
BOOK REVIEWS

Letters From a Life: Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Volume Three 1946–51, edited by Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke. Faber and Faber, £25.00.

Selected Letters of Michael Tippett, edited and transcribed by Thomas Schuttenhelm. Faber and Faber, £25.00.

‘The practice – the whole culture – of “biography” has radically altered in our time and become an unthinking pursuit of what is often represented to be the “dark” side of the biographer’s subject’ (*Letters From a Life*, p. 6). For Donald Mitchell, writing in his introduction to the third volume of Britten’s letters, a prime example of such a pursuit is Humphrey Carpenter’s biography of Britten.¹ Mitchell claims that Carpenter’s study, released a year after the first two volumes of Britten’s *Selected Letters*, was ‘hijacked’ by the subject of Britten’s sexuality and his relationship with boys (p. 5). Nevertheless, the biography ‘effected a fundamental change in much writing about the composer’ (p. 5): in what follows, Mitchell makes it clear that *Letters From a Life* is offered as a corrective to the excesses resulting from this fundamental change.

Mitchell’s concern is that a number of post-Carpenter studies (and indeed, Carpenter himself at times) identify items of biography with the experience of Britten’s music, an uncritical turn that compromises genuine insight in both fields. To interpret Britten’s life and music through the hermeneutic lens of his sexuality has led to a ‘narrowness of ... focus’ that has

toppled over from the interpretation of the music into accounts of the life itself which, in a comparable sense, can all too easily be bleached of its human, and sometimes all too human, complications and contradictions (p. 10).

To demonstrate such complications, and thereby reveal the limitations of Carpenter’s approach, Mitchell provides two lengthy examples. The first concerns Carpenter’s assertion that ‘Britten had a particular young person in mind’ – Humphrey Maud – when writing *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*

(Carpenter, p. 231). The second involves Stephen Reiss’s suggestion, reported by Carpenter, that Alistair Hardy, the son of the caretaker whose dismissal from the Aldeburgh Festival set in motion events culminating Reiss’s own resignation as General Manager, was ‘more or less the prototype for the boy in *Death in Venice*’ (Carpenter, p. 524). By providing dates of significant events, and above all interviews with Humphrey Maud and the Hardy family – the key players in the two events Carpenter describes – Mitchell effectively dismantles the premises upon which Carpenter bases his musical interpretations, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the ‘human complications and contradictions’ that can be found in all aspects of Britten’s life.

Given that Carpenter does not comment upon Reiss’s identification of Hardy with Tadzio, and that his interpretations of the *Young Person’s Guide* are so superficial as to be negligible, one could suggest that by devoting many pages to the matter, Mitchell is overstressing his case. But his points are nevertheless well-made, and indicative of the scrupulous research that characterizes all three volumes of the *Selected Letters* to date.

Nevertheless, one also senses that there is more to Mitchell’s sustained critique of Carpenter *et al* than just the solidity of the foundations upon which interpretations are based. The issue at stake is that of authenticity. For Mitchell,

the best biographical approach was to assemble an account of a life, mostly in the composer’s own words, the telling which – because of its peculiar dedication to music – had no option but also to function as a powerful illumination of the oeuvre itself (p. 4).

The same issue emerges at the end of the introduction, when Mitchell claims that an anecdote, ‘is worth more than a moment’s amused reflection. Is it not in fact a perfect example of the *authentic* – that is to say, unpredictable, unforeseeable, immeasurably intricate and often undocumented – interaction between life and art that I believe this volume of letters, annotations, and interpolations of oral history, like its predecessors, uniquely affirms’ (p. 52, emphasis added).

I have dwelt on his argument at some length because it seems clear to me that the Benjamin Britten whom Mitchell, Reed and Cooke present in *Letters From a Life* is no more or less authentic

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992)

than the Britten we find in Carpenter's biography. Whilst Carpenter may have dwelt too much on the topic of Britten's sexuality, the fact that Britten's letters contain few references either to this or to his relationship with boys results in *Letters From a Life* giving the subject too little emphasis. After all, these were important aspects of Britten's life, and Mitchell's efforts to downplay their significance further with an appeal to focus rather on the 'image of the family and its creative significance' for Britten' (p. 10) is unconvincing. Whilst *Letters from a Life* provides a welcome overview of many of the facets of Britten's personality, I imagine that Britten's sexuality – rightly or wrongly – will nevertheless continue to occupy centre-stage in the interpretation of his music for some years to come.

Following the introduction, the volume opens with a selection of letters that came to light in the last 13 years and belong to the period covered in the first two volumes. The large amount of correspondence between Britten and Edward Sackville-West that has also been discovered recently is the subject of an informative mini-essay by Mitchell. Here, Mitchell suggests that the significance of their collaborative effort *The Rescue* 'is perhaps still not adequately recognized today' (p. 117), one of the few critical comments about actual music that one can find in this volume.

But it is the letters from the period on which this third volume is focussed, 1946–51, which hold the attention most firmly. These are the years in which Britten's newly-gained international status was confirmed with works such as *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, the *Spring Symphony*, and *Billy Budd*. They also witnessed the consolidation of Britten's career as a performer, and the increasing importance of his role as an administrator – the English Opera Group and the Aldeburgh Festival were established in this astonishingly productive time.

