

## **John Antill's *Symphony on a City* (1959) and its place within the Australian symphonic repertory of the 1950s.**

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### **Abstract**

John Antill is often perceived as being a 'one work' composer owing to the prominence and success of *Corroboree*. The remainder of his large output is largely neglected.

*Symphony on a City*, commissioned by and dedicated to the City of Newcastle in 1959, is described by James Murdoch (1972) as a major work that has been performed only once.

Roger Covell (1967) wrote that the symphony “should be heard again, because in it Antill does find, even if only momentarily, other ways of representing energy at high voltage”.

Perhaps this is the work that could provide a counter-balance to the predominance of *Corroboree* in Antill's work.

This paper describes the formal and stylistic aspects of the symphony, relates it to *Corroboree* and Antill's overall orchestral output and then places the work against the backdrop of Australian symphonies of the 1950s and the wider international context. The symphony emerges as one of the more important Australian symphonic works of its period and worthy of preservation and revival.

## **John Antill's *Symphony on a City* (1959) and its place within the Australian Symphonic repertoire of the 1950s.**

John Antill's *Symphony on a City* is one of the largest symphonies written in Australia during the 1950s, with a duration of approximately 37 minutes. Despite the size of the work, and Antill's reputation as one of Australia's leading composers of the 1940s and 50s – largely based on the success of one outstanding work, *Corroboree* – *Symphony on a City* has been largely neglected since its only public performance in Newcastle in 1959 and its subsequent recording for the ABC. Its most recent broadcast was to mark Antill's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday during 1979. Is this neglect justified? Is it one of Antill's major achievements?

In 1972 James Murdoch described *Symphony on a City*, as “a major work which has been performed only once”<sup>i</sup>. In 1967 Roger Covell wrote that the symphony “should be heard again, because in it Antill does find, even if only momentarily, other ways of representing energy at high voltage”<sup>ii</sup>. Andrew McCredie (1969) wrote: “His best essay for orchestra since then [*Corroboree*] is probably the *Symphony on a City*. In it, Antill has captured some of the vivid style of *Corroboree* but with a greater epic sweep and symphonic design”<sup>iii</sup>.

This present study demonstrates that *Symphony on a City* ranks amongst Antill's most important later achievements. It also represents one of the highlights of the extensive repertoire of Australian symphonies composed during the 1950s.

The Newcastle City Council commissioned Antill to write *Symphony on a City* in January 1958<sup>iv</sup> as a part of the Centenary celebrations of the Incorporation of Newcastle in 1859. It was probably the first major work by an Australian composer to be commissioned by an Australian city council; Antill's commissioning fee being £300. The title of the work and the program connected to the music was linked to a 'coffee-table' picture book about Newcastle that was also commissioned by the City Council. The book is titled *Symphony on a City*, and the writer often uses musical metaphors for the historical development of the city and regions<sup>v</sup>. It appears that the worthy aldermen of the City Council wanted to make the metaphor of the book a reality.

The initial negotiations between Antill and the Newcastle City Council included a guided tour of Newcastle and the surrounding region. Antill's visit was documented in the *Newcastle Herald* of 25 January 1958:

*The Australian composer John Antill sees "great potentialities" in Newcastle and district for a descriptive symphony characteristic of this city. He said yesterday that the industrial facet of Newcastle would give great scope for his type of musical writing.*

*He proposed to write the symphony in four movements, each with a special significance to Newcastle. The first would deal with the history and development of the city, the second, a scherzo, with activities of citizens at work and play, the third with the pastoral aspect of the city's life and the final movement with Newcastle's heavy industries.*

*. . . Mr Antill said yesterday that he had several symphonies in the embryo stage, but the Newcastle symphony would be his first completed.*

On returning to Sydney, Antill formally accepted the commission<sup>vi</sup>, adding:

*My memorable impressions of your City have already inspired a few main themes.*

The deadline for completion was October 1958, a formidable challenge. It was a difficult period for him as his wife had died the previous year and he was completely responsible for the upbringing of his teenage daughter, Jill. His diaries for 1958 document significant periods of ill health and depression. Antill was forced to delay completion,<sup>vii</sup> eventually finishing the symphony on 3 July 1959<sup>viii</sup> after 18 months of work. His original plan for a four movement work had altered to a three movement scheme, with the musical depiction of the recreational life of the city and its industry being gathered together within the finale. After two rehearsals, the *Symphony on a City* premiered on 13 August 1959 at the Century Theatre, Broadmeadow, with the composer conducting the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The work was broadcast nation-wide two days later. Of his £300 fee, all of it and more was spent in producing the orchestral parts for the performance<sup>ix</sup>.

