

Exploring Richard Rodney Bennett's *Anniversaries* for orchestra (1982)

by John France

Context

Richard Rodney Bennett's (RRB) (1936-2012) *Anniversaries* for orchestra was commissioned by the BBC to commemorate its 60th Anniversary. It depends on what was being celebrated. The Corporation was formed on the 18 October 1922. It was some weeks later, on 14 November that the first broadcasts under the auspices of the BBC were made from 2LO located at Marconi House in The Strand. (Briggs, 1961, *passim*). For some reason, *Anniversaries* was premiered on 9 September 1982, at the Royal Albert Hall, during the Promenade Concert Series. I guess that the year is correct, at least.

Interestingly, RRB did not dedicate *Anniversaries* to the BBC but it was '...dedicated to my friend Bud Bazelon for his sixtieth birthday.'

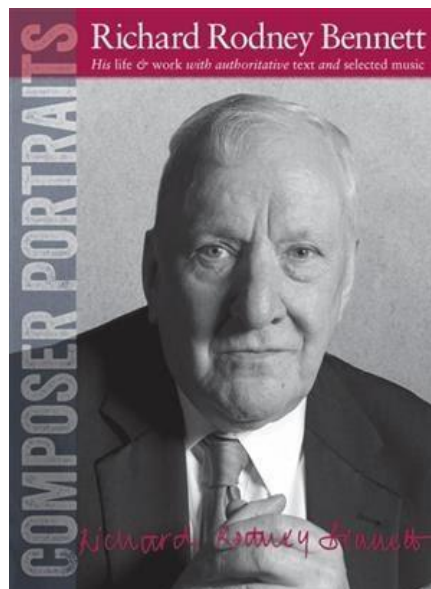
'Bud' Bazelon is not well-known in the United Kingdom. Irwin (Bud) Bazelon was born in Evanston, Illinois, on 4 June 1922. He graduated from DePaul University, Chicago in 1945, having gained a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in Music. There were further lessons with Paul Hindemith at Yale College and Darius Milhaud in Mills College in Oakland, California. For much of his career Bazelon worked between New York City and his Long Island retreat at Sagaponak. During the 1950s and 1960s, he made a living by writing scores for documentaries, art films and incidental music for the theatre. This hard work served as 'preparatory study' towards his 'concert hall' music. Bazelon saw no contradiction in earning a living in the commercial world and writing 'art' music. He did not consider that he was sacrificing his artistic integrity. His catalogues include nine symphonies, (a tenth was in progress when he died).

Richard Rodney Bennett gave the eulogy at Bazelon's funeral. He said 'Buddy and his music were both totally unpredictable; one never knew what thought was coming next, even if one was familiar with some of his characteristic states of mind... Both the man and his music were profoundly eccentric, in the best and most fascinating sense. He was absolutely uncompromising and entirely original both as a man and a composer.' ([Instant Encore Blog](#)). 'Bud' Bazelon died on 2 August 1995. He was aged 73 years.

Major works composed by Richard Rodney Bennett around the time of *Anniversaries* included the Harpsichord Concerto (1980), premiered by the St Louis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leonard Slatkin, with Rodney Bennett at the keyboard. The following year saw the first performance at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, of the ballet *Isadora*, devised to celebrate the life and dance of Isadora Duncan. Merle Park starred in the title role. In 1982, RRB completed the score for the thoughtful World War 1 drama film, *The Return of the Soldier*, starring Glenda Jackson, Julie Christie, and Alan Bates. Another work written at the same time as *Anniversaries* was the remarkable *Noctuary*, or 'a diary of the events of the night'. This piano work was a fusion of Scott Joplin's ragtime, Scriabin, Gershwin, and Ravel. It was originally conceived as a ballet score for Kenneth MacMillan; however, I understand that it remains unperformed as 'dance'.

Analysis

Stylistically, the *Anniversaries* was very much in RRB's late-1970's style – a balance of dissonance and studied lyricism. Moreover, it is 'an instrumental showpiece.' (Meredith, 2010, p.309). Structurally, *Anniversaries* is formed of 11 sections. The odd-numbered segments utilise the full orchestra and the



even ones explore various instrumental 'families.' The fundamental 'melodic' material is heard in the opening bars of the 'Fanfare' – 'Vivo e declamato'. This is a three-note group, G E D. The composer has stated that this gives 'a strong tonal character [to the music] which colours the entire work.' (RRB Programme Notes, *passim*). Interestingly, this melodic fragment was previously used as the 'starting point' for the austere *Aubade* for orchestra (1962) and the *Five Studies* for piano (1962-4). Use of this short 'motif' also gives the work significant thematic unity. The music is often 'brilliant and extrovert' but here and there the composer uses a more romantically charged language. It could be argued that an alternative formal analysis reveals a 'theme' with variations. Musical phrases are re-presented throughout the work, but always subject to change and often increasing complexity on their recurrence.

