

## - TRIBUTE -

## Hugh Wood (1932 – 2021): A Personal Reflection

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Solemn music and dance, befitting language  
 drawn with a difficult mastery of the kinds.  
 History on call, posterity in rehearsal.<sup>1</sup>

It was Geoffrey Hill who referred to it as ‘a grand and crabby music’. The stark phrase comes from a poem in Hill’s 2005 collection, *Scenes from Comus*, dedicated to Hugh Wood on his 70th birthday, and sharing its title with Wood’s 1965 cantata. It does not entirely capture the art of Hugh Wood – no words ever entirely capture music – but it makes a suitable starting point (but no more) for exploring the character of a body of musical compositions that I consider among the best in British music.

Grandness there certainly was, both in the music’s aims and its achievements. And both are demonstrated by how well the music is made: written carefully and built to last. But ‘crabby’? Well, up to a point. Here, I hesitate because there is a negativity unavoidable in the word which – if uncritiqued – establishes a misconception about Hugh Wood and his work, both essays and compositions, which was the failure of most of the obituaries that have so far appeared (notably a particularly unreasonable one in *The Times*). Yes, there is a crabby quality, but it is important at the start to understand what it really was, and how it serves only as the basecamp for adventures that were more far-reaching than might be expected, producing the richness and eloquence of his music.

The crabby and the grand is only one strand of Wood’s work, but important because it is the strand that concerns his feelings for tradition. If at times there was a sense of a wilful desire to stand at odds with the contemporary music scene, it was caused by an irritation with the breakdowns in tradition which left a composer’s relationship with the past problematic. ‘We already have an entirely natural

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes from Comus* (London: Penguin, 2005), 63.

relationship to the past' declared Wood on one occasion, 'it's called tradition'.<sup>2</sup> Except, as Hugh well knew, the matter was never that straightforward, even if one wanted it to be so. He knew this every time he faced the manuscript paper. Paul Griffiths noted, 'if he [Wood] feels bound to uphold positions that were becoming dubious a century or more ago, that is because he sees himself thereby fending off infantilism.'<sup>3</sup>

Griffiths was referring to Wood's writings rather than his music, but I think the same spirit can be found in his compositions. Griffiths also, in the same review, described Wood (and Hill) as artists of 'stubborn grandeur'. It is not as poetic as Hill's phrase, but maybe serves my purpose better, in that it at least frees us from the implied crotchiness, a quality at odds with my own experience of a man dedicated to friendship and who could reduce me to helpless laughter as few could.

Hugh's position was, in reality, more nuanced than his writings suggest. And as a composer it was motivated as much by the practical need to get notes down on the paper than anything else. Alexander Goehr, perhaps Hugh's closest composer friend and university colleague, once made the point that his conception of tradition was upheld, 'not because I really believe it, but simply because it will do'.<sup>4</sup> Hugh, I suspect, shared this feeling, adding the point that it was best to stick with what one had, flawed though it might be, if the alternatives were even worse. Why waste the limited span of a lifetime creating from scratch if you believe, as Hugh certainly did, that 'the old forms can be made to glow with renewed life; and have found thematicism the surest, most human means of communication'? Get rid of that and what is the yardstick to judge anything by?

Unsurprisingly, navigating the demands of tradition was an ongoing concern in Hugh's teaching as well as his composing. He was acknowledged as one of the best teachers in the business. Posts at Morley College, Liverpool, and Glasgow universities preceded his appointment to a Fellowship at Churchill College from

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Wood, *Staking Out the Territory* (London: Plumbago Books, 2007), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Griffiths, "Trace Elements", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 May 2008, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Goehr, "What's Left to be Done?", *Musical Times* 140, no. 1867 (Summer 1999): 27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1193892>.