So productive, in fact, that many of the letters represented in this volume are concerned with the management of Britten's numerous musical affairs. Here are the nuts and bolts of his professional life: details of commissions both fulfilled and declined; tours undertaken and cancelled; the organization and critiques of performances; and the changing relationships – personal as well as artistic – between Britten and his collaborators. Of the latter, arguably the most important – after Peter Pears, of course – was Eric Crozier, who worked with Britten on *Saint Nicolas*, *Let's Make An Opera*, *Albert Herring*, and *Billy Budd*. Whilst the story of their increasingly distant relationship is not new, the way in which it unfolds

in the letters reveals the chilly inevitability of the end of their friendship; something of which both Britten and Crozier seem completely aware.

The letters to friends, colleagues and Peter Pears reveal a great deal about Britten's personality: his warmth, his generosity and his humour all shine through. So too do the testy remarks, the impatience and the ambition. For those who regard a composer's music as an extension of his personality, the letters will reveal much about the music composed at this time. But those looking for an insight into how Britten composed, or what he really thought of the characters in his opera, the letters provide slim pickings. The stark distinction between life and art that this gives rise to stands at odds with Mitchell's claim that Britten's words 'function as a powerful illumination of the oeuvre itself'.

It is important, therefore, not to lose sight of what the book does provide us with. Forget the dubious psychology of the introduction: Mitchell's undoubted strength, along with his co-editors Reed and Cooke, can be found in the exhaustive editorial annotations to the letters. As with the first two volumes, no reference is left uncommented upon, no context left unexplained. The result is a vivid, illuminating and rewarding portrayal of the historical, social and musical context in which Britten lived and composed, which rivals the insights one finds in the letters themselves.

What a contrast this makes with Thomas Schuttenhelm's *Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*. Where Mitchell, Reed and Cooke are expansive, Schuttenhelm is minimalist, providing information about the circumstances of the letters, and personal information about the correspondents, only when the letters do not themselves make it clear. The result is that our attention is placed firmly on Tippett himself: his sexuality, his philosophy, his musical inspirations and above all his personality radiate from every page.

Tippett was a prolific correspondent: the present collection consists of approximately a fifth of some 2500 letters that have survived. Whereas Britten used afternoon walks to help crystallize his ideas, Tippett used the process of letter writing. In a letter to Alan Bush in 1944, Tippett begins:

Excuse my writing again. As you may have observed, and may remember, I seem to help clear myself (as far as I ever get clear) of the dead weight of *Weltschmerz* and other allied emotions, by writing people of intelligence. This is not so much to bother them, as to give myself the illusion of corresponding, and of discussion, which I miss very much (p. 133).

Ten years later, in a letter to Barbara Hepworth (the set designer for *The Midsummer Marriage*), we find the same sentiment: 'You must be seeing more clearly than I am that I write (as I always do) to clear my own mind' (p. 349).

It is perhaps because of Tippett's desire to clarify his own thoughts that he often wrote a series of letters to a specific individual. Thus in 1936, Tippett began one of his many letters to Alan Bush on the subject of politics, and particularly communism, with: 'Don't be worried by these rows of letters. I get into the habit of writing a whole batch to someone and then stop for a bit' (p. 124).

The association of particular individuals with particular topics may have prompted Schuttenhelm's editorial decision to arrange the letters by correspondent, rather than by date. What this gains in concentration of ideas, it loses in overall shape: one has to make disconcerting chronological leaps back and forth between sections. Grouping by correspondent also seems to lead to some needless repetition: on both p. 263 and p. 332 Tippett describes his conducting ability in relation to Britten and Henze in remarkably similar terms. One wonders if a straightforward chronological ordering would have caused one or other reference to be omitted.

When varied repetition arises due to Tippett articulating his view of a specific event in different ways, the separation of related letters is clearly to the detriment of the narrative. For instance, in a letter written to David Webster at Covent Garden, dated 27 July 1954, Tippett cautiously describes the ways in which the assembling of personnel for *The Midsummer Marriage* was far from his satisfaction. But it is in a letter reproduced some 46 pages earlier, in a letter to Edward Sackville-West, that Tippett's feelings, barely repressed in his letter to Webster, are made entirely clear; indeed, Webster is explicitly blamed for the problems Tippett describes. The first letter really needs to be followed by the other to make the fullest sense of the situation.

Another such narrative that is dispersed throughout the collection is that of Tippett's relationship with the conductor John Minchinton. His name first appears in passing in only the third letter of the collection (to Adrian Boult); the biographical appendix describes Minchinton as a 'conductor and close friend of Tippett' (p. 436). More can be gleaned from Tippett's autobiography, in which Minchinton makes a brief cameo appearance (*Those Twentieth Century Blues*, p. 226–8); we learn that the two were for a short while intimate, but this ended partly due to Minchinton's marriage, and partly

due to Tippett's relationship with Karl Hawker. But in Schuttenhelm's selection of letters, we find evidence of Tippett's considerable generosity and support of Minchinton, both personally and professionally (and this is by no means an isolated case), as well as gaining further insight into the abrupt end of their dealings.

Minchinton is not the only figure to emerge from the selected letters in a new light. Douglas Newton, with whom Tippett collaborated briefly during the early stages of *The Midsummer Marriage*, may not have had a significant role on Tippett's artistic development, but as a friend and – as it transpires – a lover, was nevertheless an important psychological and physical support for Tippett during the war years. Thus in 1943, Tippett writes 'for some reason of circumstance relations with you are more satisfying in fact than ever before with anyone' (p. 161). The volume of correspondence to Newton in these selected letters is second only to that of Francesca Allinson. Sheer volume is of course not enough to warrant a reconsideration of Newton's place in Tippett's biography, but the varied content of these letters – sex, music, dreams, conscientious objection – suggests that Newton was closer to Tippett than had otherwise been presumed.

