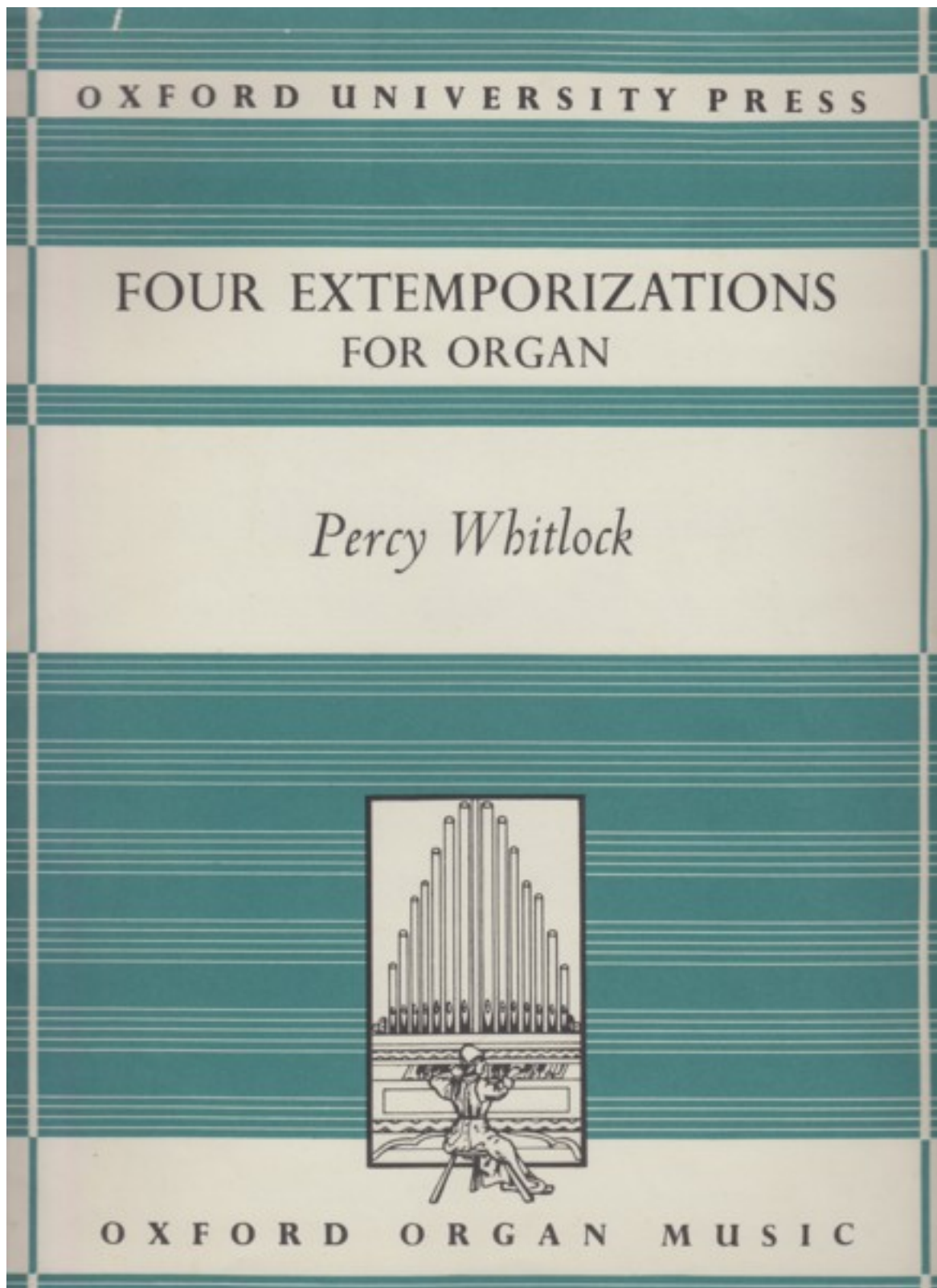


# The organ music of Percy Whitlock



**Cartmel Priory January 28th 2017**



Percy Whitlock in 1938

Percy William Whitlock was born at Chatham on June 1st 1903. At the age of 16 he entered the Royal College of Music where his teachers included Stanford, Vaughan Williams and Henry Ley. From 1921 to 1930 Whitlock was assistant organist at Rochester Cathedral. When the cathedral organist, Charles Hylton Stewart, left for a similar position at Chester Whitlock realised that it was time to move elsewhere and from 1930 to 1935 he served as music director at St Stephen's Bournemouth, combining this position from 1932 with the role of that town's borough organist at the Bournemouth Pavilion. After 1935 he worked full-time at the Pavilion.

