perhaps the supreme moment in the symphony," writes Meredith: "the moment of stylistic revelation where harmony suddenly becomes clearly tonal, settling on a C-minor chord, the kind of chord favored by the neo-romantics Richard had always deplored."

"It was what the piece needed," Bennett defended. A benedictory hand comes down on that chord as if to bless, the whole orchestra in a hushed unison return to F#. "It was fascinating to find that I'd come to a place where a new door was opened to me, that I could find a C-minor chord at the moment of crisis…The third symphony is my favorite piece I ever wrote. It wasn't written in any huge difficulty – it was somehow saying spontaneously what I wanted to say. And I loved it."

There was Bennett's dazzling first symphony and his border-testing second, but only *then,* with experience in hand, came his self-revealing third.

New Millennium music, while it may be more eclectic and less formulaic, has often seemed to trade faddish guard-rails like serialism or minimalism for a new crutch: the extra-musical, theatrical text or

scenario – not quite as prescriptive as a ballet or an opera overture where there's a story to follow or themes to run through, but not the pure music vehicle that the classical symphony is supposed to be, either. Bennett's British contemporary Peter Maxwell Davies let his *Third Symphony* be inspired by a landscape in his head, imagining (to the point of literally illustrating) life in a tiny seaside cottage overlooking the North Sea, Scotland. Musically, he defined its goal as "to admire the clarification of tonal-modal progression…What attracted me again to symphonic writing (after so long away from the form) was just this necessity of making harmonic sense through a large slice of time." He was saying in other words that his interest now, after two previous symphonies, was to get back to the inherently orderly and developmental qualities of the genre – almost a Renaissance architecture. And yet, it seems he could not help framing it in an extra-musical vision, even to the point of employing specific instrumental gestures to "represent spiraling mollusk shells" or, in the symphony's third movement, a passage to "symbolize the towering cliff-faces full of nesting birds." The atonal backdrop of the last movement wafts ethereally as though about to settle into pure music, but then drifts away again into pictures and sound effects like waves settling over a wreck far off shore…and it ends on that "picture" rather than in a purely musical closure.

John Corigliano's *Third Symphony* (2004) was even more patently illustrative: "Circus Maximus," he called it. His *First Symphony* had been for a large aggressive orchestra stimulated by his new-found fame as an epic film composer (*Altered States*; *The Red Violin*). His second was an academic exercise for strings alone. This *Symphony No. 3* seemingly combines all that experience – the instrumental virtuosity of pure music with the flash and informality of a concert band – winds, brass and percussion. It begins with the feeling of a movie curtain parting as the lights go down and, from the screen, the garish sounds of a gladiator march are heard – at least a modern version of that. Maxwell Davies faced the same dichotomy tackling his first symphony, as did worried Corigliano as he faced his own *Third*: whether to be pure or pictorial, abstract or narrative. In ancient Rome, the Circus Maximus was a public spectacle entertainment-overload. Corigliano thought: these days a similar decadence is enacted all the time. "We are besieged with entertainment as if it were news-worthy and news as though it were entertainment" …and on screen, whether TV or the internet, there are multi-messages coming at us all at once: a newscaster reads a story while an insert box gives stock prices next to a weather prediction next to a text-crawl about upcoming programming. "We do nothing neatly," is how Corigliano put it and so his third symphony would take upon itself to portray that circus – musical styles representing all performance rings at once: the meter-motor of minimalism, the cross-references of collage style, the recognizable tonal lines of classical opera, but also the impulsive impatience and lack of follow-through of a pops concert suite; then some genuinely original tone clusters. His half-hour *Symphony No. 3* would showcase circus marches, martial fanfares, jazz tunes, dissonance, farce and joyful chaos – and all in the extreme. More an event than a concert, some said -- in any case, an extravagance.

On a similar branch-line, as though seeking counter-culture status, Corigliano's contemporary composer Glenn Branca used an orchestra of massed electric guitars for his third symphony (1984). His apprenticeship had been in assembling theater pieces with musical accompaniment. By 1981 he was ready to define his new orchestral work, "Tonal Plexas," as his *Symphony No. 1*. The next year he called his second symphony "Peak of the Sacrament" and then started turning out reams of orchestral and ensemble music, calling many of them symphonies and giving each one the quirkiest subtitle he could think of: "Nether Lands" or "Hallucination City". He called his 16th symphony "Orgasm" and his 15th became "Running Through the World Like an Open Razor". But he called his third symphony just "Gloria" though he attached, as it were, a nickname: "Music for the First 127 Intervals of the Harmonic Series". Its post-minimalist tendencies and microtonal awareness made it something of a crossroads for Branca toward truly modern, rather than just unconventional, music. The critical success of that *Third Symphony* gave him courage to pursue the ever-freer sense of theatricality and eclecticism that those latter symphony sobriquets suggest. But where does such a narcissistic, haphazard definition leave the modern symphony in the future as a pure musical form? Or is pure music obsolete?

Of course, even a purely academic string quartet can be a "theatrical" experience in the dramatic interchange amongst the players – the symphony is just a much bigger display. As both music and drama, the symphony should certainly survive no matter how pop-culture subtitles trivialize it or eclecticism fragments its ideals. It just has to be personal.

And to reiterate what we have said, if first symphonies are a composer's introduction to the big-time and second symphonies react to the fame or failure of that first experience, it seems that by at least anyone's typical third symphony, the serious composer either sheds self-consciousness or expressly takes up its cause. Then we get the deepest, sharpest, most personal music there is.

Actually, reviewed in that perspective, the symphony as a musical genre, much maligned of late, has been showing great signs of life all along, if everyone's third is anything to go by.

John Caps, 2018

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Some Third Symphonies in History

1762 Haydn
1765 Mozart
1804 Beethoven
1815 Schubert
1842 Mendelssohn
1851 Schumann
1872 Dvořák
1873 Bruckner
1875 Tchaikovsky
1883 Brahms
1886 Saint-Saëns
1902 Mahler
1904 Ives
1907 Sibelius
1911 Nielsen
1922 Vaughan Williams
1928 Shostakovich
1929 Prokofiev
1930 Roussel
1934 Elgar (unfinished)
1936 Rachmaninoff
1938 Harris
1941 Schuman
1944 Martinů
1945 Stravinsky
1946 Honegger
1946 Copland
1951 Henze
1957 Sessions
1958 Still
1964 Rawsthorne
1964 Bernstein
1971 Pärt
1976 Gorecki
1983 Lutoslawski
1984 Branca
1985 Maxwell Davies
1987 Bennett
1995 Glass
2004 Corigliano