

EDMUND RUBBRA (1901-86)

SOMMCD 0179

Céleste Series

SYMPHONY NO. 2, op. 45

BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sir Adrian Boult*

SYMPHONY NO. 4, op. 53 (first performance)

BBC Symphony Orchestra, Edmund Rubbra**

Symphony No. 2, op. 45	[37:12]
1 I. Lento rubato	12:53
2 II. Scherzo: Vivace assai	5:13
3 III. Adagio tranquillo	12:28
4 IV. Rondo: Allegretto amabile – Coda: Presto	6:58
Symphony No. 4, op. 53	[28:32]
5 I. Con moto	13:02
6 II. Intermezzo: Allegretto grazioso	3:31
7 III. Introduzione: Grave e molto calmo – Allegro maestoso	11:58
8 Edmund Rubbra introduces his 4th Symphony	6:21
Total Duration:	72:23

* Live broadcast recording from Maida Vale Studios, London on October 8, 1954

** Recorded live at the Royal Albert Hall, London on August 14, 1942;
Rubbra's introduction broadcast on BBC Radio's *This Week at the Proms* on August 9, 1942

Restoration and Mastering: Ted Kendall

Front-cover photo: Sir Adrian Boult and Edmund Rubbra, Llandaff Cathedral, 1963, courtesy of *Western Mail*. See booklet for details

Design: Andrew Giles

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Writing of Edmund Rubbra over 70 years ago, the musician and commentator Arthur Hutchings stated: "Rubbra is first and foremost a symphonist; he has devoted the first years of his musical life to the perfection of a medium in which he needs room to move; where such room is denied, we cannot yet find his representative style, and if there are readers whose friends have told them that they received a tremendous musical experience at first hearing Rubbra's Third or Fourth symphony, I can only beg them to wait until they have opportunity of the same experience, and not to seek out other works by the same composer which happen to be more accessible, until they can examine them in the light of his large-scale orchestral writing".

In 1946, when that sentence was published in *British Music of Our Time*, a Pelican paperback, Rubbra was 45-years-old and had completed one-third of his eventual 165 works – his final opus number being the opening draft of an unfinished Twelfth Symphony (1986). A composer who went on to complete 11 symphonies alongside a Sinfonia Concertante for piano and orchestra (Op. 38) as well as – following the Eleventh Symphony – an extended Sinfonietta for Large String Orchestra (in duration, the equal of either the Tenth or Eleventh Symphonies), and also having begun a Twelfth Symphony at the time of his death, manifestly fulfilled Hutchings' assertion that: "Rubbra is first and foremost a symphonist".

Hutchings was not alone. One could cite similar statements from a number of noted contemporaries that the individuality of Rubbra's early symphonic works revealed him to be a composer whose music, as fellow-composer Robert Simpson wrote: "has all the deep thoughtfulness and lack of surface brilliance typical of this composer, the

most substantial of whose works will withstand long familiarity and deep examination. No-one who takes music seriously should fail to get to know this work thoroughly".

The work about which Simpson was writing in 1978 was Rubbra's Second Symphony, which, in its original version, received its first performance, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, in December 1938, 20 months after the premiere of the First. It was Boult who was the dedicatee of No. 2, and who conducts the Symphony on this disc – a performance Rubbra himself described as "quite stupendous" in a note to his publisher, Bernard de Nevers, on October 11, 1954, three days after the broadcast from which this recording is taken. Significantly, when Sir Adrian was a guest on BBC Radio's *Desert Island Discs*, he chose Rubbra's Second Symphony as one of his selections.

The Second Symphony, as with every one of Rubbra's major works, is wholly remarkable for the consistency of the composer's powerful individual creative character, its profound sense of unhurried yet purposeful forward momentum and deep seriousness of purpose. Here is a major symphony, without question, as wholly individual as that by any great symphonist of the past and all the more remarkable for it being only the second (or third, if one includes Op. 38) symphonic work in Rubbra's output.

