

# Edmund Rubbra: A Lifetime Contribution to Choral Composition

by Gregory K. Lyne

While Edmund Rubbra's compositions have been performed with some regularity in England and in Europe, his music has gone largely unnoticed in the United States. Rubbra, born in 1901, passed away on February 14, 1986 in Gerrard's Cross, England. He leaves a legacy of choral music to be explored. While he composed no fewer than eleven symphonies and numerous instrumental works, it was to the human voice and to choral music that he consistently returned as a means of musical expression. In this regard he states:

I would not enjoy being regarded solely as a symphonist, for no composer writes symphonies exclusively. I think my other kinds of work are just as important in their own way - my choral works for example - for that is a medium I enjoy working in.<sup>1</sup>

Rubbra's contribution to the choral repertoire is extensive. Out of one hundred and forty-seven opus numbers, eighty-one deal with voices in some combination. More specifically, fifty-six are choral compositions; that figure, then, represents over one-third of his compositional efforts being devoted to the choral medium.

## Biographical Sketch

Edmund Rubbra was born in Northampton, England, on May 23, 1901. Born into a working-class family, he began work at age fourteen as a railway clerk. At the age of seventeen he organized a concert in Northampton devoted to the works of Cyril Scott. This concert led the composer to accept Rubbra as his pupil. Soon after, Rubbra won an Open Composition Scholarship at University College, Reading, where Holst taught. In the following year he was awarded a scholarship to the Royal College of Music where he studied composition with Holst, counterpoint with R. O. Morris, and piano with Evelyn Howard-Jones. His earliest published part songs date from this period.

After leaving the Royal College of Music Rubbra began earning his living as a musical journalist and a composer of incidental music for plays. He also toured Italy as a pianist and gave a number of recitals in Paris. It was at this time that Augener's Music Publishing accepted his *Five Motets* for unaccompanied choir (1934). Soon after, major recognition came to Rubbra with the performance of his *First Symphony* introduced in 1937 by the BBC Symphony conducted by Adrian Boult.

During the war he formed a piano trio later to become known as the Rubbra-Gruenberg-Pleeth Trio. This ensemble performed regularly through 1956. After the war Rubbra served as a lecturer at Oxford University (1947-1968). Beginning in 1961 he served as Professor of Composition of the Guildhall School of Music in London. In 1963 he was elected Fellow of the Guildhall School of Music and was a member of the Royal Academy of Music. He was awarded two honorary Doc-

tor of Music Degrees; one was from Durham (1949) and the other from Leicester (1959).

## Some Features of His Compositional Style

There are those who might refer to Rubbra's compositional style as "traditional." It is true that "he is not a musician who is interested in discarding past traditions, but instead, seeks to express his ideas, based upon traditional methods, in a fresh context."<sup>2</sup> His music is uncluttered. It is not possible to classify his work with any school or faction. His style can be said to be non-radical in purpose. In speaking of Rubbra's position in the stream of musical composition Julius Harrison says:

... if we examine the nature of Rubbra's music, we reach the conclusion that in him we have a composer who has never held a candle to the devil for the sake of an ephemeral popularity gained by resorting to adventurous tricks of the trade or to a choice of subjects designed to provoke the world by deviation from the normal. Nor is he an exhibitionist flaunting garish orchestral colors in conscious conceit. But he is indeed an explorer who in all sincerity treads long-forgotten paths until they become new again. That implies not a retrogression to conservatism but rather a wholesome respect for tradition coupled to the vision of a prophet able to interpret the present and view the future in their relation to the past.<sup>3</sup>

His music, for the most part, is unadorned and tends to be more meditative than dramatic. While the music contains development and dramatic conflict, the textures are essentially homogenous. Abrupt textural changes are not generally encountered.

Thematic materials, for Rubbra, are fragmentary and depend upon development for their consummation. His rhythms are persistent and (like his textures) remain homogenous. The rhythms are, most often, of a prose-rhythmic type and tend to become diffused in the composition itself.

