WILLIAM WORDSWORTH:

A 75th Birthday Tribute: Interviewer, John Dodd

William Wordsworth, who will celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday later this year, has been closely associated with British musical life for over fifty years. He was born in London on 17 December 1908, and, having shown early musical ability, was sent by his parents to be a chorister at St Michael's, Croydon, where George Oldroyd was choirmaster and organist, and who is perhaps best-known for his treatise on "Fugue". In 1934 William Wordsworth went to Edinburgh to continue his studies with Sir Donald Tovey who had been impressed by a violin sonata written by the young composer. He remained in Edinburgh for nearly three years after which time he returned to Hindhead where his home was; and continued composing, had occasional performances, and eventually found a publisher. In 1941 he won the Clements Memorial Prize with his first String Quartet and in 1950 he was awarded first prize at the Edinburgh International Festival with his second Symphony, appropriately perhaps, as the city held such strong musical associations for him. His works include seven symphonies, orchestral music which includes concertos for piano, violin, and cello, six string quartets, choral music, many songs, and music for radio. Much has been played at the Edinburgh and Cheltenham Festivals, and at Promenade and Hallé concerts, and can be heard frequently on the radio. His most recent symphony, the seventh, was first performed at the Eden Court Theatre at Inverness, which is near the composer's home at Kincraig, where he and his family have been living since 1961.

JD: It must have been a considerable change for you, having spent all your life in London and Hindhead, to adjust to life in the Highlands of Scotland. What were your main reasons for moving there?

WW: Well, the main reason was that I like having the feeling of space around me and there is plenty here in the Highlands. And I think that's true of my writing, that I like to feel I've got plenty of space to spread myself in. I like the long-term, that is, doing something in one place that has consequences a long time later on. I remember when I was with Tovey he used to say that a musical work ought to be like a good detective story: you leave clues about early that are relevant later. I feel you need space to do that. It helps to make the thing coherent if your end and your beginning have something in relation to each other. The idea that the notes of the theme can be used in different positions is as old as Bach; even Beethoven breaks up his themes into fragments. I think that is why I like to have space about me, because I don't feel I can do it all in a small space. I have written songs and short pieces, but I still like the feeling of space.

JD: To use the word "space" in another sense, in your most recent symphony....

WW: *Cosmos?* I don't remember quite why I called it that. I am not sure how successful I was in trying to give it a sort of universal sense. It is in the nature of a passacaglia really. The theme starts in the bass and goes on being repeated a good many times, gradually increasing in volume rather like Ravel's *Bolero* so that you get a cumulative effect of building up by repetition. It is in one movement, which breaks

up into sections, and the pre-recorded part which is played through loud-speakers in the hall is what gave me the idea of *Cosmos*. At its first performance at the Eden Court Theatre, Inverness, whose governors had commissioned it, there were speakers in the roof and that was quite effective because you could feel the sound all around you and then the orchestra picked up what the pre-recorded tape had on it. That is the basis of the whole piece. In a sense it is partly serial, 10-tone rather than 12-tone, but the two chords which are quietly repeated on the strings are composed of the five notes of the theme which is in fourths and fifths. It makes a fairly reasonable sound and is played back with a good deal of reverberation. Then the orchestra steadily picks up the chords and there is a long crescendo. The pre-recorded chords come back as loudly as possible on the loudspeakers and that marks the end of one section. The middle section is a slow movement which is followed by a repeat of the tune with the pre-recorded chords and that leads to the final part which ends very quietly: there is just a faint echo of the two chords on the tape.

JD: It sounded very impressive. Do you regard it as your most successful symphony?

WW: I don't know yet, I'm not sure that I'm very satisfied with it. I have not heard my sixth which has voices in it and is difficult to get produced for that reason. I suppose they always fight shy of anything that wants a choir and soloists, unless it is by Mahler or Beethoven, of course. I hope to hear it sometime if I live long enough. I call it *Elegiaca* as it was written in memory of my son who was killed in a car accident. I quite like my first Symphony although I sometimes think it is a bit long-winded. It was first performed by the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra conducted by Julius Harrison. Some people liked it, others thought it dreadful. The performance was rather under-rehearsed and it is a noisy piece so that put a few people off. Also, I think it would be more effective in a big hall rather than in an enclosed studio, which tends to give it a rather congested sound. It has never had a public performance in Great Britain. The first thing that one writes is never quite right, but I don't disown it altogether.

