

Review: Crossing the Bar

Reviewed Work(s): *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain, Vol.6: The 20th Century* by Stephen Banfield

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Crossing the bar

IVAN HEWETT

There comes a moment, in the preface to any academic book, where the author or editor feels obliged to make a conventional display of breast-beating. After thanking X, Y and Z, he confesses that '... any merits the book may have is due largely to them. Its faults, which are no doubt glaring, are entirely mine.' However, there's nothing conventional about Stephen Banfield's qualms over this, the sixth volume in Blackwell's *History of music in Britain*. The editing of this book has clearly cost him some anxious soul-searching; at one point in the preface he declares 'I not only predict... that the reader will remain unsatisfied with the volume but propose he or she *must*.' (my italics). Why? Because in our century, anything like a common culture in Britain has gradually disappeared – and with it the notion of a single sort of 'British music'. The meaning of 'Britain' has become whittled away, until it is now just a description of a certain political and administrative territory where a number of 'sub-cultures' jostle for resources, influence and attention. Identify any one of these as 'British' and instantly the others become 'Other' – perceived and defined in negative terms. Then there's the division of music into 'high' and 'low', with its attendant implied value-judgement of 'good' and 'bad' (these often paired with 'durable' and 'ephemeral'). And let's not forget Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony', whereby the arts are simply the expression or 'legitimation' of the ruling classes that enjoy them. This has a special resonance in such a class-conscious nation as Britain – and what about 'neo-colonialism' and 'orientalism'? Have they not left their traces on British music? Not to mention feminism.

Pity the poor editor of a history of British music in the 20th century, who has to pick his way through this ideological minefield. It wasn't like that in the days of Henry Hadow, when a positivist faith in amassing facts was allied to an unquestioning faith in the ideals of high art. The result was a curious mix that became the norm in reference works, where 'context' and the conscientious examination of minor figures spread over many pages, but always in the end yielded pride of place to 'the great man'. Subtract values and criticism from that mix, and you're left with sterile positivism – which according to Joseph Kerman, is the glaring fault of *The new Grove*.

Stephen Banfield is painfully aware that the ideological innocence of those approaches won't do in the 90s. Any adequate survey of British music will have to reflect the strains and stresses implied in the word 'British'; on the other hand, a book that aims to be a reference work has to rise somewhat above the fray, which means retaining some positivist faith in 'the facts'. This balancing act Banfield actually pulls

off brilliantly, despite his protestations of failure. He does it by flirting with these ideologically charged ways of viewing the material, without appearing to commit himself to any of them. I say 'appears', because by the end a very strong sense of music's autonomous value is asserted, in spite of the avowed aim of putting postmodern inverted commas round everything.

But that heartening sense only emerges later; first impressions are definitely gloomy. The opening section, called 'Music in context', brings the sceptical, 'disenchanted' view of the cultural and economic historian to bear on British music (in fact I should say 'views' rather than view, for even within this section the technique of methodological and ideological pluralism is applied). The Marxist perspective rears its head in Richard Middleton's chapter on 'The "problem" of popular music', which tells us bluntly that 'musical categories are *discursively* constructed, products of *ideology*'. And later: 'The category of popular music, then, is the scapegoat required by the attempt to defend an elite tradition of artistic integrity against the pressures of modern society.' The elite that created and needed that tradition has already been shown, in Arnold Whittall's chapter on 'British music in the modern world', to have let the country down badly in its clinging to a myth of pastoral England, its refusal to engage with modernism (the theme of British backwardness recurs in the penultimate chapter, headed 'Criticism and theory'. At the turn of the century musicology was the province of the 'gentlemanly amateur', a situation mirrored in other areas of British life; Lord Rutherford was a 'gentleman scientist', who had to fund some of his epoch-making experiments out of his own pocket). Finally in this opening section we come to Cyril Ehrlich's masterly portrayal of the economic forces which have shaped music-making in Britain. He brings an ironic, clear-eyed vision both to the institutions set up to preserve high art, and the forces ranged against those institutions. It would be hard to match this succinct summary of the Arts Council's history: 'At first confidence in high culture provided it with a skeleton of rational purpose, clothed in rhetoric and abundant statistics. As the skeleton shattered under pressure from cultural relativism and bickering between the regions and the metropolis, the clothing gave scant protection'.