The selected letters are full of revelations and insights such as this. But even more engagingly, they paint a picture of Tippett as a composer well aware of his full worth. Writing to Newton in 1942, Tippett suggests that the spirituals in *A Child of our Time*, which Sackville-West had described as 'phony', 'won't appear so "phony" in years to come, but will be judged as a historical fact' (p. 144). To Britten, shortly after the première of *The Midsummer Marriage*, Tippett noted that 'for better or worse, we two are the most interesting English music has at the moment' (p. 205). There is no false modesty, or over-inflated ego: Tippett's assessment of his music was invariably spot on, and spoken with conviction.

Tippett's letters, unlike Britten's, also provide an insight into the inspiration behind the music. The protracted genesis of the plot and libretto of *The Midsummer Marriage* can be discerned from letters to a wide range of correspondents; *A Child of Our Time* and *The Knot Garden* also feature prominently. Indeed, Tippett's comments on libretti and drama in general are an endless source of fascination, though one cannot imagine Britten would have responded well to Tippett's criticisms of *The Rape of Lucretia* ('I don't suppose they'll get all over to you, because our mental processes are so different. But I should feel lacking in friendship if I didn't hand you over all I have, as far as I can' [p. 199]).

I could go on: barely an aspect of Tippett's personality, intellectual curiosity, political affiliations, views on relationships, etc., remains uncovered in this collection. For this, Schuttenhelm deserves our praise, and the *Selected Letters* must surely be considered an important landmark in Tippett scholarship. There are a few minor errors in the index, and one noticeable misidentification of a work (on pp. 46–7, Tippett is surely writing about the *Four Inventions* for recorders rather than the *Little Music for String Orchestra*), but these mistakes draw attention to themselves by virtue of the otherwise scrupulous care with which Schuttenhelm has edited the volume.

However, I cannot leave Schuttenhelm's contention that 'the publication of his letters enables Tippett to speak for himself' (p. xxiv) unchallenged. As I argued above, such claims for authenticity are critically unacceptable: in choosing one selection over another, Schuttenhelm is by definition imposing his interpretation of Tippett's personality upon the reader. Let me temper this, though, by stating that one imagines that this editorial interpretation has only a slight impact on the image of Tippett that we receive. Although the published letters are only the tip of the iceberg – the other four-fifths remaining submerged – one doubts that the unpublished material would significantly alter this picture.

There is another way in which Schuttenhelm prevents Tippett from speaking solely for himself, for he makes frequent elisions to Tippett's letters, 'to eliminate obscure references and repetition' and to remove passages that can be conceived as part of a continuing exchange which is deemed to be 'of no relevance' (p. xxii). Here we do have some idea of what has been omitted, and it transpires that such elisions can have an impact on our perception of the composer. For instance, Schuttenhelm removes the opening of a letter to Francesca Allinson dated 24 April 1944, which leaves remaining an account of Tippett's progress on his Symphony No. 1. The result is a correspondence that maps on closely to David Matthews's comments in the foreword; namely that 'the letters paint a vivid self-portrait of a man constantly absorbed with ideas that will nourish his overriding concern, his music. He was unashamedly self-centred, although perhaps no more so than many other great artists' (p. xi).

The letter in question happened to appear complete in Tippett's autobiography: the deleted lines at the start of the letter are simply: 'Sorry to see you poorly again – hope it soon passes over. Let me know how things go' (*Those Twentieth-*

Century Blues, p. 168). An awareness of these lines does not negate the fact that the bulk of the letter is about Tippett, but it can nevertheless colour our response to them.

In fact, there are quite a large number of letters in Schuttenhelm's selection that have been reproduced elsewhere. A small number of those written to the BBC appeared in Lewis Foreman's contribution to *Michael Tippett: Music and Literature* (Ashgate, 2002); there is also a cross-over between the section on Eric Walter White and White's chapter on *The Knot Garden* in his *Tippett and his Operas* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1979). A greater amount of replication can be found in the letters to Francesca Allinson and Bill Bowen: nearly half of the letters to Allinson in *Selected Letters*, and a quarter of those to Bowen, can be found in *Those Twentieth Century Blues*. Some of this overlap is undoubtedly necessary, but given the vast amount of unpublished correspondence, and given the importance of this collection, it is regrettable that more 'new' material didn't find its way into the final version.

Edward Venn

Aaron Copland and His World, edited by Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick. The Bard Music Festival Princeton Paperbacks, \$55.00/£35.95 (cloth), \$22.95/£14.95 (paper).

Music For The Common Man: Aaron Copland During The Depression and War by Elizabeth B. Crist. Oxford University Press, \$35.00.

The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity by Nadine Hubbs. University of California Press, \$50.00 (hardbound), \$19.95 paperback.

Composers keep 'developing' even after they die. Shostakovich, who was not a great composer at his death (at least not in academic circles, or American ones, anyway), has become one over the last 20 or so years. Benjamin Britten, who was for all intents and purposes a vocal composer at the end of his life, over the last 15 years or so has become an instrumental composer. Hindemith in the early 1960s was generally considered one of the three great 20th-century composers, along with Stravinsky and Bartók; now he is a sort of second- (or third-) tier composer, more or less like Milhaud, known for having been an influential pedagogue, with two or three works in the repertory, otherwise useful as a provider of teaching pieces for less usual instruments. Aaron Copland, during his lifetime, went from being

'the Dean of American Composers' at his prime to become a rather unfashionable nationalist anachronism in his later years. Yet after his death the popularity of his music increased steadily, and he has moved from being a popular and important American composer to being *the* great American composer, whose music defines the language of American music.

