Stylistic development and the extra-musical in two symphonies by William Mathias

Christian Morris

1997

Abstract

The first two symphonies by the Welsh composer William Mathias (1932-1992) are markedly different in style. This paper will take one aspect of Mathias's style, sound, and attempt to show how it developed between the two works. It will also illustrate that the sound of both of these works is closely related to extra-musical factors that are sometimes not obvious in the works' titles but are, rather, themes that frequently appear in the composer's output. It will also be shown, furthermore, that an understanding of these themes is useful in explaining how the musical argument of these pieces works. Finally, since whether a composer has his own voice is largely related to the issue of sound, an attempt will be made to assess how individual these works are and, therefore, whether they deserve to survive in the repertoire.

Contents

Acknowledgements.

I would like to thank a number of people without whose help this paper could not have been written: Rhiannon Mathias, lecturer at the University of Reading; Geraint Lewis of Nimbus Records and former lecturer at University of Wales College, Bangor; Heward Rees, former director of the Welsh Music Information Centre and also former lecturer at University of Wales College, Bangor; Huw Tregelles Williams, director of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales; Oxford University Press, particularly their marketing officer Sarah Beedle; and Dr. Christopher Mark of the University of Surrey.

Introduction.

William Mathias once remarked of his music 'I know I have my own voice'[1]. In the eyes, or rather ears, of critics, however, this was not always the case. An almost ubiquitous observation in reviews following the London premiere of *Symphony Number One* in 1969, for example, was that the music was too obviously derivative: the reviewer in *Musical Opinion* observed, 'I would have welcomed further evidence that Mathias had transcended so many of the familiar devices well-worn by a previous generation'[2], whilst Colin Mason in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, 'To stay so very much in the shadow of Tippett and Walton is a dangerous form of playing safe'[3]. The tone of reviews following the first performance of *Symphony Number Two,* however, had altered a great deal. Some noted the influences but then went on to comment on the individuality of style: Janet Beat in *Brio*, for example, wrote, 'It is a substantial work in three movements which, as befits its subtitle, follows in the English pastoral tradition as typified by Vaughan Williams and Michael Tippett, but expressed in Mathias's own well-defined musical idiom'[4]. Others were less equivocal: Neil Tierney wrote in the *Daily Telegraph,* 'nothing is imitative or derivative'[5]. It is the intention of this paper to examine how one aspect of Mathias's style, his sound[6], evolved between the first and second symphonies, and particularly how extra-musical factors, such as Mathias's interest in things Celtic and related issues of 'praise' and 'mourning', affect the sound and also how we interpret these works. In doing this it will be possible to judge whether any changes do indeed lead to a more

---

[1] William Mathias in 'William Mathias at 50. The composer speaks to Malcolm Boyd', *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 627.

[2] Anon, *Musical Opinion,* Feb. 1969.

[3] Colin Mason, *Daily Telegraph,* Jan. 15th. 1969.

[4] Janet Beat, *Brio,* vol. 28, no. 2.

[5] Neil Tierney, *Daily Telegraph,* 16th May 1983.

[6] For developments in structure see: Geraint Lewis, 'Towards the Second Symphony. A study in development', *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 629ff.

individual style, thereby assessing whether the observations of the critics are correct. Furthermore, since whether a composer has his own voice is largely related to the issue of sound this will also enable us to make a first tentative assessment as to whether these works deserve to survive in the repertoire.

Chapter One

The First Symphony

'For praise is a difficult art; it is normally done badly,
or not done at all'

In a BBC Wales documentary about the music of William Mathias, *Statements,* the composer identified one strand of twentieth century musical thought: 'the idea that music is there to talk insistently about tragedy, that it must always be unpleasant, because that is the essence of our time'[1] a view, he goes on to say, which partly derives from the Viennese philosopher Theodor Adorno, who states in *Philosophy of Modern Music:* 'Modern music...has taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world. Its fortune lies in the perception of misfortune; all of its beauty is in denying itself the illusion of beauty'[2]. Though the extent to which Adorno's ideas have been accepted by composers in the twentieth century is open to debate, Mathias's reference to them provides a powerful illumination of his own artistic philosophy, since he comments: 'It isn't true about human life, because human life isn't consistently a matter of tragic suffering'[3]. That is not to say that he did not acknowledge that there is a place for tragedy in music, on the contrary he said that 'music...does many things: it can be tragic'[4], but he felt that this should not exclude the opposite side: 'it can also be extremely happy and it can be, in my view, an act of praise'[5]. It is the concept of praise which is of central importance in the *First Symphony* (op. 31), a point Mathias acknowledged when he described the piece as being 'a work of energy, colour and affirmation'[6].

---

[1] William Mathias, *Statements,* BBC Wales television broadcast, 1992.

[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music,* p. 133.

[3] William Mathias, *Statements,* BBC Wales television broadcast, 1992.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid.

[6] Quoted by Geraint Lewis in sleeve note to the Nimbus Recording of *Symphony Number One* and *Symphony Number Two.*

A second important feature of Mathias's musical philosophy derived from his interpretation of twentieth century musical history: rather than seeing it as being deterministic - with Schoenberg leading to Webern, Webern to Boulez - he believed 'Schoenberg acted as a catalyst not for a new unified system but the disintegration into various systems'[7]. He felt, therefore, that in an age that was essentially pluralistic a composer should be free to pick exactly what stylistic elements suite him. Since the stylistic features present in the *First Symphony* arise out of his desire to communicate the idea of praise, it should come as no surprise that these features largely derive from more conservative composers.

The orchestra employed for the work is unremarkable except in the percussion department, which has parts for seven players, including one each for celesta, harp, piano and timpani and three others playing a variety of instruments, both tuned and untuned. Though there are exceptions (see, for example, the use of percussion, particularly the snare drum and tom toms, at the beginning of the second movement) the untuned instruments, and also the timpani, tend to be deployed in a fairly ordinary manner: the cymbals and gong provide the occasional crash to mark climaxes whilst the side drum, bass drum, timpani, block and tambourines tend to be used to give extra definition to activities in the rest of the orchestra. The tuned percussion, however, is used in a more characteristic manner: for extensive doubling of instrumental lines and also, in the slow movement in particular (see celesta bar 4 or glockenspiel, celesta, harp and piano at 32_{3-4} and 33_{3-4}), extensively on its own. Because of the nature of most of these instruments (apart from piano and harp which, of course, have a wider range) such doubling and solo writing occurs in a high range, adding to the essential brightness of the work. The use of high percussion, particularly in the slow movement, has led some to suggest the influence of the second act of Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* on the work's orchestration. Malcolm Boyd, for example, noted 'Mathias's imagination has clearly seized on...the ritual magic of its silvery percussion writing'[8]

---

[7] William Mathias, 'Music Now - A view from the bridge', the 1979 Menai Music Festival Lecture.

[8] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias, p. 28.*

whilst Desmond Shawe-Taylor wrote, with reference to the opera, 'the characteristic use of the celesta, the trickling and then flooding profusion of notes, all this is very Tippettian'[9]. This point will be returned to later.

The essentially affirmative nature of the work is confirmed by its harmony and melody, which are firmly tonal. In a general discussion of Mathias's style Boyd identifies three influences[10], which can all be seen in this work: the colouring of the diatonic with modal inflections, suggesting Vaughan Williams, Holst and Delius; the use of the octatonic, most likely deriving from Messiaen (an avowed strong influence[11]), and the use of fourths, suggesting Hindemith, Bartok and, more likely, Tippett (another acknowledged influence[12]). Boyd notes of the first of these influence that 'Few of Mathias's melodies can be formally assigned to the Dorian, Mixolydian or any other medieval mode'[13]. What we see, rather, is occasional inflections from these modes. The main idea of the scherzo centred on F# (top part of divisi violins, bars 7-10), for example, uses the E natural and A present in F# dorian (though note the ambiguity caused by the lowest part of the first violin divisi at bar 8, where an E# appears), whilst Mathias often (see celesta interjections at bars 4 and 8 in the slow movement, for example) shows a liking for the lydian raised fourth. Sometimes, furthermore, a mixture of modes is used, as happens in the rondo melody at 35 in the last movement, which begins in G lydian, at 35_7 moves to C ionian with mixolydian inflections appearing and disappearing at $35_{11\text{-}13}$, with a return to G lydian at 35_{14}. The octatonic also appears in the work - it provides, for example, some darker coloration in the second subject (3_5 horns and first cellos) of the first movement and in some of the

---

[9] Desmond Shawe Taylor, review of *Symphony Number One*, *Sunday Times*, Jan. 19th, 1969.

[10] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias*, p. 66-68.

[11] See below.

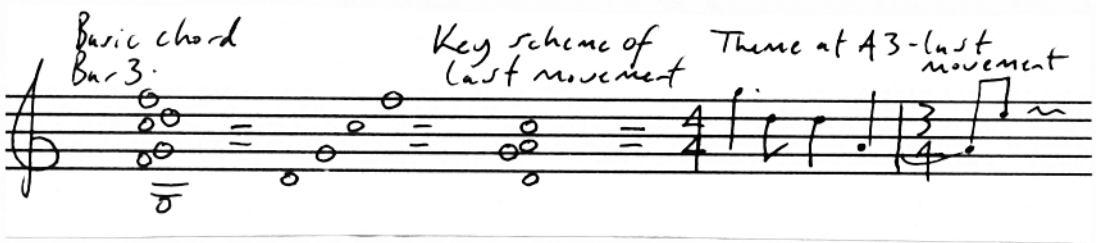
[12] Mathias remarked, in 'William Mathias at 50', *Musical Times*, Nov. 1984, p. 627: 'If you are looking for genuine, deep influences on my work I would go for Tippett and Messiaen'.

