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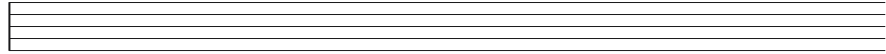
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‘DISPARAGEMENT AND INVIDIOUS COMPARISONS’? ASSESSING CRITICAL REACTIONS TO MATHIAS’S FIRST SYMPHONY

Nicholas Jones

A composer can’t, and shouldn’t, expect to please everybody. What is really important to me is whether what I’ve produced is exactly what I *mean*, and on that I’m prepared to stand. That doesn’t imply, of course, that I don’t think that some of my works are better than others – that is inevitable. One of the problems in modern music is that some composers tend to feel that they should be saying what they *ought* to mean; they’re thinking about the process of writing too much, and relying too little on the tremendous power of the instinct, which must be trusted in the end.

These words by William Mathias, conveyed to A.J. Heward Rees in 1975,¹ offer a revealing insight into a central tenet of his compositional *raison d’être* – the triumph of instinct over process. But the underlying ‘defensive’ tone in evidence here, within the context of the interview, is equally if not more fascinating. This tone was prompted no doubt by the interviewer’s probing, though well-meant, questioning: having opened the exchange by suggesting that the composer has pursued his ‘own vision rather courageously, if not relentlessly, through a galaxy of receding “isms” and fashions, thereby risking the usual disparagement and invidious comparisons’,² Heward Rees then probes further by asking Mathias about audience reaction to his music. This is quickly but tactfully followed by a question regarding critical reaction to his First Symphony, a work which, according to the interviewer, caused ‘something of an argument in the national press’ at the time of its first performance. Mathias’s response was forthright:

I didn’t see all of it, as it happens, and I didn’t bother to follow it up. So far as I’m concerned, that particular work is exactly what I meant to say for good or ill, and even looking at it now I wouldn’t alter any or very much of it. To me, when you hear a new piece, it’s like meeting a new person – not necessarily the composer’s persona; that could be the least important thing about the music. It’s a new experience, and it can be a case of either liking or disliking on first meeting.³

So what exactly did this ‘argument in the national press’ amount to? And did it have any effect on the way Mathias’s music was, and continues, to be perceived? Before addressing these questions it will be useful to put the work in context.

¹ ‘Perspectives and Prospects’, *Welsh Music* Vol. 4 No. 10, p. 13 (original emphasis).

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.



The First Symphony was the last major work of the composer's 'first period'. The works from this period, as I have described elsewhere, exhibit the hallmarks that we have come to associate with Mathias's style: 'a punchy rhythmic drive, an inventive manipulation of thematic material, a liking for vivacious contrapuntal textures, a penchant for historical formal givens, and an ostensibly tonal but modally inflected harmonic language – all of which [is] characteristically crowned by an emphatic optimism.'⁴ The symphony may be referred to as 'transitional', leading from this early period to the new tonal and structural direction of *Litanies* and the First String Quartet (both of 1967).⁵ The symphony also confirmed Mathias's reputation as one of the most promising young British composers of his generation. In the context of Mathias's own compositional development, then, the symphony is clearly a pivotal work. Yet it is problematic too. Indeed, my main argument is that, through no apparent fault of its own, the work possesses a rather negative and unhelpful subtext. But before I come to explain why I think this to be the case, the discussion will initially focus on examining critical reactions to the work, particularly those found in music journals and newspapers. From these we can start to build a picture of what aspects of the work gave commentators most pleasure, or conversely, most concern.

An article from *The Times*, published a day after the première of the work, gives a rather upbeat and positive report of the piece:

Mr William Mathias, the 31-year-old Welsh composer whose Symphony No. 1 was given its first performance last night at the concluding concert of the Llandaff festival [Cardiff] by whom it was commissioned, is not among those musicians of his generation who regard tonality as dead and the conventional four movement symphony as a blind alley down which it is hardly worth venturing. His writing expresses an optimistic belief in the survival of both.

