

Sir John Barbirolli, CH (2 December 1899 – 29 July 1970), né Giovanni Battista Barbirolli, was a British conductor and cellist. He is remembered above all as conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, which he helped save from dissolution in 1943 and conducted for the rest of his life. Earlier in his career he was Arturo Toscanini's successor as music director of the New York Philharmonic, serving from 1936 to 1943. He was also chief conductor of the Houston Symphony from 1961 to 1967, and was a guest conductor of many other orchestras, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia, the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic, with all of which he made recordings.



Born in London of Italian and French parentage, Barbirolli grew up in a family of professional musicians. After starting out as a cellist, he was given the chance to conduct, from 1926 with the British National Opera Company, and then with Covent Garden's touring company. On taking up the conductorship of the Hallé he had less opportunity to work in the opera house, but in the 1950s he conducted productions of works by Verdi, Wagner, Gluck, and Puccini at Covent Garden with such success that he was invited to become the company's permanent musical director, an invitation he declined. Late in his career he made several recordings of operas, of which his 1967 set of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* for EMI is probably the best known.

Both in the concert hall and on record, Barbirolli was particularly associated with the music of English composers such as Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams. His interpretations of other late romantic composers, such as Mahler and Sibelius, as well as of earlier classical composers, including Schubert, are also still admired.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS - A LONDON SYMPHONY

Sir John Barbirolli
The Hallé Orchestra

Geoffrey Toye, with the Queen's Hall Orchestra, led the first performance of Vaughan Williams "London" Symphony in London on March 27, 1914. As late as 1951, Vaughan Williams made new editions of symphonies Nos. 1-6. He wrote to Sir John Barbirolli that "The London Symphony is past mending -- though with all its faults I love it still; indeed it is my favourite of my family of six." His favorite had a checkered history. His friend George Butterworth said, "You know, you ought to write a symphony." Vaughan Williams duly wrote and heard performed A London Symphony, then sent the score to Germany in 1914, for publication. It got lost, but from the parts was reconstructed; Vaughan Williams made cuts and adjustments in 1918, again in 1920, before publishing the work with a dedication to Butterworth's memory. But he wasn't finished: Vaughan Williams made trims in 1934 and still more in 1936 for another published edition that remains definitive. The pleas to restore certain passages fell on deaf ears: "It's much too long, much too long, and there was some horrid modern music in the middle -- awful stuff. I cut that out -- couldn't stand it," this to Bernard Herrmann, who'd performed the 1920 version in New York.

In four movements, it is more like four related tone poems in the style of Sibelius' Lemminkäinen Legends. Vaughan Williams tended to downplay their programmatic character, especially in later years, but he did write the following, interleaved with observations by Michael Kennedy and Butterworth in square-brackets:

"There are four movements. The first begins with a slow prelude [just before dawn as Wordsworth described it -- 'all that mighty heart is lying still' -- harp and clarinet intone the Westminster chimes]. This leads to a vigorous allegro -- which may perhaps suggest the noise and hurry of London, with its always underlying calm [two solo cellos, two solo violins and harp begin a reverie in one of London's green spaces, or churches, which merges into the recapitulation of the main themes...].

"The second (slow) movement has been called 'Bloomsbury Square on a November afternoon.' This may serve as a clue to the music, but it is not a necessary 'explanation' of it. [For Butterworth, 'an idyll of grey skies and secluded by-ways.' Kennedy heard 'a lavender-seller's cry, which Vaughan Williams noted in Chelsea...a hansom cab's jingle'].

"The third movement is a nocturne in the form of a scherzo. If the hearer will imagine himself standing on Westminster Embankment at night, surrounded by the distant sounds of the Strand, with its great hotels on the one side and the 'New Cut' on the other, with its crowded streets and flaring lights [Cockney conviviality, to the simulated sounds of a mouth-organ], it may serve as a mood in which to listen....

"The last movement consists of an agitated theme in three-time, alternating with a march movement, at first solemn [not all in London are occasions of pageantry] and later on energetic. At the end of the finale comes a suggestion of the noise and fever of the first movement -- this time much subdued -- then the 'Westminster Chimes' once more. An 'Epilogue' follows in which the slow prelude is developed into a movement of some length [Clearly the rippling figures on flutes, violins, and violas represent the Thames....The coda was suggested by a passage in H.G. Wells' novel, Tono Bungay: 'To run down the Thames so is to run one's hand over the pages in the book of England from end to end....The river passes -- London passes, England passes....']."

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A LONDON SYMPHONY

Sir John Barbirolli - The Hallé Orchestra

1. Lento – Allegro Risoluto 13:56
 2. Lento 11:36
 3. Scherzo "Nocturne" (Allegro Vivace) 7:28
 4. Andante Con Moto – Maestoso Alla Marcia
Epilogue (Andante Sustainuto) 13:23
- Total Time: 46:23**

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