JD: I enjoyed James Loughran's performance of it. Winning the Edinburgh International Competition with your second Symphony must have been a great moment for you.

WW: Yes, it was very exciting to discover that I had won. I thought things would get going after that, but it didn't happen because the LPO was going through a very difficult phase at the time and so they only played it once. And the BBC refused to broadcast it because their reading panel had turned it down – so they were unable to broadcast the opening concert of the Edinburgh Festival that year. There was quite a fuss about it; if you look at the newspapers of the day you will see that the critics thought that there was no other country in which the broadcasting authority would refuse to broadcast the opening concert of a major festival at which a new symphony by one of their nationals was featured. I was told later that it was turned down because the manuscript was written in pencil and not in ink!

JD: That's amazing. You also hoped to have it performed at the Cheltenham Festival, I believe.

WW: Lengnick's, my publisher at the time, had been in touch with the Festival secretary and it was hoped that John Barbirolli and the Hallé would play it, but he decided he wouldn't do it, he said it was just a matter of personal taste, that he couldn't make anything of it. So that year at Cheltenham they did my third String Quartet instead. However, I felt that I couldn't let John Barbirolli get away with it, so I wrote another symphony, sent it to him and he said he would do it, which he did.

JD: That's your number 3 in C?

WW: That's right. In fact, he did it eight times in its first year including a Promenade Concert, and on tour with the Hallé at Manchester and Sheffield, and on the BBC Overseas Service. He also did my fourth Symphony at Edinburgh. It has a passage in 10/8 which he didn't find very easy to conduct, so he never did it again. It is strange that with each symphony I composed we also had another child, so I called the next *Divertimento.*

JD: Did that break the spell?

WW: Yes! it was commissioned by Stewart Deas for the Sheffield University Jubilee Concert in the spring of 1955 and was played by John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra.

JD: You appear always to have been attracted to the traditional forms of music; symphonies, sonatas, quartets. Was it Tovey's teaching that influenced you in this way?

WW: Tovey used to say that composing is the reconciliation of freedom and necessity. If everything is free, then everything is necessary in a sense because the inspiration comes from what the creative part of you does with the theme, and things grow together. When my late wife and I visited Bayreuth a few years ago we were very impressed by *Parsifal.* In it Wagner makes you feel that every bar is related to the rest of the piece. You can trace resemblances from one of these little phrases as it is developed, in a way that the serial composers were trying to do, only more intellectually in their case. With Wagner it seems to come naturally, and he achieved it without having to get rid of tonality. I have often used twelve-note themes myself, for example in my second Symphony. The opening theme of the first movement uses the twelve notes of the chromatic scale and most of the rest of the movement is derived from this – not entirely as I believe one must leave some freedom. I like Bartok's analogy of the fircone which symbolizes music – something evolving from a small germ; a tree or any natural growth. It is fascinating when you find what there is in your theme, what can happen, how it can be made to serve different purposes, different tempi, different positions and so on. In my opinion all these things that the serialists do can be done without producing such nasty noises.

JD: Were you attracted to the music of Bartok?

WW: Yes. I heard some of his music during the thirties when it was not very well liked, but later I was very much influenced by his *Divertimento for strings*, though I did not get to know it until after the war. I also like the Concerto for Orchestra and

Bluebeard's Castle made a tremendous impression on me. I used to get scores from Chester's Hire Library to look at and I remember taking out "Bluebeard's Castle" two or three times before the war and wishing I could hear it. Then after the war I heard it broadcast on the Third Programme and was completely bowled over by it. I remember thinking it was a really terrific piece; I felt that there was something powerful and great about it. He and Sibelius have influenced me more than others, perhaps Vaughan Williams too, to a lesser extent.

JD: How well did you know Vaughan Williams?