Here he worked with the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra (later the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra) and gave dozens of live BBC broadcasts between 1933 and 1946. He wrote a number of works for orchestra and the huge four-manual Compton organ in the Pavilion, including a Symphony in G minor which has been revived and recorded.

An avid railway enthusiast, Whitlock presented his then girlfriend (soon to be his wife) Edna May Kingdon, with a most unusual twenty-second birthday present. Entitled *The South Eastern and Chatham Railway and the London, Chatham and Dover Railway Locomotives: Their description, history, distinctive features and interest* by Percy W. Whitlock, a book which Edna's mother considered totally unsuitable.

Whitlock wrote extensively and even composed poetry. Much of his writing for the local Bournemouth press was under the pseudonym Kenneth Lark. A great deal of his correspondence and diaries have survived and these, along with many of the articles he wrote were assembled into *The Percy Whitlock Companion* which was edited by Malcolm Riley and published in 2007. They show the composer to be a kind, gentle soul with a mischievous sense of fun and a sharp, but never unkind, wit.

While only in his 20s Whitlock was diagnosed with tuberculosis; he also suffered from hypertension, and near the end of his life he lost his sight altogether. He died from a stroke on May 1st 1946, aged just 42. His wife Edna outlived him by nearly fifty years, and died in August 1993.

The principal organ works (with year of composition):

Six Hymn Preludes (1923, revised 1944)

*Darwall's 148th; Song 13; Deo Gracias;  
St. Denio; Werde munter; King's Lynn*

Five Short Pieces (1929)

*Allegretto; Folk Tune; Andante tranquillo; Scherzo; Paean*

Two Fantasie Chorales (1931–33)

*No.1 in Db major; No.2 in F# minor*

Four Extemporisations (published 1933)

*Carol; Divertimento; Fidelis; Fanfare*

Seven Sketches on Verses from the Psalms (1934)

*Pastorale; Duetto; Plaint; Exultemus  
Préambule; Intermezzo; Sortie*

Sonata in C minor (1935–36)

*Grave-Animato; Canzona; Scherzetto; Choral*

Plymouth Suite (1937–39)

*Allegro risoluto; Lantana; Chanty; Salix; Toccata*

Three Reflections: Three Quiet Pieces (1942–45)

*After an old French Air; Paziienza; Dolcezza*

## Whitlock's musical style

All sorts of ingredients go into the melting pot to produce the 'Whitlock style' and instances of almost all of them can be found in the published organ music. Some of the more obvious ones are:

- Folk song and modal harmony - *Folk Tune; Fantasie Choral No.2*
- Frederick Delius - *Carol*
- Louis Vierne - *Plaint; Divertimento*
- Elgar - *Sortie (middle section); Fantasie Choral No.1; Fanfare*
- Rachmaninov - *Sonata in C minor (particularly 4th movt.)*
- J S Bach - *Werde Munter; Duetto*
- Schumann and Mendelssohn - *Dolcezza; Intermezzo*
- Gershwin - *Preambule (ending)*

There are others, and it's not difficult to find unconscious 'borrowings' from all sorts of sources. Whitlock is fond of the sliding chromatic bass line which is also found in the music of César Franck, Karg-Elert and Elgar. Whilst his harmony is often colourful and chromatic, he is also quite at home with the old church modes: the pastiche folk melody which opens the Second Fantasie Chorale, for instance, is in the Aeolian mode and famous Folk Tune is an obvious reworking of Vaughan Williams's 'Springtime of the Year' from his *Five English Folk Songs* of 1913.

Most of Whitlock's organ music is set out for a large instrument and he frequently asks for four manuals (which he had at the Bournemouth Pavilion) and a large variety of orchestral stops. Many pieces demand a solo tuba capable of standing out against the rest of the organ, 32' pedal stops and a combination system able to make rapid changes of registration.

Here is Percy Whitlock at the console of the Compton organ in the Bournemouth Pavilion. With four manuals and 213 stop key controls there were not many sounds which it could not produce:



He was one of the most highly-regarded organists of his day, giving frequent recitals and BBC broadcasts, and so it's no surprise that much of his output for the instrument demands not only a large, comprehensive organ but also an advanced technique on the part of the player. He often requires double-peddalling and 'thumbing-down' onto another keyboard and his large hands present problems in terms of manual stretches.

Despite all these obstacles, Whitlock's organ music remained popular during his lifetime and one or two of the shorter pieces, in particular, would be included in the repertoire of most church organists. On the other hand, the *Sonata* and the two *Fantasia Chorales* were beyond the scope of most organists and in any case required a great deal of adaptation for performance on a modest two-manual instrument.