It falls into four movements, with a *Scherzo* placed second. Such a simple outline of the plan of the work in no way prepares the listener for the astoundingly original nature of the music itself. For this is music owing little to the established norms of melodic thematic material with underlying harmonies, of 'first' and 'second' (contrasting) subjects of sonata form – such norms as may well have inspired Rubbra and his contemporaries throughout their composing lives. The Second Symphony remains so utterly original in its language from start to finish that almost any application of tradition is bound to mislead.

The Symphony's language is wholly based on what one might term linear composition. Everything in the work grows from the very first idea, announced at once by first and second violins, violas and cellos in *unison*, and without a clear tonality. D minor may be thought of as a tonal centre but only in passing.

It is this long-breathed noble idea (a contemplation perhaps of a mind at peace with itself, musing over some deeply rooted considerations) from which the entire work evolves and grows. Other lines gradually emerge, unhurriedly, yet with constant forward momentum, creating a musical tapestry of genuine inner life and building to a powerful climax of considerable nobility of thought.

Here, set before us, is a 'new' music founded upon traditional themes and bases such as were familiar (long before the evolution of equal temperament and established keys) to the Elizabethans and revived by Rubbra into a great stretch of music for modern orchestra fully demanding the title of 'symphony' (recalling that the root of the word – 'sinfonia' – means 'sounding together').

Attentive listeners will find themselves drawn into this living tapestry of music. As the conductor Vernon Handley wrote of the Second Symphony: "[the first movement is one] where the development never ceases; no respite from the forcefulness of the first statement is allowed until the last two pages, and here the strings settle uncompromisingly in the key of D whereas the *teneramente* oboe line is equally certain that it is in A minor".

Rubbra is not so hidebound as to deny himself the broader basics of tonality. For him, tonality was "a natural force, like gravity" (as Robert Simpson was to write elsewhere). For the *Scherzo*, Rubbra's self-denial of thematic variety is loosened. Rhythmically as

supple as the Elizabethan madrigalists (thereby never losing sight of the work's more profound impulses), a plethora of short rhythmic themes are set against one another: a vision of energetic youths playing in a courtyard, perhaps – not children, for there is much power and strength in this muscular art – before the finely contemplative slow movement (again, a solo opening line, on a single viola) unfolds.

We are now fully within the composer's ambit. The slow movement, as in all great symphonies, offers a new view of the established world, its language no longer 'new' in our experience as we follow the threads where the initial idea takes us – contemplative, certainly, as we might expect, but never still. Always seeking out a new view of what has been expressed within an unvarying pulse, it rises to an extraordinarily powerful climax, a vision that does not take us by surprise. The movement achieves a tremendous emotional impact (especially in Boult's performance) before subsiding, from which point the finale emerges, a combination of 'old' Rondo dance form with subtly irregular rhythmic pulses, everything put at the service of a sane view of the world that knows the symphony must end positively, all other emotions discarded in the vibrancy of the composer's essential serenity and optimism.

Rubbra's Second Symphony was extensively revised in 1946, when he reduced the original triple woodwind requirements to double, making a cut in the first movement and rewriting the concluding pages to end the work in D major. Rubbra himself conducted the first performance of this revised version at the Cheltenham Festival that same year, having been demobilised from the Army at the end of 1945.

Rubbra was one of a number of established composers and musicians called up for military service in 1941. He was 40 when he was conscripted, and although he saw little in the way of action, his time for composition was severely limited. With the score

of his Fourth Symphony unfinished, he managed to find sufficient private time to complete the work, dedicating it to Sir Henry Wood who accepted it for performance during the 1942 Proms Season at the Royal Albert Hall.

The premiere on August 14 that year made a considerable impression – not least for Rubbra conducting the performance in his Army uniform, military regulations at the time requiring him to do so. Three works by Beethoven conducted by Wood comprised the first half of the programme, with Boult conducting three movements from Holst's *The Planets* following Rubbra's premiere. It is that performance that is issued for the first time on this CD.