One of the ironies of Copland's status, both now and during his lifetime, was that a politically radical-leaning, homosexual, first-generation Russian Jew from Brooklyn became the iconic representative of American music, whose works evoked the physical expanse of the American landscape and the American spirit and character. Some of his contemporaries (particularly Roy Harris and Virgil Thomson, who felt that they had a more valid claim for the position) found this a source of some consternation. Thomson pointed out, with some justice, in *American Music Since 1910*,² that he had actually got there first in a number of cases, including writing ballets and operas, using hymn tunes and folk music, and that he had shown Copland how it could be done. Harris especially felt cheated, since he thought that, having actually been born on the prairies, in Oklahoma, and on Lincoln's birthday as well, he and his music were the genuine, all-American item, and should be recognized as such.³

Every year since 1990 The Bard Music Festival has featured the work of a single composer, exploring his achievements, his influences, and his cultural surroundings. In each of these cases the Princeton University Press has published an associated book of essays on the composer. The 2005 festival, featuring Copland, was curated by Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, who also edited *Aaron Copland and His World*. Essays dealing with Copland's life (Howard Pollack and Martin Brody), his connexion with other arts (Paul Anderson, Morris Dickstein, Gail Levin, and Lynn Garafola), and his political activities (Elizabeth Crist, Beth Levy, and Neil Lerner) are complemented by analytical essays about his Piano Sonata (Larry Starr) and his three famous ballets (Elliott Antokoletz). His complete correspondence with his friend the composer and critic Arthur Berger, whose 1953 book was the first extended treatment of Copland's music,⁴ and

excerpts from his correspondence with Leonard Bernstein are also included, along with annotated transcripts of the post-concert discussion of the New York Composers' Forum-Laboratory featuring Copland in 1937 and of a television interview with visiting Soviet composers on WGBH in Boston at the height of the Cold War in 1957. There is also a detailed annotated listing of television documentaries about and interviews with Copland, concluding with an extended essay by Leon Botstein on the current view of Copland's life and music. Of these, the most immediately appealing are the letters of Copland, Bernstein, and Berger, which offer glimpses of the charm, intelligence, and seriousness of the real person at the center of the whole project.

The examination of Copland's Jewish identity by Botstein and Levy in their respective articles is perhaps the most provocative and informative part of the book. The position of Jews in the United States, the way that they are thought of by other Americans, and probably even the way they think about themselves as Americans, since the Second World War, is radically different from how things were before it. These days it is all too easy not to realize that when Copland's contemporaries friendly to him and his music wrote in the 1920s, 30s and 40s of his prophetic voice or of the Mosaic quality of his work – or, going even further, spoke of his 'strong contact with the old testament',⁵ or of being reminded by his music of 'the psalmodic chants for the synagogue with their biblical air of prophecy and gloom'⁶ – they were speaking in very specific coded language. Those who were critical felt free to be more explicit. Daniel Gregory Mason, unfailingly hostile to Copland, whom he referred to as 'a cosmopolitan Jew', was alarmed by 'the insidiousness of the Jewish menace to our artistic integrity' represented by Copland's 1925 *Music for the Theatre* (and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*). He declared that 'Our public taste is in danger of being permanently debauched ... by the intoxication of what is, after all, an alien art'.⁷ Edward Burlingame Hill wrote to Virgil Thomson, concerning *Music for the Theatre*, that it displayed the 'usual clever Hebraic assimilation of the worst features of polytonalite'.⁸ Even Lazare Saminsky, composer, critic, and director of music

² Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 55–58.

³ Harris was inordinately proud of the fact of the date of his birth, and often reminded people of it. Legend has it that on one of those occasions Roger Session pointed out to him that lightning never strikes twice in the same place.

⁴ Arthur Berger, *Aaron Copland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

⁵ John Kirkpatrick, 'Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata', *Modern Music* 19.4 (1942), p. 246.

⁶ Berger, p. 52.

⁷ Quoted from Daniel Gregory Mason, 'Is American Music Growing Up? Our Emancipation from Alien Influences', in *Arts and Decoration*, November 1920.

⁸ Letter from Edward Burlingame Hill to Virgil Thomson, 5 December 1925.

at New York's Temple Emanu-El during the 1920s, in his comments about Copland ('His neurotic drive and stringent intellectualism are typically Jewish, but of the worst sort'⁹) and about Jews in general ('... race of extraordinary definiteness of psyche, race mentally polar to a nation aggressively Western, would preclude even a shade of sterling Americanism in a composer of recent adoption. In even a son or grandson of an outlander'¹⁰) writes in language somewhere between Wagner's pronouncements about Jews in music and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Elizabeth Crist, who is represented in the Oja/Tick collection by the essay 'Copland and the Politics of Americanism', writes about Copland's politics and the political intentions and implications of his best-known music in greater length and detail in *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland During the Depression and War*. Although never a member of the Communist Party, Copland's political leanings were definitely progressive, and throughout the 1930s and 40s he was actively aligned with a host of radical causes and organizations. His association with the Composers Collective of the Pierre Degeyter Club, the Communist Party's music organization, resulted in his mass song, *Into the Streets May First*, an entry in a competition to set the text by Alfred Hayes. (His setting won; the prize was publication on the front page of the Communist journal *New Masses*.)

