

## **Program notes: Malcolm Arnold Sinfonietta no. 1**

**MALCOLM ARNOLD b.1921**

### **Sinfonietta no. 1 Op. 48**

1. Allegro comodo
2. Allegretto
3. Allegro con brio

Arnold's reputation has suffered somewhat in the past from being judged on the strength of a few much-played popular works, and much of his considerable output is nowadays unjustly neglected. It should not be forgotten that during the fifties Arnold was frequently bracketed with such figures as Benjamin Britten and William Walton and considered by many to be one of England's foremost composers of the period. An early enthusiasm for jazz, particularly the music of Louis Armstrong, led Arnold to take up the trumpet and eventually to the ranks of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in which he played for many years, acquiring a solid grounding in orchestral technique as well as working under some of the finest conductors of the day. His formal training in composition was attained under Gordon Jacob at the Royal College of Music in London.

The first of the three Sinfoniettas was written in 1954, and received a particularly memorable performance at the Tenth Aldeburgh Festival three years later when the conductor was the celebrated horn player Dennis Brain, a long standing friend of Arnold's, and one whose tragic death shortly afterwards had a profound and lasting effect on the composer.

The Sinfonietta is scored for strings, two oboes and two horns, a combination which Arnold handles freely and which catches something of the spirit of the eighteenth century divertimento, with the four wind

instruments sometimes forming a self-contained orchestral group while at other times taking on leading melodic roles. I

In the short opening movement both the first oboe and first horn are eventually given the serene opening theme, which reappears variously extended and modified without ever departing far from its original character. The highly original second movement is in effect a modulating chaconne, where the seven-bar theme repeats in regular sequence, but with each entry starting a semitone higher than its predecessor. A restless central episode, during which the theme appears in a version for three solo violas, is followed by final statements first on cellos and basses, then on muted horns.

The exuberant finale, only some two and a half minutes long, contains an abundance of themes, each of which seems to grow out of its predecessor. Towards the end the horns come to the fore in the jubilant recapitulation of earlier material.

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