

Recalling John Addison's Concerto for trumpet, strings, and percussion (1949)

by John France

John Addison (1920-1998) is best remembered for his film scores which include such masterpieces as *Reach for the Sky* (1956), *The Entertainer* (1960) and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968). Equally impressive was his music for the television studio, such as the ever-popular theme tune for *Murder She Wrote* (1984-96). It is often forgotten that he contributed several important works for the concert hall, the ballet stage, and the recital room. His masterpiece is *Carte Blanche* (1953) written for Saddler's Wells, and first performed at the 1953 Edinburgh Festival. There are also found a splendid *Partita* (1961), a Bassoon Concertino (1998) and the present Trumpet Concerto (1949). All these have been recorded at some point. Other pieces that demand a professional recording include the *Wellington Suite*, *Harlequin* for saxophone and piano, the Sextet for woodwind, the Trio for flute, oboe and piano, and a Serenade for wind quintet and harp. A brief resumé of John Addison's life and achievement can be seen [here](#).

Programme Notes

It is more than 70 years since John Addison's Concerto for trumpet and strings was composed. Despite never gaining traction with concert promoters and record producers, this delightful work remains as fresh and vibrant as the day it was written. The piece is characterised by the 'extended' range of the trumpet, rapid metrical changes, and many 'virtuoso technical challenges' from the first note to the last. There are three movements: 'Allegretto', 'Adagio misterioso' and 'Allegro Con Brio'. The Concerto lasts for just under 18 minutes. I am beholden to the programme notes written by Robert McMahan for the only recording made in 1969.

The opening theme, which begins without introduction, sets the mood for much of the work:



It is clear from these bars that the melodic interval of the perfect 4th will dominate much of this concerto. McMahan has termed this a 'swinging tune'. The second subject, 'poco meno mosso', although slower is based similar melodic intervals:



The development section includes a short fugal passage, which is not fully realised. After a short legato passage for orchestra, including solo violin, the trumpet plays a cadenza, 'senza misura' (without time signature) before the second subject is recapitulated. The movement closes with a short coda based on the opening theme.

The second movement is an 'adagio misterioso' which has more than a touch of the Gershwin-esque about it. If pictorial language were allowed, I would suggest an American 'horn' (trumpet) player standing on the banks of the Harlem River in New York, serenading the moon.



The reality is a muted trumpet playing a short fanfare initially in melodic intervals of 5ths creating a dreamlike mood. The musical palette changes to some complex string writing which gives bite through well-structured dissonances created by polytonal (two or more keys at once) writing. The tension breaks, and the opening theme of this ternary (three-part) movement brings the music to a hushed close: once again the soloist plays with a mute.

The finale is in complete contrast. The listener will feel that they had re-crossed the Atlantic and are back in the West End of London. There is much syncopation and urban hustle here, but it is 'English' in character, rather than the Big Apple. Addison has constructed a theme for this movement based on a combination of the predominant melodic intervals of the first and second movements - a 4th and a 5th respectively:



This is a rondo, with several quieter interludes or episodes interrupting the buoyant main theme. Much of the accompaniment scutters along in parallel contrary perfect 4th chords, giving an edgy sound. The Concerto concludes with a short, but rousing, coda based in the main rondo theme.

The Premiere

John Addison's Concerto for trumpet and strings was premiered at the Orangery, Hampton Court, on Sunday 16 July 1950. The New London Orchestra was conducted by Alec Sherman with the trumpet soloist David Mason. Another concerted work at this concert was Carl Maria von Weber's Bassoon Concerto in F major (1811, rev. 1822) with soloist Cecil James. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Symphony No.40 in G minor (K.550) (1788) was the 'main' event of the evening.

The Daily Telegraph (17 July 1950) picked up on the fact that Addison's work was one of very few trumpet concertos written by an Englishman since the 18th century. The reviewer thinks that the trumpet is one of the 'noblest' of instruments, but also one of the 'most intractable.' Unfortunately, R.C. (Richard Capell) felt that despite 'the young composer's interesting inventiveness and David Mason's brilliant execution of the solo, [this] fundamental difficulty was not overcome.' One other criticism was that 'Mr Addison could not help lapsing into the toy-trumpet effects of [Stravinsky's] *Petrushka*.' As an aside, Cecil James 'astonished the audience with his mastery of the bassoon.'

The unsigned review in *The Times* (18 July 1950) was enthusiastic about the '[introduction] of a new concerto for trumpet, strings and optional percussion [composed] by...a young English composer hailing from Prince Consort Road' (The Royal College of Music). The critic felt that 'no member of the audience would complain of the unapproachability of contemporary music after hearing this buoyant work, with its incisive themes, its piquant rhythms, its clean textures, and its logical and almost too transparent form.' Looking in more detail towards the music's structure, the critic notes that 'the trumpet is rarely idle, and the scoring for percussion (without which the concerto would be a good deal less entertaining) and strings show many felicitous touches.' This was especially evident in the

slow movement, 'adagio misterioso.' Overall, the impression was that 'there is room in the world for music of this unpretentious and not too earnest or disturbingly original kind...'

