

Kenneth Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra, op. 39

by John France

Introduction

Kenneth Leighton (1929-88) was one of the most important voices in British music during the latter half of the twentieth-century. The latest edition of the British Music Society's *British Composer Profiles* (BMS, 2012) has pithily summed up his musical achievement: 'it bears a highly distinctive hallmark...often deeply religious, always sincere...never sombre, it can exhibit a wildness of spirit or express exuberance and merriment without ever losing dignity, it can be passionate, austere, granitic or gentle, but displays an unerringly faultless craftsmanship...'. Leighton's music is approachable whilst often being challenging: there is nearly always an underlying romanticism and deeply felt lyricism.

Composition and Analysis

Beginning with the *Festival Overture* in 1946, Kenneth Leighton produced a succession of orchestral works. The earliest 'masterpiece' is the *Symphony for Strings*, op.3 composed in 1949. This can take its place beside the great string compositions of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Tippett and Berkeley. Leighton's hauntingly beautiful 'Veris Gratia': suite for oboe, cello and strings, op.9 was composed in 1950: it remains a personal favourite of mine. Succeeding years witnessed several orchestral works including symphonies, concertos, suites and overtures.

The Concerto for String Orchestra, op. 39, originally entitled Concerto for Large String Orchestra, was composed between 1960 and 1961: it received its first performance the following year. Other works produced at this time included the Concerto No.2 for piano and orchestra, op.37 (1958-60), and the Festive Overture (1962). There were also some anthems, the cantata *Crucifixus pro nobis*, op.38 (1960-62) and the *Missa Sancti Thomae*, op. 40 (1962).

Most commentators point up the difference between the early *Symphony for Strings* and the present work as being one of maturity and increased 'grittiness.' This is (largely) laid at the door of Kenneth Leighton's period of study with the Italian composer, conductor and academic Goffredo Petrassi (1904-2003). Petrassi introduced Leighton to several compositional and stylistic tools, including neo-classicism, Bergian serialism and some post-Webern 'avant-garde' techniques.

The structure of the Concerto for String Orchestra is satisfying. The three movements have considerable rhythmic diversity and changes of tempi. The first movement, 'Lento sostenuto' is followed by a rapid scherzo – 'Molto ritmico'. The finale, 'Adagio maestoso - allegro precipitoso - più largo e molto sostenuto', is a microcosm of plan of the entire concerto - slow outer sections, with a faster middle.

Gerald Larner (sleeve notes, Pye TPLS 13005) has noted the strong thematic unity across the entire piece. He cites the example of the 'germ of the entirely pizzicato second movement...is plainly to be heard on the plucked lower strings just after the centrally placed climax of the pyramid-shaped first movement.' The same motive 'prominently adds rhythmic impetus to the gradually accelerating middle section of the last movement...'. The conclusion of the work has a thematic reference to the opening movement.

The Concerto is characterised by an increase in dissonance over the earlier *Symphony for Strings*, but not overbearingly so, considerable use of contrapuntal techniques and a wide-ranging use of chromaticism and thematic manipulation. For example, the opening movement deploys three contrasting themes which are presented contrapuntally, and use all twelve tones of the chromatic scale.

Performance and Score Reviews

Kenneth Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra op.39 was first performed at the Wigmore Hall, London on 19 June 1962. Harvey Phillips conducted the Harvey Phillips String Orchestra. The first section of the concert also included a Concerto for Strings by John Stanley, edited by Gerald Finzi. This was followed by Sir Edward Elgar's 'delightful' Serenade for Strings in E minor, op.20 (1892). After the interval, Jennifer Ward-Clarke (1935-2015) was the soloist in Boccherini's Cello Concerto in B flat. The concert concluded with a performance of Jean Françaix's (1912-97) urbane Symphony for String Orchestra (1948). Françaix had celebrated his fiftieth birthday during the previous month.

The Times (20 June 1962) suggested that Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra 'made a distinctly favourable impression.' The unsigned reviewer (possibly William Mann) considered that the 'grave beauty of its opening movement generates a throbbing rhythm which rises to an impassioned climax', followed by 'the scherzo-like middle movement [which] is played pizzicato throughout' and the 'finale, beginning in slow march time' and presenting 'much strenuous but rewarding contrapuntal writing.' He concluded by noting that it was 'refreshing to hear a work by a comparatively young composer in which strong feeling is expressed with skill.' The 'youth' of the composer is overstated: Leighton was 32 years old when the work was composed.

R.L.H. writing in the *Daily Telegraph* (20 June 1962) was less-than-impressed with the general performance by the Harvey Phillips String Orchestra: '...[the] full, warm string tone' was '...[usually a] feature of the orchestra, however he considered that 'they rarely made full use of this basic strength.' The playing was marked by 'faulty ensemble' and a 'lack of rhythmic precision and a failure to shape the music constructively.' The reviewer considered that the 'orchestra played...most convincingly in [Leighton's]...sombre, passionate Concerto...'