[13] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias*, p. 66.

rushing scalic figures in the scherzo (see strings at 16_{10}) - but, perhaps not surprisingly in a piece concerned with affirmation, it is used comparatively rarely elsewhere.

More important than either of the above devices is the use of fourths, as a brief glance at the score proves. In the opening bars of the work, for example, the first three ideas all use this interval prominently: the first, in bar 1, consists (violin 1 and trumpet 1) of a series of fourths, the interval is prominent in the piano and string writing that follows in bar 2, as it is in the violin and piano melody (the first subject) which begins at bar 3. Furthermore, the chord that accompanies the violins at bar 3, which is derived (ex. 1) from four fourths (and is therefore a transposed version of the opening melodic figure), is referred to by Boyd as the 'basic chord' of the work since it acts as a unifying device throughout the piece: he notes, for example, that altered versions of it also begin the second and slow movements whilst the key scheme of the appearances of the rondo theme (first heard at 35) in the last movement, when laid out vertically, form a transposed version of it[15]. Furthermore, the theme which appears at 43 in the last movement is also derived from the chord and, therefore, 'emerges as a goal towards which the whole movement, and indeed the whole symphony have been

Ex. 1 The basic chord[14].



striving'[16]. This is extremely significant since the theme appears in other pieces by

[14] Based upon diagram in Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias*, p. 29.

[15] See Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias*, p. 29.

[16] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias*, p. 29.

Mathias - in *Veni creator spiritus,* op. 47, to the words 'Infunde amorem cordibus'; in the *Gloria*, op. 52, at the words 'Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam'; and in the doxologies of the *Jesus College Service,* op. 53 - and these contexts underline the idea that the theme and indeed the work as a whole is concerned with praise[17].

Though these influences do not suggest an advanced harmonic style since they all have the effect of weakening the notion of tonic they do cause tonal ambiguity. This is added to by the use of sometimes quite marked dissonance. The idea at 3_{10} in the first movement, for example, consists of six notes, a bitonal collection based on a D triad and an E diad moving in parallel, with a Bb pedal beneath, whilst the last chord of the movement consists of an Eb, Db, Bb, E and C. The first chord, however, despite having six notes, does not sound particularly dissonant because of its triadic contents. Similarly the pedal note on C at the end of the movement makes it clear that the chord is to be heard as a C major/minor diad. This illustrates that dissonant collections, which in themselves tend only to contain five or six notes, are essentially triadic, and that when there is a degree of tonal ambiguity this is often made harmonically lucid by the use of a pedal (this effectively means that the first example, despite consisting of D and E formations, is heard as a Bb tonal area) or some form of reiteration.

A final observation Boyd makes about Mathias's style in general which is applicable to this symphony is that he has 'an inventive, adventurous approach to rhythm'[18]. He notes three traits in particular: the use of syncopation and cross-rhythms, which he attributes to the influence of Walton and Constant Lambert and the use of 'irrational or rapidly-changing metres in a fast tempo' which he attributes to Tippett and Stravinsky[19]. These devices, which appear in abundance throughout the work, provide the music with much of its strong feeling of forward impetus since, more often than not, the harmony is essentially static. The response to the second subject at 3^9 in the

---

[17] ibid.

[18] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias,* p. 68.

[19] ibid.

first movement, for example, is essentially harmonically static in that it circles round a D triad and an E diad over a Bb pedal, and here forward momentum is instead maintained by abrupt changes of time. The same is true of the opening of the work, where the first subject (bar 3) appears against a static harmonic background (the basic chord). Here impetus is instead created by the marked syncopation in the first subject and also in the repetitions of the chord.

As said, Mathias felt justified in picking and choosing from the styles that existed rather than trying to be on the cutting edge of the avant-garde, not only because he felt the language of the avant-garde was too limited in its ability to communicate praise, but also because he saw twentieth century music as pluralistic rather than being dominated by any single style. However, Mathias acknowledged when he said of his music that he wanted it 'to have a lot of variety which is recognisably by the same person'[20], that in choosing from these styles one should also form a style that is recognisably ones own and, as the introduction to this paper makes clear, one of the main criticisms of this symphony is that Mathias does not adequately do this. To what extent, therefore, are these criticisms justified?

To answer this question in sufficient depth would, unfortunately, require considerably more space than is available here. It is my belief, however, that a listener familiar with the style would be able to distinguish an individual voice, for two reasons. First, Mathias's eclectic approach means that, whilst one or other feature may be traced to another composer the complete range, since it derives from many different places, cannot. For example, though the use of syncopation and cross-rhythms may recall Walton or Constant Lambert the rapid changes of metre in fast tempi are less a feature of their styles and, as said, more reminiscent of Stravinsky or Tippett. Similarly, though Mathias may share the use of modality with Holst, Delius and Vaughan Williams one would hardly associate the use of octatonic with these figures. Secondly, it can also be said that quite often Mathias does not merely adopt, but adapts

---

[20] William Mathias, *Statements*, BBC Wales television broadcast, 1992.

someone else's technique for his own ends, so his use of it is not quite the same. For example, it has been noted how the high percussion writing might suggest the influence of Tippett. In the case of doubled passages, however, it is difficult to think of a work by Tippett, or, for that matter, anyone else where the doubling is so frequent. This is particularly true in the use of the piano, which appears almost constantly throughout the score. Some have seen such ubiquitous doubling as a weakness[21] (Colin Mason, for example, said the work was 'oppressively over-scored'[22]), what is undeniable is that it gives the piece a particularly individual flavour. As for the more independent use of percussion in the slow movement the comparison with the second act of *The Midsummer Marriage* is, at best, exaggerated since Tippett's use of high percussion only extends to harp and just four bars of celesta[23] (at bar 152[24]). Perhaps a more likely influence, therefore, would be the second movement of Tippett's *Second Symphony,* where high piano and harp writing is given particular prominence. In any case, Mathias's percussion writing differs from both examples: not only is there a greater variety of high percussion, but the emphasis (especially compared to the *Second Symphony)* is on more consonant writing, and both these features add to the essential brightness of Mathias's work.

Despite the above observations, however, there is an element of truth to the criticisms that the work has not yet sufficiently escaped the influence of other composers. The problem lies, perhaps, in the manner in which Mathias integrates the various stylistic factors outlined, since some - particularly the use of fourths - are given far greater prominence than others. As a result some of the melodic writing, in particular, seems to be almost direct quotations of Tippett (ex. 2). The theme which emerges out of the 'basic chord' at 43 in the last movement is, for example, in its succession of perfect

---

[21] Though it is interesting to note that for some of critics this was one of the most impressive features of the work. Geoffrey Crankshaw, in *Music and Musicians,* Mar. 1969, for example, observed: 'The most excellent feature of the score was the orchestration'.

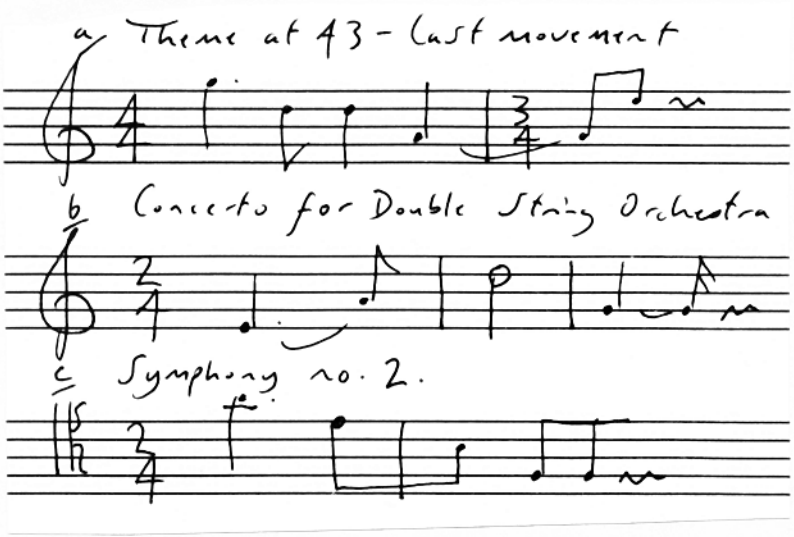
[22] Colin Mason, *Daily Telegraph,* Jan. 15th 1969.

[23] Contradicting Desmond Shawe-Taylor's observation about 'the characteristic us of celesta'.

[24] See p. 316 of study score, published by Schott and Co.

fourths similar to many in the works of Tippett: the second movement of Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra,* for example, begins with this theme (in the first string orchestra) exactly in inversion (ex. 2b) whilst in the counterpoint to the second

Ex. 2 Thematic similarities between Mathias's *Symphony Number One* and Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* and his *Second Symphony.*



subject in the *Second Symphony* at 9 the bassoon again outlines the same sequence of fourths[25] (ex. 2c).