1977 until his retirement in 1999. Robin Holloway, himself both a student and later Cambridge colleague of Wood, described his teaching thus:

He stood for severity & discipline: Harmony & Counterpoint traditional from the textbook, no new-fangled theoretical notions, repertory mainstream Teutonic Bach-to-Brahms (with ardent Schoenberg-extension). For composers, no dainties, trimmings, sweetmeats, lacework, persiflage—absolutely nothing avant-garde/experimental/conceptual.<sup>5</sup>

I am not convinced Holloway entirely hits the nail on the head here, though the problem might be that the obituary genre, in putting someone else centre stage, doesn't fit his writing style. What is missing is a sense of the ambiguities and insecurities with which Hugh wrestled as a composer and which made the music (and his teaching) so much more than the imposition of old-style tried-and-tested methods. Hugh started an argument in one mind, but often revealed himself to be in two. How else could he have been so worthwhile? Goehr comes closer in his obituary profile, '[Wood] struggled as we all do (or did) with the conflicting demands of inspiration, spontaneity and ideology. A sharp and fluent critic of others, he applied the same to himself.'<sup>6</sup>

Man, teacher, writer, and most importantly the composer, was both combative and vulnerable ('my mockery – as so often – covers up quite an ambivalence of feeling', Wood admitted once after a typically sweeping statement in a book review). From his 'Teutonic Bach-to-Brahms' castle, he was to be found, surprisingly often, to be looking outwards and wondering whether there might be (more?) fun elsewhere. On Varèse: 'dare one say that to have no past can be liberating?'; admiring 'the almost careful-careless' way the artist William Scott painted, Wood wondered, 'can it be that I may be going down with a mild attack of the Birtwistles?'<sup>7</sup> And he put such curiosity into compositional action: listen to the abrupt rough

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Holloway, "Hugh Wood (1932-2021)", University of Cambridge, Faculty of Music, accessed 30 December 2021, <https://www.mus.cam.ac.uk/news/hugh-wood-1932-2021>.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Goehr, "Hugh Wood (1932-2021)", University of Cambridge, Faculty of Music, accessed 30 December 2021, <https://www.mus.cam.ac.uk/news/hugh-wood-1932-2021>.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Wood, "Hugh Wood on his Own Work", *The Listener*, 29 October 1970, 605.

surfaces of his String Quartet no. 2, opus 13 (1970) and Chamber Concerto, opus 15 (1971).

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The wind veers  
closer to silence than most things I know  
outside your third quartet, music I  
strain to catch  
clamours of | diminution, abrupt rest.<sup>8</sup>

My relationship with Hugh's music started with the Symphony, opus 21, premièred at the 1982 Proms which I discovered through the recording on NMC by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Andrew Davis. I still think it the best work he wrote. Hugh almost agreed, telling me in a letter in April 2009 that *Scenes from Comus* had the edge in his view, elaborating that 'it has a freshness and a sort of poetry about it I never managed to recapture'. That said, that so many of his compositions run the Symphony close in terms of quality of invention and emotional impact is a sign of how consistently good he was.

Few listeners to the Symphony will guess when first confronted with the work's tumultuous – indeed, 'crabby' – opening (with lower grumbling bass notes and scurrying storm-like scalic passages: the movement is entitled 'tempesta' after all), that this score will end some forty minutes later on a root position A major triad after passages of almost Janáčekian exultation. The finale is a set of variations on a Messiaen-like chorale preceded by a brooding adagio of Bergian intensity, and a lively scherzo which more than once hints at the distant influence of Walton.

Many of Wood's works chart similar emotional journeys from a state of crisis, be it storm or inertia, to joy. The one-movement String Quartet no. 3, opus 20 (1978) is essentially a winter-to-spring piece. It opens in a mood of almost paralysed depression, 'sunk in unhope'. Bleak and distant, a quotation from John Donne ('... and I am re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death: things which are not.') is inscribed over a passage of helplessly jarring semitones huddled together high up,

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes from Comus*, 40.

frozen, veering close to silence. Over its fifteen-minute span, made up of twenty-four connected sections, the music is gradually invaded with birdsong, warmed, and brought to life. The final lyrical music is precious because it is so hard-won, inscribed with words from George Herbert: 'And now in age I bud again / After so many deaths I live and write'. The Variations for Orchestra, opus 39, heard at the 1998 Last Night of the Proms, open with a dissonant, angular, call-to-attention followed by the twelve-tone theme, but by the time we reach the fugue finale the music is almost swinging with syncopated brass dancing over the bar lines: the effect is achieved by the mixing of a 4/4 pulse with a quaver pattern of 3+3+2.