Rubbra's art is primarily a contrapuntal one in that a linear supremacy dominates his music. The ability to deal with contrapuntal intricacies forms a basis of his musical discipline. The writing invariably displays a distinctive craftsmanship and effectiveness. Within his style, two primary types of contrapuntal writing can be found.

The first type is an imitative one and stems from a canonic base. While numerous examples abound, the following excerpts will serve as worthy illustrations. From the "Sanctus" of his *Missa Cantuariensis*, Op. 59, we find the voices treated in double canon: (Example 1)

### Example 1.

Adagio (♩: 54 circa)



Lyne is Associate Professor of Choral Music at California State University at Long Beach.

Doppio movimento (♩ = 54)

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Similarly, from his Five Motets for Unaccompanied Choir, Op. 37, a double canon is found. (Example 2)

**Example 2.**

**II. VAIN WITS AND EYES**

Henry Vaughan 1621-1695 *d = 68 circa.* Edmund Rubbra Op. 87, No. 2

CHOIR I  
Soprano  
Alto  
Tenor (as lower)  
Bass

CHOIR II  
Soprano  
Alto  
Tenor (as lower)  
Bass

Piano (for practice only)

buse not, shun not ho-ly fire, But with true tears.  
A-buse not, shun not ho-ly fire, But with true tears.  
wise: A-buse not, shun not ho-ly fire, But with true  
A-buse not, shun not ho-ly fire, But with true  
and be wise: A-buse not, shun not ho-ly fire, But  
and be wise: A-buse not, shun not ho-ly  
Leave, and be wise: A-buse not, shun not hu-ly

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The second major type, not so easily recognized, finds its roots in organum. This type might also be con-

sidered as a chordal or harmonic stream which would have a harmonic reference. From the "Sanctus" of Rubbra's *Missa in Honorem in Sancti Dominici*, Op. 66, we can observe this organal-contrapuntal style between the alto and bass voices. (Example 3)

**Example 3.**

Più mosso (♩ = 96)

Sa - ba - oth. Ple - - - ni sunt cae - li et  
Sa - ba - oth. Ple - - - ni sunt cae - li et  
Sa - ba - oth. Ple - - - ni sunt cae - li et  
Sa - ba - oth. Ple - - - ni sunt cae - li et

Allarg.

ter - ra glo - - ri - a tu - a. Ho -  
ter - ra glo - - ri - a tu - a. Ho -  
ter - ra glo - - ri - a tu - a. Ho -  
ter - ra glo - - ri - a tu - a. Ho -

- san - na in ex - cel - - sis.  
- san - na in ex - cel - - sis.  
- san - na in ex - cel - - sis.  
- san - na in ex - cel - - sis.

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In the anthem "Lauda Sion," Op. 110, the organum is constructed below a triple pedalpoint. (Example 4)

**Example 4.**

Mors est ma-lis, vi-ta bo-nis:

rit. - - -  
vi - de pa-ris sump-ti - o - nis, quam sit dis-par ex - li -

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Rubbra's organal type of counterpoint bears an affinity to the vocal counterpoint of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. In addition, the features one might characteristically find in a work of an Elizabethan composer such as Byrd or Dowland are evidenced in many of Rubbra's liturgical works as well:

1. Length and plasticity of line
2. Singleness of textural style
3. Basically non-metrical melodies of a prose-rhythmical type
4. Avoidance of cadences over a long period of time
5. Linear independence of voice parts

While Rubbra, himself, has attested to the fact that in his instrumental music he is interested in "trying to bring the contrapuntal texture of the Elizabethans into the wider instrumental forms,"<sup>4</sup> he rejects the idea that he uses that style in a conscious, concerted effort. Donald Brook sums up Rubbra's use of music of the past in this way:

Rubbra owes to the music of the past what every sensible composer owes to them, namely, what study and observation will give, and no more. He does not go to them for inspiration. That is entirely his own. He has now evolved a system that is substantially built on a contrapuntal basis which has only one thing in common with scholastic counterpoint — the fundamental aim, the weaving together of melodic strands in such a way to secure a satisfactory harmonic whole.<sup>5</sup>

Rubbra's melodies are primarily conjunct ones and remain, for the most part, diatonic. The harmonic construction is essentially a product of interplay between the melodic lines. While Rubbra writes with a tonal center in mind, he often omits specific tones within a modal pattern giving an elusiveness of tonal center.

