"THE MUSIC OF CYRIL ROOTHAM (1875 – 1938)"

A CENTENARY TRIBUTE BY ARTHUR HUTCHINGS

(Transcript of a broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on Monday 15 December 1975)

Announcer: The musician, Cyril Rootham, was born 100 years ago last October. Arthur Hutchings suggests that Rootham's invaluable contribution to music at Cambridge has unduly obscured the fine qualities of his varied output as a composer.

Hutchings: Earlier last month, just before Remembrance Sunday, I was listening to a broadcast performance of Sir Arthur Bliss's *'Morning Heroes'*, when an old friend called on me. He's a retired lawyer, not a professional musician so I rose to switch off. But as I walked over towards the radio, he quickly said, "No, no. No, not for a moment. This music seems to ring a bell."

Now this requires a speaker for some of the passages selected for *'Morning Heroes'*. For instance, *Hector's Farewell to Andromache*. And when the spoken declamation came over the radio, my friend said, "Ah, no. It isn't what I thought it was." "Then what did you think it was?" "Well, I wonder if you know any of the choral and orchestral works of Cyril Bradley Rootham? He was a Cambridge don who died just before the war."

I answered a little sarcastically, "Oh, thank you for the information. I was with Rootham two days before he died and I'll show you some photographs of him and his writing on some of the scores he gave me. But which of Rootham's works did you first think this was? I mean, this broadcast of *'Morning Heroes'*?

Of course, I might have guessed the answer. He thought it was the choral orchestral setting of Thomas Moult's elegy, *'Brown Earth'*. Now that's the one major work by Rootham, which, if not exactly a repertory work, does get performed up and down the country from time to time.

So, why not others? The answer comprises several reasons, but before we mention them, I want to comment on the remarkable fact that for a few moments my lawyer friend imagined that Bliss's *'Morning Heroes'* was Rootham's *'Brown Earth'*.

Now, Bliss was wounded in the 1914 war, but during the years just previous to it he'd been up at Cambridge taking an Arts and a Music degree, and there he was not only taught but influenced artistically by Rootham, at least in extended choral works such as *'Lie Strewn the White Flocks'* and *'Morning Heroes'*. And, you see, my friend didn't know that, yet recognised it musically.

When Bliss went to Cambridge, Rootham was organist at St. John's College. He was appointed conductor of Cambridge University Musical Society in 1912 and lecturer in Music in the following year, and he soon became quite the leading personality in Cambridge music making, if not in teaching, for his vigorous extrovert character greatly appealed to young people who played or sang or acted in the productions even if they weren't actually reading Music for a degree. I'm not insulting the Professors of Music, but, you see, until Edward Dent was appointed to the Chair in 1926 the poorly paid Professors divided their interests and held their most interesting and influential appointments in London, at the RCM. I don't know how much teaching Stanford and Wood did in Cambridge during those years when they were continually commuting, but they must have spent a great deal of time composing and editing old music. Good for them! We're glad of the results, but it was good for Cambridge that Rootham's hands were so full that he couldn't live elsewhere – what with lecturing, tutoring, training St. John's choir and playing the college organ, the productions of the university orchestra and chorus.

But Cambridge's good fortune proved to be our loss. The marvel is that he composed as much as he did. All that he's credited with are some charming songs and works for vocal ensemble and the setting of the canticles in E minor for St. John's chapel.

[Musical interlude: Op.90 Evening Service in E minor - Gloria]

That service is still used in one or two cathedrals and colleges and it very well exemplifies three points I want to make about Rootham's style in general.

The first is that it's distinctive. You wouldn't take that service for one by Vaughan Williams or John Ireland or Arnold Bax or Herbert Howells. The point is worth notice because Holst, Vaughan Williams and Ireland were all born in the 1870s. They're Rootham's contemporaries, and both Vaughan Williams and Bax were amongst his close friends. Of course, he shared many of their ideals, especially concerning the setting of English words, but his harmony, texture and musical invention in general were personal, not just reflections of what's now often called the 'English Pastoral' style of the first few decades of this century. That style isn't even a vein: one style among many, in Rootham's expression – as it is in Vaughan Williams's.