Most press comment on the work prior to the premiere focussed on Antill's plan to use a huge piece (10 tons) of Newcastle steel – battleship plate, no less – as a percussion instrument just prior to the final orchestral peroration of the finale. This provoked extended debate about the logistics of getting the steel plate into the theatre and whether the stroke on the steel plate would result in structural damage<sup>x</sup>. In the end, Antill had to compromise with a smaller steel plate for his 'local' colour.

Antill's program note in the score described each of the three movements of his symphony as "a tone poem representing local development". Each movement is then described in pictorial terms.

It is difficult to say whether Antill's program was intended simply to make his music coherent to ordinary audiences or whether it truly reflected his own creative processes. In notes (probably written for a press interview or speech the week before the premiere), Antill insisted that the music should be heard for its own sake.

*One can hear in the score, all the moves and ally them to a particular facet of activity or industry. And this, I hope you do - but in reality, it is fundamentally absolute music not programme music and I would sooner we listened with a musical ear and let the other side be incidental<sup>xi</sup>.*

He underlined its symphonic status by notes in the original pencil score, marking the main structural features of the first movement.

Three complete scores and two complete sets of parts of the symphony are held in John Antill's Papers (Ms. 437) at the National Library of Australia. One of these scores is the pencil original of 103 pages, the others are a facsimile of the above and a transparency score. One further score, generated from the transparencies, is held by Symphony Australia. The work is scored for triple woodwind, standard brass choir, timpani and three percussionists and strings.

Antill described the first movement in his preface to the autograph score:

*The first movement is prefaced by a slow, eerie introduction depicting the formation of our earth into solidity. The movement proper is in accepted sonata form, having first and second subjects with extentions [sic], development and recapitulation. This spans a period of time from the wanderings of the Aboriginal to the establishment of the majestic port of today. A coda recalling the opening introduction leads into the second movement.*

The notion of depicting the creation of the world followed the 'Prelude' of Ziegler's book on Newcastle<sup>xii</sup>. Thereafter it is perhaps speculative to try and locate specific extra-

musical significance to the thematic material of the first movement. Of 327 bars and about 16 ½ minutes duration, it is a substantial movement.

The *Grave* slow introduction of 24 bars opens with a snare drum roll, which then underpins the entire introduction. This drum roll also closes the movement and the second movement as a framing and punctuating device. The woodwind section dominates the austere and mysterious slow introduction in four presentations of a halting, chromatic theme.

The image shows a musical score for three Bassoon parts. The top staff is labeled 'Bassoon' and 'Grave a2'. It features a chromatic line with a dynamic marking 'p' and a 'slight accel' instruction. The middle staff is labeled 'Bsn' and has a '3' above it, with a 'rit' instruction. The bottom staff is also labeled 'Bsn' and has a '4' above it, with a 'rit' instruction. The music is in a slow, chromatic style with various articulations and dynamics.

At first monophonic, the theme is then thinly harmonised and presented in close canon. The snare drum and bass drum build up a huge roll culminating in a full orchestral chord, thereby triggering the exposition section of the first movement proper.

After the rather static nature of the slow introduction, the exposition of the fast first movement (bars 25-146) is full of energy and constantly shifting orchestral colours. There are three first subject themes, all jaunty and marked by angular contours and strident, quite dissonant harmonies. This is the main idea.

25 **Allegro**

Oboe

*ff*

This theme has a distinctly ‘larrikin’ character especially when it returns in a customary ‘tutti’ treatment for full orchestra, complete with off-beat chordal accompaniment.

Tutti

73

*f*

Warmer triadic harmony appears in the transition section, preparing us for the more tonally distinct harmonic language of the second subject group.

There are two main ideas in the second subject group; a pentatonic theme (2A) for solo violin with a tonal centre on A

113

Timpani

Violin solo

115

Timp.

Vln

and a lyric theme on solo horn continued by a complementary phrase on solo violin (2B).

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Horn in F, Solo Violin, and Strings. The Horn part begins with a flourish marked *f* (forte) and includes a triplet. The Solo Violin part starts with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic and features a melodic line with triplets. The Strings part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and is marked *mf*. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems of staves.