Dissonance occurs from slight tonal and melodic ambiguities, which combine to form dissonance, rather than from strictly harmonic considerations.

Throughout his life, Rubbra characteristically leaned toward subjects of a contemplative and meditative nature. In this regard, much of his music is designed for purposes of worship and religious celebration. His strength of conviction to religious precepts is fundamental in his thinking. As president of the Catholic Musicians Guild, he expresses a philosophical attitude that sets him apart from most twentieth-century composers and hearkens to a much earlier time period:

... whether as composers, teachers, or performers, the work of guild members should be shot through with the light and wisdom of the Christ's teaching, so that music is again the Handmaid of the Lord and not a means of self-aggrandizement.<sup>6</sup>

A respect for life and his musical discipline remained foremost in his thinking. Through his lifetime he wrote only music he wanted to write. He sums up his philosophy of purpose in the following statement:

A composer's work entails a constant scrutiny not only of what comes to him from his own centre but of what is given from outside, whether belonging to the present or to the past, so that all he writes shall conform to an inner standard.<sup>7</sup>

*An Annotated Listing of  
Some Rubbra Choral Works*

Unfortunately, some of Rubbra's compositions are currently out of print. However, many fine representative selections are available. It should be noted that Frederick Harris Music Company, Ltd., is the sole North



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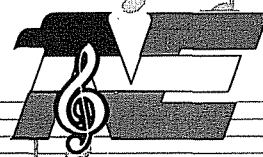
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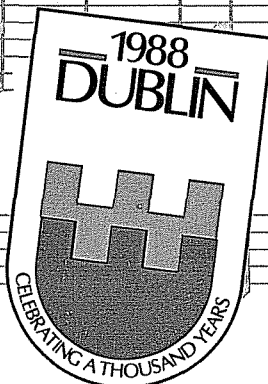
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Rubbra's compositional output includes motets, anthems, folk settings, works for ceremonial occasions, and works of a practical liturgical nature. His choral contribution has been varied and significant. Certainly, his choral music deserves to be more widely known and performed in the United States.

*Works With Orchestral Accompaniment*

1965 In Die Et Nocte Canticum Op. 129 Lengnick  
S.A.T.B. and Orchestra  
2222-2230, Timp. Perc, Harp, and Strings  
Suite in Five Movements  
Commissioned for the New Universities  
Festival, 1965  
First performed at the University of Sussex

1. Aubade (Orchestra alone)
2. Hymn at Dawn ('Splendor Paternae Gloriam')  
Text by St. Ambrose (340-397 A.D.)
3. Hymn to Spring ('Salve ver Optatum')  
Text from a manuscript of Benedictbiuern
4. Hymn before Sleep ('Fluxit Labor Diei')  
Text by Prudentius (348-410 A.D.)
5. Nocturne (Orchestra alone)

Of the five movements, the first and last are for or-

chestra alone. Movement two is quick and festive. A close text-to-music relationship exists with tonal shifts occurring for each instance of new text. Number three features a reiterative germinal unit. Harmonically, two planes occur - parallel fourths running in contrary motion to parallel thirds. Movement four is slow and introspective with proselike declamation.

1965 Inscapae Op. 122 Lengnick  
Suite for S.A.T.B., Strings,  
and Harp (or Piano)  
Text: Gerard Manley Hopkins  
Commissioned for the Stroud Festival  
of Religious Drama and the Arts.

1. Pied Beauty
2. The Lantern Out of Doors
3. Spring
4. God's Grandeur
5. Epilogue

While a religious text, the poems all deal with nature and possess a spirit and lightness of expression not found in Rubbra's more meditative settings. The high degree of textural change employed is also unusual for Rubbra. Excellent choral writing abounds with colorful interpenetration of text. Movement one concludes with a triumphal praise; movement two is slow and dramatic in its delivery. The third movement with its misplaced accents in the vocal parts is contrasted with an independent elegance in the strings. Number four (largo e grandioso) is an extreme example of word painting by Rubbra conveying the "grandeur of God." Colorful writing and much variety is contained in this work.