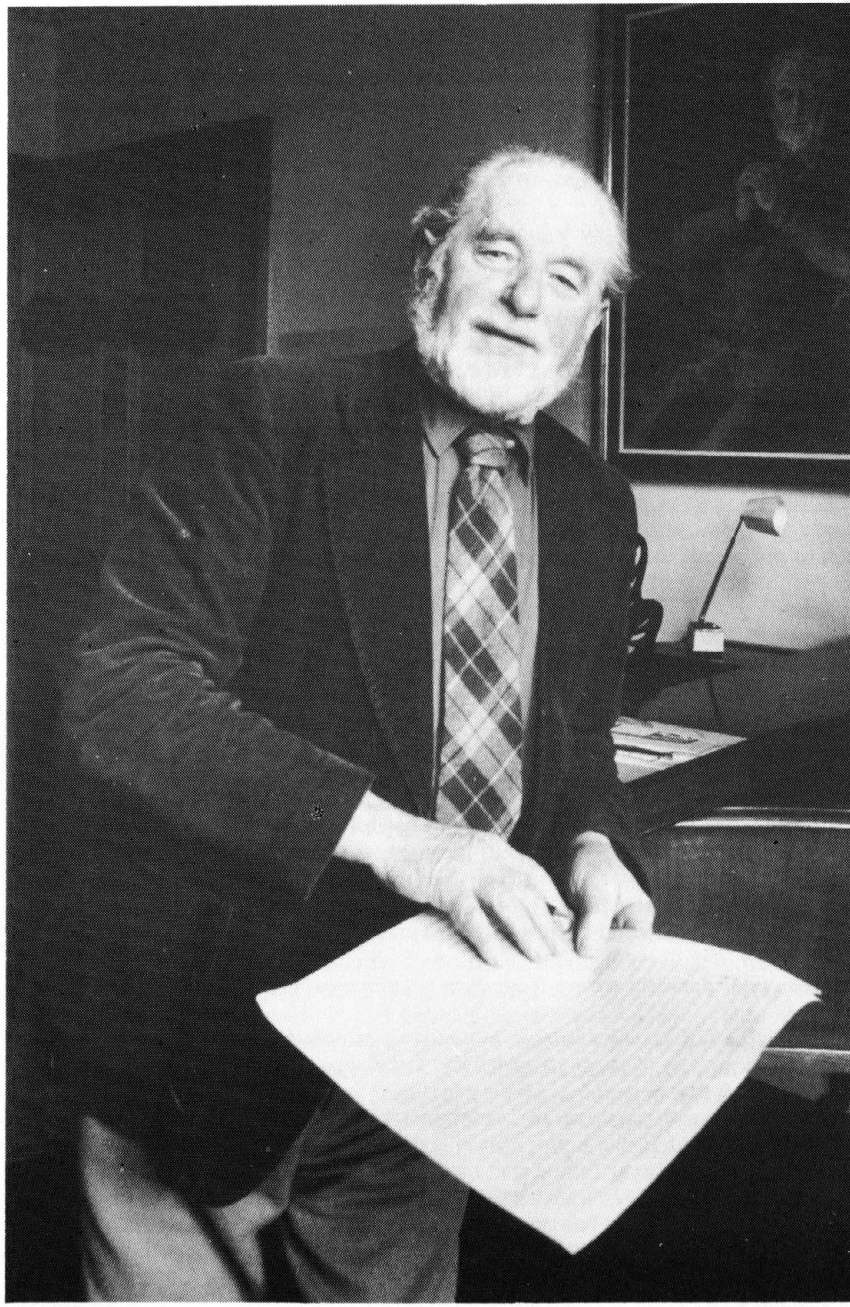
WW: Not all that well but we met on several occasions, particularly at Cheltenham. The first time I met him was during the war. Anthony Bernard had shown him my *Three Pastoral Sketches* and he liked them well enough to write a letter for my tribunal. I wrote to him later to ask if he would look through my oratorio *Dies Domini* and he invited me to lunch at his house at Dorking, when his first wife was alive, but I remember she was sitting in a wheel-chair. I had lunch with them and did my best to give him some idea of my oratorio on the piano. He was quite complimentary and said what good words I had chosen, rather the sort of words that he had set in *Sancta Civitas* from the Book of Revelation. The words I use in *Dies Domini* are from Isaiah but they have a similar apocalyptic vision, which was very much in our minds during the war.

JD: Like Britten and Tippett you were also a conscientious objector.

WW: I believe Vaughan Williams had supported them as well. I still have his letter though it is completely illegible! This was in 1942 and the tribunal offered me the usual things, farm work, hospital orderly work of the FAU (Friend's Ambulance Unit RAMC), so I chose farm work. Middleton Murry was one of my witnesses and my father came along and said that I had been a pacifist long before the war had begun, which was one of the things they wanted to know. You could be put on the Register of Conscientious Objectors either unconditionally or on condition that you did certain things. I believe Benjamin Britten got unconditional because Henry Wood, as you may know, said that if Britten wasn't given exemption he would stop the Proms. On the other hand, Tippett was given conditional, which he refused and so was sent to Wormwood Scrubs for three months.

