

## MORE LIGHT ON THE BRITISH CASE

### BERKELEY AND RAWSTHORNE

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THE Germanizing of the English musical tradition which occurred progressively during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was more, of course, than a matter of musical significance. As I pointed out, in writing of Tippett and Rubbra, English music is only just recovering after our failure to establish a vernacular opera in the seventeenth century; and that failure wasn't just the consequence of a lack of individuals with the appropriate kind of talent, it was the result of developments that were in essence social and economic. There cannot be any short-circuiting "solution" of our musical problems; the long laborious work of Holst and Vaughan Williams did much to make it possible for English composers once more to find their true roots in Tudor, and earlier, music, but no preoccupation with the technic of this or the other idiom is likely to suffice *in itself*. One can (how painfully one knows it) write in a "Tudor" or "folky" idiom without creating contemporary English music or indeed any kind of music at all. Have we been inclined to forget, because it is a truism, that musical idioms are just an aspect of human life? That to be convincing they need, behind them, what used to be called "character?"

I was reminded of this point by a broadcast of French music given the other night by Poulenc and Bernac. No one would claim that Poulenc is a great composer; and yet it seemed to me that these two artists had something which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to parallel in this country. They had behind them a *continuous tradition*, implying standards of professional artistry, competence and elegance which touch human life at every point. The complete schism which occurred in this country when the spreading capitalist industrialism severed the roots of our cultural life so that a man like Holst had to start afresh, from scratch, did not happen in France, I suppose because that country was less completely and rapidly machine-dominated. One result of this was that the French academic tradition, with such men as Fauré and D'Indy in key positions, remained relatively vital and in touch with contemporary life;

another was that even in the nineteenth century composers such as Berlioz, Chabrier and Fauré preserved the refined poise and classical objectivity which goes back to Rameau, Couperin and Lully, and, in its insistence on *melodic* (rather than harmonic) coherence, maintains continuity even with the troubadours, and with Perotin and Machaut. This preservation of continuity with the whole of France's musical past is even more conspicuous in much of the work of contemporary composers – Debussy, Satie, Koechlin, Roussel and Milhaud for instance; French composers at the turn of the century did not find themselves spiritually and technically stranded, as did composers in Britain. Of course the phenomenon represented at one level by César Franck and at another by Gounod's *Redemption* occurred, but the central tradition always remained strong enough to counterbalance it (and Gounod wrote *Philémon et Baucis*). French musicians were never condemned – the fact is a tribute to the vitality of their cultural traditions – to a monopoly of Germanicised romanticism; this is probably why the legend is still prevalent that the French are not particularly musical.

Here Benjamin Britten has had to work very hard to acquire something of what Poulenc had almost without thinking about it. That he has achieved it in his most recent works seems to me the measure of his importance to future generations of English composers – an importance possibly more than commensurate with the intrinsic value of his compositions thus far. And it seems to me significant that the increased clarity and elegance in his handling of stylizations goes along with what one can legitimately call a development of character and moral value – a development from the relatively adolescent pertness of, say, the piano concerto, to a kind of radical innocence and human tenderness in the recent vocal and choral pieces.

## III

Another and very interesting aspect of the English "case" is provided by the work of Alan Rawsthorne and Lennox Berkeley. In the years just before the war Britten, Rawsthorne, Berkeley, Rubbra and possibly Tippett were the rising names in British music. Since the war the widespread acclamation of Britten and Tippett and the solid if less spectacular recognition of Rubbra, have tended to obscure the work of Rawsthorne and Berkeley, partly because war-time duties have left them little opportunity for composition. This is a pity, because they represent tendencies in our musical culture which might be intrinsically important,

and historically their position is worth studying because it is not only more precarious, but in a sense more uncompromising than Tippett's, Rubbra's or even Britten's. To begin with it looked as though they might be no more than a kind of inversion of the folkly composers; even more than Britten, they seemed determined not to produce music that was "English" only through being parochial. But they soon came to realize that the mere choice of a convention will not do the composer's work for him. A cosmopolitan rather than provincial stylization may be a step in the right direction; but it won't produce good music unless it is reborn into the native tradition in such a way that it becomes European without ceasing to be local. And this is something which can't be done except through the maturing of the human personality; it calls for the integration first of the individual personality and ultimately, I think, for the integration of that individual in the whole context of contemporary life — into a more civilized society.