Despite this problem, however, the critical reaction to Mathias's *First Symphony* was not wholly hostile. Robert Henderson wrote in the *Musical Times,* for example, that 'The strong, forceful character of the composer's invention not only draws one immediately into the symphonic argument but his deft handling of the material keeps one closely involved'[26] whilst Desmond Shawe-Taylor defended the work against those who criticised it as being too conservative, saying that the 'The tendency to assess music by the degree of its modernity is one that should be resisted'[27]. It is also interesting to note how many of the reviews, even the most hostile, singled out one

---

[25] See also the clarinet writing at this point.

[26] Robert Henderson, *Musical Times,* Jan. 1969.

[27] Desmond Shawe Taylor, *Sunday Times,* Jan. 19th, 1969.

movement, the slow movement, for special praise. Geoffrey Crankshaw, for example, commented that 'This slow movement was, indeed...the only one of the four to achieve something at all individual'[28] whilst Alan Blyth wrote that 'The slow movement revealed an altogether subtler and more individual inspiration'[29]. The most interesting and perceptive comment, however, came from Alan Davies, who observed that 'After a vital Scherzo...there follows a most evocative slow movement in which the magical and ritualistic atmosphere amply demonstrated the closeness of the composer's Welsh affinities'[30]. It was an increasing preoccupation with these matters that was to lead to a more individual Mathias sound.

---

[28] Geoffrey Crankshaw, *Music and Musicians*, March 1969.

[29] Alan Blyth, *Musical Times*, March 1969. p. 279.

[30] Alun Davies, *London Welshman*, Feb. 1967.

Chapter Two
Towards the Second Symphony

It was noted in the first chapter that a central aspect of Mathias's musical philosophy was that music ought to be able to communicate the concept of praise. This idea can also be linked to the composer's identification with ancient Celtic poetry; as Mathias wrote: 'Anthony Conran has said of the Welsh Bardic tradition that "the poet was one who, at the coronation of the king and at his funeral, and at sundry important events in between, chanted the praises of the king, invoked ancestral strength and piety, and unified (in a kind of communion-rite of song) the whole tribe around its leader"'[1]. Therefore, just as praise was a valued part of ancient society so too did he feel it to be important in the twentieth century: 'Disposing of the tribal connotations and in relation to the twentieth century "there arises in us some kind of need for eulogy, even for formal eulogy, on a number of occasions where, in our culture, such a need is likely to go unsatisfied"'[2]. Despite this, however, Mathias observed that Celtic poetry also had a darker side: 'Welsh poetry shows the Celtic consciousness as rhetorical and lyrical; on the one hand darkly introspective and on the other highly jewelled, dance-like, and rhythmic'[3] and: 'It is an art of paradoxical contrasts - brightly jewelled colours contrasting with dark introspection, declamation with tenderness, and intellectual tautness with an almost improvisatory lyricism'[4]. In the *First Symphony* - which, as said, is principally concerned with praise - some of these literary elements can be seen to emerge in a purely musical manner: the work is 'highly jewelled' (prominent high tuned percussion), 'dance-like and rhythmic' (frequent syncopation, cross-rhythms and changes of metre) and 'intellectually taut' (the use of broad unifying devices such as the 'basic chord'). It is in the slow movement, however, that the opposite side, particularly

---

[1] William Mathias, contribution to *Michael Tippett O.M. A Celebration*, edited by Geraint Lewis.

[2] ibid.

[3] William Mathias, quoted by Malcolm Boyd in *William Mathias*, p. 71.

[4] William Mathias, quoted by Geraint Lewis in sleeve note to the Nimbus recording of the *Symphony Number One* and *Two*.

the 'almost improvisatory lyricism' and 'tenderness', is more[5] in evidence. Though, in a sense (because slow movements tend to be more lyrical anyway), this is not surprising it is, nevertheless, important because the more reflective side to Mathias's music becomes a more important feature in his style following *Symphony Number One* and this, as will be seen, leads to a far more distinct sound. It is for this reason that some of the reviews quoted at the end of the first chapter, which distinguish the slow movement as being the most individual, appear remarkably perceptive. It is also interesting to note that the reflective side tends often to be triggered not only by Mathias's general interest in things Celtic, but often by more specific extra-musical factors which sometimes, but not always (as will be seen), arise from this interest. For this reason Alan Davies's comment about the slow movement - that its 'magical and ritualistic atmosphere amply demonstrated the closeness of the composer's Welsh affinities' - is especially perceptive since, though not referred to at the time, there **is** a specifically programmatic impetus to this movement. This was admitted to by Mathias when delivering a talk about the work to a group of students at University of Wales College Bangor, at which he said: 'I'll tell you something I've never told anyone before: the slow movement was inspired by an imagined Celtic ritual (sic.)[6]'.

Despite the reflective side to the movement, however, it does not quite stand in opposition to the character of the rest of the symphony: if the other movements represent praise, the radiant language of the slow movement can hardly be said to represent mourning. Though the feeling of mourning is indeed present in works which predate the symphony (see, for example, the elegiac lyricism of the slow movements of the *Divertimento* op. 7 or the *Prelude, Aria and Finale* op. 17) the concept only gained greater definition in works following the *First Symphony* .

---

[5] This is, of course, a relative statement. For example, though the movement gives the impression of being improvisatory it nevertheless follows a carefully constructed plan.

[6] Quoted to the author by Heward Rees who was, at the time, a lecturer at University of Wales College, Bangor.

The major works of these years include the four single movement orchestral works Mathias termed 'landscapes of the mind' - *Laudi,* op. 62 (1973); *Vistas,* op. 69 (1975); *Helios,* op. 76 (1977) and *Requiescat,* op. 79 (1977) - the *Harp Concerto,* op. 50 (1970); and *Elegy for a Prince,* op. 59 (1972). *Laudi,* as with some other works of the period (such as the lightweight, but entertaining, *Celtic Dances,* op 60 (1972)), is, as the title suggests, more concerned with the concept of praise, and as such its stylistic features - including lively rhythms and a relaxed harmonic style - more analogous to the *First Symphony.* It need not, therefore, be treated here. In the other works, however, there emerges a stronger feeling of mourning which becomes more marked with the emergence of new musical devices in Mathias's style. These devices are: the increased use of the octatonic and the appearance of higher levels of dissonance which, especially when used in combination, tend to further blur (particularly in the further weakening of the triad) tonal associations; the frequent appearance of a highly expressive appoggiatura figure; and the use of slow tempi and less accented rhythms which, in contrast to the *First Symphony* (where rhythm provides most of the forward impetus), often creates a feeling of stillness.

The emergence of the harmonic factors above have partly been traced by Boyd in his study of Mathias's music. The octatonic, for example, he notes as appearing from around 1963, when it is used in the *Wind Quintet,* and he goes on to illustrate its occasional use, as already noted, in the *First Symphony.* Despite this, however, he says: 'The tonal instability inherent in the scale...lends to music that uses it a restless, searching quality which contrasts with the more assertive style we have come to recognise as characteristic of Mathias. Consequently we should not overestimate its importance in comparison with other means of melodic and harmonic construction'[7]. His failure to realise its significance in works following the *First Symphony* is understandable, since only later does it become apparent that the 'restless searching quality' was precisely the feature that Mathias was aiming to integrate into his style. Along with the octatonic Boyd also notes greater harmonic dissonance in some works

[7] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias,* p. 68.

after *Symphony No. 1,* particularly in the *Third Piano Concerto* where he writes that 'Modal contours are still present, but they are sharpened by dissonant clashes, often involving minor second and major sevenths'[8]. Once again, however, Boyd is unable to draw wider conclusions because this was a relatively recent development in Mathias's music. He does, on the other hand, make some pertinent observations about two works: the *Harp Concerto* and *Elegy for a Prince.*

Mathias said of the *Harp Concerto* that it 'explores typically Celtic contrasts between light and darkness'[9]. The outer movements - which use the sort of expanded tonal harmony, lively rhythms and attractive melodies (even extending to the self-quotation of the 'praise' idea from the *First Symphony*) familiar in the *First Symphony* - explore the former quality. The slow movement, on the other hand, is prefaced with a quote from R.S. Thomas:

> To live in Wales in to be conscious
> At dusk of the spilled blood
> That went to the making of the wild sky,
> Dyeing the immaculate rivers
> In all their courses...

