

Symphony in E

I've always wanted to write a symphony. As a form, it continues to offer a remarkable way of exploring the reconciliation of opposites – the integration within one span of the forceful and the gentle, the energetic and the contemplative. To me, this is one of the most exciting things that music can do. In our contemporary world, I sometimes feel it should be allowed to do this more.

If you wanted to be unkind, you could say that much 'contemporary classical' music is mood music: it establishes a mood, and then sustains it, often at some length, until it stops at a point that might as well be any other point. Such music can be wonderful: the sound colours can be scintillating, the harmonies exhilarating. However, the philistine in me feels – sometimes – that three minutes into a new composition, everything starts to sound the same as what has just been heard, and the sense of a journey disappears. In my own compositions, for better or worse, I like to pursue the sense of a journey, and to create what I hope are interesting, engaging juxtapositions of different ideas. For me, this means using tonality – the purposeful use of a key centre – as a resource; and that is why this symphony is described as 'in E'.

Calling it 'Symphony in E' runs the risk of sounding polemical – a bid to be regarded as determinedly, even proudly conservative (which I am not). But it's simply a statement of fact: in order to do the things I want to do, I need to make use of tonality. This is why I find it natural enough to think in terms of writing a symphony: the long tradition of symphonic writing offers superb, inspiring examples of what can be done when large-scale tonal planning is combined with a form that embraces vigorous contrast of the sort I've been describing. In this particular case – maybe because this is my first symphony – I even found myself wanting to use the traditional four-movement pattern. Not because I think this is how symphonies ought to be written: it just happened to suit the material I found myself inventing.

However, the four movements are not quite so traditional in structure as they might seem, and the tonality of the piece is often ambiguous. Thus the first movement adopts a mainly steady tempo, but is interrupted twice by much faster, scherzo-like music in a rapid triple time. In other respects it follows a more-or-less 'standard' pattern, but the key of E doesn't fully emerge until some way in, when it arrives very softly, and almost by accident.

The second movement is clearly a scherzo, but in a rapid duple time instead of the usual triple (a model for this was the wonderful scherzo in Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' Symphony). At times, the violins are divided into three sections instead of the usual two. This movement is in a kind of F major, which may seem a bit surprising. However, its most intense and exuberant passage is a sudden blaze of E major – the single most confident expression of that key in the whole symphony.

The third movement, like the first, is a bit of a mixture, with passages of quite fast music alternating with lyrical, contemplative music which suggests that this is 'really' a slow movement. You decide!

The third movement runs without a break into the fourth, which began life as the final movement of my wind sextet, *Natural Light*. This is a passacaglia – essentially a set of variations on a bass line, which is what you hear first, presented in unison by the orchestra's deepest instruments. Some of these variations take the bass line into the treble and treat it as a tune (which it is). Occasionally, the bass line gets stuck on one note, sustaining it like a drone, while other instruments develop a lyrical melody above it.

For the symphony, I added two or three further variations and altered the ending, which is a bit more rhetorical: it had to be, I felt, to live up to the 'public speaking' aspect of symphonic writing. However, there are one or two passages that feature the wind instruments very much as in the original sextet, and the whole of the last movement is characterized by an approach to the orchestra which treats it as a group of individuals. That, of course, is precisely what an orchestra is – although a symphony is also an opportunity to explore its gift for the big collective statement.

The symphony, finished in April this year, was begun in autumn 2008. In the past, I had made a number of false starts at writing a symphony, but the idea that I found myself working on in 2008 seemed to have the right potential. It was at this point that I spoke to Steve Dummer to ask whether he thought a new symphony might be of interest to the Horsham Symphony Orchestra. I am very grateful for his support, and for the interest and commitment of the Orchestra, in making this a reality through commissioning the work with additional support from the PRS Foundation for Music and the Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust. I am also very grateful for the support of the Sussex University Orchestra and Ian McCrae in programming this second performance.

Julian Broughton, Nov. 2010.