By the mid-1930s the American Communist Party, at the behest of the Comintern in Moscow, had shifted its strategy away from a militant idea of proletarian culture (matched with a militant musical modernism by leftist composers) to a more inclusive leftism, which aimed to join non-communist liberals and progressives with workers, farmers, and the middle class in opposition to reactionary forces. This movement was widely known as The Popular Front. Even though the initial impetus for The Popular Front may have come from the Comintern, Crist agrees with the contention of Michael Denning¹¹ that it was a larger cultural phenomenon, driven not by the communists, but by non-communist socialists and independent leftists, 'marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture'.¹² Politically the Popular Front

focused on ideas of democracy, anti-fascism, racial equality, and social justice; culturally it evoked American history and folklore. Folk music was considered the authentic expression of the American people, and composers were urged to make use of it. During the early 30s Copland became preoccupied with the project of writing a music which maintained the highest standards of modernism but at the same time would be comprehensible and appealing to mass audiences.

The pursuit of this project led him to develop a style of 'imposed simplicity', often using folk songs; but it also led him to seek work in more demotic media, such as radio, movies, opera, and ballet. It also had influence on his choice of extra-musical subject matter that celebrated American history and communitarian values, along with individual and personal expression and responsibility, in an attempt to create and foster an ideal liberal democratic community. It was important to Copland that this more demotic music was not less serious or even qualitatively different from his earlier, more 'abstract' music, and he was not pleased with the distinction that Arthur Berger made between his 'severe' and 'simple' styles in an article about his Piano Sonata.¹³ Copland hoped that his music intended for a wider public would draw audiences into concert halls where they could encounter those more abstract works.

Crist traces in a clear and engaging manner the history of Copland's political and musical activities, from his association with the Composers Collective of the Pierre Deygeter Club in the early 1930s; his work on *Into the Streets May First*; the radical and abstract *Short Symphony*, *Statements*, and *Piano Variations*; through his earliest work with folk material in *El Salon Mexico*; his first film score, *The City*; the high school opera, *The Second Hurricane*; the three famous ballets; and the most famous war-time works, *A Lincoln Portrait*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and, climactically, the *Third Symphony*. This history is accompanied by a serious consideration of the political contexts, intentions, and subtexts of these works, along with thorough analyses of the musical content of each and thoughtful examination of the connexions between the intentions and content. Crist also manages to continually emphasize Copland's personal integrity in his dedication to his musical and political ideals and toward the realization of a distinctive and distinguished American music.

⁹ Lazare Saminsky, *Music of Our Day: Essentials and Prophecies* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1939; repr. Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 152.

¹⁰ Saminsky, p. 161.

¹¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

¹² Denning, p. 5, quoted in Crist, p. 20.

¹³ Arthur Berger, 'Copland's Piano Sonata', *Partisan Review* 10, no. 2 (March–April, 1943), pp. 187–90. Copland's letter of 10 April 1943 to Berger regarding this article is in Oja/Tick, pp. 191–2.

In her chapter on Copland's ballets, she contrasts the rather superficial, but real, ways in which they have become the reference point for musical evocations of the American West – and, by extension, the American spirit – with the intentions of Copland, the choreographer Eugene Loring, and the impresario Lincoln Kirstein, all of them leftist intellectuals, which were to explore American social conflicts and cultural contradictions in the realization of *Billy the Kid*. In her consideration of *Rodeo*, Copland's other Western ballet, her focus is more on the possible sexual subtext, both for Copland and for Agnes de Mille, the choreographer.

The issue of Copland's homosexuality has become as important for scholars as that of his politics. Nadine Hubbs has made it the central subject in her book about the formulation of the modernist tonal style which has come to be considered quintessentially American. The flavor and substance of Hubbs's book is probably encapsulated in the following passage:

Copland was ideally suited to his position, within the exclusively male realm of twentieth-century composition, of generous and patient mentoring – but not by virtue of any identity or experience in the paterfamilias role, for indeed he had none. Copland's qualifications, rather, was that he was a gay daddy par excellence. His embrace of the classic pederastic model and his belief in the societal benefits afforded by pederastic love and mentoring were cast early in Copland's life as a gay man. (p.11)

Hubbs sees the American tonal modernist style as having been formulated by Virgil Thomson, under the influence of Gertrude Stein, and then mined, refined, and popularized by Copland. She quotes Ned Rorem as claiming that Copland ('the queer') and Thomson ('the pansy') were 'the father and mother [respectively] of American Music' (p.13).

The first chapter of the book is devoted to proposing a reading of Stein's 'abstract' text for *Four Saints In Three Acts* as a queer text explicitly about gay life. Hubbs sees the ultimate result of the combination of Catholic allusions, the libretto, and Thomson's music as being camp ('...a specifically queer social critique...', p.55) and, therefore, as simultaneously disguising and revealing its creators (who included, along with Stein and Thomson, the choreographer Frederick Ashton and Maurice Grosser, Thomson's lifelong companion, who devised the scenario, all of them cheered on by Carl Van Vechten, the novelists and photographer, who was their common friend, and who was very involved in promoting *Four Saints* and their other work) as 'sexual outlaw[s], queer in gender and sexuality' (p.25). Hubbs

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makes much of Stein's abstraction (Stein would probably have preferred to consider it cubism¹⁴) as the means by which the what she sees as being the subject of the opera, gay life, is both exposed and obscured.¹⁵ She sees this as being consonant with the necessary covertness which gay men and women at the time were forced to assume in regards to their sexual identity.