A loud flourish up and down for the orchestra ends the exposition. .

Three brooding presentations of theme 2B appear in the development (bars 147 – 259).

Solo woodwind or brass present the theme supported by triadic chords presented in a recurring dotted rhythmic figure. This idea is interspersed by a lonely, chromatic melody for solo viola, a more confident statement of theme 2A and occasional appearances of theme 1 fragments. There is also a huge climatic paragraph that begins quietly at bar 192 with second subject material that builds to a fanfare-like peroration for full orchestra.

The recapitulation (beginning at bar 260) truncates most of the musical events from the exposition, but within a similar tonal scheme as before. After presenting theme 2A for all four horns, Antill repeats the climactic paragraph from the development section (bars 192 – 220) almost exactly, to build to the final powerful climax of the movement. This links up to a full brass reprise of the slow introduction material. The snare drum roll and



a variant of the lonely melody on solo viola from the development has the last word before leading without a break into the second movement.

Antill's central, slow movement is modal (Aeolian mode on A) and triad / secondary 7<sup>th</sup> based. Here there does seem to be a link with British 20<sup>th</sup> century 'pastoral' romanticism, perhaps intentional. Antill wrote of this movement:

*Again metaphysically conceived rather than pictorially represented. Nevertheless the music does envisage peaceful farms, pleasant Hunter River (views?), landscape. The honest farmer earning his bread by the sweat of his brow going right back in time with his great grandfather in England. The same pattern but under different skies and adjusting all the time to a new environment<sup>xiii</sup>.*

Overall, the form of the movement is an arch-like ABCBA. It begins and ends with framing sections featuring a persistent pedal on A, ostinato lower string figures (representing toil perhaps) and prominent oboe and clarinet solos based on a pentatonic

figure similar to the second subject theme from the previous movement.

The image displays a musical score for a section of a symphony. The top part of the score is for the Clarinet (Cl.) and includes the tempo marking "Largo" and the dynamic marking "pp". The Cl. part features a melodic line with various ornaments and phrasing. Below the Cl. part are staves for Bns. & Contra, Trb. & tuba, and Violas & cellos, all of which are currently silent. The bottom part of the score is for the Violins (Vc.) and begins with a triplet of notes marked with a "3" above the staff and a dynamic marking of "p". The Vc. part consists of a rich, harmonized texture with secondary sevenths.

In between is the main section of the movement, beginning with a modal string theme that unwinds continuously, richly harmonised with secondary sevenths in a style reminiscent of the *Romanza* from Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony (1943). There

are two main thematic ideas, treated in a ternary shape. Here is the first of them.

The image shows a musical score for strings, consisting of three systems of staves. The first system is labeled 'Strings' and begins with a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The second system starts at measure 4 and also has an 'mf' marking. The third system starts at measure 6 and has an 'mf' marking. The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, and articulation marks, typical of a string ensemble score.

The second of the main ideas exploits triplet against duplet rhythms in a linear interplay also redolent of Vaughan Williams, leading to the main climax of the movement complete with cymbals and horns. The repeat of the long string theme leads directly into the final section of the movement. The beauty and lyricism of this movement is a highlight of Antill's complete output. It deserves to be better known.

Antill completes the symphony with a final movement of about 14 minutes duration and 344 bars. He describes the movement as follows in his preface to the score:

*The finale begins Scherzando, reflecting the carefree life and sportsmanship on the playing fields. An occasional reminder that here above all, exists a great industrial centre. This reminder persists until it eventually takes full control. As this "Symphony on a City" concludes, we are left in no doubt as to the present importance, and of the imminent greatness, of the City of Newcastle and its environs.*

The movement is cast in a rondo-like **ABA – C+B – A – DE – C – A - Coda (based on C and B)** pattern. One of the episodes (C) represents the growth of heavy industry in the city. It gradually takes over the latter third of the movement. Marked *Allegretto – Scherzando*, the finale opens with a bold fanfare idea (A) for four horns in unison, then joined by trombones and trumpets.

The second thematic element (B) is a gambolling 12/8 gigue. It has a carefree, ‘larrikin’ like mood – an idealised portrayal of the prosperous Australia of the late 1950s with a “rose in every cheek”. B is developed through antiphonal exchange between upper and lower brass, presented by the full orchestra (recalled later to end the work) then treated in fugato. The fanfares of section A then recur in more extended fashion.