By 1956, his *Five Short Pieces* had sold more than 15,000 copies and they, along with the *Salix* and *Toccata* from the *Plymouth Suite*, kept his name alive during the long eclipse after his premature death in 1946. By 1970, even the *Plymouth Suite* had been put out of print by OUP. Fashions inevitably change and the warm, colourful romantic music of this most gentle of composers was, by then, at best irrelevant and at worst, an embarrassment. It seemed that he was destined to be remembered as the composer of one or two organ miniatures and nothing more.

Thanks to the untiring efforts of a small group of enthusiasts there has been a gradual reawakening of interest in Whitlock's music. In 1983 the Percy Whitlock Trust was founded by Malcolm Riley, with the active support of Francis Jackson, the late John Scott, Graham Barber, Roy Massey, Robert Gower and, above all, the late Edna Whitlock. In 1978 Graham Barber made the first LP recording of the *Sonata* at Coventry Cathedral. For those who knew only the *Folk Tune* or the *Salix*, this was a revelation. Here was a sonata equal in stature to those of Elgar, Stanford, Howells and Bairstow. Two years later Robert Gower recorded the two *Fantasia Chorales* on Whitlock's own organ at St. Stephen's, Bournemouth, along with a selection of shorter pieces. The critical reception of this superb LP at the time was extremely enthusiastic and it was followed in 1981 by Jennifer Bate's recording of the *Plymouth Suite*, appropriately on the fine four-manual Rushworth and Dreaper instrument at St. Andrew's Church in the city.

From then on the floodgates opened. In 1985 Roderick Elms recorded most of the shorter pieces at Rugby School Chapel. The Percy Whitlock Trust financed a new publication of the *Organ Sonata* and, shortly afterwards, the two *Fantasia Chorales*. OUP discovered the manuscript of the huge *Symphony* for organ and orchestra and several other important orchestral works in 1986. This was recorded in November 1989 by Graham Barber and the Welsh Symphony Orchestra in Llandaf Cathedral and broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

In 1985 the distinguished Canadian Professor Dr. Peter Hardwick contributed a substantial feature on the organ music of Percy Whitlock to the *Organ* magazine in which he makes the point that 'the years 1930-1946 are not particularly memorable ones for English organ composition: only Herbert Howells's Second set of *Psalm Preludes*, *Six Pieces* (both completed in 1940) and Benjamin Britten's *Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria* (1946) and the compositions of Percy Whitlock are still generally regarded as truly significant contributions to the literature.' (Strangely, he fails to mention either the Howells *Sonata* of 1933 or the Bairstow *Sonata* of 1937) and, of course, much of this period includes the Second World War).

1998 saw the publication of Malcolm Riley's full-length biography, to be followed in 2007 by *The Percy Whitlock Companion* - a fascinating selection of the composer's diaries and articles. Virtually all Whitlock's organ works are now available on fine CD recordings (notably on a set of three produced by Priory Records) and even the *Symphony* has been recorded on CD.

## Critical assessment

It would be fair to say that Whitlock was not a great composer. He broke little new ground and even during his lifetime one or two critics were unsympathetic, describing his miniatures as 'picture house music' (which he may well have taken as a compliment!). Writing just after his death the *Bournemouth and Southampton Graphic* puts it rather nicely: 'He had the gift (which seems to be denied to so many musicians) of attracting and holding the interest of people to whom the appeal of music stops short of what is usually called highbrow.'

His shorter organ pieces need no apology - almost without exception they are miniature masterpieces of expert craftsmanship but with that touch of inspiration which lifts them well above the level of 'service music' and it's perhaps necessary to remind ourselves that many were not even intended as church organ voluntaries, being conceived for the huge Compton in the Pavilion. When it comes to the art of the succinct miniature it's hard to think of anyone who does it with more panache than Whitlock. The *Musical Times* review of the evergreen *Five Short Pieces* could apply equally well to any of the shorter organ pieces: 'The music has tune and freshness and is well written for the instrument. A very promising sign is the excellence of the soft pieces. We have here an organ composer who should count for much'.

The four larger organ works (the two *Fantasia Chorales*, *Sonata* and *Plymouth Suite*) pose more problems. The two *Fantasia Chorales* were written in 1931 (the second, in F# minor, was the first to be composed) and show an enormous advance from the *Five Short Pieces*. Both use an opening theme as the basis for a set of variations, rather like the César Franck *Trois Chorals* with which they clearly share an affinity. Technically demanding and rigourously thought through, they show the composer to be more than capable of handling large forms. The 'third *Fantasia Chorale*' was to surface several years later as the fourth movement of the *Sonata*.

