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## Percy Whitlock

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### Introduction and the Plymouth Suite

At the time when Vaughan Williams was writing his middle-period symphonies and Britten was beginning to find his mature voice, a composer was writing music for the organ which would become part of the standard repertoire. Percy Whitlock did not devise a 'new' music - he was no Dupré or Messiaen. However, what he achieved was a perfect fusion of late romantic, neo-classical and dance hall styles - with the emphasis on the late-romantic. He was a master-craftsman who is impossible to classify. He cannot be termed a 'light' music composer - witness his great [Organ Symphony](#). Yet he was able to produce 'pop' pieces such as the '[Bucket and Spade Polka](#)'. He was eclectic and in this sense his style appeals to all except those who despise any nod in the direction of what is popular.

### The Man

The composer Percy Whitlock was born in Chatham, Kent on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1903. At the age of seven he was given a voice trial at Rochester Cathedral, where he was successful in being accepted as a probationer. This was the beginning of a long association with the organ loft. He was a scholar at the Cathedral Choir School and then the Kings School. He attended the Royal College of Music between 1920 and 1924. There he studied organ with Henry G.Ley and composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams.

In 1921 Whitlock became the assistant organist at his old 'alma mater'. The organist of Rochester at that time was Charles Hylton Stewart. At the same time Whitlock was able to be the organist and choir master at St Mary's Chatham and then at St Mathew's Parish Church, Borstal. It was always regarded that he would become the organist at Rochester when the post became vacant. However, a certain Harold E. Bennet was appointed to the post when Hylton Stewart left for Chester Cathedral. Whitlock resigned as assistant and moved to Bournemouth where he became organist at St Stephen's Parish Church. He remained there until 1935. However the main task of the thirties and forties was his appointment in 1932 as the Borough Organist at the Municipal Pavilion. He remained in this post until his untimely death in 1946. It was here, perhaps that he discovered his truly eclectic spirit. The post required an ability to play 'heavy' classics and 'light' dance music.

During this period he was much occupied with giving recitals in London, Bournemouth and

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other parts of the South. He gave performances for the BBC. A perusal of the appendices to Malcolm Riley's book shew a fine catalogue of journalism. A regular contribution to the Bournemouth Daily Echo was published under the pseudonym of Kenneth Lark. This 'nom de plume' was also used in a number of compositions written at the time. There were a number of literary contributions to the standard musical journals of the day.

Percy Whitlock died on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946, an untimely death at the age of 42. A loss regretted by all who knew him. L.S. Barnard writing the Obituary in Musical Opinion states that "[Whitlock] had the most extraordinary and endearing personal qualities. His personality carried with it an atmosphere of serenity and gentleness seldom encountered in these sophisticated and disingenuous times. He had, too, a virile wit and sense of fun..."

He was interested in things other than music. He was a great Meccano enthusiast, building working clocks. He wrote a monograph on the steam locomotives of the South Eastern & Chatham Railway.

Whitlock was survived by his wife Edna, who was also musician.

## The Music

Whitlock's catalogue is not extensive. The range of his compositions is somewhat limited. However this is not a criticism. For what has survived the vagaries of time is of an exceptional standard of workmanship and is a invaluable addition to the literature. The main corpus is the organ music. From the relatively light Chanty from the Plymouth Suite to the deeper waters of the Fantasia Chorals Whitlock never allows the quality of his writing to slip. He never attempts to surprise the listener with 'harmonic or formal novelties'. In many ways his music is quite conservative. Yet on the other side, although much of his writing has a 'light' quality to it, it never becomes sentimental or trite. Although sometimes it is possible to hear echoes of the 'cinema organ' it is also just as possible to imagine an accompaniment to a 'high ceremonial' in a great cathedral.

There were excursions into orchestral music and chamber pieces. He wrote, as was common with many composers of the day, a Phantasy Quartet in A minor. There were works for String Quartet and Violin and Piano. Unfortunately many of Whitlock's scores have either been destroyed or lost. It will be impossible to hear much of what he wrote. However the manuscript for his Piano Quartet is available at the British Library and may one day be revived.

