

Homage to a misfit

Sir Malcolm Arnold has an extraordinary life story, including suicide attempts and a suspected lobotomy. A harrowing film will reveal more

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"I know of no other artist, with the possible exception of Maria Callas, who has suffered so much in order to inspire us, entertain us and make us laugh." The film director Tony Palmer is talking about Malcolm Arnold - the thorny, unpredictable, heart-breaking subject of his new documentary, *Toward the Unknown Region*. The two-hour film will be screened at the Royal Festival Hall, in London, next month and subsequently broadcast on ITV's *South Bank Show*, which commissioned it, in two parts.

Arnold, now 82 and in fragile health, is Britain's most recorded and most prolific composer - though you would never know that from the recognition, or lack of it, usually accorded him on concert platforms. His music includes symphonies (nine, in time-honoured tradition), concertos, dance suites, ballets, dozens of film scores, music for brass band, choral works and, for the musical cartoonist Gerard Hoffnung's satirical concerts in the late 1950s, *A Grand, Grand Overture*, starring four vacuum cleaners. More than 500 works streamed from his pen, replete with humour, vibrant personality and downright good tunes.

His attitude to music is made clear in the film's first minutes. "If the music does not reflect the man, then it's no damn good," he declares. Arnold wrote straight from the heart: "Music is a social act of communication among people... a gesture of friendship, the strongest there is."

So whatever happened to Malcolm Arnold? What went wrong? "Although the main purpose of the film is to celebrate the man and the music and to help put him back on the map," Palmer says, "what I discovered, as the documentary evolved, was the most appalling human tragedy. This is the most harrowing film I've ever tackled. Malcolm's music just poured out of him, but at the most terrible cost. I felt I had to show what he had gone through in order to demonstrate what he had achieved."

As Palmer's film reveals, Arnold's health problems began early in his life: aged only 21, he was diagnosed as schizophrenic. Compound that with a disadvantaged background, an over-healthy appetite for alcohol and women and the absence of powerful protectors akin to those of his near-contemporaries

Benjamin Britten and William Walton, and it's clear that the odds were stacked against Arnold from the start. Even his versatility may have damaged his reputation. As Palmer sardonically points out, "You can't work with Deep Purple one week, do Hoffnung concerts or music for brass band the next, and expect the intellectuals to take you seriously. Because they won't. They mark your card."

At first, Arnold seemed the most ebullient and down-to-earth of characters. The first half of Palmer's film overflows with stories of his generosity and often outrageous good humour. Even as a student at the Royal College of Music, he caused a rumpus by vanishing completely in the middle of term - only to be spotted with a red-haired girl in Plymouth a few days later, playing the trumpet in a pub jazz band. "I think his studies at the RCM were incidental," Palmer suggests, twinkle in eye.

Arnold took up the trumpet at the age of 12, after hearing and meeting Louis Armstrong at a tea dance during a family holiday in Bournemouth. He went on to become one of the UK's finest trumpeters. As principal trumpet of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, he worked under a cavalcade of great conductors - Toscanini, Furtwängler and Beecham among them. The orchestral experience proved vital to his skills as a composer: he learnt his trade from the inside, and his expertise in orchestration was second to none.

After winning the Mendelssohn Scholarship in 1948, Arnold left the LPO to devote himself to composition. One colleague, the composer Alan Rawsthorne, said that Arnold wrote music "quicker than it takes the ink to dry": along with his orchestral works and brass-band music (lavishly represented in Palmer's film), he produced film scores at the rate of six a year, the best-known including *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, *Hobson's Choice* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

He was the director David Lean's favourite composer - until he refused to score *Lawrence of Arabia*. "More fool me!" Arnold commented, with hindsight. The story goes that both Arnold and William Walton were invited to view it, but both turned down the job. Palmer, who had filmed Walton talking about the same incident, discovered a delicious discrepancy in the two composers' stories. According to Arnold, Walton fell asleep during the screening; but according to Walton, it was Arnold who fell asleep, then awoke to dismiss it as a "bloody travelogue". "Maybe they were both completely pissed!" Palmer suggests, mischievously.

The fun continued until, abruptly, Arnold decided he no longer wanted to live. Depression, attempted suicide, alcoholism, two failed marriages and periods in and out of hospital, undergoing treatments for mental illness, had a profound effect on him through the 1970s and early 1980s. He was given electric shock therapy, insulin treatment, maybe even a lobotomy. "I confronted the doctors," Palmer says. "We went to the hospital and interviewed them endlessly, but they kept repeating that they could not discuss individual cases. And so we left it with a quote from his friend John Amis, saying: 'I've always held the view that he had a lobotomy' - followed by a long silence. We do know for certain, though, that with shock treatment and mountains of insulin, parts of his brain were undoubtedly fried."

Arnold's children, too, speak movingly of the destruction of their family through their father's malady: "I've never before been faced with someone saying, 'I have lost my father,'" Palmer reports of his interview with Arnold's daughter Katherine.

Then comes the insult to add to these appalling injuries: "For a man to go through all that," says Palmer, "then continue to pour out fabulous music, and be ignored..." In Palmer's view, the BBC has a lot to answer for. "It was absolutely culpable. We interviewed Robert Ponsonby, at one time controller of Radio 3, who says it is not true that William Glock, when he was in charge, banned Arnold's music from the station. He felt it was more cock-up than conspiracy; it was simply not thought of." But then comes an interview with Arnold's friend Stan Hibbert, who relates that he once went to John Drummond, then director of the Proms, to persuade him to programme Arnold's music, only to be refused on the grounds that Arnold was "a very unpleasant man". "That", says Palmer, "put the nail in the coffin."

This documentary is the first *South Bank Show* to be broadcast across two weeks, which is testament to the power it carries. "Melvyn Bragg had warned me that he could show only 48 minutes," Palmer recounts, "but when I invited him to come and see the film, it was more than two hours long - I'd found it impossible to cut. At the end, I asked him which 48 minutes he'd like, but he said he would find a way to show the whole thing, and I realised he was in tears. He's been a wonderful supporter all along; this is the 16th film I've made for him. I dread the day he retires. Because otherwise - faced with a composer who's forgotten, a man who's difficult, two-thirds of whose brain has been fried, who doesn't care any more, but his achievements are monumental - you take this to a commissioning editor of broadcasting, and they say, 'Who? You mean Arnold Palmer, the golfer?'"

Although Arnold was knighted in 1993 and has been showered with awards and honorary doctorates, his music is still astonishingly rare in standard concert programmes. The London Philharmonic, the orchestra he served for so long, is now redressing that balance, opening its new season with a festival of his music after the public premiere of Palmer's film.

Arnold now lives quietly in Norfolk with his carer, Anthony Day. As Palmer puts it: "He has good days and bad days; we filmed both." Hopefully, this appreciation has not come entirely too late. "I hope this is a sympathetic film, but it's also an angry film," Palmer insists. "I'm angry on behalf of Malcolm Arnold. I'm saying, 'Come on, guys, we've got this great man in our midst, and you're treating him badly!' I want to do something about it. It's a passionately angry film about someone who's been terribly neglected and has suffered appallingly as a consequence. There's not much we can do about it, because he's not going to write nine more symphonies. But what we can do is pay him proper tribute."

'Toward the Unknown Region: Malcolm Arnold - A Story of Survival', Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (0870 401 8181; www.rfh.org.uk) 20 September, and on ITV, 26 September and 3 October. The LPO plays Arnold on 24 and 27 September, also at the RFH