This does not extend, however, to a slavish addition to form. He reverses the position of the Scherzo and slow movement and music progresses through a series of dramatically contrasted episodes rather than through a pattern of statement and development. [...]

It is a symphony bright in colour as well as in spirit. Obviously a young man's music, and Mr. Hugo Rignold prompted the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra to some lively playing that admirably matched the temperament of the music.⁶

Robert Henderson's review of the work for *The Musical Times* is in similar vein:

The First Symphony of the Welsh composer William Mathias, [...] is a work which takes its stand firmly in favour of the supposition that there is still a good deal of interesting music to be written in the key of C major. It uses a standard orchestra, with important additional parts for harp, piano and celesta, and the pattern of its four movements follows established symphonic tradition. And yet within this accepted framework the Symphony is always striking and keenly imaginative. The strong, forceful character of the composer's invention not only draws one immediately into the symphonic argument, but his deft handling of the material keeps one closely involved, for at least three of its movements, in that conflict of opposing tonalities from which the composer himself obviously derives his greatest creative excitement. [...] [T]here was no doubt through the work as a whole that it fulfilled extraordinarily well at least one of his own requirements, that it should make an immediate and direct impact.⁷

⁴ 'Something to Shout About: Mathias's String Quartet No. 1', *The Musical Times* 141 (Autumn 2000), p. 24.

⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 24–32, for further elaboration.

⁶ 'Welsh composer's symphony for Llandaff festival. From our Special Correspondent [probably Kenneth Loveland] – Cardiff, June 23', *The Times*, June 24, 1966, p. 18.

⁷ 'Llandaff: Mathias's Symphony', *The Musical Times* 107 (August 1966), p. 695.

Both reviews highlight that the symphony follows a conventional four-movement plan. As Malcolm Boyd has pointed out,⁸ the same sequence of movements (sonata-form first movement – scherzo – slow movement – finale) is to be found in Walton's First Symphony (perhaps Mathias turned to this model as a result of the attention given to the première of Walton's Second Symphony in 1960). Yet other points of contact between these two works are apparent: both were written by composers in their early thirties and accordingly can be cited as exemplars of 'young man's music'; both composers' finales are goal-oriented and conclude optimistically; and, although stylistically Mathias and Walton are quite some distance apart (the astringent harmonic language and the angst-ridden character of the first three movements of Walton's work were not features that Mathias was willing to absorb), there is still some common ground to be found: the perfect fourth-related theme of the fugue in Walton's finale⁹ corresponds with Mathias's own preference for themes and harmonies built around this interval (see my discussion, below).

Both reviewers are also perceptive in highlighting two other important features of the work. Henderson mentions 'the conflict of opposing tonalities', whilst the first reviewer states that the music 'progresses through a series of dramatically contrasted episodes rather than through a pattern of statement and development'. Contrast is in fact fundamental to Mathias's compositional technique, and although the music is not as episodic and fragmentary as it was to become in *Litanies* and beyond, the element of contrast, particularly between adjacent musical ideas, comes to the fore in the symphony and anticipates the change of direction Mathias was to take after its completion.

A clear sense of this can be gained from examination of the sketch material, which is housed at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.¹⁰ Despite the paucity of precompositional material available for the work (suggesting that a significant bulk of it is either missing or has yet to be lodged), there exists an untitled and unpaginated sheet of manuscript (24-stave, A3 format) which amounts to a 'table of motifs', on which Mathias has set out the main musical materials (themes, as well as actual motifs) that make up the first movement.¹¹ I have attempted to show in Table 1 how this relates to the exposition section in the published score (OUP, 1969). Table 1 also highlights the 'conflict of opposing tonalities', achieved mainly in this section through tritonal polar relationships (see the first subject, for instance). One can also deduce that Mathias's method of attaining contrast applies not only to the 'macro' (adjacent themes) but also to the 'micro' (adjacent motifs). This is demonstrated at the start of the work where Mathias juxtaposes quite disparate ideas in quick succession (see Ex. 1; I have mapped motifs (a) to (f) from Table 1 onto this example). It is indeed fascinating to trace the 'motifs' set out on this sketch throughout this first movement and to see how they are subsumed within the overall sonata-form design; such an investigation confirms the first reviewer's contention that the music is not 'developmental' in the conventional (Beethovenian) sense of the word.