But there is another surprise for listeners new to the Wood Symphony, and a more important one for understanding Wood's music and its relationship to tradition. During the first movement's 'tempesta', the storm suddenly breaks, leaving four cellos hanging on a chord. This melts into a short quotation from Wagner's *Die Walküre* – the moment when Siegmund first recognises his love for Sieglinde. Later, in the second movement, there are two bald quotations from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

Clearly, something personal and precise is being evoked, and in one sense this strengthens the work's lineage to the grand tradition. A composer cannot quote music without on one level at least claiming it for their own. But such moments, more than anything else in Hugh's work, make problematic the relationship with the past, and the music knows this to be true (regardless of what Hugh himself might have claimed as quoted earlier in this article). The arrival of the Wagner quotation in the first movement is responded to with an orchestral eruption of direct *outrage* at the imposition. *The Magic Flute* march is at first ignored and then twisted into a terrifying climax. The quotation of actual music from the past ensures the symphony ceases to flow unthinkingly as if it were part of that past tradition. There is disruption: the relationship becomes unnatural, contested, layered. And the music is all the better for this. The same could be said of the eventual reference to Elgar in the Cello Concerto, opus 12 (1969) – another outstanding piece.

Here is a note from Hans Keller to Hugh referring to the quotations in the Symphony:

... one of your quotations replaces musical thinking with *thinking about music*; *thinking abt't it* instead of *thinking it* is, universally, our culture's gravest symptom, because it replaces culture with civilization.<sup>9</sup>

I think Hans Keller gets it spot-on in relation to the particulars, and then draws the point out to an absurd generalisation. This I take to be evidence of a tendency to bully a point into a neat formula that aims to close down discussion but actually confuses more than it reveals. Hugh would not have agreed with me, and on several occasions got annoyed with my scepticism. My reservations about Keller were always swatted down with a cry of, 'well, if you had known him, you wouldn't feel like that'. But Keller's first point is apt, and it clarifies the tension between how Hugh wanted to compose (with the 'natural relationship' to the past that made his feelings for Brahms, the last composer of that tradition that could manage it, so revealing), and how he did compose (slowly, and as Stephen Walsh put it, resembling a man 'running in socks on velcro').<sup>10</sup> As a student Hugh had noted, 'Trying to write music is a Sisyphean task, time-consuming, arduous, unproductive and rather maddening. The most stunted and pitiful results are the product of untold hours of labour and concentration: mountains producing one-eyed mice'.<sup>11</sup> It never got easier, and he would have been worried if it had.

So, the appearance of the quoted material is when Wood's Symphony is claimed for our own post-tradition, modernist era rather than the past. And there are other wonderful moments in his music when similar liberations occur. The Piano Concerto, opus 32, is a masterly work, the best British piano concerto since Tippett. Premièred at the 1991 Proms by Joanna MacGregor (a former pupil of Wood's), its success was mixed with surprise. Was this Hugh Wood embracing elements of minimalism in the finale where motor-like chords chug along in an almost Steve Reich-groove? Is that hints of big-band harmony and orchestration in the first movement? And what of the exquisite slow movement, a set of variations which

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Wood in *Staking Out the Territory*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Here, having taken a shot at Holloway earlier, I must accept that he *is* spot-on when he refers to Hugh's 'ardent Schoenberg-extension'. *Ardent* is doing quite a bit of heavy lifting here, and its contentiousness nicely communicated by the way Holloway put the word within the brackets.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Wood, *The Isis*, 5 May 1954, 20.

eventually reveals its source of borrowed music? This time the stolen fragment is not Mozart, Wagner or Pfitzner (as in *Serenade and Elegy*, opus 42), but the popular song, ‘Sweet Lorraine’ by Cliff Burwell, popularised by Nat King Cole. Wood and MacGregor shared a love of jazz, and there is a nice story of Hugh turning up early to help MacGregor prepare for a dinner party. When she put on some Ella Fitzgerald, Hugh replied, ‘Oh come on, you can’t expect me to concentrate on chopping carrots to *that*’.