This argument is not completely convincing. It is true that Thomson wrote that the subject was 'the life we were both living', but he explicitly identified that life as 'the working artist's working life',¹⁶ for which the saints' religious life was a metaphor, rather than the 'gay life' which Hubbs claims is depicted by the activities of the many saints in the opera. In her overarching argument regarding Thomson and Stein, she completely neglects to consider their other opera, *The Mother of Us All*. On the one hand one might suspect that this is due to the fact that their later opera has the appearance of being much more straightforward, and thus is less open to being construed however one might wish. On the other, since it features a same-sex couple – Susan B. and her companion Anne, whose relationship is presented unambiguously and as an unremarkable fact (and who, of the several partnerships in the opera, are the only ones to have a completely satisfactory and successful relationship) – its omission from the argument is puzzling. Although Hubbs posits the connexion between features of Thomson's language and that of Copland's Popular Front style, her discussion of the actual music, in excerpts of their compositions is cursory and rather general, pointing up elements that they do share, but which they also share with many other pieces by many other composers, both gay and straight.

¹⁴ 'First of all, *Tender Buttons*, subtitled *Objects: Food: Rooms*, is an essay in description, of which the subjects are those commonly employed by painters of still life. And cubist painting too was concerned with still life. Cubism's characteristic device in representing still life was to eliminate the spatially fixed viewpoint, to see around corners, so to speak, to reduce its subject to essentials of form and profile and then to reassemble these as a summary or digest of its model. Resemblance was not forbidden; on the contrary, clues were offered to help the viewer recognize the image; and cubist painters (from the beginning, according to Gertrude) had been disdainful of viewers who could not "read" their canvases. (Today's "abstract" painters, on the other hand, maintain that in their work resemblances are purely accidental.)' – Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 172–73.

¹⁵ 'Whereas Stein celebrated quotidian pleasures in occult language, the decadents celebrated occult pleasure in relatively quotidian language' (Hubbs, p. 59). By virtue of its abstract formal characteristics, *Four Saints* already evinces a "refusal of [and] withdrawal from social normativity" that may be said to mirror queerness and other kinds of social marginality and resistance' (Hubbs, p. 49).

¹⁶ Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, p. 90.

In the rest of the book Hubbs considers the relationships of Copland and Thomson to a number of other homosexual American composers (most prominently Ned Rorem and Paul Bowles, less thoroughly Marc Blitzstein, Leonard Bernstein, David Diamond, Samuel Barber, and Gian Carlo Menotti) and the possible linkage between their sexuality and the tonal modernist language they employed. She also considers the inclination of most of them towards French music, in contrast to the more dissonant, less tonal, possibly more German-oriented language which became predominant after the Second World War, and which was apparently much more the domain of heterosexual composers. She also discusses the rumors of a 'homosexual mafia' or 'Homintern,' concerning the worldly success of these composers during the war and postwar years: a particular vintage of sour grapes that intertwined with both homophobia and McCathyist anti-communism. She comes perilously close to claiming that Congressman Fred Busbey's notorious protest at the inclusion of *A Lincoln Portrait* in a concert celebrating the presidential inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower – which led to the removal of the work from the concert and was the beginning a number of political problems for Copland personally – was due to the fact that Copland's music was not 12-tone (pp. 164–5). That misses the real fact that it was what he knew, or thought he knew about Copland's politics, not anything about the actual music, which was objectionable to the congressman and his allies.

Although the book is accurate in its discussion of many of the historical and epistemological aspects of its topic, its actual engagement with the music of the composers it deals with is hardly existent. One is left with the nagging feeling that it has taken negative stereotypes which many gay people have, for a long time, tried to prove false and to overcome, warmed them over, dressed them up, and then presented them back more or less the same, except as positives.

The concentrated attention to Copland and his music afforded by these three books leave the lasting impression of work of remarkable seriousness, integrity, and quality, produced by a man dedicated to the proposition that his music could be of some use and value to the world. His comment about his overall purpose in being a composer, expressed in conversation with Vivian Perlis, was

I think basically you compose because you want to somehow summarize in some permanent form your most basic feelings about being alive. Life seems so

transitory that it seems very attractive to be able to set down in either words, or tones, or paint, or some way some sort of permanent statement about the way it feels to live now today. So, that when it's all gone people will be able to go to the art work of the time and get some sense of what it felt like to be alive.¹⁷

Even though the reception of a composer's work changes with time, the work itself is constant. The evaluation of Copland's career by his friend, rival, and fellow crusader for American music, Virgil Thomson, still rings true:

He has never turned out bad work, nor worked without an idea, an inspiration. His stance is that not only of a professional but also of an artist—responsible, prepared, giving of his best. And if that best is also the best we have, there is every reason to be thankful for its straightforward employment of high gifts. Also, of course, for what is the result of exactly that, 'this simple and great man in our midst.'¹⁸

Rodney Lister

Polish Music since Szymanowski by Adrian Thomas. Cambridge University Press, £60.00.

'Music is now something above nationality, above identity' proclaims Daniel Barenboim, his loudhailer recent advertisements for the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's debut recording.¹⁹ Readers of Adrian Thomas's study of the searches for identity undertaken by Polish composers amidst the tumult of Poland's 20th century will be encouraged to develop more nuanced views on this matter. In *Polish Music since Szymanowski*, Thomas demonstrates how recent Polish music and music-making can be read both to reflect and to transcend their immediate socio-political contexts. In turn, the book illustrates how this tipping point of critical ambiguity remains one of the richest sites for serious commentary on the art – especially when a detailed interplay of context and content is meticulously conveyed, as here, by a scholar with an eye for the enthralling historical panoply of his topic and an ear for the most telling analytical detail.