⁸ *William Mathias* (University of Wales Press, 1978), p. 26.

⁹ At Fig. 112 in OUP's 1936 miniature score.

¹⁰ *William Mathias 1: Music Manuscripts* (C1994/31, 18)

¹¹ I say 'precompositional', but there is a possibility that he drew up this 'table' after completing the movement, although I cannot see any reason why he should have done this.

Allegro moderato (♩ = c. 104)

Example 1: Mathias's Symphony No.1, first movement, opening

Motif	Bar(s)	Orchestration	Description
(a)	1	tpts, tbnes, str (<i>pizz.</i>)	Juxtaposition of 5 motifs within the first few seconds
(b)	2	lower str, pno	
(c)	2–3	obs, cls	
(d)	3	hns, hp	
(e)	3	timp	
(f)	3	vlns I and II, pno	First subject, theme 1 (pedal note = G; interval of perf 4th prevalent)
(g)	8	obs, cls, bsns, d. bsn, str (<i>pizz.</i>)	First subject, theme 2 (tonal anchor = C#)
(h)	13–14	picc, fls, xyl	Semiquaver pattern based, like motif (b), on interval of perf 4th
		[Figs. 1-3	Sequential repetition of (f) and (g)]
(i)	Fig. 3	timp, lower str	Transition section - synco-pated rhythmic pattern on pedal B _♭ (plus a 'countermotif' on piano and <i>pizz.</i> strings)
(j)	4 bars after Fig. 3	hn 1, vc	Second subject, theme 1 (octatonic scale on B _♭ : B _♭ -C _♭ -D _♭ -D-E-F-G-A _♭)
(k)	8 bars after Fig. 3	fls, cls, celesta	Second subject, theme 2
[not labelled]	2 bars before Fig. 5	hn 2, vlas, vcs	Second subject, theme 3 (continuation of motif (k))
[not labelled]	Fig. 6	fls, obs, cls, pno, vlns	1-bar link into Development section; the motif (constructed from interval of perf 4th) is a variant of 'countermotif' (at Fig. 3) and motifs (b) and (h).

Table 1: 'Table of motifs' for Mathias's First Symphony, first movement

The apparent absence of ‘disparagement’ and ‘invidious comparisons’ in these two reviews perhaps can be attributed partly to the partisan nature of the work’s première (a symphony composed by a Welshman, premièred in Wales’s capital city) and partly to the fact that both reviewers seem somewhat sympathetic to Mathias’s music. However, by the time the symphony reached London three years later (a high-profile affair given by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Charles Groves at the Festival Hall) critical reaction was noticeably more hostile:

The London première of William Mathias’s First Symphony, [...] proved to be somewhat disappointing. Not that Mathias showed himself lacking in technical ability – far from it: the work had any amount of skill – what seemed absent was inspiration. At no point did the musical argument take charge of events and project images of genuine impact. The most excellent feature of the score was the orchestration – always lucid and well balanced, and, in the Adagio, sensitive and imaginative. This slow movement was, indeed, the best section of the symphony and the only one of the four to achieve something at all individual. [...] In the symphony as a whole he let himself down by attempting to hang weighty arguments on material unsuitable for extended treatment. The first symphony is always the crucial one for a symphonist, and Mathias failed the test, evolving a somewhat portentous construction from themes of astonishing drabness. There was some vitality in the Scherzo and the rondo-like finale, but as one cast thought back upon the work as a whole only the Adagio seemed at all significant.¹²

Even more extreme is the following rather provocative, not to mention (by today’s standards) politically incorrect review by Alan Blyth:

Mathias’s First Symphony [...] has aroused more discussion than its workmanlike, often pleasing qualities would seem to require. Why is it that anything emanating from Wales, and not only in the arts, always produces a wave of special pleading, as though everyone in the principality were afraid that they would be ignored if they did not shout? There have been many symphonies in recent years (Rubbra’s in particular) that are more worthy of ballyhoo than this one.