Berkeley received his musical training in Paris and most of it under Nadia Boulanger. Despite its value as a corrective to British "Teutonic" academicism, this is a convention which is not without dangers to British composers. It doesn't seem to me that Berkeley accepted it with complete spontaneity; certainly there is in his early work such as the cantata, *Jonah*, a brittleness, a lack of melodic and structural conviction which is quite foreign to the music of Poulenc for instance — to cite a composer whose sophisticated-naïve diatonicism has points of contact with Berkeley's early work and who is certainly not naturally endowed with a greater talent than the Englishman. Both Berkeley and Britten in their early days have a good deal in common with Britten's teacher — a composer of the preceding generation, Frank Bridge. All three have a kind of spiritual and technical facility, an instinct for the fashionable (such an instinct was by no means to be deplored at that time in our musical history), and good taste (on the whole) combined with a fatal lack of direction. Direction can come only with the growth of moral fibre, and perhaps it is indicative of the improvement in our cultural milieu that whereas Frank Bridge, despite considerable gifts of musicianship, died before he had achieved it (though the fine fourth quartet suggests the manner in which his music might have developed mature personality), Britten has attained it at a comparatively early age, and in recent works Berkeley is undoubtedly winning through to it. His *Symphony*, *Divertimento* and *String Trio* remind one somewhat of Roussel; the music is growing much more powerfully organized rhythmically, and melodically both longer-breathed and

more sinewy. The influence of late Mahler is perhaps operative as in some of Britten. Significantly, as it becomes more powerful the music grows less eclectic in effect; though it makes none of the implicit concessions to the English tradition that the best music of Britten, Tippett and Rubbra does (in which Tudor polyphony, Purcellian declamation or medieval lyricism are seldom completely lost sight of), it is making itself inseparably a part of that tradition, as the authentic incarnation of an English sensibility.

Rawsthorne, I'm inclined to think, is as gifted as any British composer of his generation and more gifted than most. The exiguousness of his output is disappointing and not entirely due, I imagine, to war-time conditions, for his very integrity has always made it impossible for him to adopt any short-cuts, fashionable or otherwise, to the solution of the problems inherent in the English cultural tradition. He is the only English composer of any consequence who has consistently used the kind of idiom which is somewhat loosely referred to as "central European." He has never been an atonalist, but he does use an extension of instrumental diatonicism which parallels Hindemith's convention, and I should think that he has studied Hindemith's scores carefully. He seems to be naturally an instrumental rather than a vocal composer and in this apparently differs from the central English tradition (even Rubbra's symphonic work is in touch with the temper of Tudor polyphony). But that he has welded this ostensibly un-English idiom strongly into our native traditions is clearly indicated in all his more important works. Poles apart from Vaughan Williams though the convention may be, the fine chaconne of the piano concerto is impregnated, beneath its lucidly instrumental treatment, with the inflections of English folk-song. This is a triumph both of technic and of personality, especially valuable to us in that it combines lyrical tension and rhythmic energy with great concision and a mordant wit. It has in abundance the virtues which English music at the turn of the century conspicuously lacked; and it is fundamentally serious and unfacetious. The *Symphonic Variations* and the *Piano Concerto* I would put with the very best work of Britten, Tippett and Rubbra; these works completely transcend a kind of emotional stasis which somewhat inhibits such distinguished works as the two-violin *Variations* or the viola sonata; it is to be hoped that his service in the forces will not encourage this condition through the virtual relinquishment of creative activity during the years of the war. Rawsthorne's music needs, and deserves, every encouragement.