The industrial motive (Theme C), an ostinato based on a three-tone timpani figure (c-b-g), now appears for the first time. Against it, upper string figures based on B swell to a multi-voiced, siren-like wail. At bar 81 Antill contrives an interesting counterpoint of all the themes of the movement heard so far. This mood is broken by a second recurrence of theme A. The next episode begins with a bucolic 12/8 theme (D) presented by bassoons, which is developed until interrupted by another outburst of industrial clamour and a section for timpani, bass drum and snare drum alone. The timpani rhythm (Theme E) is transformed into a quiet and gentle episode for muted strings in C major. Significant solos for cor anglais and solo violin maintain the mood of gentle reverie and nostalgia until the percussion trio takes over again. Then, emerging quietly from a roll, the timpani recommences its ostinato (Theme C) for over 90 bars while fragments of theme B appear

on glockenspiel, upper wind and strings. The frequent insertion of 3/8 bars into the main 4/4 metre gives the growing sense of power an interesting asymmetric twist until the rhythm takes over the whole orchestra. Two bars of theme B for full orchestra stop the hurly-burly. A *ffff* cymbal and gong stroke rings, and the main rondo theme (A) for horn finally returns.

The complete fanfare is heard and the music makes final cadential gestures in B major. We feel that the end is nigh. However, Antill is not finished with the industrial motif and Theme C returns for another gradual crescendo to completely overwhelm the listener. It is crowned by a whack on the BHP steel plate (which sounds very tame on the ABC recording – so much for the fears of ‘bringing down the house’ due to structural damage). The final peroration of the work repeats the ‘larrikin’ theme B in a triumphant blaze of full orchestra in clear B major.

In the context of Antill’s overall output for orchestra, *Symphony on a City* speaks a more conventional musical language than the striking and often harmonically stark idiom of *Corroboree*. However, the sections in the finale built on rhythmic ostinatos do look back to the outer movements of the older ballet. Also, there are stylistic links between the first subject theme of the first movement and the scurrying figures of the third movement of *Corroboree* and the second subject theme with the solo violin section in the second movement of the ballet. Based on the evidence of *Symphony on a City*, by 1958/9 Antill had definitely moved on and widened the range of his style. The string suite *The Unknown Land* (1955) took on pastoral, modal elements in its style, the *Momentous*

*Occasion Overture* (1957) demonstrated a command of ceremonial fanfare and *An Outback Overture* (1953) and the *Sentimental Suite* (1955) showed Antill's command of an idealised 'larrikin' and 'barn dance' idiom, and counterpoint. To this he added an even greater emphasis on linear counterpoint and harmonic motion in the symphony. Especially in the first two movements, *Symphony on a City* shows a sense of convincing symphonic shape and continuity. The slow movement is perhaps the most beautiful music Antill ever wrote. Alongside *Corroboree*, this is Antill's finest work.

Within the modernist international context of the late 1950s, *Symphony on a City* seems old fashioned against the music of Boulez, Stockhausen, Varese and Cage. However, the 1950s also produced the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> symphonies of Shostakovich, the *Concerto for Orchestra* of Lutoslawski, the last three symphonies of Vaughan Williams and symphonies from figures like Martinu, Honegger, Hindemith and Arnold. The 1950s marked the end of the 'Third Age' of the Symphony – a period arguably inspired by the adulation for Sibelius's symphonies in Britain and America and by the demand for public, large-scale musical statements in the Soviet Union. Against this backdrop, Antill's symphony is not out of place.

Many Australian composers of the period 1948 – 1960 composed symphonies, a trend which seems to have drawn little comment from the main commentators on Australian music of this period. No fewer than 36 symphonies by Australians were entered into the Commonwealth Jubilee Symphony competition of 1951, out of a total of 89 entrants from throughout the British Commonwealth. Robert Hughes and Clive Douglas won second

and third prize respectively. The competition seems to have been a catalyst for the production of Australian symphonies during the following decade. So far I have traced 38 extant symphonies by Australians from this period. Unfortunately, the identity of many of the 36 competition entrants remains unknown, but the 1950s repertory includes symphonies by Edgar Bainton, Clive Douglas (3), Felix Gethen, Peggy Glanville-Hicks (if *Sinfonia da Pacifica* is counted), Raymond Hanson, Alfred Hill (11), Mirrie Hill, Robert Hughes (2), Dorian Le Gallienne, David Morgan (5), James Penberthy (3), Horace Perkins (2), J.V.Peters, Margaret Sutherland, Felix Werder (2) and Malcolm Williamson. Antill, as Federal Music Editor for the ABC must have been aware of this large corpus of work. As we have seen, he had attempted symphonies prior to 1958, but *Symphony on a City* is his first and only completed work in this genre. It is one of the latter fruits of this symphonic period in Australian composition. How does it compare to the symphonies of his peers?