All of which is not to say the Teutonic Bach-to-Brahms is completely absent in the concerto, but rather held in balance by other musical concerns. I recently made the simplistic claim that Wood’s Piano Concerto could be seen as the Germanic counterpart to Thomas Ades’s ‘French’ Piano Concerto (2018), the comparison being invited by both works’ relationship to American popular idioms. I think both concertos also display a quality throughout that is more than just playfulness, but tips over into *cheek*. Wood’s final piano ‘capriccioso’ gesture is a throw-away wink to the audience. It is a mood similar to that in *Scenes from Comus*, when the music reveals that the virginal heroine awaiting rescue, ‘appears to be enjoying herself’ as the composer’s own programme note puts it.

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My title promised some personal reflections: here they are.

Hugh was the most intelligent person I have ever met. It was not just what he knew but that he had pondered it all and found interesting perspectives about what he knew. He was also funny. It was Clive James who defined a sense of humour as ‘nothing but common-sense dancing’ and this perfectly captures Hugh’s pirouetting intellect and turn of phrase, which was never showy. Any reader of his essays finds this quality. From a long list I pick two laugh-aloud extracts. The first is a rant – he was good at these – reviewing the revised edition of George Perle’s book, *Serial Composition and Atonality* in 1969:

Best of all is the fate of a chapter originally entitled ‘The Number of Possible Chords’ and reprinted, the text unchanged but with a new title: ‘The Tabulation

of Non-Equivalent Pitch-Collections'. I find it impossible to see inside the mind of an adult person who could allow himself to cross out the first sentence and write in the second.<sup>12</sup>

The second demonstrates how the process of précis can, with skill, take a list and cadence it into a gag. Here he is on the student Ravel:

But soon his own teenage cultural tastes – abetted by his friendship with fellow student Ricardo Viñes, the pianist – became far too exotic for the Conservatoire: Russian music, Chabrier, Satie, an enthusiasm for Wagner later largely diverted towards Liszt; Baudelaire, Poe, Mallarmé; the cult of the dandy rather than that of d'Indy.<sup>13</sup>

Like all friendships we built ours on shared loves and hates, who we admired and who we didn't. We shared an enthusiasm for the journalist Lynn Barber, Hugh being particularly impressed that she sat, and passed with flying colours, a stringent spelling and punctuation test before working at *Penthouse*. Having sent him a copy of her hatchet job on John Tavener, I was rewarded with a voicemail of extended giggles punctuated with cries of, 'she's my heroine!'

We exchanged Christmas presents, and this way he introduced me to the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald. And we indulged in a game of buying each other books that we hoped, forlornly, that someone might confiscate. I sent him Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbor's Wife* ('sex as commodity – the Americans are funny ...') and he sent back D. H. Lawrence's *Il Duro* inscribed, 'you shouldn't be reading naughty books at your age'.

His criticism of my own music could be blunt, but never unfair. You learn a lot from direct appraisals as long as two conditions are met: that the teacher wants you to be a better composer than you are; and that they are holding themselves to the same standards as imposing on you. Neither was ever in doubt with Hugh. And how lovely to get an honest judgement if it also was parcelled up in such lovely imagery. Here he is on an organ piece of mine:

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<sup>12</sup> Hugh Wood, "Just Twelve Notes", *Musical Times* 110, no. 1518 (August 1969): 838, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/953258>.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Wood, *Staking Out the Territory*, 127.



... from its sprawling length the piece never really recovers – although there is a dramatic and well-handled climax later on (you're good at climaxes) ... But the piece does overall give the impression of being a cactus which only flowers once every five years.

Or my viola concertino:

*Autumnal* is your best achievement (I'm sorry it turns out to be the earliest one (2003) – I certainly don't mean that it's downhill all the way from then).

The greatest of his essays is 'A Photograph of Brahms', first published in the *Cambridge Companion to Brahms* (1999). I have two friends who can quote entire paragraphs of this piece from memory, and delight in doing so. It is a broad sweep of history and culture, a hope in the power of tradition to sustain, and an acknowledgement that it can't, and that something has been lost, and the loss was impossible to avoid. Never has crabbiness been so enjoyable to read. George Steiner, also a Fellow at Churchill College Cambridge, complained to Hugh that he read like Kingsley Amis in the piece. Hugh was delighted.