This suggests an evocation of place, namely Wales, but its dark tone means that the idea of mourning is not far away either (a fact that will be underlined in a moment). This leads to the employment of the newer stylistic features. The movement is, for example, almost completely forged from the octatonic which in itself (because of the harmonic instability inherent in the scale) lends the music a darker tone. Also, though at times triads are still very obviously present (bar three, for example, begins as a bitonal collection of eb/a triads, which then move sequentially through the three transpositions of the octatonic) at other times, such as at bar 7 (where the chords outline a whole-tone collection based upon two tritones a tone apart), they are not. Also important is the melodic line in the upper violin divisi doubled by flute and oboe in bars 3-6, which

---

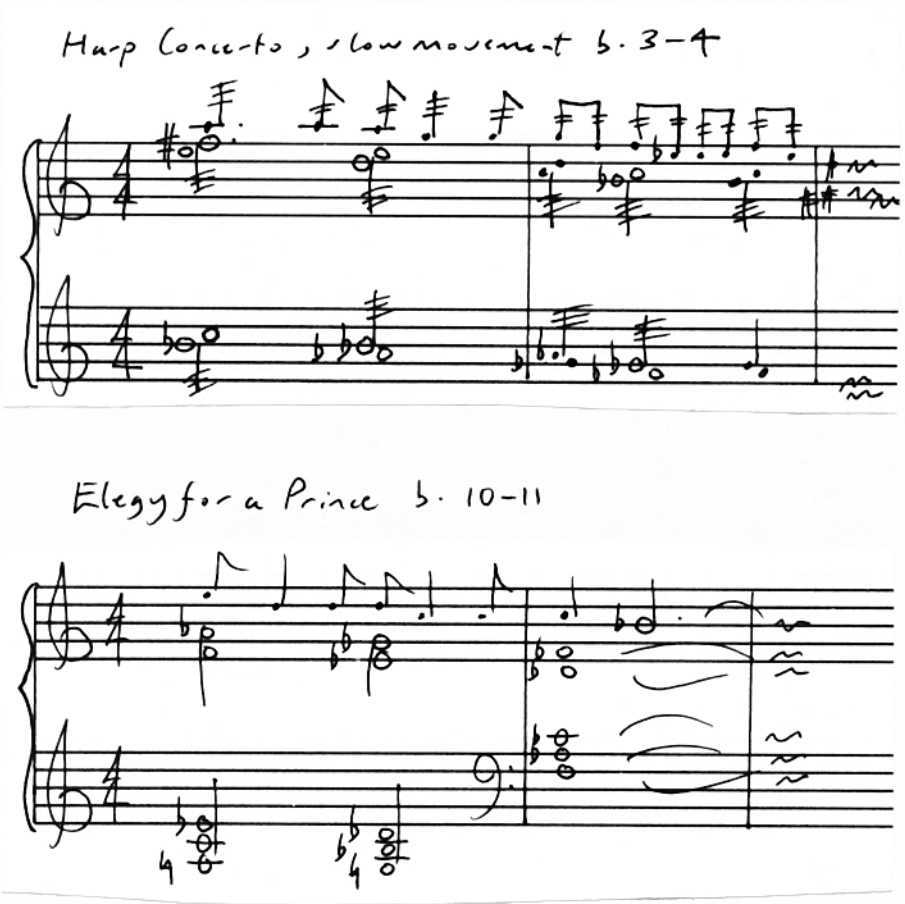
[8] Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias,* p. 37.

[9] William Mathias in 'William Mathias at 50', *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 626ff.

suspends a note from the previous transposition of the octatonic resolving onto a note contained in the new one. This appoggiatura is a constant feature within the movement, both when this section is repeated and also in a developed form in other places (as, for example, in the trumpet and piccolo melody at 16 or in the oboe from $17_{2\text{-}10}$), and its extremely expressive nature helps to add to the insecure, searching quality of the music.

If the concept of mourning is not exactly defined by the quote that prefaces the movement the links with a later work, *Elegy for a Prince,* makes it clear that this is exactly what Mathias had in mind. The piece is a setting, for bass-baritone and orchestra, of the English translation (by Anthony Conran) of Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch's ode following the death in 1282 of the last Welsh Prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and it is, therefore, specifically concerned with mourning. Not only does the

Ex. 3 The appoggiatura figure in *Elegy for a Prince* and the *Harp Concerto.*



work share the general stylistic features noted in the *Harp Concerto* - including the use of the appoggiatura figure in the same harmonic context in the brass (ex. 3) - but it actually quotes[10] (at K^6 and K^{19}) the central section of the slow movement (beginning at 19) over which the soloist declaims, in Schoenbergian sprechsgesang:

> See you not the way of the wind and the rain?
> See you not the oak trees buffet together?
> See you not the see stinging the land?
> See you not truth in travail?
> See you not the sun hurtling through the sky
> And that the stars are fallen?
> Do you not believe in God demented mortals?
> Do you not see the whole world's danger?
> Why, O my God, does the sea not cover the land?
> Why are we left to linger?...
> I see no counsel, neither lock nor opening,
> No way to escape fear's sad counsel.

This pairing of a work which is more obviously 'absolute music' with one with a text gives the former an additional layer of extra-musical connotations even, as here, when the work with the text comes later. Such paring, as will be seen, is important in understanding the *Second Symphony* .

The concern with the extra-musical can also be seen in the three 'landscapes of the mind' *Requiescat, Helios* and *Vistas*. *Requiescat* - as the title, the dedication ('In memoriam Sir Ben Bowen Thomas') and the quote at the end of the work, ('...And the slumber of the body seems to be but the waking of the soul') - suggest, is concerned with mourning in the context of rest. *Vistas* and *Helios,* on the other hand, were inspired by visits to the USA and Greece respectively and, as was implied by Mathias[11], are intended to communicate a 'sense of place'. Therefore though not specifically concerned with mourning, they **are** analogous with a similar type of

---

[10] See Boyd, *William Mathias,* p. 41.

[11] See 'William Mathias at 50', *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 627.

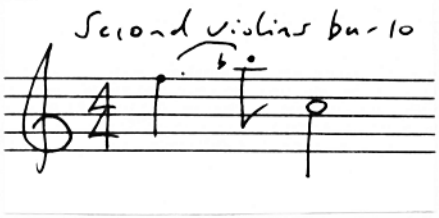
evocation in the slow movement of the *Harp Concerto*. All three of these pieces, furthermore, use the newer features of style outlined earlier.

One of the features particularly strong in these works, which was not so much evident in the *Harp Concerto* and *Elegy for a Prince,* is the use slow tempi coupled with indistinct rhythms to a create a feeling of stillness. In the openings of *Helios* and *Requiescat* this is achieved in a remarkably similar way. Both, for example, open with the same tempo marking 'Lento' and also begin with cells of notes freely repeated in the strings, (so that no sense of beat is apparent). In both works, furthermore, this leads to the emergence of two ideas, the first of which is still very rhythmically ambiguous, the second less so. In *Helios,* for example, the horn idea at bars 7-14 does little to establish a definite pulse because it begins on a weak beat and subsequent bars contain ties across strong beats. Similarly, the idea in woodwind and celesta at bars 3-6 of *Requiescat* fails to establish a clear pulse because its three phrases each begin (on the C#) on a different part of the bar. Furthermore, this ambiguity is exacerbated by the rhythmic accelerando built into the passage, which means that it is difficult to discern which note values derive from the basic pulse. These ideas then lead to a third: in *Helios* at bar 15, in the trumpet, and in *Requiescat* at bar 7, still in woodwind and celesta. In *Helios* the idea is rhythmically unambiguous since it is almost entirely on the beat, whilst in *Requiescat* the first bar (where first and third beats are marked) begins to see an emergence of pulse, though subsequent syncopation in bars 8-9 maintains a degree of ambiguity.

In the rest of *Helios,* though a faster and more sharply rhythmic idea appears (first heard at 2), this is abruptly juxtaposed with the rhythmically ambiguous opening, whilst a feeling of stillness returns at the close and, as a result, it is this stillness which, in fact, dominates the work. The opening of *Requiescat,* on the other hand, leads to the expressive appoggiatura figure (a feature of the *Harp Concerto* and *Elegy for a Prince)* at 3, which then dominates the work. From its first appearance, for example, it is used to build towards a climax at 6_5, where a dotted figure is introduced. This is, in fact, merely a rhythmic variation of the idea, and in this form appears almost constantly until

10_6, after which the calm of the opening begins to return (though we are briefly reminded of the idea in the flutes and clarinets at 12_1). The stillness apparent in *Helios* and *Requiescat* can also be seen, though in a slightly different way, in *Vistas*. Though the opening bars, for example, are not quite so rhythmically ambiguous as in the other works - since the high percussion quintuplet/ triplet cross-rhythms do not prevent a sense of pulse emerging as happened in the cells of repeated notes - there is, nevertheless, a feeling of repose since the only strong accent is provided by the Es heard in the glockenspiel, crotale and piano at the beginning of every two or, later, three bars. This feeling is only dispersed by the emergence of a more sharply rhythmic motive in the strings (ex. 4) first heard at bar 10 (second violins), which gradually appears closer together, increasing the feeling of accent. Apart from this opening, however, in other respects *Vistas* refuses to be 'pigeon-holed' in the way the other works in this chapter can. The rhythmic ambiguities of the opening, for example, do not reappear in any consistent manner throughout the rest of the work and the appoggiatura figure does not appear (at least not in a form that bears direct comparison to the other instances noted) at all. The work does, however, use an expanded tonal language (as compared to the *First Symphony)* which can be discussed alongside similar developments in *Helios* and *Requiescat.*

Ex. 4. Motive in strings in *Vistas*.



A marked feature of all of these works, even more than in the *Harp Concerto* and *Elegy for a Prince,* is the use much higher levels of dissonance than were apparent in the *First Symphony*. In *Helios,* for example, the string cells in the double basses, cellos, violas and second violins in the opening contain a total of eight notes which, when the section is repeated at 1, is expanded to include all twelve. Similarly, in *Vistas* the four notes - D, E, Eb and F - present (though not simultaneously) in the texture in the first bar are expanded to include eight - C, D#, E, F, G, G#, A# and B - by $A_{10\text{-}11}$ and all twelve by $A_{12\text{-}14}$. All of these works also end with extremely dissonant chords:

Vistas' contains ten notes, *Helios's* nine, *Requiescat's* 8. Two of them, however, are built upon triads; *Helios's* on F# and *Vistas'* on an open fifth on A (suggesting we should hear it as A Major, since the chord above contains a C#); though the number of other notes present makes such formations weaker than comparable ones in the *First Symphony* (see, for example, the chord that ends the first movement of the *First Symphony*, which was discussed in chapter one).

