

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1130

JOSEPH HOLBROOKE

Joseph Holbrooke (also known as Josef) was born in Croydon on 5th July 1878. His family soon moved to Islington, where the boy sang in a local church choir. His Scottish mother was a singer who died in 1880, leaving Joseph and his two sisters to the care of his father; he was a man of uncertain temper who worked as a pianist in Music Hall and taught him both the piano and the violin. Joseph also gained much practical experience with his father in the Music Hall orchestras and showed such promise that he was sent to the Royal Academy of Music at the age of fifteen. He studied there for three years under Corder (composition) and Westlake (piano) and was already composing with a facility which never left him. Already, too, he was showing that uncompromising belief in his own powers which sometimes made him his own worst enemy. Put down to play Schumann's *Toccata* in C at a student concert, to the bewilderment of all he plunged boldly into *L'Orgie*, a challenging new composition of his own.

In 1896 it became necessary for him to earn his own living, whereupon he took whatever musical work he could get: concert-party tours, teaching, conductor and musical director (for a production of *Aladdin and the Lamp*) and so on. Meanwhile he was writing music steadily (and rewriting, for Holbrooke was a great reviser of his own scores) and secured a performance of his tone poem, *The Raven*, at the Crystal Palace under Augustus Manns in 1900. He subsequently attracted the attention of Granville Bantock, who became a good friend, Henry Wood, Thomas Beecham and others, and he lost no opportunity, real or imagined, to bring himself and his works before anyone who he felt might be sympathetic and interested in new music. Many such people were impressed by the young composer's industry and imagination, but they argued that his large-scale scores were often expensive to programme and difficult to play. They frequently made unreasonable demands (e.g. a bass sarrusophone for *Apollo and the Seaman*) and also puzzled the ordinary public, whose tastes Holbrooke never pretended to cater for except in moments when he was called upon (for payment) to write "commercially". He ultimately became an assured orchestrator, but unlike such innovators as Berlioz he retained a taste for strange effects at the expense of melody and musical substance, without which no work is likely to make the transition from concert novelty to repertory favourite.

As time passed, Holbrooke's catalogue of works greatly increased to include songs, piano and chamber music, opera, symphonies, ballet and choral music, many of which were published and which have never ceased to attract the special pleading of committed music-lovers. Notable sources of inspiration were the poems of Edgar Allen Poe and Welsh mythology. His interest in the latter was perhaps prompted by Lord Howard de Walden who as "T. E. Ellis" supplied the libretto for *The Cauldron of Anwyn*, an operatic trilogy, and also acted for a period as Holbrooke's patron. He was then relieved from the chores of teaching and

journalism and the need to compose for commercial purposes (songs, music for the young and so on) but nevertheless found time in his life for ceaseless letter-writing and pamphleteering. He never shrank from vigorous, even pugnacious controversy and was genuinely surprised when, rather than reply in kind, his victims merely noted the scathing attacks and preferred to avoid him and his music for the future. He was himself the subject of a biography as early as 1920 and his own book *Contemporary British Composers*, from the same period, offers many insights (if not always those intended by the author).

Holbrooke was married with six children, one of whom is the distinguished bassoonist, Gwydion Brooke. Although enabled by his patron to live and compose, he never really gained the recognition he craved and as the years passed, he became deaf and disillusioned. Other new composers came along and to be heard at all, he found it necessary to promote his own concerts. He compiled and printed a list of nearly 150 such concerts given between 1903 and 1931, in which his own works were given together with music by Granville Bantock, Thomas Dunhill, William Wallace, Joseph Speaight, Waldo Warner, Richard Walthew, Cyril Scott and many others whose names are now forgotten. Apart from London and major British cities, venues ranged from Harlech in North Wales to Trinidad and Vienna, where on 7th May 1929, he conducted the overture to *Bronwen*, the tone poems *Ulalume* and *Queen Mab* and other items, appearing as pianist under Max von Schillings in *The Song of Cwyn-ap-Nudd*, his own First Piano Concerto which in its day had been taken up by the likes of Frederic Lamond.

Forgotten and ignored, Holbrooke died in Hampstead on 5th August 1958, not long after his 80th birthday. Major performances never completely ceased, but by then they had become noteworthy events. When the enterprising and indefatigable Frank Merrick broadcast the First Piano Concerto in March 1958, both John Ireland and Cyril Scott wrote warm letters of appreciation to the aged and disappointed composer. "I believe Holbrooke's music will do better in the world," wrote Sydney Grew in 1924, "when he is no longer in it to interfere." This collection of historic recordings made in his own lifetime and under his supervision is barely enough to act as an introduction, but perhaps one day modern recordings will be made of Holbrooke's best music and it will at last receive its due.

Joseph Holbrooke - The Man

If hard work and an unflagging belief in his own powers were enough to make a great composer, Holbrooke's place in musical life would be assured. In private life, those who, like the Bantocks, knew him well could find him great fun and good company; in public, his pungent, erratically typed letters made him few friends and the onset of deafness made it increasingly difficult for strangers to deal with him in person. The critic and journalist, Gerald Cumberland, who died in 1926, published the following memoir in 1918 in his book *Set Down in Malice*.

"Joseph Holbrooke, for sheer cleverness, for capacity for hard work and for intellectual energy, has no equal among our composers ... Holbrooke's weakness - but I do not consider it a weakness - is his pugnacity. He has fought the critics

times without number and, in many cases, with excellent results for British music, though Holbrooke must know much better than I do that in fighting for his colleagues he has incidentally injured himself. . . . But not only the critics have felt the lash of Holbrooke's scorn; conductors, musical institutions, some very prosperous so-called composers, committees, publishers and, indeed, almost every kind of man who has power in the musical world has felt his sting.

