

English Music in the 20th Century

William Walton

William Turner Walton was born on 29 March 1902 at 93, Werneth Hall Road, Oldham, Lancashire. His father Charles Walton had been one of the first intake in 1893 at the new Royal Manchester College of Music, where he was a bass-baritone pupil of Andrew Black, who, five years later, was to create the title-part in Elgar's *Caractacus*. Charles became organist and choirmaster at St John's Church, Werneth, for 21 years and also taught singing and the organ elsewhere. His wife, Louisa Maria Turner, was a good amateur contralto. William and his elder brother sang in the St John's Choir. William also learned to play the piano and (for a brief time) the violin. His musical talent was obvious and when he was ten he was entered for a voice trial for probationer choristers at Christ Church Cathedral School, Oxford. Although he arrived late because of a missed train, his mother pleaded for him to be heard and the organist, Dr H.G. Ley, accepted him after he sang Marcello's 'O Lord Our Governor'.

Walton was at the choir school from 1912 to 1918. When war was declared in 1914, Charles Walton's singing pupils declined in number and William would have been brought home to become an office-boy or to work as a clerk in a cotton-mill if Dr Thomas Strong, Dean of Christ Church, had not himself paid the balance of the school fees not met by the scholarship. Dr. Strong was a firm believer in the boy's talent. Walton was by then composing anthems and songs, some of which Strong showed to Sir Hubert Parry who remarked: 'There's a lot in this chap, you must keep an eye on him!' Walton's version of why he started composing was 'I must make myself interesting somehow or when my voice breaks, I'll be sent home to Oldham'. His musical education at Oxford was supervised by Hugh Allen, then organist of New College and later professor of music at Oxford University and Director of the Royal College of Music. Through Allen and Strong he was introduced to the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ravel, Debussy and Prokofiev, the avant-garde of the time. He passed the first half of his Bachelor of Music exam in June 1918, but failed the exam called Responsions at three attempts in 1919. He passed the second part of his B. Mus. in June 1920 (and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Music in 1941). His musical education had continued in the holidays at Oldham: his father took him to Hallé concerts in Manchester and he attended performances of Sir Thomas Beecham's famous opera seasons in Manchester in 1916 and 1917.

In 1918, at the age of sixteen, Walton began to compose a Piano Quartet, his first large-scale composition. This work caught the attention of another undergraduate at Oxford, Sacheverell Sitwell, who insisted that his older brother Osbert should come to Oxford to encounter a 'genius'. After he had failed his exams, Walton said to Sacheverell: 'What the hell am I going to do?' The reply was 'Why not come to stay with us?' The Sitwell brothers, with their sister Edith, were intellectual aesthetes who were just beginning to make a flamboyant impact on literary circles in London. Walton went to stay in London for a few weeks – which turned into several years. They more or less adopted him and, with Dr Strong, the composer Lord Berners and the poet Siegfried Sassoon, guaranteed him an annual income to enable him to devote all his time to composition. The first fruit of his co-habitation with the Sitwells was *Façade*, an 'entertainment' in which eighteen of Edith's poems were recited over a background of Walton's music scored originally for five instrumentalists. The work was first performed privately in January 1922 and publicly in 1923, when it caused something of a furore mainly because of the unusual method of presentation – the poems were declaimed through a megaphone thrust through a painted curtain. By 1926 the work was the talk of the town. Walton continued to revise it, adding and subtracting items.