The octatonic is also used, though with widely varying degrees of prominence, in all of these works. In *Requiescat* it appears frequently: the last chord, for example, contains all eight notes of mode 2/ii and the opening, up to 1, is forged entirely from the same transposition of the scale. Similarly, it also appears consistently in the cells of repeated notes which appear throughout the work (though sometimes, as at 3_5 - where E, F, G and Ab from 2/i and D, C#, B and A# from 2/ii are used - these cells contain a mixture of two transpositions of the scale). In *Helios* the scale also appears, though not with the same degree of consistency. The faster idea at $2_{1\text{-}3}$, for example, is in mode 2/ii, though one out of the seven notes, the C-natural, does not belong to the scale. This fast idea, as said, appears throughout the work and subsequent appearances, where it is developed or gains extra counterpoints make further use of the scale. At $8_{3\text{-}6}$ and $8_{9\text{-}18}$, for example, the clarinet response to the melody (in the oboe at 8) is entirely in 2/ii, whilst the rising violin and viola scales at $15_{1\text{-}3}$, $16_{1\text{-}3}$ and $17_{1\text{-}3}$ are in modes 2/i, 2/iii and 2/ii respectively. In *Vistas* the scale appears least, though some of the writing - such as the oboe melody and its accompaniment (except the C# in the celesta) from E_2-E_6 which is in mode 2/ii - does make use of it.

This final point illustrates that not all the stylistic factor outlined in this chapter appear in every one of these works: the octatonic and the appoggiatura figure, for example, appear frequently in the *Harp Concerto, Elegy for a Prince* and *Requiescat* but not in the other two works; whilst high levels of a dissonance and a feeling of stillness are most marked in the three 'landscapes of the mind'. Despite this, however, **all** of these stylistic developments, together with the extra-musical factors outlined - the evocation of place, the concept of mourning and the pairing of a work that is more obviously

'absolute music', with one which has a text - appear, as will be seen, in the *Second Symphony*.

Chapter Three

Symphony Number Two

A landscape of the mind...

Mathias's *Symphony Number Two,* op. 90, was commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society and was first performed, on 14th May 1983, in the final concert of a five-day 'Contemporary Composer Seminar' devoted to his music. Just as the works examined in the previous chapter show, either in their titles or subtitles, an interest in the extra-musical the same can be seen here: the symphony as a whole is subtitled *Summer Music* whilst the first movement is labelled 'Aestiva Regio' ('Summer Region'), which was 'the generalised name for Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall in the 6th century AD'[1]; the second is prefaced with a quotation from 'The Tale of Taliesin' by a thirteenth century Welsh poet Gwion ap Gwreang[2], '"A'm gwlad gysefin yw bro ser-hefin...' ('My original country is the region of the summer stars...')"; whilst the third is headed with the final lines of Dylan Thomas's preface to his collected works, 'My ark sings in the sun/ At God speeded summer's end/ And the flood flowers now...'. Though these subtitles do not immediately suggest the idea of praise or mourning (though these issues, as will be seen, are relevant to the work), they are certainly analogous with Mathias's interest in things Celtic seen in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the first two movements' subtitles, 'Summer **region**' and '**region** of the summer stars' evoke a sense of place in the same way as in *Vistas, Helios* and the *Harp Concerto.* It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the musical devices noted in the previous chapter are most prominent in these movements.

In the first movement two of the features noted in the last chapter appear prominently: the use of less defined rhythms and slower tempi to create a feeling of stillness, and the expanded tonal palette. Whereas the *First Symphony's* opening movement contained the occasional use of slower tempi, for example, here a slower pulse (crotchet=69) is

---

[1] William Mathias, note in preface to the score of *Symphony Number Two.*

[2] See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess, A historical grammar of poetic myth,* p. 74.

given equal prominence with a quicker one (crotchet=120). Despite this, however, since the movement begins and ends, as well as has a long central section (12-15) using this slower pulse, it means the movement as a whole (in a similar manner to *Helios)* gives the impression of being predominantly slow, rather than quick. Coupled with this the rhythms in the slower tempo are frequently ambiguous. In the opening four bars, for example, it is possible to discern the first beat of each bar (where entries in the strings and woodwind occur) but, apart from this, all we hear is an indistinct rumble from the piano and harp, underpinned by the rolls in the timpani and bass drum and tam tam strokes. This is then followed by a theme in the upper strings at bars 5-19 which, as will be shown, is of huge significance both within the movement and in the work as a whole. For now, however, it can be pointed out that this too is rhythmically indistinct, since main beats are confused by the use of ties and changes of metre.

One other feature of the movement which was not so apparent, except in *Helios,* in the last chapter is the expanded use of low percussion. It was noted in the *First Symphony* that Mathias frequently used high percussion, either doubling or independently, to give extra brightness to the work. Here high percussion is still in evidence (though when it is used prominently, such as at 8, the greater use of dissonant harmony means that it is rarely as bright in effect as in the *First Symphony)* but there is also an emphasis, particularly in the slower tempo, on quiet threatening sounds in the timpani, bass drum and tam tam (see, for example, the opening up to 6, or the beginning of the slow middle section at 12), and this greatly adds to the dark, brooding quality of the music.

Also apparent is the expanded harmonic vocabulary that emerged in the previous chapter. For example, though tonality is still very much a feature in the continued presence of pedal points (prominent throughout the movement), there are much higher levels of dissonance than were apparent in the *First Symphony.* In some of these dissonant collections triads are still easily discernible, as, for example, in the brass at $4_{1\text{-}2}$ and $4_{3\text{-}4}$ where all the notes of B and Bb respectively are sounded (recalling Messiaen's dominant chord though in both cases modal inflections are present in the

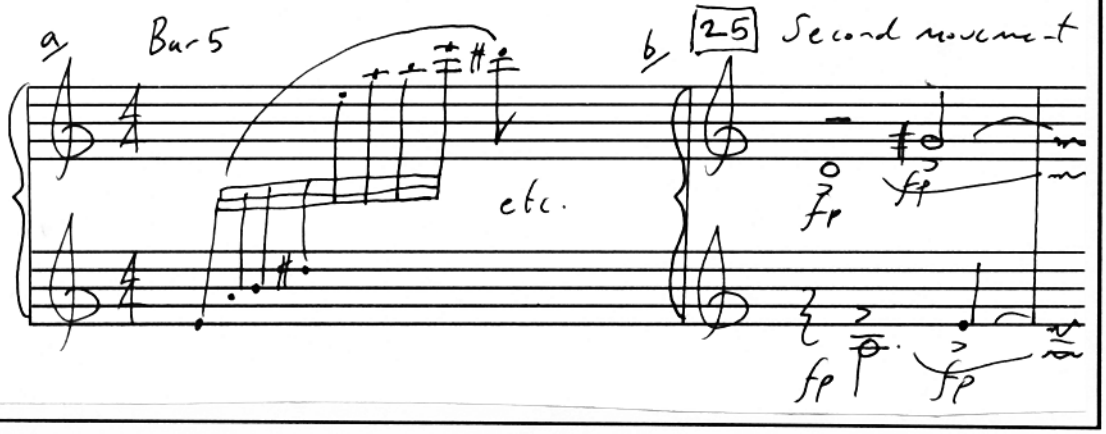
form of the lydian raised fourth). At other times, however, they are far more ambiguous. The string chord at 13_8, for example, sounds eight notes - E, F#, Ab, C, D, Eb and F - with no obvious triadic basis (the chord is best understood, in fact, as a whole tone collection on E with an Eb and F added) and all the chords which follow, up to 14_3, are equally ambiguous. Similarly, parallel scalic structures are also used to add to this harmonic ambiguity - the fanfare figures at 1, 3, 6 and 7, for example, outline whole-tone collections (though these alter in later repetitions of this section) whilst the rushing scalic woodwind and string writing that becomes a feature from 21_5 uses the octatonic - though they are not used as extensively (particularly in the case of the octatonic) as in some of the works in the last chapter.

The second movement also makes use of the newer devices. It is significant in itself, for example, that in writing a three movement symphony Mathias discards the scherzo altogether in favour of retaining this, the slow movement, meaning in the work as a whole there is a greater feeling (particularly as the first movement is dominated by a slow tempo) of stillness. This feeling is also emphasised in the opening of the slow movement (bars 1-26_{12}) by a certain amount of ambiguity as to the placement of strong beats: the opening two bars of woodwind writing, for example, are tied across the beat and the solo woodwind writing that follows contains frequent changes of time with some ambiguities of phrasing (the solo oboe melody is initially heard to begin as a tied over anacrusis to 25_3 whilst, at 25_5 it starts on the beat and at 26_2 (doubled by flute) begins on the second beat). At 27, however, the tempo begins to move on and the rhythms to become more four-square, giving the music a more expressive searching quality (since it appears to be directing itself towards something), an effect which is emphasised by the appearance of the appoggiatura figure in the horns (which continues to be developed up to the end of 29) and by changes of harmony. After the two bars of woodwind the opening of the movement (very probably because of the reference to 'summer stars'), for example, is written predominantly in the bright mode of A lydian. From 26_7, however, the flute and clarinet writing uses Messiaen's mode 2/iii and subsequent pages, though not always wholly derived from the octatonic frequently

contain inflections associated with it. The horn writing at 27, for example, is centred on Bb (with the upper part moving in parallel) and uses minor second and minor thirds prominently and both these intervals, together with other inflections from the scale, appear frequently in the string writing at $28_{1\text{-}4}$, $28_{7\text{-}10}$ and $29_{3\text{-}10}$, whilst the percussion interjections at $28_{5\text{-}6}$ and $29_{1\text{-}2}$ are wholly octatonic. The searching quality that these features invoke do indeed lead to something, a radiant climax using Messiaen's dominant chord at 30. This is a hugely significant point in the work. It, and subsequent events (including the darkening of the harmony at 31_3 and the whole of the last movement) can only be understood, however, after examining extra-musical elements in the symphony which run far deeper than those invoked by the programmatic subtitles.