The least well-known of Whitlock's published organ works, they are both of unfailingly high quality both in terms of invention and skill and deserve a better fate than the neglect to which they have been subject for so many years.

The *Sonata* is Whitlock's greatest achievement. The two inner movements are as perfect as anything he wrote, with the *Scherzetto* containing the very essence of the composer: brilliant, witty and yet

understated. The first movement is magnificent in its great sweep and the final *Choral* (by far the longest of the four movements), with its superb homage to Rachmaninov is unforgettable. Yet, it has never really established itself in the repertoire. There is only one other sonata by an English composer which could be considered its superior - that by Elgar - so why is this great work so little known?

I believe that there are a number of reasons. It is extremely long for a solo organ work at just shy of 40 minutes. It requires (ideally) a very large organ of four manuals with the usual Whitlock array of orchestral stops, a huge tuba, at least one 32' stop, two enclosed divisions and a full complement of thumb and toe pistons. It is very difficult, exploiting all the techniques of which Whitlock was a master. It is hard to build a recital programme around such a large work.

But perhaps the main reason for its neglect lies in its ending: to close such a monumental undertaking *pianissimo* is a very big ask of any audience!

The last of the four large-scale works, the *Plymouth Suite*, is, perhaps, the most successful. Each of the five movements is crafted to perfection, each is highly individual and yet it hangs together extremely well. Here there is pathos (*Salix*), humour (*Chanty*), gentle calm (*Lantana*), excitement (the brilliant closing *Toccata*) and, best of all, the finest organ *Allegro* I have ever encountered. There is not a dull moment from start to finish and, if the *Plymouth Suite* doesn't reach the heights of the *Sonata* or the *Fantasia Chorales*, it commands our affection by its warmth and humanity.

A selection of Percy Whitlock's organ music:

I've chosen at least one movement from each of the published collections but I don't mind confessing that these are also my favourites!

Darwall's 148th (*Six Hymn Preludes*)

Although not published until 1945, this, along with the hymn prelude on *Werde Munter*, was actually written in November 1923 when the composer was still a student at the Royal College of Music. It's a remarkably confident piece and, already at the age of 20, it shows many of the characteristics of the mature composer and is clearly identifiable as 'Whitlock'.



### Allegretto (*Five Short Pieces*)

Dating from 1929, the Five Short Pieces (of which this is the first) remain Whitlock's most popular work. It's dedicated to James Peter Burney who was a Rochester chorister and the tune was inspired by his whistling in the Choir School yard. The same tune appears as *Peter's Tune*, part of the 1941 *Suite: Music for Orchestra*.

### Fantasie Chorale No.2 in F# minor

Just two years separate the *Five Short Pieces* and the two *Fantasie Chorales* of 1931 but the distance travelled by the composer in that period is enormous. The second Chorale (the first to be written) was first performed by the composer in September 1931 at Chester cathedral and is dedicated to Norman Greenwood, assistant to George Thalben-Ball at the Temple Church in London. (Interestingly, that same year Greenwood had asked for Whitlock's help in compiling the Christian Science Hymnal). Lasting just under 12 minutes the work is a continuous set of variations on the timeless folk-style theme heard at the opening and is clearly meant to emulate the form of César Franck's E major Choral. The writing is frequently contrapuntal and designed for a large organ with a wide variety of solo stops. The quality of invention and craftsmanship is superb and the composer achieves an intensity and seriousness of purpose which is almost unparalleled in any other organ music of the period.

Many composers write a work which subsequently becomes a kind of 'virtual quarry' from which they extract much of the material for everything which comes after. Poulenc does it with the Organ Concerto of 1938, William Mathias does much the same with his superb Harp Concerto and, it seems to me, Whitlock has produced, in this F# minor Fantasie Choral, just about all the music which finds its way into the later organ works, including the great *Sonata*. It's all here in what, in my humble opinion, is one of the finest organ compositions by a British composer of any time.

### Fidelis (*Four Extemporizations*)

Whitlock was known as a master of extemporization but, of the four pieces which comprise this set, only this one could genuinely be so-called. Dedicated to Charles Keel, a faithful chorister at St. Stephen's (hence the title) it's a perfect 'in-going voluntary' and yet every note has been placed with absolute precision and, as Harvey Grace wrote in

the *Musical Times* review following its first publication, it is 'a good example of the composer's ability to be simple without loss of freshness'.

