

MATTHEW RILEY (ED.), *BRITISH MUSIC AND MODERNISM, 1895–1960* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2010). ISBN 978-0-7546-6585-4, xvi+329pp, £65.

Before delving into the rich detail of this timely publication, it may be as well to begin with a brief consideration of its scope. This is not the general survey that the title might seem to suggest; rather, the fourteen essays focus on very specific points in British musical modernism, discussing certain figures, works and trends in considerable detail. The index does not include, for instance, Cyril Scott, Arnold Bax, John Ireland, Eugene Goossens, Herbert Howells, Lennox Berkeley, Michael Tippett or Malcolm Arnold (although most are mentioned in passing), all of whom were associated with musical modernism in Britain during the period under discussion, and Constant Lambert is discussed only in relation to William Walton and Walter Leigh, and primarily through *Music Ho!* rather than through his music. Neither do the chapters on specific composers necessarily attempt to evaluate the positions of these figures and their output within British musical modernism. Those on Bridge and Walton, for instance, focus on specific features of individual, relatively early works. As the book unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the narrow focus of the individual chapters allows a depth of enquiry and insight that would be impossible to replicate in a study with a more general perspective. Some of the many illuminating links between topics are highlighted, while others are left for the reader to trace; as a result, some of the works and specific topics covered can seem isolated at first, but together they muster a rewarding breadth and depth of enquiry. Only occasionally did I feel that opportunities for a wider discussion of composers and their places in British modernism had been missed, or that an essential strand had been neglected.

Matthew Riley acknowledges both the limits and advantages of the book's format in his introduction: 'This book is not the last word on British music and modernism before 1960, for its coverage is not comprehensive as regards composers, institutions or genres. Its main contribution lies in the application of new ideas and theoretical approaches.' (3) By this yardstick, the book must certainly be considered a success, and it will surely encourage further valuable research. As Riley notes at the outset, the phase of British music discussed here has not received the sort of rigorous analysis, technical or contextual, to which other modernist music of the period has been subjected, as its techniques and aesthetics seem to lag behind the more radical advances of the European mainland; detailed discussions of how British musical modernism developed and was received—both by composers and commentators—have been few. Given that British composers tended to avoid avant-garde radicalism, Riley's examination of the term 'modernism' is perhaps inevitable, although he wisely elects not to formulate a prescriptive definition, as the chapters that follow remind us that modernism is a wide-ranging spectrum rather than an absolute (Ben Earle's stimulating musings on the term in the final chapter round off the volume rather elegantly).

The first four chapters provide a broad and extremely useful background to the remainder of the book, tackling post-Victorian music criticism, the reception of Elgar and Schoenberg, and the impact of the Ballets Russes. Riley himself contributes chapter 1, 'Liberal Critics and Modern Music in the Post-Victorian Age', which sets the scene for much of the ensuing discussion. He begins by pointing out that the denigration of modernist art by conservative critics does little to elucidate the specifically British musical climate, as such attacks can be found in many countries. Rather, an examination of the attitudes of liberal critics reveals some of the principal aesthetic preoccupations of early twentieth-century British modernism, as well as their origins. Riley traces the continuities between Victorian and post-Victorian liberal intellectualism and attitudes to modernism. This discussion provides an essential foundation to the remainder of the book, contextualizing the attitudes of composers and critics alike.

The rapid acceleration of concepts of modernism in British musical life is illustrated by the next two chapters: Meirion Hughes's "'A thoroughgoing modern": Elgar Reception in the *Manchester Guardian*, 1896–1908', and Deborah Heckert's 'Schoenberg, Roger Fry and the Emergence of a Critical Language for the reception of Musical Modernism in Britain, 1912–1914'. Hughes begins by outlining the basis of Elgar's conservative political leanings, brought into focus by the composer's dismayed reaction to the Liberal Party's election victory in 1906: 'For Elgar, the incoming Liberal government, with its commitment to old-age pensions, National Insurance, higher taxes on the aristocracy and Irish "Home Rule", threatened the political and social order upon which his newly acquired gentility, and aspirations to nobility, depended' (32). Yet Elgar was not averse to modernity and progress, regarding himself 'as a modern, as an artist at the cutting edge of musical development, proud that he drew the deepest inspiration from Wagner, in whose music dramas he was steeped.' (34) This latter point alerts us to the rapidly changing musical landscape of the first decade of the twentieth century and the caution on the part of British composers to commit wholeheartedly to the most recent innovations: Wagner and, later, Strauss were still regarded as modern even when figures like Debussy, Schoenberg and Stravinsky were creating entirely new languages. Hughes's discussion of the *Manchester Guardian*, the most emphatically Liberal major newspaper of the day, and its role in promoting Elgar makes for a pleasant change from the emphasis usually placed on London newspapers and periodicals such as *The Musical Times*. The consideration of party politics links nicely with Riley's discussion in the previous chapter, and thus provides an unusual perspective to Elgar's reception as a 'modern'.

