

ARNOLD'S CELLO CONCERTO A FAILURE?

*It's a
masterpiece!*

More than 20 years after its uneasy premiere, Malcolm Arnold's Cello Concerto has at last found an ardent champion, Raphael Wallfisch. As the cellist records the work for Naxos, **Andrew Achenbach** listens in

There can't be many recent works with a more curious history than the Cello Concerto by Sir Malcolm Arnold. He wrote it, as he did all of his concertos, for a particular artist, in this instance Julian Lloyd Webber. By all accounts, the dedicatee's 1989 premiere with the RPO under Vernon Handley was an uneasy affair and not a critical success: some members of the orchestra were reportedly flummoxed by the thinness of the textures, fuelling rumours that the score was left in an unfinished state. With the composer already in marked decline both mentally and physically, he entrusted David Ellis with the task of putting together a new performing edition of the score. This was finally heard in Germany on June 15, 2003, and met with a cordial reception (the 81-year-old composer, sadly, was too infirm to attend). So, when I learnt that Naxos was committed to recording the work with a cellist of the calibre (and with the canny instinct) of Raphael Wallfisch, I was doubly curious to hear the piece – and you don't need me to tell you that Wallfisch has few peers when it comes to interpreting and championing British cello repertoire from the last 100 years.

Which is how I find myself, on a soggy Monday morning in February, making my way to Withington Girls' School in south

Manchester. There to greet me is the Northern Chamber Orchestra's manager, Jonathan Thackeray, who leads me to the Arts Centre, a particularly handsome facility which would be the envy of any educational establishment in the land. The performers are already in place – with, unexpectedly, the soloist seated facing the orchestra (of which more anon), and Nicholas Ward directing proceedings from the first desk – and busily polishing the first movement prior to the first take at 11am. Certainly, everything sounds securely “under the fingers”, so it comes as no surprise to learn that they have in fact already scored a notable success with the piece at a concert in Macclesfield 10 days earlier. “The audience reaction was most encouraging,” Ward tells me later. “People who know Arnold's music enjoyed it and those who didn't know what to expect were pleasantly surprised.”

The concerto lasts around 21 minutes and is cast in three movements, the first of which comprises a tautly argued *Allegro* in sonata form, with a rhythmic acuity to keep everyone on their toes – some of the off-beat *tuttis* will make you jump – yet shot through with songful lyricism, too (I'm reminded a little of Finzi's Cello Concerto). The *Lento* centrepiece could hardly be more different, a spare-textured, unnervingly bleak essay, dominated by some gaunt two-part counterpoint, with growling bass-lines

reminiscent of the opening of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony and plaintive solos for cor anglais and trumpet (Arnold's own instrument). Bringing up the rear is a roistering jig, which recycles material from the first movement and incorporates both a more poignantly reflective episode and a pithy cadenza before one exuberant final flourish. The sessions proceed with a minimum of fuss, producer David Ellis a quietly authoritative presence in the control room. After three complete takes of the slow movement, Wallfisch still isn't entirely happy with a passage involving some tricky harmonics but Ellis is able to reassure him: “Trust me, Raphael: if it gets any closer, it will sound out of tune!” Two and half hours later, the concerto is safely in the can and the cadenza polished to Wallfisch's satisfaction – all accomplished with time to spare.

Chatting in the control room afterwards, I am amazed to learn that Arnold never consulted Ellis about any aspect of the score, so complete was his trust in his capabilities (a former stalwart at BBC Manchester and an established composer in his own right, his close ties with Arnold date back over half a century). “Not long before he died,” recalls Ellis, “he got in touch again and asked me to rework a very early piano sonata into a

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saxophone concerto. My initial reaction was that he was winding me up but, no, it was what he wanted. That will also be appearing on the CD along with the Flute Concertino and Symphony for Strings – a really strong work.”

Also present is Fiona Southey, another longstanding friend of the composer who was appointed his personal assistant in 2004. “I first got to know Malcolm around the time of the concerto's original composition. I was working for Novello when it acquired the Paterson catalogue, which had been Arnold's publisher up to that point. Then, of course, Malcolm moved to Novello full time, as it were.” I express my surprise that such a powerfully communicative work should have had to wait so long for its first recording. “I'll quote you on that, if you don't mind! What can I say? I'm delighted and thrilled with what I've heard – and Malcolm would have been, too. You know, every time I hear a performance of Malcolm's music, I always feel he's just walked into the room. David has done a superb job with the score – he's so inside the composer's sound world – and

Arnold's Cello Concerto Session Report



take it at face value. Also, there simply wasn't enough for the soloist to do – it is a concerto, after all! But I think we've got a good balance now. You also probably noticed we tweaked the seating arrangement for the recording. Believe it or not, the winds often can't hear what's going on when the cellist is facing out. In fact, they probably heard much more this time round than in the concert performance. It's a bit like playing chamber music, really."

All of which is a potent reminder of the fact that Anglophiles everywhere owe Wallfisch a huge debt of gratitude, for his indefatigable exploration of a staggering quantity of unfairly overlooked repertoire by 20th-century British composers. "It's a body of music that's closest to my heart. There isn't a composer from that period whose music I haven't played. Without exception, they're all great works – not just the pieces for cello and orchestra but there's so much superb chamber and instrumental music too. It's a chance for these pieces to have another life – I suppose I've made it my life's mission in a way and I've just had a great opportunity to do it, from those early BBC studio recordings to countless CDs for the likes of Naxos, BMS, Dutton and Chandos. Oh, and did I mention that John Joubert is writing a concerto for me? A marvellous composer, 84 this year and still very active. To say I'm excited would be an understatement!"

Arnold's Cello Concerto is out on Naxos in September

Raphael Wallfisch and the Northern Chamber Orchestra (above) in sessions for the Cello Concerto of Malcolm Arnold (top); composer and dedicatee, Julian Lloyd Webber (left)

Malcolm would have adored Raphael's playing. His tone is gorgeous, and I think he has caught the chiaroscuro quite beautifully."

This is Wallfisch's third CD with the Northern Chamber Orchestra for Naxos (a fourth is already planned for 2012), and naturally he jumped at the chance to record a concerto by such a major figure. "I do remember hearing that Arnold had written a concerto for Julian [Lloyd Webber] but wasn't able to catch the premiere. I'd known about the revision for a number of years but when I finally took a good look at the score, I quickly realised that, even with David's amendments and fleshing out, I would need to make some changes and additions to the solo part. It was originally pitched very low – too low, in fact, more like a deep baritone than a tenor. The writing looks quite straightforward but actually isn't; it has its own particular challenges and you can't just

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