The Piano Quartet was completed in 1921, although not performed until 1924, and a string quartet of formidable density and complexity was selected for the International Society for Contemporary Music's festival in Salzburg in 1923. It caught the favourable attention of Alban Berg. In the early 1920's Walton earned some money by making arrangements of foxtrots for Debroy Somers's band at the Savoy Hotel. He met Gershwin in 1925, at about the time he began to compose his rumbustious overture *Portsmouth Point*, inspired by a print by Rowlandson. It was selected for the 1926 ISCM festival in Zürich. His next important work was a *Sinfonia Concertante* for piano and orchestra, each movement being dedicated to one of the Sitwells. This was recast from music written for a ballet Diaghilev had rejected. It was an under-rated work, thoroughly characteristic, but was overshadowed by its successor, the Viola Concerto of 1928-9. This was written at Amalfi in Italy and was intended for Lionel Tertis, who had almost single-handedly restored the viola to the ranks of solo instruments, and had inspired many works by English composers in the process. To Walton's hurt and dismay, Tertis rejected it (he later admitted he was wrong, and performed it) and the first performance, at a Promenade Concert in 1929, was given by Paul Hindemith. Many still regard this concerto as Walton's masterpiece, and with good reason. In it we can hear an Elgarian melancholy and wistfulness (although Elgar hated it when he heard it). The Scherzo is typical of Walton in its rhythmical electricity and syncopation, while the Finale is poignant, bittersweet and superbly balanced. In the writing for the orchestra, the care to ensure that the viola is clearly heard is masterly throughout. With this great work, for such it is, Walton at the age of 27, was in the forefront of English composers of his generation and his position was reinforced two years later when his cantata *Belshazzar's Feast* was introduced at the 1931 Leeds Festival. The text had been selected from the Old Testament by Osbert Sitwell. It had originally been commissioned by the BBC as a chamber work but outgrew their specifications. Much of it was again written in Amalfi and at Ascona, Switzerland, where Walton was living with a German baroness, Imma von Doernberg. Concise, dramatic, barbaric, combining passages of Handelian splendour with jazzy interpolations and Elgarian pomp and circumstance, *Belshazzar's Feast* was almost unanimously acclaimed as the most important English choral work since *The Dream of Gerontius*.

At the beginning of 1932 Walton attended a performance of his Viola Concerto by Tertis and the Hallé in Manchester. The conductor, Sir Hamilton Harty, asked him to write a symphony and very soon he began to work on one. It made patchy progress but the first two movements were completed by the spring of 1933 and three movements were fully scored by February 1934, with sketches for the Finale. At this point his relationship with Imma ended and he became involved with Viscountess Wimborne, 22 years older than he and one of London's society hostesses (she organised private concerts at her London home). This emotional crisis delayed the symphony, as did his acceptance of a lucrative commission to write music for the film *Escape Me Never*. The first performance of the symphony had already been advertised and then cancelled, so the self-governing London Symphony Orchestra, of which Harty was now conductor, decided to perform the three completed movements on 3 December 1934. The Finale was completed during 1935 and the full work was performed on 6 November that year. A fellow composer wrote to Walton: 'It has established you as the most vital and original genius in Europe'. If not going quite that far, most critics recognised the vitality and colour of the symphony, which also has its melancholy aspects and is characterised throughout by a febrile nervous energy. The scoring is brilliant and occasionally brash as befits an unashamedly emotional outpouring. Far from it being an anticlimax, the long delayed Finale is an example of Walton in his most ceremonial manner, its closing pages a marvellously exhilarating exordium. Not surprisingly, the march he wrote for King George VI's Coronation in 1937, *Crown Imperial*, is a by-product of this style.

