

- REVIEW -

British Musical Criticism and Intellectual Thought, 1850-1950

Edited by Jeremy Dibble and Julian Horton
Boydell Press, 2018
390 pp.

Over the last forty years, the scholarly pursuit of British music history between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century has been especially fruitful, though examination of British music historiography and criticism of this period has admittedly remained substantially behind that of other national intellectual traditions. Whilst some book-length studies have emerged about some of the vivid personalities explored in this book, no extended exploration of this subject has emerged since Nigel Scaife's 1994 doctoral thesis.¹ It is the welcome aim of this new collection to provoke new interest in this long-neglected field.

Perhaps the dominant narrative of this collection is to explore the peculiarly conservative brand of modernism that evolved partially *in vacuo*, yet to some extent in tandem with mainstream continental European modernism. In this vein, the most laudable achievement of this book is its success in disentangling British critical trends from a hegemonic and Germanocentric aesthetic of European modernism, which has perpetuated the exclusion of peripheral yet significant figures and critical trends. The British case has long been a particularly unfortunate casualty of such prejudice. Horton and Dibble's introduction seeks to set out some of the dualities that emerge throughout the course of the book: between nationalism and internationalism, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, and conservatism and modernism.

The essays are arranged more-or-less chronologically, with some breaks for chapters that explore themes in a more synoptic perspective. Peter Horton's opening chapter explores the polemical cut-throat world of music journalism from 1850 to 1870, focusing especially on J. W. Davison and Henry Chorley, where music criticism was the preserve of newspapers rather than academic institutions. Bennett Zon then offers an introduction to the music criticism of serial

controversialist Herbert Spencer, discussing the role of 'sympathy' in his criticism and the means by which an evolutionary perspective allowed him to construct an 'anti-intellectual' approach to music criticism, a critical philosophy that influenced future generations of the 'Oxford School' of critics, principal among whom Zon ranks Parry, Stainer, and Hadow

In chapter three, Jeremy Dibble explores the life and legacy of the influential Oxford critic Ernest Walker. Dubbing Walker the 'English Hanslick', Dibble equates Walker's Idealism with Eduard Hanslick's influential defence of absolute music, set out in *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854). This idealism manifests itself most prominently in Walker's scholarship by his focus on 'the music itself' whereby 'analytical evidence of the music was the most fundamental (and trusted) method of illuminating musical truths' (p. 71). Much of Dibble's chapter analyses Walker's monograph *A History of Music in England*, though from Dibble's examples Walker seems to have viewed much English music with contempt. He condescends towards Purcell with faint praise, is dismissive of Arthur Sullivan ('a mere popularity-hunting trifler', p. 74), but saves his strongest criticism for the then recent church music of Stainer, Branby, and Dykes, an attitude that may have been influenced by Walker's late-blooming atheism.

Paul Watt offers a survey of Ernest Newman, especially on the role of 'method': in essence, the adoption of pseudo-empirical positivism. Watt explores this phenomenon with examples from the critic's study of Gluck's operas, which unusually adopted a comparative approach, and sought to place the music in its social and historical context. Newman was also a strong advocate for music analysis, and an early champion of the analytical method of Heinrich Schenker. With recourse to the critic's vast output in *The Sunday Times*, Watt shows how Newman attempted to expand his ideas into a broader vision for music historiography for a public audience. Perhaps missing from Watt's survey is Newman the polemicist; for instance, Newman's venomous and relentless attacks of Shostakovich have elsewhere been posited as a factor in the poor fortune of the composer's music in Britain.²

The following chapter by Harry White explores the music criticism of George Bernard Shaw. The chapter persuasively demonstrates the ways in which Shaw's

critical relationship to Wagnerian music drama influenced his plays. The chapter also explores the blinkered prejudice Shaw exhibited towards Brahms, Parry, and Stanford, and his paradoxical idolisation of Elgar, all undergirded by an anti-academic, populist critical philosophy, as well as a steadfast derision of Victorian musical culture.

In chapter six, Julian Horton takes Donald Francis Tovey to task for his analyses of Schumann and Bruckner, serving to 'reassess and update Tovey's analyses' of these composers' symphonies. Horton provides compelling graphical, motivic, and structural analyses of works that offer a measured response to Tovey's essentialist views.

Karen Arrandale's chapter serves as a brief survey of the career of Cambridge musicologist Edward J. Dent, demonstrating the meticulously scholarly bent of his criticism. Dent's scrupulous historicism is convincingly demonstrated, and at times was the unwitting cause for scandal, as was the case of his misjudged attack of Elgar, driven according to Arrandale by a 'personal aversion to late Victorian piety' (p. 170).

In chapter eight, Philip Ross Bullock offers an assessment of British criticism of Russian and Eastern European music, though his focus lies almost exclusively on the former. Bullock brings into focus the imperial rivalries that dominated early discourse, and the importance of women such as Rosa Newmarch in early criticism of Russian music, on whom Bullock has already produced a substantial survey.³ Incidentally, Newmarch is the only female critic mentioned in the entire book. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the careers of Gerald Abraham and Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, and how Russia's status as an ally in the Second World War drove up demand for up-to-date information. In this regard, it might have been illuminating to have included something on the Workers' Music Association, which published contemporary scores at the cutting edge of Soviet music as well as criticism often bordering on the sycophantic by communist-leaning figures such as Alan Bush and Rena Moisenko, about which there remains a disappointing paucity of secondary literature.⁴ The pathbreaking journalism of Alexander Werth is also absent, though it is easy to point the finger for omissions, and an essay on such a scale could never hope to be exhaustive.

