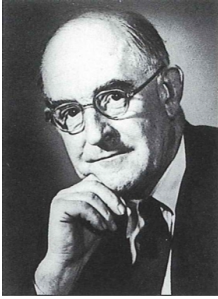


Armstrong Gibbs (1889-1960)

Symphony No. 3 in B flat, Op. 104 "Westmorland" (1944)



Armstrong Gibbs

Moderato (*I will lift up mine eyes*)

Lento (*Castnel Fell*)

Scherzo Vivace con fuoco (*Weathers*)

With complete serenity (*The Lake*)

Armstrong Gibbs (he always hated his first given name, Cecil) was one of the most prolific of his generation of British composers, but since his death on 12 May 1960 has become one of the most neglected. His small surviving reputation is based on a mere handful from his nearly 200 songs but he also wrote operas, incidental music, a great many choral works ranging from small unaccompanied pieces, through a long series of secular and sacred cantatas with orchestra, to the hour-long choral Symphony "Odysseus", instrumental and chamber music including at least a dozen string quartets, and orchestral music embracing symphonic poems, concertos, numerous light music suites, and the two full-scale symphonies.

By the time Gibbs came to compose his Symphony No. 3 *Westmorland*, he and his family were evacuees in the Lake District - refugees, virtually, from the comfortable home now requisitioned for war purposes - with an income by no means secure, and stricken by wartime tragedy. Their son David had been killed in action on 18 November 1943, and it is impossible not to feel that this eloquent and moving work - perhaps Armstrong Gibbs' masterpiece, and certainly his most considerable purely orchestral composition - is music both of mourning and of consolation.

The first movement (headed "I will lift up mine eyes") begins with a 44-bar Moderato introduction which nevertheless has a numbed funereal quality, with quiet drumbeats and rolls underlying a climbing figure on horns and trombones, full of foreboding. Timpani crescendo to a decisive thump on the dominant, F, and an accelerando for the full orchestra unleashes the Allegro Deciso first subject which unfolds purposefully until it slows and cadences into D-flat major for a long (18-bar) second subject melody of great beauty and immediacy, introduced on the cellos. So memorable is it, indeed, that from here on its influence permeates the movement and indeed the remainder of the Symphony - not so much in a strictly thematic way (though it does come back literally at the end of the work), but as an emotional centre of gravity, an idealised place to be, to which the work strives to return. The melody is repeated, with richer orchestration, but its circular structure necessitates a huge effort to tear away from it and move into the development of full.

The first subject group lends itself to extension by overlapping entries, fruitful dismemberment, and redistribution amongst the orchestra; after a pause, the big tune comes back, but only its opening phrase, as a kind of feint. A passage of rushing

strings seem to herald its full restatement, but instead sidesteps into a recapitulation of the first subject - but of course then the second subject, in full, peeling panoply. There is a general pause, and the music collapses back into the mood of the opening, a hushed postlude that dies away in the same muffled drumbeats.

Westmorland is a potent reaction to wartime peril, personal loss, and natural beauty, but the Lento second movement is the only one inspired by a specific place in the Lake District. After introductory exchanges on horns and woodwind, “Cartmel Fell” is evoked first by an eloquent principal subject on divided lower strings (its opening descending quavers borrowed from the first movement big tune); then a cooler, questioning second motif first heard on a solo oboe, and finally a rather Elgarian third main idea whose passionate intensity erupts like a crag through the surrounding sylvan beauty at each appearance.

Gibbs specifically labels his Vivace con fuoco third movement, “Weathers”, a scherzo, though again there is no formal ABA structure with a central trio. Bold opening timpani introduce a string of vigorous, short-lived ideas. A swinging, singing violin tune is the closest thing the movement has to a trio, but rather than leading to a restatement of the opening material (though the solo timpani does return), it keeps the lion’s share of the end of the movement to itself.