Take Thomas's discussion of Lutosławski's Concerto for Orchestra (1950–54), 'the imagination, scale and socialist-realist relevance of which were recognized immediately', he writes, in Stalinist Poland (p. 76). As Thomas

explains, the piece's rhetoric 'is remarkably close to the grandiosity of other contemporary Polish pieces' (77), as is its use of 18th-century genres and, most crucially, folksong-inspired materials. But 'Lutosławski's genius', Thomas argues, 'was not to make heavy weather of these archaic resources' (77), and to fuse them with treatments of folk materials not as socialist-realist window-dressing, but rather as themes filled with symphonic potential. Consequently, because the piece's 'materials, goal-directed structure and clear expressive idiom epitomized many of the ideals of socialist realism', while reconfiguring the possibilities of the multi-movement orchestral work in a composition of dazzling inventiveness, it is 'definitively a creature of its time as well as, miraculously, a transcendence of it' (79).

For this review to highlight Lutosławski, of course, is to invoke the clichéd canon of Polish music (focusing next, one would expect, on Górecki and Penderecki) that Thomas's book so deftly deconstructs. His 'revisionist ambition' (xvii) is to contextualize and counterpoint the study's inevitably detailed discussions of the big Polish names through its recognition of the diversity, richness and sheer profusion of decent and, sometimes, outstanding music that has been composed in Poland since 1900. Consequently, the study does not merely rewrite the book on Polish music: it compels one to rethink the Western European-centric narrative of modernism which remains at the heart of most tellings of that tale.²⁰ Instead of *modernism* (or for that matter neo-classicism, postmodernism, or any other 'ism' one cares to invoke), one must, this book reminds us, think *modernisms* (etc., etc.). So alongside Szymanowski and the big post-war three, Panufnik, Bacewicz, Szabelski, Baird, Serocki, Szalonek, Schaeffer, Meyer, Krauze, Sikorski, Kilar, Knapik, Lason, and a latter day 'Young Poland' to parallel Szymanowski's artistic milieu (Kulenty, Szymański, Knittel, Talma-Sutt and Wielecki), to name but a few, are analysed and contextualised here. If one does not know some (or even most) of these composers (and who but Thomas does, outside Poland?), this book will function as a provocation both to investigate an extraordinary new repertoire – including music that, like the pieces which first inspired Thomas's interest in Polish music in the

¹⁷ Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve, *Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music* – transcript, www.yale.edu/oham/CD2transcript.html

¹⁸ Thomson, *American Music Since 1910*, p. 58.

¹⁹ See, for example, the back page of *The Guardian*, 'Friday Review', 9 September 2005.

²⁰ The lack of any kind of broad appraisal of Central-to-Eastern European modernisms is a serious flaw, for instance, in both the design and execution of Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, eds, *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

late 1960s, often manages 'to be both contemporary and communicative as well as sounding totally different from [contemporaneous] Western European music' (xvii) – and to reconstruct one's personal narrative of 20th-century music.

The composer focuses are contextualised within a five-part, basically chronological structure which pivots around externally imposed turning points in the development of Polish music. 'The captive muse' examines the interlinked impacts of World War II (a time when 'any expression of Polishness could prove fatal', 16) and the Soviet imposition of socialist-realist ideals (statement in the journal *Ruch Muzyczny* from 1945: 'The sooner good music reaches the peasant and the worker, the sooner we can look into the future with absolute certainty', 41). The discussions here of Turzki's Symphony No. 2, *Olympic* (1948) and Panufnik's *Symphony of Peace* (1951) are masterly, offering balanced musical comments where others would merely treat the pieces concerned as symptoms of a malaise; indeed, these chapters and the next few deserve to become set texts on any music and politics module, as 'Facing west' examines the re-engagement of Polish musicians with the Western avant-garde after Stalin's death, with a particular focus on the 'Warsaw Autumn' festivals in 1956 and 1958–61. Thomas thereby seeks to take full advantage of 'a rare opportunity to examine creative responses to external stimuli following a period of cultural repression' (92) – responses including the manifold sonorisms of a 'Polish School' diverse enough to include Penderecki's *Threnody* (1960), Schaeffer's *Nonstop* (1960), Dobrowolski's tape experiments, Górecki's *Genesis I: Elementi* (1962) and Szalonek's *Les sons* (1965), as well as Bacewicz and Lutosławski's judicious accommodations with experimentalism. An extraordinary time.

'The search for individual identity' following the Polish thaw then occupies part three and, arguably, the final two sections ('Modernism and national iconographies' and the three-page postscript 'After Lutosławski'). Following the double whammy of *socrealizm* and the shock of the new in the mid-1950s, the Polish composers' searches for identity form a hall of mirrors reflecting Szymanowski's much earlier dualistic struggle 'to achieve not only Poland's musical identity but also his own' (8). Szymanowski wrote of his desire to let 'all streams from universal art mingle freely with ours', maintaining contact with culture beyond Poland's shifting boundaries 'because it is only on such a plane that a truly great, living art, including nationalistic music, can

flourish'.²¹ Such creative wrangling, proceeding through communism, the rise and fall of Solidarity, and into the harsh new world of a truly democratic Poland, forms the source material for the composer portraits and thumbnail sketches that Thomas provides in the second half of the study, as the focus of his book shifts from (to generalize) extra-musically enforced musical identities to self-made identities, the ultimate diversity of which was nonetheless shaped, ironically, by Poland's experience of stifling (pre-thaw) socio-political and (post-thaw) aesthetic ideologies. In this respect, supporting appendices usefully chart the fast-moving socio-political events of 1953–6, the 'Warsaw Autumn' programmes from 1956–61 (a good place to start revising one's narrative of 20th-century music, incidentally, with usual and unusual 'Western' suspects counterpointing their 'Eastern' colleagues), and pivotal Polish events from 1966–90.