Sarah Collins then provides a fascinating account of ‘anti-intellectualism’ and its nationalist trope in British musical criticism. Collins explores how British conservatism as a dominant narrative both fostered and perpetuated a kind of nationalism-fuelled naïveté, which drove attempts to reframe debates around cultural modernity along ‘authentically British’ lines, in contradistinction to the mainstream aesthetics of modernism fostered in continental Europe. This, according to Collins, was driven by marketing British composers as atheoretical (‘as “doers” rather than thinkers’, p. 209), that is, not underpinned by dry music theory but instead being ‘practical’. The public image and critical reception of Delius and Elgar are upheld as convincing examples. The debates surrounding the Victorian marketing of music studies as a vocational rather than an academic subject, institutionalised through the Royal Academy of Music and Royal College of Music rather than at universities, are also convincingly woven into the argument.

The following contribution by Séamas de Barra offers a fascinating account of three titans of inter-War music criticism: Bernard van Dieren, Philip Heseltine (better known by his pseudonym Peter Warlock), and Cecil Gray. They were, according to de Barra, ‘outspoken in their revolt against everything that seemed stuffy and provincial in everyday life’ (p. 235). Who would have thought that the composer of *Capriol Suite* was also the unlikely early English advocate for Arnold Schoenberg? Heseltine/Warlock published an article (not cited by de Barra) on the German composer at the age of seventeen. Also of interest are his correspondence with Delius and Bartók, fighting to raise both their public profiles in Britain. De Barra’s treatment of Gray is also noteworthy, especially in revealing him as a prominent figure in raising the profile of Sibelius in Britain, even though much of his criticism had an unfortunate tendency towards nebulous sensationalism.

There follows a discussion of the critical writings of Vaughan Williams from Aidan J. Thomas, highlighting the composer’s historicist critical outlook that formed a reaction to romantic subjectivity. Thomas offers a nuanced discussion of the aesthetically transcendental qualities Vaughan Williams ascribed to folk music. By reaching back further into the past, Thomas argues, the composer sought to build aesthetic bridges, and construct his own brand of aesthetic modernity that rejected the intellectualism of mainstream European modernist trends.

Christopher Mark then offers a stimulating commentary to Constant Lambert's seminal *Music Ho!* (1934), whose provocative subtitle *A Study of Music in Decline* seems to encapsulate a heavy dose on Spenglerian pessimism, though the tone of Lambert's text as relayed by Mark is witty and eminently readable. Mark draws attention to some startling quirks in Lambert's critical text and concludes that the work remains 'entertaining to read, a model of literary elegance, and an important model for reception studies' (p. 302), standing apart from similar contemporary pseudo-populist musical surveys from the likes of Hubert Foss or Cecil Gray. Mark even demonstrates, with appropriate caution, how some of Lambert's critical maxims seem prescient of the New Musicology of the 1990s.

In the book's penultimate chapter, Jonathan Clinch offers a fascinating discussion of Herbert Howells's attitude to modernism, as exhibited by a series of lectures he provided for the BBC, the transcripts of which are preserved in the Royal College of Music archives. The image of Howells's critical narrative that emerges is of a mild-mannered yet determined attempt to argue for the supremacy of an aesthetically tempered and culturally conservative species of British musical modernism that evolved separate to continental European modernism. Howells finds this trend exemplified in the compositions of Walton and Vaughan Williams, though not in his own compositions; omitted, Clinch hypothesises, in order to lend the lectures an air of disinterested objectivity.

In the final essay, breaking from the chronological frame announced in the book's title, Patrick Zuk explores the musical criticism of Hans Keller. Most interestingly unpacked by Zuk are Keller's views on modernism: while he reverently respected the music of Schoenberg, Keller lamented the stagnancy that had come about in the 1950s and '60s by widespread adoption of atonal music by the likes of Boulez and Stockhausen. While in Keller's eyes Schoenberg's atonalism had been a language of great expressive potential, among later composers the style had been reduced to a technical fad presiding over the 'de-musicalisation of music' towards 'unmusic' (p. 342). Zuk demonstrates that Keller's argument displayed a high level of refinement, and thus deserves to be confronted rather than side-stepped as has generally been the case.

The editorial quality of the collection is very high. Errors are infrequent, and all the ones I found were grammatical rather than factual. The nature of the multi-authored volume allows for a welcome breadth and depth of expertise, though at times there are gaps, and the editors themselves acknowledge the absence of important names such as J. A. Fuller Maitland, H. C. Coles, Edwin Evans, Arthur Eaglefield Hull, Samuel Langford, A. H. Fox Strangways, W. J. Turner, and Neville Cardus. Concomitantly, at times one finds material repeated in later chapters that has already been explored. On the whole, this collection constitutes a fascinating and valuable contribution to a long-neglected topic, and will with any luck will serve as inspiration for future work.

Philip Wheldon-Robinson
University of Manchester

Philip Wheldon-Robinson is a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester. He has research interests in Russian/Soviet music, Anglo-Soviet musical relations, twentieth-century opera, and music analysis. His doctoral thesis is devoted to opera, festival-making, and transnationalism in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

philip.robinson-2@manchester.ac.uk

¹ Nigel Scaife, *British Musical Criticism in a New Era: Studies in Critical thought, 1894-1945* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1994).

² Pauline Fairclough, 'The "Old Shostakovich": Reception in the British Press,' *Music and Letters* 88:2 (2007).

³ Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

⁴ For instance Alan Bush, *Music in the Soviet Union (Two Lectures)* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1944); Rena Moisenko, *Twenty Soviet Composers* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1943); reissued and expanded as *Realist Music: 25 Soviet Composers* (London: Meridian Books, 1949).