The finale, entitled “The Lake”, is another slow movement: “A day of early June, without cloud or mist. At my feet the water lies mistily blue”. For this vision Gibbs dispenses with tuba, trumpets, triangle, and cymbals throughout, and trombones apart from a few bars near the end. Oscillating thirds in clarinets frame the picture. A long main theme, unmistakably consolatory in mood, emerges on oboe; a pause, and then a solo violin picks up the melody. Another pause, and then the cellos introduce what at first seems like anew idea but is then transformed into an unmistakable reminiscence of the first movement second subject. Like a recalled chain of thought, ominousness returns with tolling timpani, and then the clouds part to reveal the finale’s main theme now on violins, the oscillating thirds transferred to violas. The first movement melody returns, darkened by trombones, and then the timpani, but at the last the solo violin soars clearly aloft into the June sky.

Though Gibbs’ superscription is unambiguous, the end of the finale is marked “Finished ad majorem Dei gloriam” Windermere November 4th 1944’. The catharsis had taken almost a year to arrive at creative fruition.

The first performance came relatively quickly, by BBC forces at Manchester on 23 August 1945, but apart from one further BBC performance, at Glasgow in 1956, the Symphony seems not to have been heard again until a live performance given by the Essex Chamber Orchestra in 2006. The performance by the Australian Discovery Orchestra in 2016 is an Australian premiere.

Extracted in part from liner notes by David J. Brown ©1994

The Life of Cecil Armstrong Gibbs

A little-known prolific English Composer, Adjudicator and Conductor, who studied under Sir Adrian Boult and Ralph Vaughan Williams, and a contemporary of Sir Arthur Bliss, Herbert Howells and Sir Arnold Bax.

Known principally for his solo songs, Armstrong Gibbs also wrote music for the stage, sacred works, three symphonies and a substantial amount of chamber music, much of which remains unpublished. He gained wide recognition during the early part of his life, but until recently, like many of his contemporaries, has been little known. He died in Chelmsford on 12th May 1960 and is buried with his wife in Danbury churchyard.

Early life

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (he hated the name Cecil) was born in 1889 at The Vineyards, Great Baddow, Chelmsford, the first child of Ida Gibbs (née Whitehead) and David Cecil Gibbs, the famous soap and chemicals manufacturer. His mother died when he was only two years old, so he was brought up by his five maiden aunts. So apparent were his musical gifts at a young age, that the aunts begged the boy's father to send him abroad to receive a musical education. However David Cecil, who had himself been educated in Germany, was determined to give his son the benefit of an English public school education. Consequently the young Armstrong was sent first to a preparatory school on the Hove / Brighton borders and then on to Winchester College.

Education

From Winchester, Armstrong Gibbs gained an exhibition and a sizarship to Trinity College Cambridge to read history. After completing his History Tripos in 1911 he stayed on at Cambridge to take his Mus. B. During that period he received composition and harmony lessons from E. J. Dent and Charles Wood and studied the organ briefly under Cyril Rootham. Realising that he could not make a living from composition alone, he decided to take up teaching. He spent just over a year at Copthorne School, East Grinstead, before returning to his old preparatory school, The Wick. Although he was not able to compose as much as he had hoped, he did write some songs to poems of Walter de la Mare. On being asked to produce a play for the headmaster's retirement in 1919, Armstrong Gibbs approached de la Mare directly and was delighted when the author produced the play Crossings for him to set to music.

Entry to the Royal College of Music

The producer of the play, Armstrong Gibbs' old composition teacher E.J. Dent, brought the young Adrian Boult down to conduct Crossings. He was so impressed with the music that he generously offered to fund Gibbs for a year as a mature student at the Royal College of Music. Encouraged by his wife, Honor, to take up the challenge, Armstrong Gibbs resigned from his post and moved back to Essex. After a year at the RCM studying conducting under Boult and composition under Vaughan Williams, he accepted a part-time teaching post at the college.

In Danbury, near Chelmsford

Soon after moving to Danbury in 1919, Armstrong Gibbs set up a choral society which then participated in the Essex Musical Association festivals in Chelmsford. The setting of one of his own compositions, for a festival class in Bath, led to his becoming an

adjudicator and eventually Vice-President of the National Federation of Music Festivals. Thereafter followed a busy life of touring the country adjudicating festivals, conducting and composing. As well as conducting the Choral Society in Danbury and singing with the Church Choir, Armstrong Gibbs played cricket and bowls and lent active support to many local organisations.