With Wood and Boult involved in that Prom (which began at the wartime start of 6pm) it should be clear that the BBC Symphony Orchestra had been well primed for the other works on the programme. As Paul Conway has written, they sounded equally assured in the Rubbra: "It is a remarkably powerful and well-played performance with all the unique authority a composer can sometimes bring in conducting his or her own work". He went on to say: "Rubbra's Fourth Symphony is an epic wartime work, as remarkable for its serene, other-worldly opening movement as the Brucknerian contrapuntal grandeur of its bipartite Finale".

One cannot but agree with such assessment, and it is significant to contemplate the generally-held (and correct) view that Rubbra's first four symphonies – coming as they did within less than six years (the Fourth was completed in short score just before Rubbra was called up) – represent a 'set' of such works, a series temporarily halted by the war.

Rubbra's Fifth Symphony followed in 1948, the six-year gap between Nos. Four and Five unprecedented in his earlier output. It marked a new development in the composer's

*Programme title page
for first performance of
Rubbra's 4th Symphony*

ROYAL ALBERT HALL
(Manager: C. S. Taylor)

BBC
PROMENADE CONCERTS

SIR HENRY WOOD'S FORTY-EIGHTH SEASON

Friday, 14 August 1942 at 6 p.m.

BEETHOVEN CONCERT

Part I conducted by Sir Henry Wood

OVERTURE Prometheus *Beethoven*
CONCERTO No. 4, in G, for Pianoforte and Orchestra *Beethoven*
SYMPHONY No. 6, in F (Pastoral) *Beethoven*

Part II conducted by Sir Adrian Boult

SYMPHONY No. 4 *Edmund Rubbra*
(First performance)
(Conducted by the Composer)

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(b) SATURN }
(c) JUPITER }

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symphonic thinking and was the first of his symphonies to be recorded commercially (by Sir John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra for HMV). Significantly, it was also the first to which he gave a key – B-flat major – following the revised ending of No. 2, in which the final tonality of D major was no longer avoided (as it had been in the first version, a far fainter implication, if not a final settlement).

The reality of a ‘home’ tonal basis over an entire work had been outlined with the finest subtleties and creative skill in the Fourth Symphony. Its appearance in the Fifth was not, therefore, a change of direction. Robert Layton (a pupil of Rubbra’s) described the beginning of the Fourth as “one of the most beautiful openings not just in Rubbra but in all English music”.

It is also, perhaps, one of the simplest in that Rubbra takes a basic major triad (in this case, E major) and makes us listen to those three notes anew: B falls to E then rises to G sharp, as the violins unveil the clear statement of musical fact. But it is what, equally subtly, goes on underneath that acts as harmonic propulsion. In wartime London, over the air, this must have sounded as beatific a vision as Vaughan Williams’ Fifth Symphony did in June 1943 (another Prom, also at the Royal Albert Hall, and also conducted by the composer – a recording available on SOMM Céleste CD 071).

If the differences between Rubbra’s Fourth and Vaughan Williams’ Fifth Symphonies (the latter dedicated to Sibelius, beginning with the subtlest quotation from the Finn) are many, the initial mood of both first movements is similar, though in temporal and structural terms they soon go their own ways.

The structure of Rubbra’s Fourth is remarkable. Its first and third movements are comparable in length (13 and 12 minutes respectively in this performance) and

separated by a short (three-minute) Intermezzo, the differentiations and balance making a perfectly-judged totality. The composer’s invention (indeed, his inspiration) is notably original in evolving those initial basic ideas, which, as they unfold, unhurriedly (if marked ‘Con moto’), build and develop into a succession of organic variants whose expressive range through the growth and release of tension demonstrates, yet again, the quality of Rubbra’s thought.