JD: Does your pacifism spring from your religious conviction?

WW: Well, my father was a parson, as were my grandfather and great-grandfather. (Gt-grandfather was Bishop of Lincoln). I was brought up as an Anglican but rebelled against that quite early. I have a feeling that unless you rebel against religion it may get too much of a hold on you and then it would become superficial, or it would have for me if I hadn't had my doubts and disbeliefs – in other words I do not like narrow religion. However I think that having had a Christian upbringing has been a very great help in my life, it's a rock that hasn't given way. If religion is anything, it is everything, if you see what I mean. It gives meaning to the whole of life, though I can also see that religion could well be said to be evil in the way that Israel and Ireland show. I read recently that Wagner thought Christianity was everything but that he did not like religion.



William Wordsworth, March 1982 *Courtesy of Aberdeen Press and Journal*

JD: Some of your early musical training was as a chorister at Croydon wasn't it?

WW: That's right. My father was Chaplain of the Religious Arts Society which used to meet at our house at Hindhead. One of the members of the Society was a Miss Sterry and she used to teach me the piano – I had a great passion for Chopin in my early days but was never much good at playing the piano. Miss Sterry came from Croydon and used to cycle over to us at Hindhead, stay a night or two and give me some lessons, and then go back again. After a time she felt that it was necessary for me to go to somebody else and so suggested George Oldroyd, because he came from Croydon too. I seem to remember my parents taking me to Croydon for a few weeks so that I could go to Oldroyd and he could say whether he thought I had a future in music, and after a certain amount of time he thought that perhaps I had. Oldroyd used to run the Musicians' Guild of St Michael which also used to come to Hindhead twice a year. I used to meet many musicians that way, Alec Rowley and Greville Cooke, for example. Oldroyd wasn't only an academic, he was also a good composer, one the BMS should resurrect. He taught me harmony, counterpoint, the organ and the viola and his main idea was that if I got a degree, a Mus. Bac., then I would be "allowed" to compose. However that wasn't quite as I saw it; but I sang in his choir and that was a great asset as it gave me a feeling for plainsong and the chance to get inside some of the really great masterpieces like the *St Matthew Passion*, that is, inside from a performer's point of view. We also performed some of his music; I particularly remember his *Stabat Mater* for unaccompanied voices.

JD: Did you go on to Tovey when you left Croydon?

WW: No, I went back to Hindhead. My mother had died in 1924 and my father's sister, Susie, came to keep house for us. She was quite a character. She used to cycle to Salisbury each Monday for a choir practice with Walter Alcock, who was organist of the Cathedral, stay the night with another aunt, Irene who worked at St Nicholas' Hospital, Salisbury, and then cycle back the next day, sometimes rather cross if the wind had been against her. She was a person of strong character and a very great help to me in many ways. When she died in 1944 I dedicated my *Four Sacred Sonnets*, Op 21 to her. We had a neighbour at Hindhead who was also an enormous support to me. She was a violinist and came from Liverpool where she played in an orchestra with Eugene Goossens. Her name was Nellie Gill and she gave me lots of encouragement over the next few years. I wrote several pieces for her, one of which, the *Intermezzo* for violin and piano, was actually published by Novello, and a violin sonata. I took the violin sonata to Arthur Bliss and he suggested that I go to the Royal College to study with Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. However, I accepted Tovey's offer at about the same time. Arthur Bliss wrote me a very appreciative letter when I won the Edinburgh prize for my second symphony and I got to know him quite well when I was a member of the Composers' Guild.

JD: That was presumably much later, in the 1950s, as the Guild did not exist until then.