The War Years

His house Crossings being requisitioned as a hospital during the Second World War, Armstrong Gibbs moved to Windermere, where he continued composing and conducting. After his son David was killed on active service in Italy he wrote his third symphony, *The Westmorland*. On his return to Essex in 1945 he re-formed Danbury Choral Society and renewed his association with the Festivals Movement, playing a key role in the organisation of the music for the Mothers' Union World Wide Conference of 1948 and the Festival of Britain in 1951.

As a Man...

Armstrong Gibbs was a country man at heart who did not care to be part of the London musical scene. He played a full part in village life, serving on several committees and participating in local events. A sincere Christian, he sang in the church choir, supported the bell ringers and spent much time fund raising for the restoration of the Church Tower and Organ. He took a great interest in the local flower show and knew everyone in the village. When he grew too old to play in village cricket matches he became a keen bowls player.

Armstrong Gibbs was a warm and affectionate man, devoted to his family, and with many friends to whom he showed great loyalty and generosity. He was scrupulously fair and quick to champion anyone he felt had been unfairly treated. His great sense of humour, clearly recalled by his daughter, is borne out by the many tales he tells in his unpublished autobiography *Common Time*.

He had a large frame and could look imposing, particularly on formal occasions when he wore his Mus D. gown. He had a definite sense of how things should be ordered, so found it difficult to countenance other people's opinions. He always spoke out for what he thought was right. As a young man he had red hair and a temper to match; but he was always the first to apologise after an outburst. His nervous disposition and digestive problems he put down to his father's draconian attitudes when he was a child.

As with most people, there were contradictions in his character. For instance, the same person who could tap a young chorister on the shoulder for getting a fit of the giggles, could also himself drum on the choir stall in front of him, when the Rector was in full flood, and mutter audibly 'Whenever will that man finish?'

The Music of Armstrong Gibbs

Although he is principally remembered as a composer of solo songs, Armstrong Gibbs was a versatile musician whose output included part songs, larger choral works, chamber music and three symphonies. Much of his chamber music remains unpublished and the few recordings that are available give scant exposure to his compositions.

Some of the well-known Gibbs settings date from the early years of his career; for example Nod, Silver, Five Eyes and A Song of Shadows, all poems by Walter de la Mare with whom he had a close artistic association. Songs from the children's play Crossings, written by de la Mare, mark the beginning of his career as a composer.

Gibbs made his name by writing for the stage. After Crossings came the incidental music for a production of Webster's *The White Devil*, in Cambridge. This was quickly followed by the music for Maeterlinck's play *The Betrothal*, in 1921 and concurrently the Cambridge Greek play *the Oresteia*. Shortly afterwards he wrote the music for A.P. Herbert's comic opera *The Blue Peter* and for Clifford Bax's successful harlequinade *Midsummer Madness*. Gibbs always wanted to write a successful comic operetta and was bitterly disappointed, in the fifties, when the BBC rejected *Mr Cornelius*.

Much of Gibbs' early music was written for string quartet with piano or other instruments. Often this combination was used as an accompaniment for his songs. Gibbs' fluent writing for strings gained him the second prize in the Daily Telegraph Competition in 1934 (String Quartet in A Major). It also resulted in the popular *Dusk* - the slow waltz from his suite *Fancy Dress*, written for orchestra and piano. In the thirties too, he wrote *Almayne*, based on a 17th century air and *A Spring Garland*, a collection of musical pictures of flowers. A commission from the Westmorland Orchestra, in the early fifties, produced the reflective *Dale and Fell* suite. On the death of Walter de la Mare in 1956 Gibbs wrote the poignant *Threnody* for string quartet and string orchestra. Other instrumental music included pieces for violin, cello and clarinet and an oboe concerto dedicated to Leon Goossens.

What is presumed to be Gibbs first Symphony in E - an early mention referred to it as the second - was written in 1931 / 32 and performed in October 1932, under the baton of Sir Adrian Boult. The second, the choral symphony *Odysseus*, thought by Gibbs to be one of his best works, had to wait until 1946 for its first performance. The third symphony, the *Westmorland*, was completed in 1944 (following the tragic death of his son who was killed in action in Italy), while the composer and his wife were living in the Lake District.

Extracted and edited from The Armstrong Gibbs Society Website
<http://www.armstronggibbs.com/html/bio.htm>