

Benjamin Frankel's *May Day Overture - Worker's March or Rustic Ramble*

by John France

Two hermeneutical tools are required to appreciate Benjamin Frankel's *May Day Overture*. First, his left-ward political leanings at this time and, secondly, the fact that when this work was composed, Frankel had been writing film and radio music for some years. This was an important part of his career which would continue until his death. Dimitri Kennaway (2006) notes that Frankel was attracted to the 'ideals of Communism, along with many contemporary colleagues, seeing it as the antidote to the advancing Nazis.' Frankel finally joined the Party in 1941. Fellow musicians who also became members included Alan Bush, Elisabeth Lutyens and Bernard Stevens.



The *May Day Overture* was completed in 1948, a couple of years before its premiere in 1950. Other works written by Frankel around this time included the String Quartet No.4, op.21, the *Early Morning Music* for oboe, clarinet and bassoon and the Three Poems for cello and piano. His masterpiece, the Violin Concerto 'In memory of the Six Million', op. 24 would be completed in 1951. There were several film scores dating from this time, including *London Belongs to Me* (1948), *Trottie True* (1949), and *So Long at the Fair* (1950).

The imperative of this Overture needs to be resolved. It was well put by I.K. in his review of the then newly published miniature score by Augener. (*Music and Letters*, October 1950, p.374). He wonders if *May Day* is for the 'workers' or 'mere lasses and lads.' He thinks that this is 'not clear from this robust and high-spirited hotch-potch, in which the instruments of the orchestra are flung about with joyous abandon.' Certainly, the May-Day holiday is of ancient origin. Historically, it was observed on the first day of that month and was traditionally celebrated with 'merrymaking and festivities.' On the other hand, in 1899, 1st May was set aside to commemorate the Labour Movement in several countries around the world, including for some, the United Kingdom. Workers' Day or International Workers' Day celebrates the 'historic struggles and gains made by workers and the labour movement.' As a Communist, Frankel would have found this grist to his mill. Listening to this Overture does not remind me of May Queens and Kings, floral garlands, and dancing round the maypole in the village green; despite some humour, the tone of this music is serious and not rustic. I guess that the 'call' for the workers prevails.

The formal construction of the Overture has been described (Kennaway 2006) as being 'kaleidoscopic'. Another adjective that suggests itself is 'episodic.' This ties in with the works subtitle 'Panorama' which indicates a sweeping filmic overview of the topic. There are no obvious first and second subjects, development, and recapitulation. Buxton Orr (1995) has noted 'Frankel's extraordinary ability to conjure up a wide variety of moods and descriptions in a few well-chosen bars.' This 'panorama' presents 'scenes bucolic, grotesque, urban and rural dances, the sentimental, the ironic, the sincere and deeply felt, all painted with ever changing orchestral colour.' It is a work that will remind the listener of Frankel's great achievements as a film score composer.

The *Overture* typically presents a bustling mood often enhanced by fanfares for brass and percussion and even the strings. Occasionally there are moments of tranquillity and reflection but the general mood seems to be of unresolved conflict. That said, the conclusion of the piece does provide a mood of 'ultimate calm and reflection' before concluding with a loud and positive up-swing in the orchestra. The aesthetic of this work tends towards the 'lighter' end of the musical spectrum, without being 'popular.' Kennaway (2006) has described it as 'occasional'. The same author reminds the reader that

part of this work originally featured in Frankel's score for the naval wartime documentary *The Broad Fourteens*.

May Day was given its world premiere by the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra on 17 January 1950. The orchestra was conducted by Hugo Rignold. Other music that evening included Richard Wagner's *Forest Murmurs*, Robert Schumann's Cello Concerto in A minor, Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and Maurice Ravel's orchestration of Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The cellist was Enrico Mainardi.

The *Liverpool Post* (18 January 1950, p.3) dryly reported that Frankel's work 'is apparently a comment on modern life in a modern idiom and has some striking orchestration, in which the brass especially distinguished itself.' The composer was in attendance. An interesting critique of this concert appeared in *Music Survey* (Spring 1950, p.276) H.B. Raynor noted that the Overture 'gave an impression of lively orchestration and vigorous cinematic romanticism...'

A second key performance of the *Overture: May Day* was heard during the 1950 Promenade Concert Season at the Royal Albert Hall on 25 August 1950. The London Philharmonic Orchestra under Basil Cameron gave an 'irresistible' account of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and an 'equally distinguished' presentation of his Piano Concerto No.4 with Moura Lympany as soloist. Colin Mason (*Manchester Guardian*, 26 August 1950, p.3) noted that this Overture, at least to London audiences, reveals Frankel's leanings toward the film music, rather than his recent string quartets. He concluded that 'it is a fine work, entirely un-symphonic in character, but convincingly justifying its sub-title 'panorama.'" Other music heard that evening included Beethoven's *Fidelio* Overture, John Ireland's Concertino pastorale and J.S. Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 537, op 86 in the Elgar orchestration.