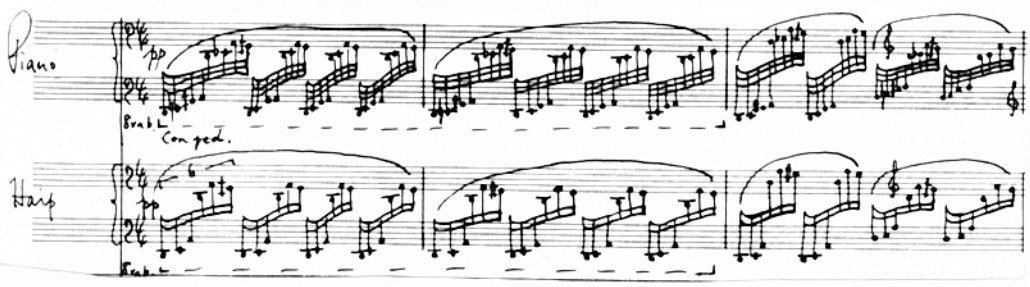
These elements, both thematic and motivic, derive from *Lux Aeterna,* Mathias's large-scale setting of the Requiem text (with interpolated Marian anthems and four of Roy Campbell's English translations of poems by St. John of the Cross) written a year before the symphony. Just as the pairing of the *Harp Concerto* with *Elegy for a Prince* increased the former's programmatic associations the same can be seen to occur here. The clue to the significance of *Lux Aeterna* in the context of this symphony lies not just in surface thematic quotations (more of which in a moment), but in a sketch of thematic material which exists for the symphony in the William Mathias archive at Aberystwyth. During the period beginning 10th September 1981 and ending 17 January 1982 Mathias was at work on the pencil sketch of *Lux Aeterna*. The controlling motive of this work

Ex. 5 Motive x in *Lux Aeterna*.



(motive x) is heard at the outset (ex. 5a) and is later stated, in a transposed version, very obviously at 25, at the beginning of the mezzo-soprano solo 'Oh flame of love' (ex. 5b). The date markings on the sketch show this latter section to have been written between 23rd November and 5th December 1981. Also in the William Mathias archive, amongst the *Lux Aeterna* material, is a sketch of thematic material for the *Second Symphony*. The sketch begins with the cell of notes heard at the 'Oh flame' section written out with one note, the A raised to a Bb. Below this are sketched three ideas: the low sounds of the opening four bars, the beginning of the upper string melody in the fifteen bars which follow and the fanfare ideas at 1. The sketch is dated 28th November 1981 suggesting that, at the very least, the idea was subconsciously inspired by the section 'Oh Flame' or, more likely, that whilst working on that section he suddenly saw the potential of the cell in a different context and quickly noted down some ideas (which were then kept on ice for almost a year - the *Second Symphony* sketch was begun on 20th October 1982).The derivation from this motive is not always obvious without an awareness of the significance of this sketch. The matter is clear cut, for example, in the opening bars because the idea is stated (at the same pitch and in its original 'Oh flame' form- i.e. without the A raised to a Bb) repeatedly in arpeggiated form in the piano and harp (ex. 6). The fanfares at 1, however, begin by stating the three notes of the original motive with the fourth, the A, extended, as indicated in the sketch, by a semitone to Bb to rob the cell of tonal illusions (by making it a whole-tone collection) with following

Ex. 6. Motive x in the harp and piano in the opening bars of the symphony[3].

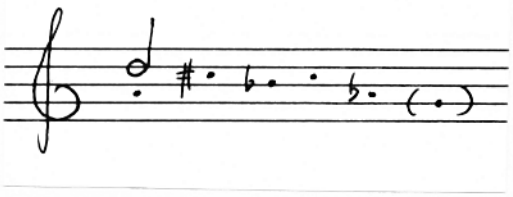


[3] © Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission.

entries on Gb and Ab to complete the process. The derivation of the writing in bars 5-19 is complicated by the fact that it also originates from another idea in *Lux Aeterna,* and this needs to be examined before considering how it is linked to motive x.

The second idea is the 'dies irae' theme that appears at 40 in *Lux Aeterna.* This section is quoted at the same pitch and with the same force in the symphony, at 23 in the first movement. It is clear, however, that much of the rest of the material derives from this idea. It first appears at bars 5-19 in the first movement, for example, in a softened form and in various other guises throughout the work (see the opening of the second movement in woodwind and also in the string writing from 25 and at 32^{7}, whilst it also appears frequently in the last movement, as will be discussed more fully later). Its initial shape (bars 5-19, first movement) can be summarised (ex. 7) as a movement from the D reaching downwards to the G (perfect fifth) but only getting as far as the Ab (diminished fifth). This shape, like Mathias's 'basic chord' of the first symphony governs the underlying structure of the work. This point is illustrated in the appendix, which is a summary of the first two movements in terms of their pedal points. The beamed collections illustrate how the direction of the movements is derived from the shape of the 'dies irae' motive. Hence the opening of the work (1-8) reaches down towards the G, but only gets as far as the A before, at 9, reverting back to D, whilst the same reaching downwards, this time over the full diminished fifth occurs from 11_{11}-12 and at 13_{8} (where the process is also mirrored in inversion). At other times, such as at 15-19, 21-24 and in the second movement at 27 and 29_{3} we see just the bare diminished fifth outline whilst at others, at 29_{7} and 31_{3} we see the reaching down, though over a different interval. The idea of reaching towards G is also reflected in the overall structure: the first movement begins on D and at the end reaches Bb, preparing the second movement on A, which at 32_{11}

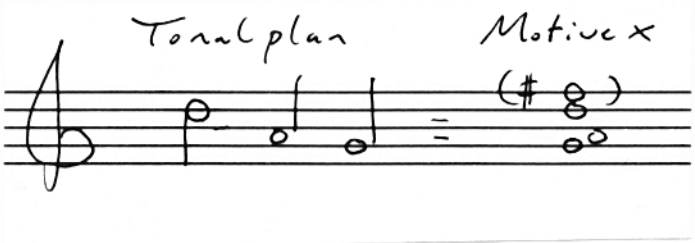
Ex 7. Shape of 'dies irae' idea.



reaches Ab, finally leading to G, and the completion of the perfect fifth, at the beginning of the third movement.

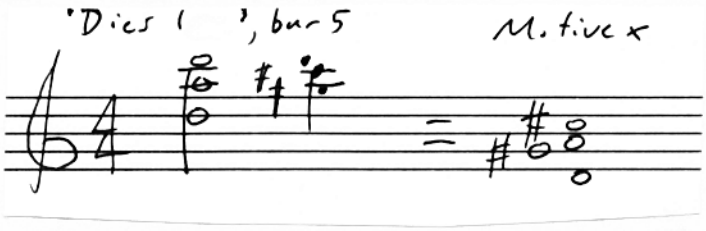
The 'dies irae' theme may be linked to the motive x in two ways. The underlying tonal plan of the symphony - first movement on D, second on A, third on G - which derives from the 'dies irae' theme is also a transposed version of this cell missing one note (ex. 8).

Ex. 8. Link between the symphony's tonal plan and motive x.



There is also, however, a more direct link: if the opening collection of notes from the 'dies irae' idea are taken they are identical to those of the other motive if its fourth is raised (ex).

Ex. 9. Direct link between 'dies irae' theme and motive x.



This should not present us with any problems since Mathias actually uses the cell in this form (with a second added for extra richness) in an arpeggiated manner which clearly derives from the opening of *Lux Aeterna,* both in *Lux Aeterna* itself, at 86, and in the second movement of the symphony at 25 (where, furthermore, it is actually accompanying the A lydian version of the 'dies irae' motive).

As shown, the extra-musical ideas conveyed by the movements' subtitles help to explain the style of the work. They do not, however, give the work any specific programme. However, the work **can** be viewed as exploring the concepts of praise and mourning. This is a valid exercise since, not only have the themes been shown to be

central to Mathias's artistic philosophy, but they are particularly associated in his mind with things Celtic, which the subtitles show to be a strong influence here. Furthermore, the fact that the tonal plan and surface thematic material (especially since it is from the section 'Dies illa, dies irae') derive from a Requiem setting strongly suggest that the idea of mourning at least is important within the symphony.