It is easy to declare that the outer movements are derivative; more seriously, they did not seem to add to our stock of imaginative experience. Always confidently argued, often harmonically teasing and rhythmically exciting, they nevertheless depend too much on a general ethos prevalent 30 or 40 years ago, which would perhaps matter less if the ideas were more striking in themselves.¹³

‘It is easy to declare that the outer movements are derivative’: but derivative of what, or of whom? Perhaps we are now getting closer to the sort of (unsubstantiated) comments that provoked Heward Rees to suggest that Mathias’s music had been subjected to ‘disparagement and invidious comparisons’. But one may argue that because Mathias’s style is ‘eclectic’,¹⁴ it is often difficult to refrain from making comparisons in some shape or form. At least Blyth is a little more specific with regard to the scherzo, stating that it is ‘a drop from that endless source of invention, the *Rite*’. Other commentators have made comparisons, too. Trevor Roberts associates the same movement with the film scores of the American composer Bernard Hermann,¹⁵ while WH Perry likens the slow movement with Bartók ‘in one of his nocturnal moods’.¹⁶ The majority of commentators, though, cite Tippett as having the profoundest effect on Mathias’s musical language. Malcolm

¹² Geoffrey Crankshaw, ‘Mathias’ First’, *Music and Musicians* 17 (March 1969), p. 57.

¹³ ‘Music in London: Mathias’, *The Musical Times* 110 (March 1969), p. 279.

¹⁴ In the Heward Rees interview (op. cit, p. 11), Mathias states that he is ‘quite happy’ with this term.

¹⁵ See his article, ‘William Mathias’s First Symphony’, *Welsh Music* Vol. 3 No. 9 (Spring 1971), pp. 2–7.

Boyd, for instance, states that Mathias's slow movement 'is leisurely and expansive. Even more than the slow movement of the Concerto for Orchestra [1964], it seems to inhabit the same world as the second act of Tippett's opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*, and Mathias's imagination has clearly seized on the florid, intertwining strands of Tippett's music, its warm brass colourings, and the ritual magic of its silvery percussion writing.'¹⁷

Another rich and fruitful model for Mathias's symphony, it seems to me, is Tippett's Second Symphony (1956–7). In an article dating from 1985, Mathias described this work as 'superb' and 'proud', 'a celebratory work which succeeds in expanding in purely musical terms (like the Piano Concerto) on *The Midsummer Marriage*.'¹⁸ Admiration for this work evidently led Mathias to some discreet 'borrowings', the most striking of which being the similarity between the openings to both works: the scurrying bass lines, the presentation of highly mobile first-subject material on high strings – the aural connexions one can make from listening to both openings side by side is quite revealing. Also, the fact that both works are 'in C' points towards the tantalizing possibility of the following lineage: Stravinsky, Symphony in C – Tippett, Symphony No. 2 – Mathias, Symphony No. 1. This is not as fanciful as it may first seem. Malcolm Boyd, for instance, has pointed out that the rising semitone, falling perfect fourth motif that begins Mathias's first subject (F#-G-D; see Ex. 1) is the same motif (B-C-G) that plays such a significant role in Stravinsky's symphony.¹⁹ But, of course, for this lineage to work in any meaningful way there obviously needs to be some relationship on Mathias's part to a concept of neoclassicism, and although a thorough investigation of this topic is beyond the scope of this present article, it is nevertheless one worth pursuing for the moment.²⁰