There was a fair amount of choral music written. Settings of the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis, a simple communion service and a number of other anthems and liturgical pieces. There were two pageants written for the communities of Bridgwater and Rochester which were for chorus and orchestra. However it is probably difficult to rescue what were highly ephemeral pieces of music.

Whitlock fans are lucky that the CD company Marco Polo is due to release an album of his orchestral music. In fact nearly two thirds of the surviving scores are due to be published. Most of it is frankly 'light' music though none the worse for that. They have evocative titles such as the Wessex Suite and the Holiday Suite. This first of these suites has sentimental but attractive movements such as 'Revels in Hogsnorton' and 'The Blue Poole' - the second suite enjoying pieces called the 'Bucket and Spade Polka' and 'In the Ballroom'. - Echoes of

holidays by the sea - especially at Bournemouth.

More profound is the Prelude Air and Fugue of 1939 which was given at Bournemouth to somewhat mixed reviews.

There is much organ music. Many of the pieces have become favourites of those who haunt organ lofts. Most organists probably have one or more of them well and truly under their belts.

The earliest were the Five Short Pieces - perhaps the most popular being the second piece - Folksong. It has all the trappings of the 'English folk song revival'.

Four Extemporisations were issued in 1933 followed by the two volumes of Seven Sketches on Verses from the Psalms. Whitlock entered on a more serious period with his Two Fantasie Chorals - one in D flat major and the second in F sharp minor. Both these pieces reflect the Whitlock romanticism at full flight.

The Organ Sonata in C minor dwarfs most of the other pieces that this composer wrote. There is little of the 'sea front and deck chairs' about this work although the Scherzetto has a lot of 'fun' about it.

However, Whitlock's masterpiece must be his 'Organ Symphony' of 1936/37. It is a work in four movements lasting nearly three quarters of an hour. Scored for large orchestra including two harps, it is set in four movements. The piece was inspired by an article in the Radio Times where George Thalben-Ball lamented the fact that there was no good 'English Organ Concerto' in existence. Whitlock rose to the challenge and produced this work which is more of a 'concertante' piece than a concerto. Musical detectives have found references to the styles of a number of composers in this work including Elgar, Richard Strauss, Delius and of course Sergei Rachmaninov. However this is no pastiche - no cut and paste exercise. It is pure Whitlock. A highly romantic and tuneful work which deserves to be in the repertoire of all concert organists and is just crying out to be played at the Proms.

To the present writer it is an extremely moving work, touching the heart and mind much more than many supposedly finer and more subtle works produced by the 'big boys' of the day.

But music is about heart and mind - and Whitlock serves both well.

The 'Plymouth Suite' was a highly competent return to a somewhat more approachable vein - in fact it is probably the composers most famous and most popular work. There was gap of six years between this famous work and the two volumes of the Six Hymn Preludes of 1945.

The last published organ music Whitlock wrote was 'Reflections( Three Quiet pieces)' given in 1946.

Riley mentions a lost set of Variations which were the last piece to exercise the composer before his untimely death.

### **Plymouth Suite.**

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Whitlock and his wife Edna had gone on a trip to Plymouth to attend a conference of 'The Incorporated Association of Organists'.

The Plymouth Suite was the outcome of this visit. There are five movements. Each of them is dedicated to an organist who had attended the conference.

The piece was composed between August and November of 1937. A glance at the catalogue shews that it followed the Wessex Suite for Orchestra, a 'Foxtrot' the manuscript for which has been lost & a Shanty selection which has also been lost without all trace. However the major work of the previous year had been the Symphony in G Minor for Organ and Orchestra.

The first movement was dedicated to the then famous organist Harvey Grace. Harvey Grace was the organist of Chichester Cathedral and had succeeded W.G MacNaught as editor of the Musical Times. He was well known as an adjudicator at music festivals up and down the country. His book on the Organ Music of J.S. Bach enjoyed a vogue.