In essence the tonal plan of the symphony points to a struggle for resolution which is finally achieved, by the arrival of G, in the last movement. This suggests the archetypal 'darkness to light' musical plan but in Mathias's case may be viewed as a move from mourning towards praise. In the first movement this sense of mourning is conveyed by the stylistic factors noted - the brooding stillness, use of symmetrical scales and dissonance - and also by the omnipresence of the 'dies irae' idea, first in a softened, but portentous version and then in its brutal original form (as heard in *Lux Aeterna)* at 23. The second movement begins to see a lifting of this atmosphere where, at 25, the 'dies irae' idea, which accompanies the woodwind solos, uses, as said, the bright mode of A lydian. At 27, however, the searching quality begins again and this time reaches the 'tonic' at 30. This is, in essence, therefore, a preview of the resolution to G in the final movement. That this resolution might not be as secure as the one here, however, is hinted at at 31_3, where the tonal clouds darken with a bitonal e^b/f chord, which gradually expands outwards, leading finally to the portentous original version of the 'dies irae' idea at 32_7.

This paves the way for the last movement. After a short introduction in the percussion the main theme, centred firmly on G, bursts forward in the horns. Is this, therefore, the long awaited resolution? Not quite: almost immediately thing do not seem quite right, a feeling that gathers as the movement progresses. The first reason for this is in the continued presence of the 'dies irae' idea, which constantly reminds us of the idea of mourning present in the first and, to a lesser extent, second movements. The answer to the opening horn theme in the trumpets at 34_5 (in that it outlines the same movement from a D towards a D and G), for example, is derived from the idea, and it is treated extensively from $46\text{-}49_{19}$. Similarly, at 54 and 55 it combines, in the clarinets,

trombones, second violins and violas with the main theme before returning for one last time in a more triumphant form in the bassoons, trumpets and horns at 58.

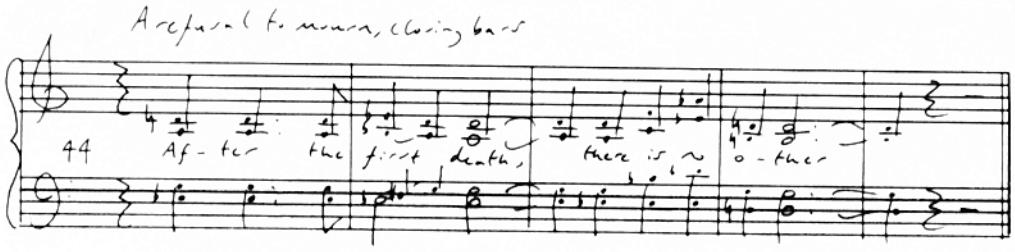
Coupled with this the movement's harmony and melody, rather than using the more relaxed harmonic idiom we have come to associate with praise (as seen in the *First Symphony* or in the outer movements of the *Harp Concerto),* makes more use of the newer harmonic devices seen in the second chapter. The melodic writing in the whole of the opening (up to 41_{20}), for example, constantly outlines harmonically unstable diminished sevenths and the rushing strings and woodwind, which become a feature from 35, are written consistently in the octatonic. At 42 the mood changes abruptly with unambiguous C harmony. This, however, sounds forced in the context of what precedes it, a fact that is more than confirmed at 45 where it is unceremoniously pushed aside by tritonal horn and trombone glissandi (another quote, in fact, from *Lux Aeterna,* this time from the 'Libera me', see bar 8 and 34_{11} of the third movement). After the long development of the 'dies irae' idea at $46\text{-}49_{19}$ there then follows a quote from the dark, dissonant central part of the first movement ($13_{8}\text{-}14_{20}$) and this leads to the recapitulation at 52 with the return of diminished seventh and octatonic melodic and harmonic writing, which continues to the end of the movement, only giving way, at 60_{4}, to an open fifth that sounds as hollowly triumphant as everything that precedes it.

If this movement seems to forego the expected move towards praise how, therefore, should we explain it? The clue is provided by the quote from Dylan Thomas with which it is prefaced. On an entirely superficial level the movement can be said to be mirroring the wild energy of the poem from which it derives[4] which, in fact, also seems forced, partly because it is so insistent and also because of is rather convoluted palindromic rhyme scheme. More importantly, however, the reference to Dylan Thomas provides a clue to the significance of the transformation of the 'dies irae' idea at 46 which, as noted by Geraint Lewis, becomes a 'recollection of a line from Mathias's 1968 setting of Dylan Thomas's *A refusal to mourn the death by fire of a child in London'* (ex. 10).

---

[4] See Dylan Thomas, preface to the *Collected Works.* Also printed in the preface to the *Miscellany* of his works.

Ex. 10. The quoted section from *A refusal to mourn.*



A conscious quote? Whether it is or not need worry us here, however; what is important is that this provides us with a way of interpreting the symphony as a whole in the context of praise and mourning seen elsewhere in this paper. Whereas the *First Symphony* was concerned largely with praise as was one intervening work, *Laudi*, others saw praise juxtaposed with morning (*Harp Concerto)* or dwelt specifically with mourning (*Elegy for a Prince, Requiescat).* This work adds a new interpretation: the first movement clearly represents morning, whilst in the second we begin to sense that this mourning might be overcome. In the last movement, however, its harmonic ambiguity and the continued threatening presence of the 'dies irae' idea mean that the attempt to resolve into praise sounds utterly hollow. The movement may, therefore, be interpreted as a 'refusal to mourn' which is ultimately unsuccessful.

Conclusion

It should now be apparent that Mathias's sound did substantially change in the years between the first two symphonies, and that this change is closely bound up with his interest in the extra-musical. The idiom of the *First Symphony* is essentially tonal (though this is enriched by the use of modality, fourths and the occasional use of the octatonic), highly rhythmic, and brightly orchestrated and all these features give the work an outgoing quality that accords strongly with Mathias's view that music should be able to communicate praise. The intervening years, however, saw Mathias's interest in the extra-musical widen to incorporate a greater interest in the concept of mourning (*Elegy for a Prince, Harp Concerto, Requiescat),* especially as associated with things Celtic (*Harp Concerto* and *Requiescat),* and also in the evocation of place (*Vistas, Requiescat and Helios).* At the same time newer aspects of style were emerging and, though these devices appear in works following the symphony with no specific extra-musical impetus (such as the *Third Piano Concerto),* it is true to say that works with such connotations seem to trigger the use of these devices with some regularity. The newer style associated with these extra-musical elements is one in which there is a tendency for rhythmic profiles to become less defined, frequently leading to a sort of mysterious stillness or for an expressive searching figure, involving the use of appoggiaturas, to become prominent; and all this takes place within a far darker harmonic idiom, now embracing the octatonic far more fully with higher levels of dissonance and harmonic ambiguity.

All these factors are seen in the *Second Symphony*. The first two movements' subtitles evoke a sense of place, particularly relating to the Celtic past, and all these features of style are prominent. The last movement, on the other hand, can only be fully understood in the light of the whole work's links with *Lux Aeterna,* both in terms of surface quotation and the way it derives its tonal plan from the vocal piece. An examination of these factors, as has been shown, means it is possible to view the symphony as a large-scale progression from mourning towards

praise, though the praise in the last movement is, ultimately, forced because of the continued presence of the 'dies irae' idea from *Lux Aeterna*, and because of stylistic features, particularly the use of the octatonic.

These developments are important in assessing the strengths of Mathias's music for two reasons. First, the emergence of the newer stylistic features means that the older ones are given less prominence, and this has the effect - particularly in the reduced reliance on fourths as a means of construction - of creating a better integrated and therefore more distinct sound. In this sense, therefore, the observations of the critics in the introduction are correct: by this stage Mathias undoubtedly has a more individual style, a point best summed up by Gareth H. Lewis, who notes that 'Unlike the first symphony...its successor revolves around a deep, static pool of sound which envelops the listener, drawing him slowly into its depths. The effect is hypnotic and quite unlike anything else in modern British music'[1]. Secondly, the style of the *First Symphony* - with its bustling rhythms, bright orchestration and relaxed harmonic style - does not leave it unopen to the criticism that it is deficient in intellectual weight. Stephen Walsh wrote in the *Observer,* for example: 'What it lacks (and this ought to be important in a first symphony) is significance of thought. Mathias has written deftly and fluently in this manner in other, smaller compositions...succeeding well enough where entertainment was his primary aim. In a 30-minute symphony, however, it won't quite do'[2]. This is not a criticism, however, that one could easily apply to the *Second Symphony*, where the newer features of style create a far darker and more challenging sound and the issues discussed, particularly the idea of praise seen in the context of mourning, more profound.

A final point raised in the introduction concerns whether these works deserve to survive in the repertoire. Before making a judgement, however, it should be pointed out that any conclusions are limited in value by the scope of this paper: the concentration on sound means

---

[1] Gareth H Lewis, review of the CD Nimbus CD recording of the two symphonies in *Welsh Music,* vol. 9, no. 3.

[2] Stephen Walsh, *Observer,* Jan. 19th, 1969.

that an important criticism of both these works, and one that is yet to be examined by any writer, has not been addressed. When reviewing the CD recording of the work, for example, Arnold Whittall noted of the *First Symphony* that 'comparison with, say Tippett's Second underlines Mathias's tendency to relax into rather easy-going rhapsodising'[3]. An examination of the 'development' section of the first movement of the *First Symphony* (8-10[17]), where Mathias simply repeats two short sections three times, illustrates the type of structural weaknesses that Whittall has in mind, and this is an area that needs further study if a full assessment is to be made. Concentrating, for now, on the argument presented here, however, it may seem that it is being suggested that the *First Symphony* is perhaps too light-weight and lacking in individuality to survive in contrast to the *Second,* where the style is more personal and the issues discussed more profound. It is certainly true that, of the two, the *Second* deserves to survive most. However, it has already been shown that the lack of originality that some have seen in the *First* is, at least in some respects, exaggerated. Besides, indebtedness of one type or another is apparent in all composers' works, as Mathias once commented: 'Mozart subliminally quoted Haydn, Beethoven subliminally quoted both of them, and Handel quoted almost everybody. Composers are not islands, nor should they be'. And what of the criticism that the work is too lightweight? Surely this should not worry us: why should not a place be reserved in our repertoires for works that are straightforwardly enjoyable to listen to?