Like Amis and Larkin, he loved England enough to lose his rag with it. Like Goehr and Maxwell Davies, he had attended Darmstadt in the 1950s. Sixty years later, his home-made posters against Brexit were something to behold. His many song settings (of which he was rightly proud) are a dialogue with contemporary English verse: Laurie Lee, D. H. Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell, Ted Hughes, and most frequently, Robert Graves. Even the wonderful Neruda settings use an English translation by Christopher Logue. Only in 2001 is there a German cycle, setting Erich Fried.

Where do I place Hugh in the generation of British composers born in the 1930s? At the very summit, with perhaps Richard Rodney Bennett running a close second. But then I am a composer, so my view is subjective, driven by what I need, like that cactus trying to find the means to flower. After all, Ravel believed Chabrier superior to Wagner, which is simply what Ravel needed to believe in order to be Ravel.

A more worthwhile question might be to ask what I learnt from Hugh. Answers can only be provisional because the best lessons take time to learn. But I think I have some starting points. Firstly, to be serious and not to be serious (a variant of Eliot's 'teach us to care and not to care / teach us to sit still') and to avoid self-pity or self-regard, if only because both take up time that would be better spent working to make one's music better. As he put it in a letter to me in April 2009:

When I was young I used to despise elderly composers who were eaten up by grievance; always grouching how neglected they were & how unfair everything was. Not a pretty sight or sound. On the contrary: everything is perfectly fair – you make your own destiny. I've long ago grown accustomed to throwing stones into a muddy pond and never knowing when or if they hit the bottom. This has the advantage of narrowing down one's expectations so that in the end all you're left with is the fascination & pleasure of doing the work itself – and you re-discover that you actually like composing. And, even tho' I continue to find it all terribly difficult (doesn't get any easier with age) that that should be all that one's left with is quite enough for me – and, one hopes, for anyone.

Secondly, fix one's mind to 'continue as we have before' and let the music come out as it will, different or not. Hugh was suspicious of ideas of 'late idiom', but more than his contemporaries he did have a late idiom as displayed in his final works, which consciously returned to aborted student works and completed them with an older autumnal pen. The biggest of these is *An Epithalamion*, opus 60, recovered, re-composed, and completed in 2015 from sketches over fifty years old. And there were also three songs similarly reworked from earlier efforts, premièred at the Presteigne Festival in 2010 and entitled, surely with his tongue in the cheek, as *Beginnings*, opus 54. These were recorded in August 2020 – the last time I saw Hugh in the flesh. We managed a dinner outside with conductor George Vass. Hugh was full of gossip and jokes. Later phone calls involved competing with his wireless (not radio) which he was never able to turn the volume down on.

Finally, in an age of mediocrity (has anyone ever felt they lived in anything but?) freed of any artistic standards, a concrete wilderness spreads out in which young composers are taken on their own evaluation, because what else is there to go on? Surely the final capitulation can only be around the next corner, and might arrive

before this obituary appears: crass commercialism freed at last from *any* musical consideration at all. These youngsters will be signed up and promoted because of how many followers they have on Instagram, or (why not?) for how sexy they look. In this horror, Hugh starts to resemble that old Brahmsian beard in the middle distance. Trashed as elitist – *nothing* worse these days – awaiting confirmation that it is laughable to still be suggesting that composers should be judged not on their hairstyles, or even the subject matter of their operas, but on, well, how the music sounds. Whether it can hold the attention for longer than a sound bite; whether you take anything enriching from the experience of listening. Is it worth trying to judge achievement rather than aim?

Yes, I am beginning to sound like the peroration of ‘A photograph of Brahms’. It is deliberate. But then other beautiful words from Hugh cut across my flow:

Art is not the more or less successful realization of a theory ... this lovely, irreplaceable flower of the spirit may burgeon upon any old dunghill of rhetorical contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the figure in the distance is still waving rather than drowning?

As I sit in reflection in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, I think about Hugh Wood.

God bless him.

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<sup>14</sup> Hugh Wood, “Follow the Row”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 June 1977.

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