

SIR WILLIAM WALTON

Malcolm Barry

The death of Sir William Turner Walton in March gives rise to one certainty — Michael Tippett and Alan Bush are now the Grand Old Men of British music. Yet Tippett remains one of the most eternally youthful in looks and preoccupations while Bush's perpetual search for renewals, in both music and personal senses, are a model to younger musicians. Walton, it seems, was the reverse — middle aged throughout his career, a span which embraced a childhood in Oldham and a graceful autumnal existence on a Mediterranean island. Like Gracie Fields, another Lancastrian who 'made it big', Walton's career demonstrates the power of accommodation — the *enfant terrible* or popular entertainer gradually becoming an establishment figure and, in the process, losing the bite and vitality of earlier offerings.

In the 1920s Walton's association with the Sitwells and his comparatively straitened financial circumstances made him eclectic and modernistically inclined. Whether orchestrating for a jazz band or composing *Facade*, Walton demonstrated at once the desire to 'ape the bourgeoisie', so characteristic of the 1920s, and the

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essentially phoney nature of the revolt. *Facade* (1922) is clever, the conception of short snappy jazzy pieces illustrating the clever wordage of Edith Sitwell's poetry. It is amusing but ultimately represents its title all too well.

Similarly with the other great work of the 1920s, the *Viola Concerto* (1929). The viola is not well represented in the concerto repertoire, the more brilliant violin occupying the limelight, but the examples of Lionel Tertis and Paul Hindemith, player and composer respectively, did much to lift the neglected instrument from its obscurity during the 1920s. Walton's Concerto makes a contribution to this, too, but there is a distinct tension in the work between the modernism of the language and Walton's mixed convictions about such modernism. The result is a hybrid work.

Walton was always destined to be a 'public' composer: the scandal surrounding *Facade* caught general attention. The 1930s saw him move easily into this role with two works that confirmed him as one of Britain's leading composers. First, *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931). This is an oratorio, in the English choral tradition of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* and countless 19th century works of lesser distinction. *Belshazzar's Feast*, however, sounds pagan: its occasionally hard modernisms did not commend it to the guardians of that tradition but the advocacy of Malcolm Sargent, who conducted the first performance, ensured that it secured a place in the repertoire. With this work, mixing a self-conscious modernism and an English tradition, Walton had really arrived.

But a composer was not a composer who had not written a symphony and Walton's second major work of the 1930s was in that form. This was written in 1935. His hesitations over it and his changes of mind over placing of movements have been documented in issues of the *Musical Times*.



The episode clearly supports Hugh Ottoway's opinion (in the new edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*) that Walton was a 'reluctant' composer, not in the sense of putting notes to paper but rather in the final release of a finished work and consequent public commitment.


By this time Walton was making money — big money — out of film scores. His music for the Olivier Shakespeare canon, filmed to stir morale in the Second World War, stands as an excellent example of the mixture between craft and commerce. With this music, in which traces of the abrasive sounds derived from Hindemith can still be heard, Walton became very much the British composer, the rallier of the troops,

the distinguished figure. But by this time it is questionable as to whether he was really interested in his own musical development. He had married an Argentinian woman of considerable means, which enabled him to move to the Mediterranean. His music after 1945 is a curious mixture of autumnal feeling and occasional lurches after the recapture of a lost youth — a *Second Symphony* (1960) and two operas, *Troilus and Cressida* (1954) and *The Bear* (1967). All were received politely and turned aside from. For by this time new stars were in the ascendancy, particularly Britten and Tippett.

Walton's remaining years produced a series of works, crafted well enough in an English sort of manner (ie, provincial in terms of European art music) but somehow drifting further away into isolation. It is significant that Oxford University Press, his publishers, actively promoted his earlier music in his 80th year: his more recent output was honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

In no sense could Walton be called an heroic figure in the manner of Britten or Tippett or even Vaughan Williams. His natural predilections emerged in the 1920s and found their perfect counterpart in the clever, amusing but ultimately vacuous ethos of the Sitwells and their friends. He, and *Facade*, stand as a perfect commentary of the *avant-garde* of the 1920s. His most enduring work, *Belshazzar's Feast* stands at right angles to the tradition it furthered and, in that, is of interest. Other than that, he stands as the epitome of a shooting star in the world of music and a reputation as much deserving of sympathy as of criticism. Except that the current Gramophone Classical Catalogue has more than two columns of recordings of his music. Tippett rates just over one column and Alan Bush one single entry. So this emptiness must suit some tastes. . .

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