

## The First Performance of Adam Pounds' Second Symphony

By John France

The first performance of a new symphony is always an extremely important event in a composer's career. On 28 September 2019 Adam Pounds' Symphony No.2 was premiered at a remarkable concert in Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge. The programme began with Johannes Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* nos. 1 and 3, followed by Franz Schubert's Symphony No.8 in B minor (Unfinished). After the interval Chloe Hanslip was the soloist in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K216. The concert concluded with Pounds new Symphony. The Academy of Great St. Mary's was conducted by the composer. For the record, Adam Pounds' Symphony No.1 was premiered some 34 years previously on 29th November 1985 at the Walthamstow Assembly Hall.

The Symphony No.2 was completed in July 2019. It is written in four relatively short movements and scored for a standard orchestra with the addition of a saxophone and piano.

The work opens with a vibrant 'allegro' which the programme notes state deals with the hustle and bustle of urban life. Pounds presents this metropolitan 'environment' by writing highly rhythmic music that is brassy and strident. Yet, this is 'edgy' rather than threatening. The tension barely eases for a second, although there is a slight repose about a third of the way through the movement. Rather unusually, this movement closes quietly, but uneasily, clearly in preparation for the sultry 'Nocturne.' This second movement is both the emotional heart of this Symphony as well as its musical highlight. As the title implies, this music meditates on 'night-time' in the city. Pounds has introduced a moody and sometimes groovy saxophone, heard alongside music that nods back to Ralph Vaughan Williams's 'London' Symphony. The composer writes that this 'nocturne' is not 'a calm depiction of night' in a Chopin-esque sense, but a picture of a city in the wee small hours. I think that it reflects the mixed emotions of an individual 'on the streets' not necessarily homeless, but with nowhere to go. It is not scary. Nothing bad happens, it is just a picture of temporary desolation and loneliness. The 'sleazy' sounds of the saxophone are designed to highlight this feeling of emptiness. Adam Pounds has told me that he "really saw the saxophone solo as our 'lone character', the addition of the trumpet (harmon mute) and the piano, are probably a nod back to when I frequented a local jazz club and when I was working (still a student) for *Crescendo* jazz magazine based in Wardour street."

After a short pause the third movement 'scherzo' begins. This is like the opening 'allegro' insofar as it is full of drive and impetus. Again, I hear distinct echoes of RVW. Pounds makes good use of an 'antiphonal' exchange between the brass and woodwind. The central 'trio' of this scherzo is a 'brutal war march' rather than a traditionally more relaxed theme. After the march, the music returns to calmer waters. A short woodwind cadenza brings this movement to a close.

The finale opens with a regal fanfare. This is ceremonial music with an edge. Soon the strings are scurrying around, echoing the opening material. Brass comes to the fore here. The original fanfare returns, which the Pounds explains includes a conspectus of themes derived from the entire Symphony. The work comes to a dynamic but not overwhelming close.

Adam Pounds states that the inspiration for his Symphony No.2 came as a result of moving to the centre of Cambridge after living in the countryside. He claims that this new urban environment and the 'faster pace of life' was 'stimulating' and resulted in 'more compositional focus.' I can see where he is coming from, but for me the music does not conjure up Cambridge. The 'Nocturne' is more Hudson River, New York than the banks of the Cam and much of the rest of the work would seem to evoke the pomp, circumstance and pizzazz of London rather than an ancient University town.

The basic stylistic parameter of this work is that it is written in an approachable musical vernacular with several lyrical passages balancing more aggressive and dissonant music. If the listener is hunting musical comparisons, composers as diverse as William Walton, Arnold Cooke, Malcolm Arnold are

alluded to in these pages. It is not an insult to the composer to suggest that there is much of the 'Cheltenham' school of symphonic writing about this work: it is technically well-written and approachable by all but the most musically conservative listeners. The orchestration is splendid, with effective use of the brass and the woodwind sections. The saxophone is an inspired touch. My only complaint is that the Symphony is a little too short. There is much excellent musical material in this work: I feel that some of it could have been developed at greater length.

The final rehearsal of Adam Pounds's Symphony No.2 was recorded and has been uploaded to the composer's YouTube Channel:

[First Movement: Allegro](#)

[Second Movement: Nocturne – Largo moderato](#)

[Third Movement: Allegro](#)

[Fourth Movement: Largo moderato, Allegro moderato, A tempo primo, Allegro moderato](#)

I understand that it is the composer's hope that a definitive performance of the work will be released on CD in the future.