The most extensive review of the Trumpet Concerto's premiere was written by Malcolm Rayment in *Musical Express* (21 July 1950). He begins by pointing out that 'both the merits and the weaknesses of the work are very apparent at first hearing.' On the positive side, Addison has avoided 'the unforgivable sin of a trumpet work – vulgarity.' Rayment suggests that the piece has much in common with Dmitri Shostakovich's Concerto in C minor for Piano, Trumpet, and String Orchestra, Op. 35 (1933) but insists that 'nowhere are the banalities of parts of that work apparent here' [in the Addison]. Looking back 70 years, I wonder if Rayment has misjudged Shostakovich's music. The musical parodies in that work are an integral and satisfying part of the concerto. Turning to the 'weaknesses' of Addison's Concerto, he feels that the main issue lies in the formal structure of the work rather than its content. I guess his criticism of the 'inevitable fugato' in the opening 'Allegretto' is redundant. It seems ideally placed to create interest. I can understand the comment that the changes of time signature in the score 'to avoid monotony', may be an unnecessary affectation. Malcolm Rayment considers that the 'best movement' is the 'Adagio Misterioso' where the composer 'has not made the slightest attempt to be clever, and the simplicity of his thoughts are matched in the formal conception.' This presents music 'of undeniable beauty.'

In 1951, a piano reduction of the Concerto was published by Joseph Williams. Reviewing this score for *Music and Letters* (July 1952), E.J. writes that:

'John Addison's Concerto makes a welcome addition to the trumpet repertory, being expertly composed and having a solo part most appropriate to the instrument, even in the slow movement. It is admirably clear in design and has well-managed climaxes. Though firmly based in the main key of C major, it has plenty of variety of harmony and tonality in the lively outer movements and suitable intensity in the second. The solo part, though difficult, has no showy effects, but is founded largely on characteristic figures, especially the leap of a perfect fourth.'

The reviewer (P.F.R) in *Music Review* (August 1953) thought that this is written 'in a thoroughly English idiom, owing something to Vaughan Williams, in a fresh and attractive manner.' I am not convinced that the elder composer is alluded to in these pages, except for a few short passages in the slow movement. This critic concludes that 'the thematic ideas are not in themselves of great distinction, but they are handled with a pleasant sense of colour, especially in the slow central movement and the whole work shows promise and vitality.'

Three years later, John Addison's Concerto for trumpet crossed the Atlantic. It was given its American premiere at a 'public dress rehearsal' at the Hunter College Auditorium, New York, on Sunday 8 November 1953. The Little Orchestra Society was conducted by Thomas Scherman and the trumpet soloist was Robert Nagel. Other compositions heard at this concert were Béla Bartók's ghostly *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* and Manuel de Falla's *Master Peter's Puppet Show* (El retablo de maese Pedro). Two days later, Howard Taubman reported on the concert for the *New York Times*. Rather grudgingly, he states that Addison's Concerto 'is a perfectly respectable piece' but adds that it 'tells little of the composer's individuality.' The reason for this lukewarm response would seem to be that the Concerto contained 'little in it that sounds radical today.' This lack of modernity will hardly trouble listeners in 2020. Taubman conceded that the soloist 'Mr Nagel' played the solo part 'in sprightly and musical fashion' that emphasised the 'idiomatic use of the trumpet, giving it both virtuoso and lyrical passages...'

The Recording

John Addison's Concerto for trumpet, strings, and percussion, was first released in 1969 in the United States on First Edition Records (LOU-695). It was coupled with *Danse Africaines* by Heitor Villa-Lobos. The Louisville Orchestra was conducted by Jorge Mester and the trumpet soloist was Leon Rapier.

In 1976, the RCA Gold Seal Label (GL 25018) issued a remarkable album featuring four British works, all performed by The Louisville Orchestra. This included Malcolm Arnold's Concerto for two violins and strings, Gordon Crosse's *Some Marches on a Ground*, Hungarian émigré to UK Matyas Seiber's Concertino for clarinet and strings and a repackaging of the 1969 release of the Trumpet Concerto by John Addison.



Writing in *The Gramophone*, October 1976, Malcolm McDonald enthusiastically praised this new 'selection of four lively pieces by contemporary British composers, none of which we have managed to get on to disc ourselves yet.' Forty-four years later the situation is hardly much better. Only Malcolm Arnold seems to have fared well with several recordings of his Concerto. MacDonald thinks that 'Addison has the measure of the trumpet as a soloist, allowing it to be athletic in rhythm, or lyrically smooth by contrast and eschewing extremes of range or of dynamic'. Finally, he suggests that 'trumpet players must surely enjoy playing this one.'

Lewis Foreman, reviewing the CD release of the Trumpet Concerto on First Edition Music (FED 1904, 2005) for *MusicWeb International*, ([6 February 2006](#)) wrote that:

'John Addison's Trumpet Concerto is a substantial and brilliant work, which I have to say I did not know...Whether he is being energetic or lyrical, elegiac (as in the slow movement, trumpet muted) and expressive or fizzing as in his finale, his invention is always likeable. The syncopations in the finale are catchy, the trumpet writing dazzling. Trumpeter Leon Rapier is brilliant in the demanding solo part and plangently expressive in the deeper quiet slow music. But why such a sparkling score should be so little played that we are unaware of it is beyond me...'

Any unbiased listener must surely agree that it is time one of the younger trumpet virtuosos should take up this remarkable and highly entertaining concerto. It would be a worthy addition to constant repackagings of Michael Haydn and multifarious arrangements of music not originally composed for the instrument.

John Addison's Concerto for trumpet, strings and percussion has been uploaded to YouTube: [1st Movement](#), [2nd Movement](#), [3rd Movement](#). (Accessed 20 May 2020)

Acknowledgments

Musical excerpts from John Addison's Trumpet Concerto © Copyright 1951 Stainer & Bell Ltd, 23 Gruneisen Road, London N3 1DZ, UK, www.stainer.co.uk. Reproduced by permission.

John France