After such a large amount of sceptical acid has been poured over the value and ideological framework, not just of 'art' but also of 'Britain', it might now seem otiose to proceed to the music itself. But that, of course, is exactly what happens – this is after all a book about British music, and Blackwell would

The Blackwell history of music in Britain, vol.6: the 20th century
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 Blackwell
 (Oxford, 1995);
 xvi, 571pp; £90.
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hardly have been pleased if the authors had explained their subject out of existence. And now something remarkable happens. As you start to delve into the various sub-sections of popular music, and then art music, you realise that the authors are addressing their subject as if the distinctions between popular and art music, high and low, good and bad, are after all real distinctions, which inhere in the notes themselves, and are not a mere 'epiphenomenon' of the ideological and economic structures that occasioned them. The change takes place gradually – Richard Middleton's talk about authenticity in the section on 'The rock revolution' is still in the 'inverted-commas' mode of the first section. But by the time we get to Peter Evans the inverted commas have disappeared, and value-judgements are used with every appearance of sincerity. His superbly written chapter, which deals with instrumental music up to the death of Vaughan Williams, is the longest in the book, along with Stephen Banfield's less patrician, but equally well-written chapter on English song. Together with Jim Samson's chapter on post-Vaughan-Williams instrumental music, these essays take up 264 pages, almost exactly half the text.

This means that opera and musicals, jazz, amateur music, popular music, film and TV music, and the whole cultural context has been squeezed to give pride of place to art music – which rather blows the lid on the book's pretence of ideological neutrality. But in fact there's a pressing reason why these sections need to be long. Far from constituting the calm, uncontended 'high ground' of the book's subject matter, these sections are in a way the most contentious of all. No-one needs to plead a case for the Beatles, and this book doesn't attempt to do so (in fact, for such icons of British post-war cultural resurgence, they receive surprisingly few pages in this book). Nor will it raise any eyebrows to assert the importance of reggae and bhangra on the pop scene. And what could be more conventional than to assert that Britain is uncomfortable with modernism, or that art music is a fig-leaf for the ruling classes' passion for ruling? But what will raise eyebrows is the unequivocal dismissal of Havergal Brian as a second-rater (indeed if I were the author or editor of these pages I might now be tempted to go into hiding, to avoid the wrath of the Havergal Brian Society). As Peter

Evans loftily puts it, 'A response of indifference to activity on so a heroic a scale seems less generous than one of antipathy, yet a cross-section of his [Brian's] works prompts no expectation of richly individual music awaiting discovery.' This after a cool assessment of Brian's weaknesses, which makes this negative judgement on the work as a whole actually seem quite mild.

And yet Brian is only the most egregious of a whole host of composers who have been the subject of long, vociferous special pleading (is it a peculiar feature of British musical life, or do there exist in France and Germany the equivalent of the John Foulds Society or the Bernard van Dieren Society, determined to prove that the neglect of their idol is the result of a dastardly conspiracy? A chapter on 'Neglected composers and their champions' might have provided an amusing intermezzo in this book). The villain of the piece tends to be trendy continental modernism, with its partner in crime the BBC, whose sterile antics seize the limelight from the quiet, humane, 'sincere' voice of British composers. It's a voice that eschews technical finesse – indeed its technical awkwardness, its fondness for *ad hoc* solutions, and its avoidance of system are all signs of a special purity of heart, which only the British themselves can fully appreciate.

This, say the mythologisers of the 'neglected British composer', is where the 'essence' of British art music is to be found. This book wants to have no truck with 'essences', but it can't ignore the host of composers who've been promoted on the grounds that they exemplify this particular one. Instead it does something far more deadly. For Peter Evans the issue is clear-cut; do these 'neglected' British composers – or for that matter the much-played and knighted ones – match up to the highest standards of continental modernism? If not, they're relegated to the ranks of the second-rate. He is severe on Vaughan Williams; the Sixth Symphony he says 'juxtaposes uncertainly the composer's most urgent expression and a disdain for technical finesse approaching irresponsibility'. The eighth and ninth symphonies give the impression that 'the habits of composition have outlasted the impulse.' Similarly Holst's orchestration is compared unfavourably with