A long review of this Prom Premiere was given in *The Stage* (31 August 1950, p.12). The author develops the notion of the worker/reveller dichotomy and considers that 'Panorama' may give a 'clearer indication of the scope of the work.' The title 'seems rather arbitrarily chosen as a fulcrum for a roving, occasionally satirical, comment on life.' The critic felt that the work was 'characterised by finished craftsmanship' and that was a 'sincere expression of contemporary thought.' Finally, Basil Cameron's conducting of the work was 'unobtrusive, self-assured and comprehensive...'

Harold Truscott, recalling the Proms performance felt that the Overture 'was attractive, but [displayed] no integration.' He concludes by suggesting that 'form is a much-abused word, but it has a meaning, which is the coherence that gives speech a connected significance. There is none here: a pity for the work is worth it.' (*Music Survey*, December 1950, p.136)

An important review of the Overture's score was given in *Music Survey* (March 1951, p184-5). Ralph W. Wood considered that 'the obvious fault to find with 'May Day' is that it is 'bitty' (15 changes of tempo in some 240 bars), that in fact it bears all too much resemblance to [Donald] Tovey's *bête noire*, a series of introductions to introductions.' Tovey was a well-known musicologist, musical analyst, and composer. On the other hand, Frankel's response to this criticism would be that the work is subtitled 'panorama' and that 'it is futile' to 'base a judgement on standards irrelevant to his intentions.' Wood, like many other critics, picks up on the 'brilliance of the orchestration.' Elaborating on this, he suggests that this 'brilliance is of a rather special kind, extraordinarily economical, extraordinarily sure and clear and quite Berliozian in its persistent thrusting towards each instrument's technical idiosyncrasies and favourite sonorities.'

It was to be two years later, in 1952, that Benjamin Frankel resigned from the Communist Party of Great Britain. Frankel became concerned about the Party's 'illiberal attitude towards culture, and music in particular'. Like several other party members, he was outraged by the 'show trials' and executions of alleged spies in Prague.

In the mid-1990s, CPO Records bravely began to issue a series of CDs devoted to Benjamin Frankel's music. It was a joint project with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. This included all the Symphonies, the Violin Concerto, the String Quartets and a good selection of other orchestral pieces and chamber works. Sadly, with one or two exceptions the project stopped there. Apart from a few film scores and the inevitable *Carriage and Pair*, and an early recording of the String Quartet No.5, Frankel has been left high and dry by the recording industry. One important exception was the remarkable Hyperion disc (CDH55105) featuring the Clarinet Quintet. Other composers on this CD included Arnold Cooke, Elizabeth Maconchy, Herbert Howells, and Josef Holbrooke.



The first CD in the cycle of symphonies, features the Symphony No.1, op.33 and Symphony No.5, op.46. As a 'filler', *May Day*, op.22 is the final track (see below for details). Three reviews of this performance of the *Overture* will be of interest. Hubert Culot ([MusicWeb International](#), September 2002) wrote that 'The earliest work on the first CD is the *Overture May Day* op.22 written in 1948 and performed at the Proms in 1950. It is comparatively light - full of vitality and colour. It would have become a popular item; had it been performed more regularly.' In another review ([MusicWeb International](#), August 2002) of this work, Rob Barnett, thought that 'the *Mayday Overture* is a work of cleanly blown crystal fanfares, militaristic, bustling, not carefree, even the final triumph glares and whinnies.' Looking at the overall production of the CD, *The Gramophone* (July 1994, p.44) reviewer MEO reported that 'The performances are first-class and so are the recordings.'

Bibliography:

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 Kennaway, Dimitri, Biography of Benjamin Frankel, www.benjaminfrankel.org (*Wayback Machine*)
 Orr, Buxton. *Liner Note* CPO 999 240-2, 1995
 Pages of *The Times*, *Music Survey*, *Liverpool Post*, *The Stage*, etc.

Discography:

Frankel, Benjamin, *Overture: May Day*, op.22, Symphony No.1, op.33; Symphony No.5, op.46 Queensland Symphony Orchestra/Werner Andreas Albert CPO 999 240-2, (1995). Included in the boxed set of the Complete Symphonies CPO 999 661-2 (2002) and on the compilation CD Discover New Worlds with Werner Andreas Albert CPO 999310 (1995).

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