Although the focus of chapter 3 might seem narrow, Heckert establishes that the years 1912–14 were indeed pivotal for the development of musical modernism in Britain and demonstrates this by discussing the differences between the reviews of the first and second London performances of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces. While

the first performance attracted widespread derision in the press, it also encouraged British critics to engage more earnestly with modernism, and the work was met with more goodwill on its second hearing. Heckert's consideration of the influence of Roger Fry and Clive Bell is fascinating, most significantly in their 'generating a new critical language to deal with modernism, a language whose formalist critical methodology became integral to the conceptualization and discussion of modernism in English for most of the twentieth century' (58).

Gareth Thomas's 'Modernism, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in London', the subject of chapter 4, makes for an interesting companion piece to Heckert's contribution as there are striking contrasts in the reception and influence of Russian and French music. His discussion of the Ballets Russes presents the essential points of a substantial topic very clearly, and provides excellent insight into changing tastes throughout the 1910s and early 20s. The examination of non-musical elements, such as choreography and staging, is also revealing. Two significant gaps in the book's coverage make themselves felt at this point, however: Richard Strauss is discussed only in passing, and there is no dedicated discussion of the influence of French music. While Debussy and Ravel appear on numerous occasions, a more integrated consideration of the reception of their music and its massive impact on British composers would have been useful.

The chapters focussing on specific composers begin with Stephen Downes's examination of Bridge's *The Sea*, one of several contributions to deal in depth with a single work. Downes reveals *The Sea* to be a pivotal work in Bridge's *oeuvre*; it is, however, still an early one, and given the composer's remarkable development throughout the next two decades it is a pity that there is no detailed discussion of his later music—particularly as several of the themes that Downes develops are directly relevant to these more radical pieces. Nevertheless, although *The Sea* may seem an odd choice through which to explore modernism in Bridge, it turns out to be an excellent starting point.

Christopher M. Scheer's discussion of formalism, in "'A direct and intimate realization": Holst and Formalism in the 1920s', links directly with Heckert's chapter, providing a concrete example of the influence of formalist aesthetics on a specific composer, and on one work in particular: Holst's First Choral Symphony. This contribution is a valuable addition to the literature on Holst who, as Scheer notes at the outset, 'fits uneasily into traditional accounts of British music history' (109). By focussing on the aesthetics of the composer's later music, Scheer establishes a technical model capable of avoiding the problems that Holst's eclecticism can cause.

Tim Barringer's 'Façades for *Façade*: William Walton, Visual Culture and English Modernism in the Sitwell Circle' continues the volume's concern with the relationship

between music and visual art, which 'was a key element of *Façade* from its inception, making the work what might at first encounter seem a multiple paradox: a pioneering English modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*' (127). Barringer examines the ways in which the three front-cloths used in performances up to 1942 reflect the changing image of the work. It is to be hoped that his discussion here will inspire the renewed adoption of a front-cloth in performances of *Façade*, as this was an integral feature of the original conception and would change the effect of the work significantly. While Barringer's discussion of *Façade*'s engagement with modernism (and Walton's changing attitude to its aesthetic identity) is illuminating, the work remains something of an anomaly in Walton's output and in British music more generally. A consideration of its place within the composer's development and its relationship to music by contemporaries such as Bliss would have been welcome, although perhaps this was felt to be outside the scope of the chapter.

Daniel M. Grimley's 'Landscape and Distance: Vaughan Williams, Modernism and the Symphonic Pastoral' is a significant addition to the literature on English pastoralism, a topic that has been radically re-examined in other arts in recent years by scholars such as Peter Mandler and Jed Esty. A more differentiated examination of Vaughan Williams's particular brand (and aesthetics) of pastoral reference has long been overdue, but Grimley's discussion of the interplay of modernist symphonic and pastoral elements makes it worth the wait. J. P. E. Harper-Scott continues the focus on Vaughan Williams in a chapter entitled 'Vaughan Williams's Antic Symphony'. His evaluation of the modernist elements of Vaughan Williams's language tackles an important point that has rarely been discussed with sufficient clarity; in doing so, he also offers an exemplary analysis of the Fourth Symphony. Despite their seemingly narrow range of enquiry, these two chapters provide an excellent discussion of the position of Vaughan Williams and his music within British musical modernism, and are among the highlights of this volume. Dealing with the central issues of pastoralism and modernism in the composer's style and language, they also offer valuable insights into Vaughan Williams's aesthetics; their discussion of two works that significantly influenced several younger contemporaries, and British musical modernism more generally, is enlightening.