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Debussy's and Schoenberg's. One by one they're brought before the bar – van Dieren, Bliss, Walton, Bax – in a detail and at a length that might seem excessive. Why should the most minor of these figures be given more space than say, the Beatles? Because therapy, if it's to be effective, must sometimes be long and a bit painful. And the effects are not all bad. The composers who do measure up – as Britten and Tippett emphatically do (and, on occasion, Rawsthorne, Bridge and a few others) – shine all the more brightly by contrast; particularly when described so felicitously as here. Out of many acute observations in the book I might instance Peter Evans description of the recapitulation of Britten's Second Quartet, where the cellos 'celebrate a tonic mislaid rather than banished during the middle section'; or Stephen Banfield's analysis of the way apparently neo-classical misalignments of tonic and dominant functions in Britten's folk-song arrangements actually spring from a very different expressive impulse (these chapters, along with Cyril Ehrlich's, are the high points of the book in terms of writing. It

must be said that the valleys are a long way below them, and that one or two chapters are very pedestrian indeed). Another virtue of the book is that it brings out the continuities in British musical life. The left-wing convictions of Cardew are shown to be of a piece with Alan Bush and Rutland Boughton; the Elizabethan music craze of the 20s, described in one chapter, finds its echo in the early works of Tippett, described in another a hundred pages away. The idea of music as 'landscape', now so firmly linked with the name of Birtwistle, is shown to have long and winding roots in British music.

By the end of the 230-page section on art music, the cultural pessimism and scepticism of the opening section is a distant memory; so distant, in fact, that you start to wonder whether you're remembering some other, very different book. One has to be glad, though, that the book abandoned its ideological neutrality so strenuously signalled at the outset; otherwise it couldn't have become the judicious, perceptive, authoritative survey that it's actually turned out to be.

Book review

CD REVIEW

Dislocation and direction

EDWARD DUDLEY HUGHES

Helmut Lachenmann is already 61, and this CD of solo works explores a range of pieces written throughout his career (the earliest dates from 1963, the most recent from 1986). A sense of aesthetic dislocation arises from this collection's juxtaposition of works with seemingly diverging aesthetic intentions; but perhaps this is a deliberate effect. Whereas Wergo's CDs of Cage's early works disarmingly traced an evolution towards a new concern with sound and freedom, this is a record which negates the documentary effect and is disarming only in its apparent lack of direction. Lachenmann's music displays the general experimental concerns of the post-fifties Darmstadt avant-gardists but has a special personality of its own in its attempt to embody political and aesthetic questions in each work – this is the sound of philosophy tearing loose rather than the usual composerly attempt at creating a self-contained musical system. David Alberman, in his interesting liner notes, remarks: 'central tenets such as the unconditional pursuit of beauty, standardised definitions of beauty, or the notion that music should only soothe the human mind, and not disturb it: all these, and many more, came under [Lachenmann's] critical scrutiny.' The idea that there has ever been a generally accepted notion that music should *only* soothe the human mind is questionable: if the idea of music as consolation is uniquely under attack then this seems to be a mis-

guided approach; music does have a legitimate role in providing consolation to the individual listener and to say that this limits the total potential effect of music suggests that the critic's definition of what music can be is either too wide or too vague. However, Lachenmann's enterprise is undoubtedly challenging even if its curious surface dooms it to failure in terms of wider acceptance.

The earliest piece on the disc, *Wiegenmusik* (1963) for piano, less than four minutes long, tinkers with 'consonance and post-serial clusters' in a way that suggests that the fifties ideal of unself-conscious immersion in either sound or in system is already no longer viable. The composer's notion of constellations of material perhaps glances at the literary concerns of Walter Benjamin. The aural effect of short phrases cutting between the strongly meditative and the pointillist is not without unexpected lightness and energy although the inconsequential ending is typical of the denial of expressive intensity. In its aural concerns, *Pression* (1969–70) for cello provides the clearest confirmation of the received idea of Lachenmann's work: the piece is unremitting in its exploration of unconventional sound effects; Lachenmann is fascinated with the sounding possibilities of all parts of the instrument; the bow is drawn over the body of the instrument, tuning pins and occasionally the strings, sometimes at great pressure with the wrenching effect that one

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