The second point I have to make concerns Rootham's fastidious attitude to words. This may have been implanted before he formed his literary tastes at Clifton and Cambridge, for his father, Daniel Rootham, was both cathedral organist and conductor of the Madrigal Society at Bristol. What Rootham deplored in an older generation than his is that their study of German and other symphonies – which was necessary if they were to learn how to integrate long movements – led them to force English words into their symphonic themes and rhythms.

The third point I want to make about Rootham's music is this. Though he was so attracted to the setting of words, he was aware of the weakness often displayed by English composers. The trouble is, as Rootham pointed out with regard to the exquisite choral textures of Samuel Sebastian Wesley, that phrases and paragraphs may be admirable as units but they don't add up to great wholes comparable with symphonic movements built on recurrent motifs and expanding variation of themes.

You can't make an impressive whole by setting one sentence beautifully, then setting the next one to different music because the imagery has changed. But in his young days Rootham knew Stanford. Not just at Cambridge, but as his pupil at the RCM. He knew Stanford's operas as well as his church music, and he saw how recurrent motives in Stanford's instrumental accompaniments helped to integrate word setting which couldn't always fit thematic rhythms. It's not much good attempting the setting of words because they suggest rhythms and harmonies and atmosphere unless you've learnt to invent music without them and to compose at length without their stimulus.

Now Rootham's work as a don consisted not merely in lecturing on musical history or demonstrating short samples of period counterpoint, such as Bachian fugues and canons or Palestrinian motets. He taught thematic composition in whatever style the student favoured, which might be as modern as young Bliss wanted it or as sprightly as young Spike Hughes wanted it.

As Dr Colles wrote in the last edition of 'Grove', the first of Rootham's two symphonies – the C minor - is vigorous and reflects much in the forceful man known in Cambridge in 1932 when it was completed. Despite the limitations of an old recording, perhaps an extract from the first movement will vindicate my claim that for all his love of word setting, Rootham did not depend on words for the invention of vital forward movement and interesting texture.

Here's the opening of that symphony, conducted by the composer in 1936.

[Musical interlude: from Op.86 "Symphony No 1 in C minor"]

Surely that symphony calls loudly for revival, for it's the kind of work musicians like and yet it holds the interest of audiences.

I'm not a Cambridge man myself, but I was invited by my young friends there to see the dramatised versions of *'Jephtha'*, *'Saul'* and other Handel oratorios in the old Guildhall, and the masques, the Purcell

works and the Mozart operas in English. Then to my delight Harvey Grace, the editor of *'The Musical Times',* sent me to report some of these musical events and to remember him to Rootham. Alas, only for one year was I able to enjoy Rootham's company before the fatal stroke which confined him into a bath chair, just as there seemed to be a prospect of a little more time for composition. He was only 62 when he died.

Between the wars Cambridge was very much alive musically, but the pity is that Rootham's happy energy in teaching and music making deferred the time when as Dr Colles says, "He was conscious that his creative energy, far from being exhausted, had not attained complete expression". Colles also says that his later works show an untiring aim to reach farther and grasp higher.

This is well illustrated by Rootham's last major work: the Second Symphony in D major, which was written in the last two years of his life. Here's part of the third movement, as recorded at the first performance in March 1939 under the direction of Sir Adrian Boult.

[Musical interlude: from Op.97 "Symphony No 2 in D major"]

If the Second Symphony was the culmination of Rootham's output, he himself felt that he first showed his full powers in the setting of Milton's *'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'*, which was completed in 1928. It was given at the Gloucester Festival of 1934 after a first performance in Cambridge and it's to be broadcast on Radio 3 on this coming Thursday. Certainly it's his most ambitious work, combining brilliant word setting with symphonic thematicism, and I do hope that many listeners will read Milton's *'Ode'* once more before they hear it.

I can't help wondering myself if this and some of Rootham's other major works would not already be in the repertory if their composer had not been known chiefly as a university teacher or if he'd been wealthy enough to give most of his time to composition of the kind not likely to bring immediate financial reward.

Announcer: That talk was given by Arthur Hutchings. As you've just heard, Rootham's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity' will be broadcast on Radio 3 on Thursday morning, in a centenary concert which begins at twenty to ten *[on 18 December 1975]*.