

- REVIEW -

The Symphonic Poem in Britain, 1850-1950

Edited by Michael Allis and Paul Watt
The Boydell Press, 2020
367 pp.

The title of this book arouses high expectations: a thorough account of the British tone poem has long been as desirable as has been penetrating research into the reflection of international symphonic and tone poems in British music. The first surprise, hence, must be the number of pages; it will be immediately clear to anybody with a deep interest in the topic that anything comprehensive is far from possible on such limited space. And it is not in the least understandable how the editors imagine to offer 'a much needed balance to the detailed studies of other genres in British music of the period [1850–1950], including song, symphony, opera and the piano sonata' (p. 2). The problem they have set themselves may indeed be hardly surmountable – not least because, although both areas are strongly interrelated, they need considerable space to unfold and to place current research into international perspective.

Jeremy Dibble has with his chapter 'Narrative and Formal Plasticity in the British Symphonic Poem, 1850–1950' the uncomfortable task of opening the field. Despite having 40 pages at his disposal, he can only touch exemplary aspects of the wide field. Reading this chapter leaves one hoping that he had been permitted to extend his statements into a full-sized book, which would have given a rather comprehensive historic overview of the situation, and in accordance with the present book's title.

Concerning subsequent chapters, one of the first (and not insignificant) problems nearly all authors face is the question of the genre of the 'symphonic poem' in general. In the international (particularly German) musicology, there are numerous publications on the development of the symphonic poem from the programmatic concert overture in the first half of the 19th century to tone poems

and 'symphonic tableaux' (let alone 'programme symphonies' or suites). In fact, the term 'symphonic poem' (coined not least by Liszt) is not used in German research when referring to compositions from ca. 1890; Richard Strauss' *Macbeth* received its first performance at that time, a work the composer stated to be a tone poem, and not a symphonic poem. The traditional usage of the phrase '*poème symphonique*' was much longer in use in France and Eastern Europe, but in these countries there were clear divisions between the typical one-movement 'Symphonic Poem' and the multi-movement 'Symphonic Suite', or a 'Programme Symphony'.

Looking at the book from this perspective makes clear some very awkward omissions – namely, the little space given to any research on the reflection of internationally-recognised 'symphonic poems' in Great Britain. Paul Watt's valuable chapter on 'The Symphonic Poem and British Music Criticism' gives a condensed but very informative overview of this very aspect, but it is all the more surprising that his lengthy table of 'Representative descriptors in reviews of symphonic poems in Britain' (pp. 62-3) gives no references to the underlying reviews whatsoever. Differences between symphonic poems, tone poems, symphonic tableaux and even symphonic suites are not made, and it is strikingly surprising that important reviewers such as Arthur Eaglefield-Hull and Havergal Brian are not referred to at all. Sadly, a 'companion piece' to this important chapter, namely one on the reception of non-British programmatic orchestral music (to summarise the various forms and guises of music inspired by 'poetic ideas' of any leaning unduly) by British composers, is missing altogether. David Larkin's 'Richard Strauss's Tone Poems in Britain, 1890–1950' and Barbara L. Kelly's 'Debussy and Ravel's Orchestral Music in Britain from *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* to *Boléro*', both more or less penetrating in their respective ways, are far from replacements to this central aspect: again, performances stand in the limelight rather than the reflection of the music in the eyes of British composers. There are sufficient published recollections, etc., of British composers, and sufficient such remarks by these composers, on foreign programme music which under no circumstances should have been missed in a book claiming authority on

the subject. All the more, it is frustrating to find nothing at all on the symphonic poems of Vincent d'Indy and many other French, Belgian, or Italian composers, nor the many programmatic symphonic works written by Americans. The list of composers and works omitted in the book becomes all too apparent in the index. And it is regrettable to read erroneous judgements, such as Havergal Brian being deemed as 'conservative', just because he despised atonal music in 1934 (p. 107). Brian was well versed in polytonality and did not need to follow all the trends that were around; and, of course, he knew Schoenberg's music well enough and esteemed some of it highly.

Anne-Marie Forbes and Heather Monkhouse reverse the emphasis in their closing chapter of the book's first half, 'The Rise of the Symphonic Poem in Glasgow, 1879–1916: A Documentary History', to the inclusion of newly composed native orchestral programme music. That Scottish music-making developed intensely in the following years, not least through Tovey and Chisholm, does not even receive a passing mention.

The second half of the book is devoted to five thorough and enlightening 'case-studies', covering the tone poem *Villon* by William Wallace (Michael Allis), Gustav Holst's Oriental Suite *Beni Mora* (Christopher M. Scheer), Parry's *From Death to Life* (Benedict Taylor), Ireland's *Mai-Dun* (Fiona Richards), and Frank Bridge's 'Poems of Re-enchantment' (Jonathan Clinch). Whether such a small selection can cover the vast diversity of the development of the British tone poem from Bantock, Holbrooke, Bax, Foulds, or Vaughan Williams to the huge number of post-1918 British 'Tone-Poets', must be most disputable, given the various approaches of various idiosyncratic composers, although most of them retained a more or less tonal language. Nor is there an outlook into the farther developments well into the present day, when John Pickard, Thomas Adès and others still write orchestral music more or less inspired by a 'poetic idea' – be it literary, a work of art, or anything related to nature.

After reading the book, many a question that had posed itself to this reviewer remained unanswered. And some annoyance remained, at the utter and consequent ignorance of any international (non-English-language) research. Guido

Heldt, who has been a Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Bristol for several years, published a book with the circumstantial title *Das Nationale als Problem in der englischen Musik des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts: Tondichtungen von Granville Bantock, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Edward Elgar, George Butterworth, Gerald Finzi und Gustav Holst* (Hamburg, 2007), covering Vaughan Williams' *In the Fen Country*, Elgar's *Falstaff*, Bantock's *The Witch of Atlas*, Butterworth's *A Shropshire Lad*, Finzi's *Nocturne (New Year Music)*, and Holst's *Egdon Heath*. Another that may be mentioned is Erik Dremel's *Pastorale Träume: Die Idealisierung von Natur in der englischen Musik 1900–1950* (Cologne, 2005), touching works by Holst (*Egdon Heath*, *A Somerset Rhapsody*), Bax (*The Garden of Fand*, *Tintagel*), Butterworth, Delius, Finzi (*Severn Rhapsody*), Gurney, Ireland, and Vaughan Williams. Any lover of British orchestral music may still look in vain for her or his favourite piece, but at least the scope broadens when reading these two additional books.

Maybe – for a second edition, the Boydell Press may consider doubling the size of the book (as well as the number of chapters), including more in-depth studies (whilst also considering less-known scores), and with its contents engaging meaningfully with international scholarship.

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