The Edinburgh-based newspaper, *The Scotsman* (20 November 1964) reported on a performance of the Concerto for String Orchestra on 19 November 1964 at the Reid School of Music, Edinburgh. Conrad Wilson states that the work was 'refreshingly clear cut, laying out its argument sharply, concisely, and with impressive effect' and considered that it was 'a stirring, powerful piece.' Apparently, the work was repeated at the same concert. Interestingly, Wilson states that the work was dedicated to Harvey Phillips. This is not supported in Carolyn J. Smith's *Bio-Bibliography* of the composer (2004), the Chandos (CHAN 10461) liner notes or the thesis on Leighton's early music by Adam Binks (2007).

The score of Kenneth Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra was published by Novello in 1965: it was reviewed by Hugh Ottaway in the *Musical Times* (July 1965). He considered that the work displayed '...a fine professionalism' and specifies the '...excellent handling of resources...' He remarks that although Leighton is 'not a composer of immediately striking individuality [he] has a keen imagination of a kind that imparts relevance and force to each successive step his music takes.' Ottaway concludes his review of the score by noting the combination of the 'closeness of composition with an expansive energy that sweeps the music forward surely and vigorously.'

Records and Record Reviews

There are only two recordings of Kenneth Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra in the record catalogues, one of which has been long-deleted. The first was released on LP by Pye in 1967 (TPLS 13005). The present work was coupled with John McCabe's Symphony [No.1] (Elegy) op.40 (1965) and Adrian Cruft's Divertimento for String Orchestra, op. 43 (1963). The London Philharmonic Orchestra was conducted by John Snashall. Fortunately, the Leighton piece has been uploaded to [YouTube](#).

Malcolm MacDonald (*The Gramophone*, January 1968) was impressed by the entire disc. He felt that the 'symphonic style [apparent in the McCabe] is also much in evidence...in Kenneth Leighton's concerto.' He notes that, like the McCabe work, 'three movements...constitute the whole, and again something of an elegiac quality is in evidence towards the beginning of the work.' MacDonald concludes by suggesting that 'the mind is gripped by the quality of the music, rather than by any specific instrumental character it has – even though it is certainly exceedingly well written for the strings.'

A brief mention of the Concerto is given in Peter Pirie's review of the album in the *Musical Times* (April 1968): 'The Leighton is very well written, academic in the best sense, and would make more impact in less formidable company...'

Between 2008 and 2010, Chandos Records issued a three-volume retrospective of [some] of Kenneth Leighton's orchestral works. I am not sure if the series was suspended mid-way, as there are several other orchestral works by Leighton that demand our attention. It should be remembered that Chandos had previously released 'Veris Gratia', the Symphony No.3 (Laudes musicae), op.90 (1984) and the Cello Concerto, op.31 (1956). Other CDs have included a survey of the piano music and selected choral music and chamber works.

'Volume 1' (CHAN 10461) of the series featured the Concerto for String Orchestra: Richard Hickox and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales also included the Symphony for Strings as well as the Organ Concerto, op.58 (1970). It received excellent reviews.

Writing for *MusicWeb International* (June 08) [Hubert Culot](#) explained that '...I have always had a soft spot for the Concerto for String Orchestra...simply because it was the very first work by Leighton that I have ever heard.' Comparing this work to the earlier Symphony for Strings, he felt that it was 'a considerably more mature work.' Much of this maturity was down to the opportunity for study with Goffredo Petrassi. Culot suggests that 'Petrassi...introduced Leighton to dodecaphony and serialism and, more importantly, taught him how to use these techniques in a supple way in order to meet his personal expressive and formal needs; Petrassi was never a strict serialist.'

[Rob Barnett](#) builds on this discussion in his subsequent review for the same website (January 2009). He writes: '[Leighton's] exposure to the music of the Second Viennese School has added a deep patina of Bergian stress.' Other influences noted by Barnett include the 'flighty-fantastic pizzicato central *Toccata* to provide contrast but its fury from time to time recalls Herrmann's *Psycho* music' and 'Shostakovich is certainly a presence and appears unmistakably in the finale with the grim and gritty redolence of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony.'

The Chandos CD was also reviewed by *Fanfare* and the *American Record Guide*. In the former (November 2008) Paul A. Snook considers that Richard Hickox '...with the assistance of Chandos's expanded acoustic, easily improves upon the earlier recording, offering much more clarity and insight into Leighton's sedulous and deliberate knitting together of motifs while suffusing the whole with a high degree of tension, intensity, and even an atmosphere of fatalism.'

Mark L. Lehman writing in the *American Record Guide* (September/October 2008) understood that the Concerto for Strings is '... [more] acidic, knotty, dark, biting, and tense' than Leighton's early Symphony which exuded 'effusive romantic warmth'. Lehman notes the 'slow, chromatically unwinding lines in sinewy counterpoint pay[ing] homage to Bartok's spectral Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celeste' in the opening movement, whilst the 'short central scherzo, played entirely pizzicato, is light on its feet but still restless and uneasy.' The finale is 'a sombre and heavy-treading double-dotted march diverted into a brisk, active, sharply accented fugal development.' It is an excellent summary of this important work.

Like so much British music one feels that if Kenneth Leighton's Concerto for String Orchestra, had been written by a foreign composer (e.g. Bartok or Shostakovich) it would have had multiple recordings. On

the other hand, it is good to have these two fine recordings available to listeners. I feel that both Snashall and Hickox do the work full justice. They provide a splendid account of a work that successfully balances a 'gritty' intensity with the composer's fundamentally lyrical style and romantic warmth.

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