The first episode (*Leggiero e fantastico*) is for woodwind, 'whirling against a cloudy background of strings, harp and piano'. This has a nocturnal feel. An aggressive 'scherzo' played 'con fuoco' (with fire) follows. It has a slightly calmer middle section before the belligerent music reappears. The second episode is scored for piano, harp, and tuned percussion. It is played 'Drammatico.' This segues into the gentler, central part of *Anniversaries*. The slow 'Arioso' commences the emotional heart of the work, which leads to the third episode, scored for strings. After this, the music becomes quieter with evocative solos for flute and oboe and 'chorale like' passages for the brass. This section comes to a magical conclusion. The fourth episode is scored for percussion and timpani. It deliberately 'blows away' the preceding lyrical mood with its bright and extrovert soul.

There is a 'Brillante' bridge passage which reprises material from the 'Con fuoco' and the first episode, 'leggiero e fantastico' for woodwind. This leads into the final 'episode' which is marked 'Strepitoso'. This Italian term simply encourages players to perform the music in a boisterous and noisy manner. Not surprisingly, Richard Rodney Bennett has made considerable use of brass and percussion in this riotous music. Progress does calm down considerably, prior to the music building up into a tumultuous climax, before dropping into the 'Finale' which features a much-expanded reappearance of the 'vivo e declamato' heard at the work's opening. The final bars include the easily missed appearance of the tune 'Happy Birthday'.

It is interesting that there is a substructure to *Anniversaries* which suggests a three-movement symphonic form. Sections 1 to 4 could be construed as the 'first movement', sections 5 to 7 would be the slow movement and 8 to 11 is the finale and coda. To be fair, this is not to suggest that the work is 'classically constructed' as a symphony, only to imply that the general impression of this piece lends itself to this possible interpretation.

The score for *Anniversaries* is dated 'New York City, Chapel Hill N.C., Cape Cod, Jan.10 – May 19 '82'. It is scored for Piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, Cor anglais, 2 Clarinets in B flat, Bass Clarinet in B flat, 2 Bassoons, Double Bassoon, 4 Horns in F, 3 Trumpets in C, 2 Tenor Trombones, Bass Trombone, Tuba, 3 Percussion: I Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Ching-Ring (tambourine frame), 3 Timbales. II Vibraphone, Crotales, Claves, Side Drum, Tenor Drum, Small Bongo. III Marimba, Tubular Bells, Bass Drum, Tam-tam, 3 Woodblocks, 3 Suspended Cymbals. Timpani, Piano (doubling Celesta), Harp and Strings.

Premiere & Reception

Anniversaries was premiered at the Royal Albert Hall, on Thursday, 9 September 1982. The evening was an all-British event. The programme began with Vaughan Williams's exuberant Overture *The Wasps* (1909). This was followed by RRB's new piece. Janet Baker was the soloist in a triumphant performance of Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, op.37 (1899). After the interval, the Prommers were treated to Walton's Symphony No. 1 in B flat minor (1935). The BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by James Loughran. RRB gave the pre-prom talk at the Royal College of Music, beginning at 6.30 pm.

The Times (10 September 1982, p.7) reviewer Nicolas Kenyon gave a detailed report about this concert. Disparagingly, he felt that 'Mr Bennett's attractive and unpretentious celebration turned out instead to be a kind of middle-aged person's guide to the orchestra, in which six busy, jolly sections for full band were interleaved with sections that each featured one section of the orchestra.' Writing descriptively, he noted that the 'woodwind flitted, like an echo of a scherzo, the brass brayed in solid chords...the strings dug into passionate chromatic lines and, less successfully, first tuned and then untuned percussion tapped out wartime messages of code.' The 'strenuous, upward bounding themes that glued these meditations [a new description of this piece] together were jittery, [and] full of nervous energy.' Alas, Kenyon felt that the playing was not up to scratch. He considered that 'James Loughran caught the general ebullience of the piece: a rather rough performance smudged several edges to the brass and covered up so much finely-worked detail...'

Edward Greenfield reviewed the concert for the *Manchester Guardian* (10 September 1982, p.10). He notes that Elgar, Walton, and Bennett 'were and are orchestral masters to their fingertips.' *Anniversaries* 'is an occasional piece (complete with [a] hint of 'Happy Birthday to You' in the final bars) which transcends mere cleverness in a colourful structure of eleven compact sections full of sharply identifiable landmarks.' On the other hand, Greenfield felt that 'even in the slow central sections it hardly delves deep, and one would at times welcome the sort of hummable melodies which even the intermittent serialist feels bound to eschew, yet which in such a work as this seem always to be on the point of emerging.'

