

Vierne 150

A programme of French and British Music

Concert 6

Plymouth Suite, Whitlock
Symphony no. 6 in B Minor, Vierne



Plymouth Suite

Percy Whitlock (1903-1946) was an English organist and composer. He studied at the Royal College of Music with Stanford and Vaughan Williams, before taking up the position of Assistant Organist at Rochester Cathedral in 1921. After nine years at the Cathedral, he moved to Bournemouth where he served as Director of Music at St Stephen's Church alongside a position as the town's borough organist. This gave him the opportunity to work with Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra and play at the local Pavilion Theatre. Indeed, he played so regularly that, in 1935, he decided to work at the theatre full-time. Sadly, Whitlock died of tuberculosis in 1946, aged just 42. His music was largely forgotten for decades after his death, but enjoyed a modest resurgence in the 1980s due to the foundation of the Percy Whitlock Trust in 1983.

The Plymouth Suite was composed between August and November 1937, after a visit to Plymouth to attend a conference of The Incorporated Association of Organists. Each of the five movements is dedicated to an organist at the conference.

1. Allegro risoluto
2. Lantana
3. Chanty
4. Salix
5. Toccata

The Allegro Risoluto is dedicated to Harvey Grace, then organist of Chichester Cathedral, who also edited *The Musical Times* and wrote extensively about music history, composers' biographies and organ technique. It begins with a lilting 3/4 melody above a slightly breathless accompaniment, characterised by gently accented cadences at the beginning of each bar and, gradually, the energy picks up as the harmonic and rhythmic pace increases. In his article *The Organ Music of Percy Whitlock*, Peter Hardwick noted a few instances of polytonal and polymodal parallel triads throughout the first movement, working in opposition to each other, as well as a number of parallel fourths and tritones. Whitlock also plays with the listener's sense of pulse by changing the metre between 5/4 and 3/4, and 2/4 and 3/4, which Hardwick suggested was done to suggest the "...changing rhythms and moods of the sea". The peak of the movement is approached by way of a brief tuba solo, quickly answered by the chorus, before the dynamic builds and the movement ends with a fanfare of brilliant chords and a triumphant blaze of E major.

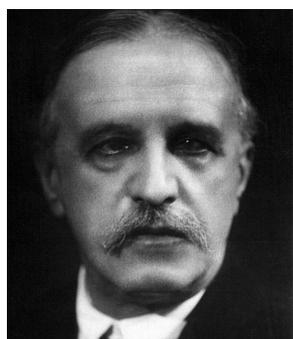
The second movement, Lantana, is dedicated to Dom. Wilfred, the organist of Buckfast Abbey. Its peaceful atmosphere is distinctly English and, in some places, unmistakably Elgarian. The steady pace and predominantly homophonic texture gives the music a hymn-like feel, and the harmony shifts between diatonic and modal. Occasionally accidentals provide a moment of whimsical folk-tune like colour; occasionally they take the harmony in a new direction. A central passage is full of imitation and complex meandering counterpoint, and the movement concludes with a recapitulation of melodic ideas established in the opening bars, above a slightly altered harmony.

The ternary form Chanty was composed for manuals only, and is dedicated to Reginald Dixon, who served as organist and director of music at St Peter's Catholic Cathedral Lancaster from 1909-71. The 'A' section of the piece is made up of a jaunty theme, sparkling with lively rhythms and little staccato hints at a hornpipe, played on the great flutes and echoed on the swell. This is answered by a slightly shorter 'B' section in the tonic minor which uses much of the same rhythmic material as before, but with the introduction of a little syncopation. The melodic contour has also been inverted: where the A section ascended and descended in an arc, the B section sweeps downward in a broad 'u' shape. As before, this is repeated on the swell, and a brief chromatic section transitions the music back to the tonic major and a recapitulation of the opening theme.

The fourth movement Salix (from the Latin for willow) is dedicated to Henry Austin Dewdney, a well-respected Bournemouth musician who held the position of organist of Immanuel Church, Southbourne from 1919-32, and of St Swithun's Church from 1932-35, and frequently wrote as music critic for the *Bournemouth Daily Echo*. The music has a sombre, pastoral feel. It opens with a gentle cor anglais solo which is answered by a flute and string chorus. The pace increases here first in the faster note values and then in a slight accelerando which moves the music towards its highest point and its dynamic climax. This is followed by an ornamented recapitulation of the opening

theme above cascading semiquavers and a lilting homophonic accompaniment. Gradually, the dynamic falls away and, after a brief tenor solo from the cor anglais, the piece ends with a gentle plagal cadence.

The grand finale of the Suite is a brilliant Toccata written in the French tradition of Boellmann and Gigout, and dedicated to George Harry Moreton, Borough organist of Plymouth, and organist and director of music at St Andrew's Church. It is Whitlock's only toccata and is made up of two themes. The first is a slow-moving solo between the pedal and the left hand of the great, under sparkling semiquavers in the right hand. In the second theme, the semiquaver accompaniment moves to the left hand and the right hand takes over with a dance-like solo reed, echoed by the swell. Both solo ideas return with altered melodies and harmony. This time, the second theme tumbles from the soprano to the tenor register and gradually transforms into a vibrant fanfare which heralds the final statement of the now thunderous pedal theme, echoed by the solo reed. Towards the end, the harmony becomes increasingly chromatic - the Allegro Risoluto's tritones reappear in both the solo and accompaniment - and the Toccata concludes with four resounding full-organ chords.