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1951 Festival Te Deum Op. 71 Lengnick  
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 2222-4331, Timp., Perc., Harp,  
 Celeste, Organ, and Strings  
 Commissioned by the Arts Council of  
 Great Britain for the Festival  
 of Britain  
 First Performance: June 30, 1951, Festival Hall

The Festival Te Deum is a diatonic work throughout, with long, sweeping sections. Primarily homophonic, the lyrical lines serve well a ceremonial occasion. Melodically produced modulations and frequent changes of tempo add great variety to the work. The final section, "Day by Day We Magnify Thee" blossoms into an ingenious counterpoint.

*Works With Piano/Organ Accompaniment*

1964 And When the Builders Op. 125 Lengnick  
 S.A.T.B. and Organ  
 Words from Ezra

This anthem is an austere setting in which the voices move in block chords against an accompaniment of alternating chords. Rubbra anchors all this together by an unbroken pedal below. It is a singable, rather spirited work throughout.

1949 Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis Op. 65 Lengnick  
 S.A.T.B. and Organ

A very practical liturgical work, this is a consonant setting of two familiar texts. The organ accompaniment

is independent from the choral lines. Reminiscent of Vaughan Williams's settings of the same texts, the work is primarily homophonic and illustrates Rubbra's ability to effectively set texts of majesty.

*Works for Unaccompanied Choir*

1957 Festival Gloria Op. 94 Lengnick  
 S.S.A.A.T.T.B.B., Soprano and  
 Baritone Soli  
 Commissioned by and dedicated to  
 the St. Paul's Cathedral Choir

The work begins with two choirs pitted against each other, which leads to an antiphonal engagement between the choral forces. Parts are most often divided. Texturally, great variety is found in the piece, and an effective balance between the harmonic and contrapuntal is achieved. Extremes of ranges are demanded. A large festival-sized choir is necessary to execute the exultant climax.

1957 The Givers Op. 96 Lengnick  
 S.A.T.B.  
 Text by Louis MacNeice  
 Written in honor of the 85th Birthday  
 of Ralph Vaughan Williams

"The Givers" features an intimate setting of a rather profound text. It is primarily syllabic and contrasts the male voices with the female chorus in responsorial fashion. Word painting and tonal shifts contribute to the effectiveness of the text delivery.

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I SING THE GREATNESS OF OUR GOD  
 Fred Bock

LET THE WHOLE CREATION CRY!  
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 arr. Fred Bock

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 Doris Akers/Allan Davies

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 Clifford McCormick

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD  
 John Stainer/Fred Bock

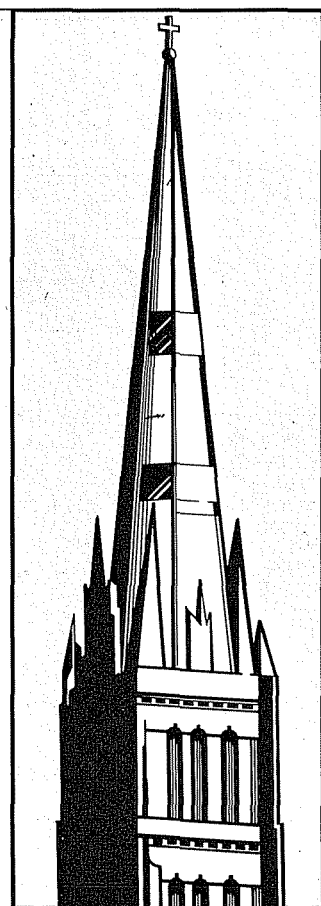
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1961 *Lauda Sion* Op. 110 Lengnick  
 S.S.A.A.T.T.B.B., Soprano  
 and Baritone Solo  
 Text by St. Thomas Aquinas

This hymn of praise is a work of grandeur and great majesty. The work is made formally cohesive through the use of a rondo structure. Thematic material is entirely integrated throughout. Polyphony dominates and Rubbra makes use of a chordal counterpoint as well. A work of some dimension, "Lauda Sion" represents a dignified example of maintaining attention to a symphonic structure. For the most advanced, festival-sized choir only.