There followed in 1939, a Violin Concerto, commissioned and first performed by Jascha Heifetz. This is in many ways the most beautiful work Walton wrote, suffused with the happiness he had found with Alice Wimbourne and imbued with the warmth and colour of Italy, where it was composed. Walton did not hear the first performance in Cleveland, Ohio, because by then war had been declared. Walton's 'war work' was to write music for propaganda films, which he did with outstanding success, as in *The First of the Few* (about the designer of the Spitfire fighter aircraft) and Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*. To mark his return to non-cinematic music after the war, he composed the String Quartet in A minor. It was rather churlishly received ('the mixture as before'). The climate of British music had changed. No longer was Walton the 'white hope' or 'the golden boy'. Since 1942, when he returned to England, Britten had composed a succession of fine works, culminating in 1945 in the opera *Peter Grimes*. Already, Walton seemed to some of the post-war generation to be a figure from the past. But in 1947 the BBC commissioned an opera from him. He settled on the subject of *Troilus and Cressida* (Chaucer, not Shakespeare) and chose Christopher Hassall as librettist. Before he composed a note of it, Alice Wimbourne died in April 1948. Walton assuaged his grief by composing a Violin Sonata and revising *Belshazzar's Feast*. Later that year he went to Buenos Aires as delegate to an international conference of the Performing Right Society. There he met and married Susana Gil Passo, who was 24 years his junior. He informed her they would live for six months of every year in Italy. They went to the island of Ischia, in the Bay of Naples, which was not then the magnet for tourists it is today, and settled there permanently. In the grounds of the house they eventually built there, La Mortella, Susana Walton created one of the most wonderful gardens in the world.

Troilus and Cressida was completed in the summer of 1954 and first performed at Covent Garden, to which it was ceded by the BBC, in December. Its reception was respectful rather than ecstatic. The pendulum had swung away from romanticism to the newer operatic styles of Britten and Tippett, and it was not until the 1990s that the opera was acknowledged in its own right. Walton, who had received a knighthood in 1951, had still been first choice for another Coronation march (*Orb and Sceptre*) in 1953 and for a *Te Deum*. But honoured though he was in his own country, it was from America that he received most acclaim in the late 1950s and 1960s. Gregor Piatigorsky commissioned the Cello Concerto (1955-6), music of Mediterranean warmth and languor, beautifully crafted but which again divided critical opinion between those who found it 'refreshed in spirit' and those who regarded it as 'an idiom growing old'. Cellists loved the work and added it to their repertory. The commission for the *Partita*, one of Walton's most scintillating (and difficult) scores came from the Cleveland Orchestra, whose conductor Georg Szell was an ardent Walton champion. Although the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society commissioned the Second Symphony, first performed in 1960 and seriously underrated for many years, it was Szell and the Cleveland who made a superb recording which Walton described as 'stupendous... absolutely right musically speaking'. Instead of realising that this symphony was anything but 'the mixture as before', many critics blamed it for not being like the First Symphony of quarter of a century earlier. Walton must have felt he couldn't win. The Walton who wrote the one-act comic opera *The Bear*, the delightful song cycle *Anon in Love*, the Variations on a Theme of Hindemith and the Improvisations on an Impromptu by Benjamin Britten was of course essentially the same composer who wrote the pre-1939 works, but a sparer, wiser, more sophisticated and even perhaps a better composer. The times were out of joint, however. For critics who savoured the avant-garde, Walton was no longer of any interest. He was hurt by this, jealous of the success Britten and Tippett enjoyed. Some believed that his absence in Ischia contributed towards his sidelining. Britten was on the spot to promote his works, Walton was a kind of exile. Some consolation, however, must have been provided by his receiving the prestigious award, bestowed on him by The Queen, of the Order of Merit in 1967.

He devoted much of the 1970s to a campaign for a revival of *Troilus and Cressida*. He revised the heroine's part to suit the mezzo-soprano range of Janet Baker, who sang the role at a bargain-basement re-staging at Covent Garden in 1976. Audiences were enthusiastic, the house was full for all performances, but the critics (most of them) still found it "old hat". By now, Walton's health was beginning to fail. He had been operated on for lung cancer in 1966 and he had recovered well. Now other infirmities struck him. He began a third symphony but wrote only a few bars. He wrote a few short works, but the act of creation was an effort for him. It always had been, because of his self-criticism and the high standard he set himself, but inspiration was fifful and fickle in his old age. His 75th and 80th birthday concerts in London were illustrious events which can have left him in no doubt that he was regarded as one of the great men of British music. He died in Ischia three weeks before his 81st birthday.