Perhaps neoclassicism was what Blyth was referring to in his review when he said that the outer movements of Mathias's work depended too much on 'a general ethos prevalent 30 or 40 years ago'. But how relevant is this 'ethos' when applied to Mathias's First Symphony? Writing in 1990 Geraint Lewis made the following comment:

[Mathias] is by temperament an essentially classical, controlled composer as opposed to a freely romantic one. [...] But even allowing for the occasional Stravinskian gesture this is not a conventionally neo-classical score in which the classicism is cosmetic. The tonal argument underlying the symphony is integral to its articulation and the movements evolve organically both in themselves and as part of the whole.²¹

Leaving aside the fact that research in recent years has seriously undermined the assumption that musical works can 'evolve organically', I would tend to agree with Lewis on his verdict that 'this is not a conventionally neo-classical score'. Indeed the classicism is deeply ingrained, and not only in the carefully-planned tonal organization,²² but also in its classical attributes of resolution, of synthesis, of conver-

¹⁶ 'William Mathias's Symphony', *The Birmingham Post*, October 14, 1966.

¹⁷ *William Mathias*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁸ 'And all is always now', in Geraint Lewis, ed.: *Michael Tippett O.M.: a celebration* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Baton Press, 1985), p. 247.

¹⁹ *William Mathias*, p. 27.

²⁰ For an fascinating insight into the relationship between Tippett's Second Symphony and Stravinsky's neoclassical works, see Kenneth Gloag, 'Tippett's Second Symphony, Stravinsky and the language of neoclassicism: towards a critical framework', in *Tippett Studies*, ed. David Clarke (CUP, 1999), pp. 78–94.

²¹ CD liner note for a 1990 recording of the work (Nimbus NI 5260), conducted by the composer.

²² See Boyd, *William Mathias*, pp. 26–29 for an illuminating discussion on this topic.

gence onto a centre; of formal continuities; of a balance and reconciliation of contrasts; of communicating in a direct and lucid manner.²³ One may go further and argue that this music has no axe to grind, no 'agenda'; rather, it is an honest and meaningful engagement with a number of classical principles without irony or sarcasm, or without the content or style being in any way 'anachronistic'.

But Mathias's refusal to engage with contemporary stylistic and technical developments, preferring instead to pursue his 'own vision rather courageously, if not relentlessly, through a galaxy of receding "isms" and fashions', as Heward Rees puts it, must have exasperated and perplexed people at the time. This is clearly manifest in the reviews by Blyth and Crankshaw. But one can also detect in these reviews clear evidence of a certain perception of Mathias's music: namely, that his music, though endlessly inventive, eminently communicative, and put together with great skill and facility, is largely inconsequential, and fails to convey any vital substance. This 'received opinion', which still has currency even today, some 14 years after the composer's death, is thus a legacy from this time, when critical reaction to Mathias's music was acutely polarized. This is not to suggest that this view did not exist before the symphony was composed, but the high-profile status of the composition itself – the symphony as *the* consecrated genre – presented commentators with the opportunity to focus their views, for and against.

Sadly, some of the more adverse elements of this criticism have proven difficult to shake off. The symphony, then, unwittingly became heavily involved in – some might say largely responsible for – the formulation of that rather negative perception. This received opinion might strike some as being rather unfair, since there are other works in Mathias's oeuvre that offer perfectly good counter-examples, such as the profound and essential String Quartet No. 1 or the wonderfully vibrant and dramatic *Elegy for a Prince* (1972).

The fortieth anniversary this year of the première of Mathias's First Symphony offers a good opportunity to pause and reflect on this charismatic, invigorating, yet problematic work. Indeed, it might have been the work that put Mathias on the musical map and established him as a force to be reckoned with, but in terms of the manner in which his music is perceived it was also the work that was to do him the most damage in the long term.

Musical example reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press

²³ It might come as no great surprise to learn that a lecture Mathias delivered in 1991, a year before his death, was entitled: 'Forward To Mozart? – A Composer's Manifesto' (Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1991).