"But if he is clever and witty in his writing, he is much cleverer and wittier in his talk. I do not suppose I shall ever forget one Sunday I spent with him, for by midday he had reduced my mind to chaos and my body to limpness with his consuming energy. When he was not playing, he was talking, and he did both as though the day were the last he was going to spend on earth, so eager and convulsive was his speech, so vehement his playing.

"Perhaps his most remarkable quality is his power of concentration. I remember his telling me that when he was yachting with Lord Howard de Walden in the Mediterranean, he was engaged on the composition of *Dylan*, an opera containing some of the most gorgeous and weirdly uncanny music that has been written in our generation. At this opera he worked, not in hours of inspiration (for, like Arnold Bennett, he does not believe in inspiration), but when he had nothing more exciting or more necessary to do.

"Of the truly vast quantity of music he has written, I, to my regret, know only a portion, and that belongs chiefly to his very early period, when he was under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is his spiritual affinity, and Holbrooke's setting of *Annabel Lee* - a work which I can play backwards from memory - is more beautiful and haunting than the beautiful and haunting poem itself.

"I have called Holbrooke pugnacious and, some years ago, much to his amusement and, I think, gratification, I called him the stormy petrel of music. But what makes him stormy? What are the defects in our musical life that he so persistently attacks? First of all, he hates incompetence, especially official incompetence, and the incompetence that makes vast sums of money. He hates commercialism in art, and by that phrase I mean the various enterprises that exploit art for the sole purpose of making money. He hates publishers who issue trash; he hates critics who write rubbish. He hates the obscurity in which so many of his gifted colleagues live, and he hates the love of the British public for foreign music inferior to that which is being written at home. And I believe he hates the system that presents editors of newspapers with free concert tickets for the use of their critics.

"But, in dwelling at such length on Holbrooke's combativeness, I feel I am giving a rather one-sided view of his true character. For he is not all hate . . . I have heard him called perverse, unreliable, injudicious, and many other disagreeable things. He may be. But Holbrooke is not an angel. He is simply a composer of genius working under conditions that tend to thwart and paralyse genius."

This is quoted as an abridged account of Holbrooke's character as seen by an acute observer of the time. The work which Holbrooke could so readily take up and leave off aboard Lord Howard de Walden's yacht was orchestration rather than composition itself.

The Decca records (X series) date from 24th June 1937. *The Sea King's Song* is the only example known of Holbrooke on record as a conductor, but the series is perhaps more valuable for a chance to hear the overture to *The Children of Don*, a well argued piece of genuine musical theatre; the extended *Prelude to Dylan* is more obviously a patchwork of themes from the opera and is intended only for concert use. Both the Columbia and Decca sessions, which use unnamed orchestras, were probably undertaken with the support of Lord Howard de Walden, Holbrooke's patron and librettist for the epic trilogy of operas known as *The Cauldron of Anwyn*. *The Children of Don*, *Dylan* and *Bronwen* were devised to be complete in themselves, but together tell a barbaric, yet poetic story of Druids, Celtic warriors and the ancient Gods of Britain. It is beyond the scope of these notes to retell the elaborate, violent legends which Holbrooke, who lived at Harlech for some time, set to music; they are far removed from the fey atmosphere of *The Immortal Hour*, Rutland Boughton's Celtic fantasy which had such a success in the 1920s, and found unlikely adherents nearer our own time when the Disney Company made *The Black Cauldron*, an expensive but unsuccessful cartoon feature film released in 1985. Holbrooke's trilogy reached the stage in 1912, 1914 and 1929 respectively, so that the *Bronwen* records on Columbia (LX series) were made in the year of the premiere (given by the Carl Rosa Opera Company in Huddersfield). They were made in the Central Hall, Westminster and released as a set with a leaflet

Doris Vane sings touchingly. John Coates, who was nearing the end of a distinguished career, sings with almost too much fire and passion, and his diction allows us to hear some of T. E. Ellis's self consciously poetic words. The overture to *Bronwen* makes much use of a Welsh folk song *The Song of the Bottle* (not as sometimes stated, *All Through the Night*). The same song also forms the basis of the impressive Funeral March and was previously used by Holbrooke in incidental music to T. E. Ellis's play *Pontorewyn*.

As Bran, King of Britain, Coates sings in the first extract of the political marriage of his sister, Bronwen, to Matholoc, King of Ireland. He then takes the part of Taliessin, the Bard, singing first of war and then of Bronwen's loss.

Doris Vane as Bronwen sings a Cradle Song to Gwern, her baby son whose murder is only one of the woes she suffers before her own death which is marked by the concluding funeral march. The large orchestra is used here with considerable power, now that there are no singers to consider, and so ends the opera and the trilogy. It is hard to believe such music would not stand revival today.

The Enchanter is a fairy opera with a very different subject: a prince who meets his princess in spite of a wizard who enchants travellers and compels them to dance for him. It lives only in the brief extract recorded by the composer as a piano solo for the Piccadilly label and released in 1930, along with three exotic encores in his "popular" style. These well turned if unmemorable little pieces at least avoid the banality of the orchestral extract from the Finale to the Third Symphony, where over much use is made of that well known sea shanty, *A-Rovin*. This is included here in the interests of completeness as one of the eight sides cut by Decca in the composer's presence.

A worthier tribute to Holbrooke, who was a fine pianist, is the pair of extracts, acoustically recorded in June 1919, from the Piano Quartet in G Minor. This is a fiery and passionate performance of music from the first and second movements: hard work for the players, but their commitment glows and shines through the limitations of the primitive recording in what is one of the rarest and most important of all the early Holbrooke discs. The importance of those presented here is not merely the account they give of Holbrooke as a performer; we may assume he attended both the Columbia and Decca sessions as well and that all the issued sides carry his imprimatur.

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