#### Duetto (*Seven Sketches on verses from the Psalms*)

The Seven Sketches were written very quickly during a fortnight in May 1934 and they run the whole gamut of the composer's rich palette. Whitlock rarely commented on his own music but he was clearly fond of this movement as he wrote: 'I am fond of Duetto, and should not like to scrap that one, especially as it goes awfully well on the organ.' The first verse from Psalm 55 which the publisher has at the head of this movement reads *Hear my prayer O God and hide not thyself from my petition.* (It's worth pointing out that Malcolm Riley, Whitlock's biographer actually quotes verse 15 of the same Psalm: *We took sweet counsel together, and walked in the house of God as friends.* To my mind the gentle plodding of the pedal part and the intertwined manual parts suggest that this is more likely to have been the inspiration for this beautiful movement).

#### Plaint (*Seven Sketches on verses from the Psalms*)

There's no doubt about the aptness of the music here: verse 2 of Psalm 6 reads *Have mercy upon me O Lord, for I am weak. O Lord, heal me for my bones are vexed.* This miniature gives us Whitlock's most intense utterance and his most extreme harmonic experiment. The only parallels are to be found in the late Symphonies of Louis Vierne. Whitlock himself wrote to Hubert Foss at the OUP in August 1934 *The only one I don't care for is Plaint, which I see you also omit from your list.* Obviously composer and publisher subsequently relented, but this is bleak music indeed.

#### Scherzetto (*Sonata*)

The dedication of the Sonata is 'To D.L.S. and Harriet'. D.L.S. is Dorothy L. Sayers and Harriet is Harriet Deborah Vane, heroine of the Lord Peter Wimsey novels. The dedication is followed at the head of the score by a Greek cryptogram (designed to tease Lord Peter!) which, to cut a long story short (you can read the full unravelling in Malcolm Riley's biography), translates as *On hearing the second Rachmaninow in Spring.* The 'second Rachmaninow' refers to Rachmaninov's Second Symphony which Whitlock heard in March 1933 and was completely enthralled. *On hearing . . . in Spring* is, of course, a

reference to the composer of *On hearing the first cuckoo in spring*, Frederick Delius. Not only was the *Carol (Four Extemporizations)* written in homage to 'F.D.' but Whitlock openly admits his admiration for the music of Delius. (To take it a stage further the Sonata's dedication to D.L.S. might also be seen as DeLiuS!)

The spirit of both Rachmaninov and Delius pervades much of the Sonata (particularly in the outer movements) but to find the real Whitlock we need to listen to the quicksilver *Scherzetto*. The lack of any time-signature allows total freedom from rigidity and here we are in the light-footed world of the ballet. There is nothing quite like this in the organ repertoire and the only piece I can think of as a possible model is that most perfect of scherzi - Mendelssohn's for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

#### *Allegro Risoluto (Plymouth Suite)*

The Whitlocks attended the IAO Congress in 1937 which was held at Plymouth and each of the five movements is dedicated to one of the delegates. The final *Toccata* is dedicated to Dr Harry Moreton who was Organist of St. Andrew's Church and also Plymouth Borough Organist, whilst the opening *Allegro* is dedicated to Harvey Grace, Organist of Chichester cathedral, editor of the Musical Times and that year's president of the IAO. The *Chanty* is dedicated to J.H. Reginald Dixon, long-time Organist of Lancaster cathedral and Lancaster City organist.

Whitlock excels himself in the opening movement and it's hard to think of a finer concert allegro for the organ. The energy is breathless and it sweeps along to its final triumphant conclusion.



Percy and Sir Henry Wood, Bournemouth. 1938

## Pazienza (*Reflections*)

Whitlock's last organ work was published after his death, having been proof-read by his great friend Bernard Walker (the dedicatee of the *Fanfare*). This, the middle of the three gentle movements, was completed on August 31st, 1943 and is the most anguished and harmonically intense of the set. His duties at the Pavilion, his war work and his deteriorating health left little time for composition and, whilst these little pieces are, perhaps, not his best, they still contain the essence of the composer and are a poignant reminder for us of what was lost by his early death.

## Percy Whitlock - a repertoire list

There isn't really any easy organ music by Whitlock but the pieces below are a bit less demanding than most:

- Werde munter (*Six Hymn-Preludes*)
- Song 13 (*Six Hymn-Preludes*)
- Andante Tranquillo (*Five Short Pieces*)
- Folk Tune (*Five Short Pieces*)
- Fidelis (*Four Extemporizations*)
- Pastorale (*Seven Sketches on verses from the Psalms*)
- Lantana (*Plymouth Suite*)
- Chanty (*Plymouth Suite*)
- *Reflections*, of which *Dolcezza* is probably the most straightforward