Like much of Whitlock's music this movement is not easy to play. It is a somewhat laid back Allegro Risoluto with pretension to sounding like a theme for a passacaglia. This theme is treated in an extremely competent manner with robust harmonies. The second theme has been influenced by a phrase from the first movement of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony. The two themes are worked quite extensively with the first re-appearing towards the end. The piece concludes with tuba fanfares. The writer Peter Hardwick in his article 'The Organ Music of Percy Whitlock' notices a number of neo-classicist finger-prints leading to some interesting dissonances. There are polytonal and polymodal parallel triads working in opposition to each other and spare parallel fourths and tritones. The metre is also subject to 'modernism' - there are quick alterations between 5/4 and 3/4 time and 2/4 to 3/4. Hardwick suggests that this is done to suggest the 'changing rhythms and moods of the sea.'

The second movement is entitled 'Lantana' - the dictionary definition of which is a 'tree-like shrub.' However it is translated by Whitlock as the 'Wayfaring Tree.' This movement was dedicated to the organist of Buckfast Abbey, Dom. Wilfred. The monk was well known for 'organ' crawls and even collected bits and pieces of kit for use on his own instrument. The mood is peaceful and quite distant in it's atmosphere. There is no doubt that there are echoes of Edward Elgar in the working out of the melody.

The third movement is a Chanty, which is written for manuals only. It is dedicated to the Lancaster Roman Catholic Cathedral organist Dr. Reginald Dixon. Apparently this gentleman was regarded by Whitlock as being the 'generally the naughty boy at any party.' Here we have a genuine Plymouth reference. Quite definitely a nautical piece in a quick 2/4 rhythm. Riley points out that this piece is more in the style of an eighteenth century Hornpipe rather than a Shanty. Hornpipes however did not always have a nautical association. Handel used the form in his one of his concerti grossi. The time signature of this was 3/2. A 'shanty' was definitely a sailor's song - devised to make hard manual work easier by assisting the rhythmic motions of task aboard ship.

The fourth movement, called 'Salix' is an example of the pastoral style. It would be easy to see such a piece composed by the likes of Finzi or perhaps William Lloyd Webber. The depth of the piece is actually more intense than the 'light hearted' dedication would imply. Apparently the dedicatee was a certain Henry Austin Dewdney who was a Bournemouth

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pianist. He was involved in most of the local music making in the nineteen thirties. Whitlock states of him 'A perpetual grouser, yet with much humour.' Salix means a willow tree - a weeping willow. The main theme is a gentle 'Sicilian' tune in 6/8 time. It is quite definitely one of the composers finest miniatures. One wonders what it would sound like arranged for strings or small orchestra.

The last movement is a robust toccata. This was dedicated to the Borough Organist of Plymouth, Dr. George Harry Moreton. Strangely, perhaps this is Whitlock's only essay in the form of Toccata. However this piece is in the tradition of the great French Toccatas of Böellmann, Gigout and Mulet. This is a grand finale to a fine suite. Superficially it is easy to play, however the subtle changes of key and figuration make it much harder to 'bring off' than a first glance would suggest. There are two themes at work. A wonderful, fairly slow moving pedal theme is set against a semi-quaver accompaniment on the manuals. The solo reed emerges to lift this piece into the heavens. This uses a wider melodic range and shorter note values.

It would make an excellent recessional for a wedding if only more people were aware of it's existence.

The Plymouth Suite is well served in recordings. The definitive version is probably Graham Barber's recording on the Hull City Hall organ. [Priory PRCD 489] However Jennifer Bate & Donald Hunt have also made it their own. The Toccata is a regular concert pull.

## Conclusion

Whitlock died at an early age. Who knows what would have issued from his pen if he had lived until the 1980's, say. He would have seen the demise of the seaside orchestras and the music-making of a pre-rock and roll era. The public's interest in hearing organ recitals waned and dancers danced to the sound of records rather than a resident band or instrumentalist.

However, we have a excellent corpus of works from this very fine and competent composer. And amongst this corpus are a number of real treasures. The Organ Symphony and the Sonata would entitle any composer to huge respect if not the suggestion of genius.

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