WW: It started in the late 40s/early 50s, I can't remember quite when; and I was invited to join the Executive Committee in 1955. Later I became Chairman almost by default; Iain Hamilton was the Chairman before me and he couldn't find anyone else to follow him, so he asked me. It was only at the last minute that he asked me, he said

he had asked others but no-one wanted the job as it means a lot of work and no pay. However, I used to go up to the office in Harley Street once or twice a week and there was quite a lot of socializing which was difficult for me as I still lived at Hindhead. There was a great debate on at the time whether the Guild should be selective, whether it could recommend any one composer, any one composer's work, and so on. At the Annual Dinner at the end of which I became Chairman, Thomas Beecham was the speaker and he said that he knew that there were complaints from the Composers' Guild that no conductors would play contemporary music, so he added "you choose twelve works by your members and send me the list and I shall perform them all". We didn't really believe him but we felt we could not afford *not* to do what he had asked us to do.

Well, as you can imagine it was an awful nuisance as Chairman having to choose which pieces to recommend and it led to many lengthy discussions. Eventually we decided to send a letter to all our members asking if they thought it was possible for us to prepare a list and, if so, to send one score each of an orchestral piece. I remember Eugene Goossens was on the committee of people who chose the pieces and I believe Richard Arnell and Elizabeth Maconchy were on the final list. I can't remember the others.

JD: Was it Richard Arnell's third Symphony on the list? I have a feeling that Beecham recorded it, or at least performed it.

WW: I can't remember now but I know that only three of the twelve pieces were ever played. Beecham wasn't really interested in them and I often wonder if he ever really intended to play them. So I was glad when my year came to an end except for the fact that I had to make a speech at the Annual Dinner and I'm not very good at that kind of thing. I worried quite a lot about that beforehand but finally got through it. We had Menuhin as our guest speaker on that occasion and some of the members did not like that very much because they felt he was telling them some things about their music that they knew better themselves and also because he told them how good Bartok was and a lot of them didn't like Bartok.

JD: You must have moved to Scotland soon after that.

WW: We came up here in March 1961 and the Composers' Guild asked me to be the Regional Representative but we soon found that it was impossible to attend the various functions, because we were so remote. So that inevitably led to the formation at a later date of the "Society of Scottish Composers".

JD: It seems that just as you were gaining recognition as a composer and having frequent performances in London and elsewhere, you decided to move to Scotland.

WW: As I said earlier, my main reason for coming was the need for space – I have been attracted to this kind of environment since a child. But I was also feeling out of sympathy with the general London scene. What I had seen while I was a member of the Guild, and particularly as Chairman, had bothered me. One particular thing was when the Arts Council was asked to give a list of the thirty leading composers and I was upset when not included. It seems to me very different in Scotland, there is a much more open feeling and the composers are not all fighting each other.

JD: But your music was not affected by all this.

WW: The main thing I feel about music is what Mendelssohn said, that because it is so subtle, precise and profound a language, it is quite impossible to translate its meaning into words. On the other hand, it is bound to be influenced by what you feel and what you are. It is very difficult to say what it is that prompts you to write something. One can say the circumstances in which a piece was written; I have written a piece in memory of my wife, Frieda, that was obviously prompted by her death and life. I don't think I intended to write a piece in memory of her particularly, but an idea came to me and I realised what it was. It was out of the feeling which I'd had, and thinking and working it out as an idea. Once one has started one is working, at least in my case, almost entirely from a musical point of view, the working out of themes, the emotion that created them is in the themes and the way you treat them is technical. So when I say that I don't think that what I write is just from experience, its the start of it maybe, but the working out of it is in a sense an intellectual exercise, but also the emotion comes from seeing the thing whole. I don't know who it was who wrote about Wagner that the mind that conceived *Tristan und Isolde* must have been as cold as ice, which is an interesting angle on such an emotional piece. But you can see what he means, that there is a unity of reason and emotion. I think that is true of all good music – that it is partly intellectual and partly emotional, that the brain has to work on the emotion to form it into the pieces you want. It is interesting watching oneself do it, if one can. Being aware of what is happening, if one can stay outside it a bit, is what that quotation about Wagner means; in a way you are detached from what you are doing, you are not so involved that you can't be rational about it at the same time as you are feeling it. Have you read John McMurray? He wrote a book called "Reason and Emotion" which I thought a very fine book. He was a Scots professor at Edinburgh, dead now, and he did some radio talks in the 1930s (called "Freedom in the Modern World") which had a great influence on me. He was a philosopher and later became a Quaker; I don't think he was a pacifist.

JD: You are still very concerned with what is happening in the world?

WW: Of course.

JD: Can we expect two more symphonies to make nine?

WW: I would like to hear a performance of my sixth symphony before that happens.