Finally then, how these works fared, both on record and in performance, and what are the prospects for their survival? As far as the *First Symphony* is concerned its initial performances have not been followed by others. The *Second,* however, has met with more success: following its world premiere by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic in 1983 it was also premiered in America, by the Santa Fe Symphony Orchestra, in November 1990[4] and was played by the

---

[3] Arnold Whittall, *Gramophone,* December 1990. p. 1211.

[4] It met, furthermore, with a rapturous reception; David Noble wrote in *Lifestyles* on November 22nd, 1990: 'This work is a British classic that bears comparison to symphonies by Vaughan Williams and

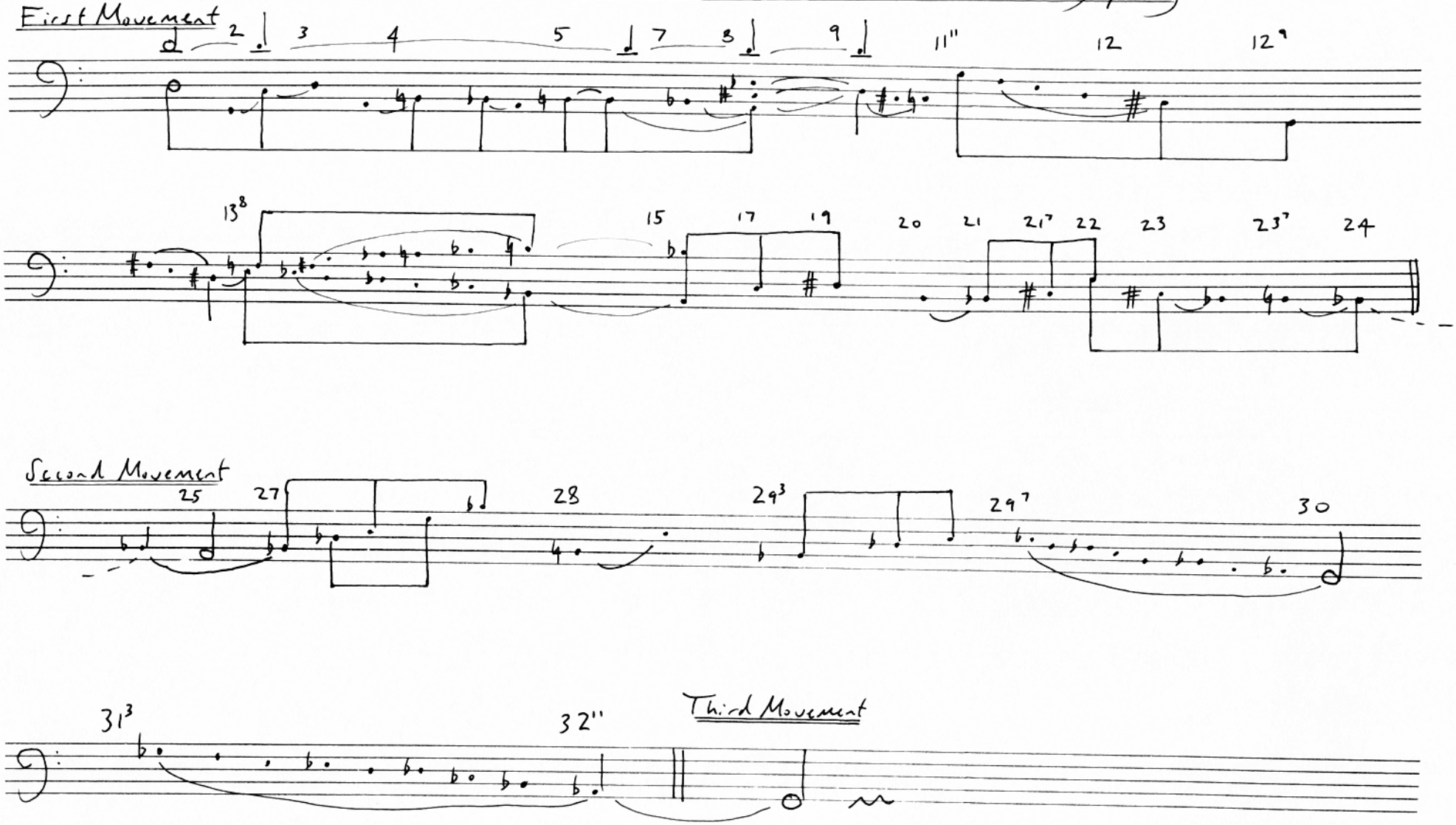
BBC National Orchestra of Wales in February 1995. Both these works, furthermore, have been recorded, the first on LP, and both later on CD. Despite this, however, BBCNOW has no plans to perform either symphony in the future[5]. If Wales's own national orchestra is not playing these works it seems, therefore, unlikely that they will ever gain wider acceptance. Perhaps the pieces have served their initial purpose and will now be forgotten; as Mathias once said: 'Compose for the people of today, and not for an uncertain future'[6]. It would be a shame, however, if this was to be the case. Time will tell.

Walton', and even led the Santa Fe orchestra to commission a fourth symphony which, unfortunately, remained a mere one page sketch on Mathias's death.

[5] Source: Huw Tregelles Williams, director of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

[6] William Mathias, 'Music Now - A view from the bridge' (The 1979 Menai Festival Lecture), reproduced in *Welsh Music,* vol 6. no. 3.

Appendix: The 'Dies I' Motive in the 'Second Symphony'



Sources

Scores

All Mathias scores referred to in the text are published by Oxford University Press, with the exception of *A refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London,* which is published by Novello.

Recordings

CD recording of the two symphonies are available on Nimbus NI 5260, performed by the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra conducted by William Mathias.

Books

1. Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias.*

2. William Mathias, 'And all is always now', a contribution to *Michael Tippett O.M. A Celebration* ed. Geraint Lewis.

3. Stewart R. Craggs *William Mathias. A Bio-bibliography.*

4. Theodor W. Adorno *Philosophy of Modern Music.*

5. Norris J. Lacy (ed),*The Arthurian Encyclopaedia.*

6. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess, A historical grammar of poetic myth.*

7. Dylan Thomas, *Miscellany.*

Articles in journals

1. 'William Mathias at 50. The composer speaks to Malcolm Boyd' *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 626ff.

2. Geraint Lewis, 'Towards the Second Symphony. A study in development' *Musical Times,* Nov. 1984, p. 629ff.

3. William Mathias, 'Music now- A view from the bridge' (The 1979 Menai Festival Lecture) reproduced in *Welsh Music* vol 6. No. 3.

4. Stephen Walsh, 'The Music of William Mathias', *Musical Times* Jan. 1969 p. 27ff.

Reviews in journals/ newspapers

Symphony Number One:

1. Desmond Shawe-Taylor, 'Modern Times', *Sunday Times,* Jan. 19th 1969.

2. Anon, review in *Musical Opinion,* Feb. 1969.

3. Robert Henderson 'Mathias's Symphony', *Musical Times,* Jan. 1969.

4. Geoffrey Crankshaw, 'Mathias's First', *Music and Musicians,* Mar. 1969.

5. Alun Davies, 'Music: Morris and Mathias', *London Welshman,* Feb. 1969.

6. Stephen Walsh, 'Symphonic first shot', *Observer,* Jan. 19th 1969.

7. Stanley Sadie, 'Conservative idiom of Mathias symphony', *Times,* Jan. 15th, 1969.

8. Colin Mason, 'High-powered playing of Rachmaninov', *Daily Telegraph,* Jan 15th, 1969.

9. Hugo Cole, 'Mathias's First', *Guardian,* Jan 15th, 1969.

Symphony Number Two:

1. Anon, review in *Musical Times,* Aug. 1983.

2. Stephen Pettitt, 'Concerts', *Times,* May 16th 1983.

3. Rex Bowden 'New work gets a super reception', *Liverpool Daily Post,* May 16th, 1983.

4. Neil Tierney, 'William Mathias Second Symphony', *Daily Telegraph,* May 16th 1983.

5. Gareth H. Lewis, 'On the Record' (review of CD), *Western Mail,* Oct. 19th 1990.

6. Gareth H. Lewis, record review in *Welsh Music,* vol. 9, no. 3.

7. Arnold Whittall, review in *Gramophone,* Dec. 1990, p.1211.

8. Janet Beat, review in *Brio,* vol. 18, no. 2.

9.David Noble, 'Mathias' symphony given American premiere in SF [Santa Fe]', *Lifestyles,* Nov. 22, 1990.

Pencil sketches in the William Mathias archive in Aberystwyth

1. *Symphony Number One*

2. *Symphony Number Two*

3. *Lux Aeterna*, with thematic sketch for *Symphony Number Two.*

4. Thematic sketch for *Symphony Number Four.*

Other

1. William Mathias, programme note to the world premiere performance of *Symphony Number 2*.

2. *Statements,* a BBC Wales documentary on the music of William Mathias, 1992.