Following that lengthy first movement, the relatively brief Intermezzo in waltz time views aspects of the earlier material in more direct – and certainly less complicated – fashion, a perfect foil to the earlier deeper thoughts before the extended finale, a movement headed (in the score) as being in two distinct parts. Some may feel that another great symphonist – Sibelius – is recalled through the combination that transfigures the first movement of the Finn’s Fifth Symphony (even if the processes are broadly dissimilar) with the introductory first part of Rubbra’s finale serving as a slow movement – “as in many respects it is”, according to the composer – before the tension is released to carry the music onwards to the triumphant closing pages.

This CD is completed with an illustrated talk by Rubbra himself on the Fourth Symphony (broadcast five days before the Proms performance) in which he sums up his work as “rounded, complete and independent; subject to its own laws”. Exactly.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2018

The cover photograph was taken on March 5, 1963 at Llandaff Cathedral on the occasion of Sir Adrian Boult rehearsing Rubbra’s Sixth Symphony with the BBC Welsh Orchestra for a live broadcast later that evening.

TECHNICAL NOTE

There are two definitive recordings of Rubbra symphonies in this issue – the composer described Boult's reading of the Second as such, and the premiere of the Fourth he conducted himself; the uniformity of tempi between the illustrations in the introductory talk and the actual performance indicates that he got exactly what he wanted from the orchestra.

Although significant both as a performance and an historical document, the recording of the Fourth has technical faults which have prevented its issue until now, the most obvious being speed, and hence pitch, instability. The BBC, like other organisations, laboured under great difficulties during the war – equipment was in short supply; many programme and engineering staff were lost to the Forces; and troubles with power supply and availability of programme lines were the rule rather than the exception. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the odd technical fault occurred. The speed variation (or 'wow') on the nine 78rpm sides which carry this first performance is partly cyclical, but has random lurches here and there – it may be that the drive idler of the cutting turntable was out of adjustment and therefore 'hunting'. Whatever the cause was, it had to be dealt with, and for this I turned to CEDAR Respeed. Carefully driven, this removed the distracting wow and made for much more comfortable and intelligible listening. The piano examples in the talk were similarly afflicted, and similarly treated. The talk itself was copied many years ago from worn acetates, and required much detailed work to remove distracting thumps, clicks and swishes.

I mentioned that the Fourth was recorded on nine sides of 78rpm disc. This in itself caused problems at side changes. As the cutter moves towards the centre of the

disc, the linear groove speed falls and the curvature of the groove increases, causing the sound to become duller, with increased distortion, particularly in loud passages. The 'butt' changeovers between sides meant that there was no possibility of moving the edit point for camouflage purposes, and this became particularly awkward when I discovered that three of the sides are 'dubs' – that is, disc-to-disc copies. The reason for this is not obvious, but it imposes the limitations of a 1942 gramophone pickup and turntable, plus two sets of end-of-side distortion, on the sound of these sides. Fortunately, I have been able to ameliorate much of this, and most of the side changes pass unnoticed, but at one point the quality change between the outgoing and incoming sides is very obvious – the 'dubbed' outgoing side is dull and congested, whilst the incoming 'direct' side is bright and clear, and try as I might I couldn't disguise the change in quality. Nevertheless, even with these residual defects, the recording is now a very effective reminder of a thrilling occasion – the audience certainly found it so!

By comparison, the Second was relatively straightforward. Recorded onto good quality tape from the BBC transmission and then transferred to microgroove acetate disc, this gave a good 'Maida Vale One' sound from the outset. The BBC's main orchestral studio gave a clear, moderately reverberant sound, only marred by a tendency for the sound to harden in climaxes – this I have eased as far as possible. The remainder of the restoration work largely consisted of removing the fairly well-damped heterodyne whistles of the off-air signal and cleaning up swishes and gravelly passages on the aged but not battered acetate.

As ever, the point of this meticulous work is to bring the listener closer to the performance. If these performances speak to you as they have spoken to me, then I shall have succeeded in that aim.

Ted Kendall