Thomas Irvine's 'Hindemith's Disciple in London: Walter Leigh on Modern Music, 1932–40' is the only chapter to deal with a relatively marginal topic. The influence of Hindemith on British composers and musical life is an area that has perhaps not received the attention it deserves, and Irvine's consideration of Leigh proves to be an illuminating angle from which to approach it. His discussion of Hindemith's aesthetics is insightful and makes for a surprisingly relevant lens through which to view debates on the aesthetics of music in Britain in the 1930s. A key figure in these debates was Constant Lambert, who opposed Hindemith's aesthetics vehemently, notably in *Music*

*Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (1934). While *Music Ho!* was indeed a seminal contribution to the British literature on modern music, its renewed prominence here reminds the reader that, firstly, a detailed discussion of Lambert's music and its place within British musical modernism is overdue—I look forward to Stephen Lloyd's forthcoming book, *Constant Lambert: Beyond the Rio Grande* (Boydell & Brewer)—and, secondly, more serious consideration of George Dyson's *The New Music* (1924), Cecil Gray's *Survey of Contemporary Music* (1924) and Gerald Abraham's *This Modern Stuff* (1933) would not have been unwelcome at some point.

Christopher Dromey's 'Benjamin Britten's "Pierrot" Ensembles' is the most wide-ranging of the chapters, despite apparently focussing on a tiny and relatively obscure portion of Britten's output. The discussion of *Pierrot Lunaire* and the survey of Pierrot ensembles and repertoire are fascinating in themselves and touch upon a wide range of issues relating to modernism in Britain and elsewhere. Britten's own contributions, for documentaries produced by the British Commercial Gas Association, are an unexpected window into the composer's modernist leanings, an enormously complex subject that could hardly be dealt with satisfactorily in a single chapter such as this. That said, there is a slight sense of discontinuity between the wider discussion of Pierrot ensembles and the examination of Britten's music, and some further comment on how the activities discussed here relate to Britten's development more generally would have been desirable; as it stands, the end of the chapter seems rather abrupt.

Matthew Riley's second chapter, 'Music for the Machines of the Future: H. G. Wells, Arthur Bliss and *Things to Come* (1936)', is another highlight, providing brief yet highly insightful discussions of both Wells's and Bliss's aesthetic stances in the 1930s and how these shaped their collaboration on the film *Things to Come*. The introductory evaluation of Bliss's modernist credentials is excellent, contextualizing the discussion of specific details in the score under consideration.

The two final chapters, Laurel Parsons's 'Early Music and the Ambivalent Origins of Elisabeth Lutyens's Modernism' and Ben Earle's "'The real thing—at last"? Historicizing Humphrey Searle', discuss composers who have traditionally been ignored in accounts of the 'British Musical Renaissance'. Parsons's discussion of Lutyens's interest in Purcell—an interest in national tradition that would seem to align her with numerous predecessors and contemporaries—reveals precisely how her approach contrasts with that of earlier British composers. Earle's probing and at times rather combative chapter on Searle, meanwhile, finds time to re-evaluate significant swathes of received wisdom about British music during the central decades of the twentieth century as well as discussing Searle in some depth. The integration of these two supposedly 'isolated' composers—even if only by proximity—into a continuous narrative is most timely and exposes one of the principal achievements of this study, namely to

view its subjects through much wider perspectives than has traditionally been attempted.

This avoidance of narrow classifications emphasizes the isolation of the composers and works studied, but conversely allows the broad backdrop against which they are considered to reveal itself. In a sense, this is the opposite approach to that taken in, say, Blackwell's *Concise Companion to Modernism* (2003), which focuses explicitly on much wider issues such as evolution and eugenics, and the popularization of anthropology, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, and traces the effect of such areas on culture, aesthetics and works of art. The Blackwell *Companion* is, as a result, an extraordinarily rich study, but there is little room in it for discussion of specific pieces of literature. In music, such an approach can be dangerous, as the work of individual composers—particularly in discussions of modernist music—often requires detailed technical discussion for wider relationships to be traced in a meaningful manner. As noted above, the balance between detail and wider perspective, and illustrations of the relationships between the two, vary across the chapters in *British Music and Modernism*, but this is not ultimately problematic; rather, the overriding impression is that the book provides a series of case studies into how worthwhile, detailed research into this period of British music can be undertaken. The results are often remarkable, and this book is essential reading for anyone interested in twentieth-century British music or the development of modernist music more generally.

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