1945 *Missa Cantuariensis* Op. 59 Lengnick  
 S.S.A.A.T.T.B.B. (except for  
 Credo which uses organ  
 accompaniment)  
 Commissioned by Canterbury Cathedral  
 to celebrate the end of WWII

The work is a festival mass setting of the English Rite for double chorus. The Kyrie is in plainsong declamation. False relations and enharmonic transitions give color to the movement.

The Credo makes use of organ, accompanied by plainsong-like narration above. At the words, "et resurrexit," a canon takes place. The Sanctus, too, is contrapuntal, again featuring a canon. The Benedictus begins with a stepwise declamation and yields to a rich polyphonic texture for the "Hosanna." The relaxed Agnus Dei is also contrapuntal.

As is traditional in the English Rite, the Gloria occurs at the end of the work. It begins with an elaborate double fugue. The triple rhythm of this movement is suggestive of dance. The work closes allargando with a glorious canon.

1948 *Missa in Honorem Sancti Dominici* Op. 66 Lengnick  
 S.A.T.B.

This work (one of Rubbra's best known), is an unadorned presentation of the strict Roman Rite. The piece marks his conversion to Catholicism. The music is textually inspired and shows an affinity to the type of text setting which might be found in the sixteenth century. While dissonances are frequent, the work reveals rather conservative harmonic treatment. Polyphony abounds but it is offset by many parallel freely-rhymed sections with as many as seven individual voice parts. The work is accessible to most choirs and represents a distinctive contribution to the Mass repertoire.

1954-1963 *Nine Tenebrae Motets* Op. 72 Lengnick  
 S.A.T.B. (divisi section)

First Nocturne:  
 (written for the 75th Birthday of  
 Charles Kennedy Scott)  
 In Montre Oliveti  
 Tristis est anima mea  
 Ecce Vidimus cum

Second Nocturne:  
 (written for Alec Robertson)

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Amicus meus  
Judas mercator pessimus  
Unus ex Discipulis

Third Nocturne:  
(written for the Cork Festival, 1962,  
and dedicated to Denys Darlow and  
the Tilford Bach Choir)  
Eram quasi Agnus innocens  
Una Hora non potuistis  
Seniores populi

The fully liturgical Tenebrae settings, written for the Roman Catholic service, are to be performed on Maundy Thursday. The first Nocturne (which includes Nos. 1-3) was written in 1954. The work was completed in 1963 with the writing of the Second and Third Nocturnes (Nos. 4-9).

For the most part the work is homophonic and utilizes block chords. There is little contrapuntal movement, although a chordal canon occurs in No. 4, "Amicus meus." The overall setting is somewhat sombre, and often hushed. Much of the work is reminiscent of a Bruckner motet in its organ-like richness and harmonic flexibility.

1953 Salutation Op. 82 Lengnick  
S.A.T.B.  
Text by Christopher Hassall  
Commissioned for the Coronation  
of Queen Elizabeth II  
Originally published by Stainer and  
Bell, Ltd., under the title,  
"A Garland for the Queen."

Explicit and varied dynamic markings and frequent textural change make this a most colorful piece. Textually inspired, dramatic sections serve as a contrast to the more subdued parlando sections. This piece represents an excellent example of Rubbra's close association between text and music.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Murray Schaefer, "Edmund Rubbra," *British Composers In Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory K. Lyne, "Edmund Rubbra: The Man and His Choral Works" (doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Julius Harrison, "The Music of Edmund Rubbra" *Musical Opinion* 77 (December 1953): 151.

<sup>4</sup> D. Hugh Ottaway, "A Note on Edmund Rubbra" *Musical Opinion* 75 (April 1952): 401.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Brook, *Composer's Gallery, Biographical Sketches of Contemporary Composers* (London: Rockliffe Publ., 1946), p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> "Chronicle and Comment" *Catholic Choirmaster* 41 (Spring 1955): 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Rubbra, "Letter to a Young Composer." *The Listener* 56 (September 13, 1956): 380.

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