The *Daily Telegraph* (10 September 1982, p.13) reviewer Alan Blyth, considered that the music is 'well built...with a recognisable shape, a constant movement forward, and it is orchestrated in masterly fashion.' After a brief description of the work's progress, Blyth concludes his review by admitting this is 'a likeable, consistently fascinating piece...which should gain its many repetitions if our orchestras are really looking for easily accessible, yet perfectly reputable, worthwhile new music.' Blyth posed the eternal question: 'Will...*Anniversaries*...attain the lasting fame of the other British works performed at last night's Prom?' The obvious answer to that is 'No.' I imagine that the new Chandos recording (see below) is one of the few opportunities that music lovers have had of hearing this work since 1982. Blyth muses that it is a 'question probably not many of us will be here to answer.' On the other hand, he thought that 'at first hearing it certainly seemed to have the ingredients to stay the course.'

It is unfortunate that looking at the subsequent performances listed in the publisher's webpage, there have only been two in the 21st century - in 2006 and 2016. Both received mixed reviews. Citing a single example, (*The Times* 30 November 2016, p.9) Geoff Brown thought that 'the concert's second half proved harder to enjoy. Gamba gave a firecracker jump as he launched the orchestral *Anniversaries* from 1982, but its terse rhythms and trumpeting exuberance grew hollow over time.'

One review that upset the composer was printed in the *Financial Times* (10 September 1982, cited Meredith, 2010, p.309). Andrew Clements noted the '17 minutes of effortlessly turned orchestral writing.' So far so good. He then 'revived the old patronising criticism' which eventually led to Bennett leaving England for New York. He stated: 'Bennett's sheer facility must generate much admiration: not a note of this score is out of place, not a texture miscalculated. Yet, it constitutes an utterly unmemorable musical argument; within quarter of an hour of ending one remembered only generalities, which had fallen so easily on the ear.' Richard Rodney Bennett had moved to New York in 1979 due to professional frustration and a sense of being 'hemmed in' by his life in Britain. (*The Guardian*, 26 December 2012, p.4)

Geoffrey Norris, writing in the *Musical Times* (November 1982, p.769) noted the premiere of Bennett's 'new piece d'occasion, *Anniversaries*' which he felt was 'vigorously orchestrated (sometimes with recourse to gamelan effects) ...' He also reminded readers that 1982 was the 80th birthday (29 March) of William Walton, and this was marked at this concert by a 'fresh, alertly rhythmic performance of the First Symphony.' Turning to *Sea Pictures*, Norris noted the 'marvellous singing...[where] every word

and every note counted, and we were offered - particularly in [Janet Baker's] encore of 'Where Corals Lie' - music-making of telling depth of feeling.'

Recording

As part of their ongoing (hopefully) survey of Richard Rodney Bennett's orchestral music, Volume 4 was released in early 2020 - see below for details. John Wilson and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra give an excellent and imaginative account of a diverse selection of the composer's work. Especially vibrant is the performance of *Anniversaries*. It is the premiere recording.

The Gramophone (July 2020, p.32) published its review of the latest volume. Edward Seckerson rehearsed the fact that *Anniversaries* is effectively a 'concerto for orchestra', with a major role for the percussion section. This he feels, is 'the engine of the works episodic design.' But as noted above, these 'episodes' may not be entirely independent of an overarching formal construct. Seckerson feels that the overall impact of the music is a good example of 'how effortlessly (or so it seems) that Bennett spins and develops ideas while wielding the largest of orchestras.' *Anniversaries* (like the entire album) is an example of 'precision and virtuosity [applied to] music that sounds like it's evolving in the playing of it.'



Marc Rochester, reviewing this CD for *MusicWeb International* (May 2020) considered that:

'We hear the BBC Scottish in great detail in *Anniversaries*, which takes the form of a concerto for orchestra – or rather a more grown-up version of Britten's *Young Person's Guide*. Each of the five 'Episodes' focuses on a particular instrumental group (I am particularly taken by Episode 5 which highlights the brass, and can only admire Bennett's instinctive and highly idiomatic writing), with each of the six surrounding movements offering some kind of commentary on the basic three-note theme on which the whole work is based'.

Three months later, William Hedley (*MusicWeb International* August 2020) wrote that:

'There are several lyrical passages in [this] work that none the less gives the overall impression of great exuberance...[however] there are many beguiling sounds throughout the work...I don't think many listeners would think of *Anniversaries* as a tonal work, any more than they might pick up, had they not read the booklet note, the blink-and-you-miss-it reference to 'Happy Birthday to You' at the end.'

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Files of the *Music Web Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Musical Times*, etc

Discography

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/John Wilson, *Richard Rodney Bennett, Anniversaries Troubadour Music, Concerto for piano and orchestra, Aubade, Country Dances*, CHANDOS CHSA5244 SACD 2020.