Firstly, in size *Symphony on a City* is only equalled by Bainton's Symphony No.3 and Perkins's '*Elegiac*' *Symphony*. Werder, Hanson, and Le Gallienne maintain a more dissonant idiom than Antill, as does Douglas in Symphony No.2 '*Namatjira*', but Antill is more forward-looking than the Hills, Bainton, Perkins, Gethen and Hughes. Antill's lean, angular melodies and dissonant harmonies in much of the outer movements often stretch the sense of tonality. Shifting metres and a strong sense of rhythm enhances the musical interest. His orchestration is sharp and incisive, with particular emphasis on woodwind and muted brass. Amongst Australian symphonists of the period, Antill's scoring is only matched by Bainton, Douglas and Hughes. Apart from the second

movement, Antill's style does not sound derivative of British models, and his idiom is often distinctive. His sense of symphonic continuity and forward-looking energy is convincing in much of the work, let down only in the rather static slow introduction, and the sectional middle portion of the finale. In this respect, I think that *Symphony on a City* is overshadowed by Hughes's Symphony No.1, Le Gallienne's Symphony in E and David Morgan's Symphony No.2.

After the premiere and first broadcast performances, *Symphony on a City* remained silent, only to reappear briefly in an ABC broadcast on Radio 2 in 1979 to mark the composer's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. The time is ripe for a reassessment of pre 1960s Australian works like this one, especially in the present context of tonality and accessibility in the works of Australian composers like Meale, Sculthorpe, Edwards and Vine. Works like *Symphony on a City* should be heard on their own terms, rather than through the filters of a 1960s/1970s modernist perspective. As one of the more important Australian symphonies of the period, and as one of Antill's best works, *Symphony on a City* deserves revival in the shape of live performances, broadcasts and recordings. This is particularly relevant in this, John Antill's centenary year.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> Murdoch, J. 1972, *Australia's Contemporary Composers*, Sun Books, Melbourne, p.9.

<sup>ii</sup> Covell, R. 1967, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, Sun Books, Melbourne, p.155.

<sup>iii</sup> McCredie, A. 1969 *Musical Composition in Australia*, Commonwealth Government Publications, Canberra, p. 11



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<sup>iv</sup> *Newcastle Herald*, 25 January 1958 (kept in Antill's scrap album in Papers of John Antill, MS 437, Series 15, Book V, National Library of Australia).

<sup>v</sup> Ziegler, O. 1958, *Symphony on a City*, Oswald Ziegler Publications, Sydney

<sup>vi</sup> Letter from John Antill to W. Burges (Town Clerk of Newcastle), 30 January 1958, Papers of John Antill, MS 437, Series 3, Folder 6, National Library of Australia.

<sup>vii</sup> Letter from Oswald Ziegler to John Antill, 14 August 1958, National Library of Australia, MS 437, Series 3, Folder 6.

<sup>viii</sup> Antill, J. Diary for 1959, National Library of Australia, MS 437, Series 4, Folder 4.

<sup>ix</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 1960 (cutting kept with the Antill Papers at the National Library of Australia, Canberra).

<sup>x</sup> *Newcastle Sun*, August 1959, Papers of John Antill, MS 437, Series 15, Book V, National Library of Australia.

<sup>xi</sup> Folder entitled 'Notes; script and itinerary, 1958-59', Papers of John Antill, MS 437, Series 8, *Symphony on a City*, Folio 36, National Library of Australia.

<sup>xii</sup> Ziegler, O. 1958, *Symphony on a City*, Oswald Ziegler Publications, Sydney, p.7

<sup>xiii</sup> Folder entitled 'Notes; script and itinerary, 1958-59', Papers of John Antill, MS 437, Series 8, *Symphony on a City*, Folio 36, National Library of Australia.

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