Symphony no. 6 in B Minor

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was a French organist and composer who, despite being born almost blind, displayed an exceptional talent for music from a very early age. He first heard the piano at the age of two and, after hearing a Schubert lullaby, is reputed to have been able to pick out the notes of the melody on the piano. He went on to study at the Paris Conservatoire and, from 1892, served as assistant to Charles-Marie Widor at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He was appointed organist of Notre Dame in 1900 and held the post until his death in 1937, where he famously died at the console.

Composed in 1930, Symphony no. 6 in B Minor was one of the last pieces Vierne ever wrote. It uses the cyclical, five-movement format he had perfected over the course of the previous five symphonies, and demonstrates his technical ability and fluency in the still relatively new chromatic musical language which would ultimately become the foundation of his successors' compositional style. These composers include his student Dupré, as well as Messiaen, Langlais and Alain. It was dedicated to Lynwood Farnham, a Canadian organist who spent most of his career in America, and debuted by Dupré at Notre Dame in 1934.

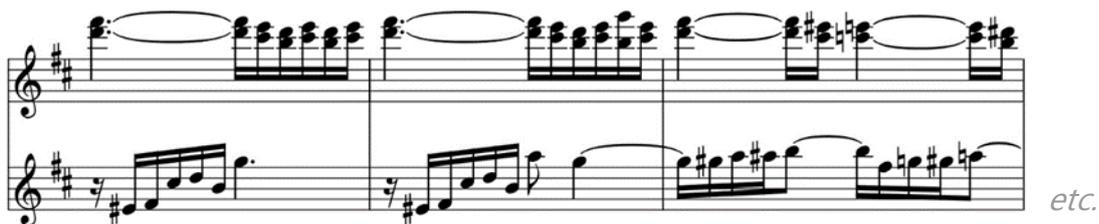
- I. Introduction et Allegro
- II. Aria
- III. Scherzo
- IV. Adagio
- V. Final

The Introduction et Allegro presents the two themes which will feature throughout the symphony. Theme 1 is an improvisatory scalic flourish; Theme 2 is a slightly more mysterious melody, beneath an accompaniment of chromatic thirds.

Theme 1



Theme 2



Both are repeated forte, this time with Theme 2 in the pedal, before a brief despairing *Lento* section opens into the Allegro. Here too, both themes appear, subtly developed, combined and woven into the texture. Powerful toccata-like figurations alternate with softer, more lyrical material. However, despite the *piano* dynamic, the 8' and 4' foundations and reeds of these softer passages still snarl from behind the swell box. The transition to B major in the closing bars is thoroughly unexpected and the Allegro concludes with the familiar triumph and virtuosic pedal writing of Symphony 5's Final.

The second movement Aria is mysterious and meandering. Passages of homophonic writing alternate with an 8' trompette et flûte solo. This solo melody follows the (inverted) contours of Theme 1 in wide intervallic leaps, but with a far more sustained line. As the Aria progresses, its dissonance gradually begins to soften; the leaping intervals of the solo have become more familiar and feel less erratic, and the chromatic accompaniment takes on a gentle lilt. Occasional augmented harmonies provide moments of intrigue, and the movement ends with a recapitulation of the alternating homophony and solo melody, finally settling on a shimmering D major chord.

Vierne once said of the Scherzo that he had attempted to depict the derisive grin of a gargoyle in its bizarre and eccentric rhythms. It opens with an unpredictable and highly

chromatic theme which leaps from great to choir and back again, before a quirky melody appears on the swell oboe. Each phrase climbs quickly from the bottom to the top of the staff, ending with a little figuration like a trumpet call, before plummeting back down and beginning again. These two ideas alternate - occasionally the second melody is inverted - and the Scherzo ends with a *moto perpetuo* race to the final bar.

The fourth movement Adagio opens with a long pedal point B flat, slightly reminiscent of the bell-like G which rings above the Prelude of Symphony 4. Gradually, a solemn chromatic melody emerges, first on the pedals and then the manuals, before Vierne begins to introduce iterations of Theme 1 and 2 in increasingly complex counterpoint. A middle section in B major and C major has a more clearly defined sense of key, occasionally disrupted by chromatic elements. The return of the B flat pedal point introduces a brief recapitulation of the opening pedal melody, and the Adagio draws to a close with an unusually static chordal coda.

The calm of the Adagio is instantly overwhelmed by the exuberant B major Final in sonata-rondo form. The opening fanfare-tocatta is built on a joyful transformation of Theme 2, which is first played on the manuals alone and then above a percussive pedal ostinato. This ostinato is then transferred to the manuals as a second lyrical theme appears in the pedals. It is promptly echoed on the great and briefly treated as a chorale, before the semiquaver ostinato begins to usher the music towards its exhilarating conclusion. In the last section of this movement, Vierne even manages a second transformation of the dark and mysterious Theme 2, this time as a pedal line for the soaring chorale-like melody. Finally, despite the hardships he had suffered and portrayed in his music, Vierne ends Symphony 6 and his entire symphonic output with cascades of pedal scales and a triumphant B major sixth chord.