For historians reading *Polish Music since Szymanowski*, Thomas's fundamentally analytical focus may sometimes get in the way of the socio-cultural narrative; for composers, analyst-critics and new music enthusiasts, the analyses may not always go far enough. Thomas would probably recognize this tension; his previous and forthcoming publications (existing monographs on Bacewicz and Górecki, forthcoming books on Poland's socialist-realist 'Dark Decade' and Lutosławski's Cello Concerto) speak to the need for a mobile depth of field in historically-informed analysis (or analytically-informed history writing). However, that Thomas is able to undertake such a diversity of surveys is a clear marker of the present book's greatest source of strength: its writer's 30-plus years of active engagement with the music, culture and people of Poland. The book is bursting with insights – it is an astonishingly realized synthesis, but could clearly have been profitably longer – all delivered with a degree of critical balance that Polish commentators may find difficult (or unappealing) to match. Consequently, while the book is bounded by discussions of death (Szymanowski's and Lutosławski's), Thomas's palpable enthusiasm for his topic and discriminatingly lively writing perfectly complement his investigation and overriding acclamation of the inextinguishability of Polish musical life.

Nicholas Reyland

²¹ Karol Szymanowski, 'On Contemporary Musical Opinion in Poland' (1920), in Alastair Wightman (trans and ed.), *Szymanowski on Music* (London: Toccata Press, 1999), p. 93. Quoted in Thomas, *Polish Music since Szymanowski*, p. ix.

Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music. A Symposium edited by Colin Scott-Sutherland. With a Foreword by Lord Menuhin. Toccata Press, £45.00.

Upon receiving this volume for review, my first temptation – and a strong one it was – was to give it an unqualified rave, since for people like me who really care about Ronald Stevenson's music, the mere appearance of this book represents something of a watershed. It would have indeed been easy for me to sweep all critical faculties aside in favor of a blind endorsement; anything to urge listeners and performers alike to find out everything they can about this most astonishing and compelling musician.

It is therefore my greatest pleasure to be able to report that the book not only lived up to my hopes, but in many respects surpassed what I had expected. It is true that it was bound to do that in any case, since it told me many things I hadn't been aware of in regard to the remarkable breadth of Stevenson's output. With the exception of opera and electronic music, he has managed to represent almost every genre within the realm of concert music, and has done so with utmost craftsmanship and artistry, putting a very personal stamp on anything he touched. It should also be said that, although the influences in his compositional output are many and varied, ranging from 'serious' music of all eras, folk- and world- music to Busoni (a very strong presence throughout his *oeuvre*), he has managed to fuse and internalize them into a deeply individual language in which one never feels a trace of artificiality or second-handedness.

Every care seems to have been taken to pay homage to Stevenson's life-work, and each of the contributors writes generously and with great detail. Ateş Orga's chapter, devoted to the piano music, is as descriptive and all-encompassing as one could wish; many of the shorter pieces are examined, which is most welcome and essential, considering the overwhelming importance of larger works such as the *Passacaglia on DSCH* or the *Prelude, Fugue and Fantasy on Busoni's 'Doktor Faust'*.

Other chapters, which examine the choral music, his numerous songs, his orchestral works and his chamber music, are all equally illuminating. Each of the authors is profoundly acquainted with the composer's aesthetic, in addition to having had the chance to know him personally and to experience first-hand the riveting way he can discuss all matters musical. I myself feel fortunate in having had the great pleasure of his company on a number of occasions.

Martin Anderson has provided a very usefully detailed list of works, which covers 79 pages. Many musical examples have been provided throughout the book, and this is of course always a welcome feature, especially for someone so under-represented in the concert hall as Stevenson is. But an especially attractive feature to me is the inclusion of several facsimile pages of the composer's own manuscripts; this particular selection consists entirely of shorter pieces presented in their entirety, and it allows us the bonus of being able to enjoy the composer's exquisite calligraphy.

Publishing ventures such as this are exactly what is needed to pull performers away from their tendency towards a sameness of repertoire. There is some vital music to be discovered in Stevenson's work; anyone curious enough to examine what he has given us will discover some of the richest, most sincere and, in many cases, most accessible music written during the last century.

Marc-André Hamelin

Prince of Virtuosos: A Life of Walter Rummel, American Pianist, by Charles Timbrell. Scarecrow Press, £29.00 / \$44.95.

Your reaction might well be, as mine was, Walter who? It is extraordinary that a pianist of Walter Rummel's eminence can have been so completely forgotten – a warning in itself not to trust what 'posterity' hands down to us as the ways things happened: the celebrated winnowing process of history is a capricious business. Yet the title of Charles Timbrell's biography of Walter Rummel comes from a comment by Debussy, whose *Douze Études* he premièred, and a close friend; Mengelberg called him 'one of the greatest pianists I know', and d'Albert confessed that 'his playing moved me deeply'. These endorsements come from the first paragraph of Timbrell's prologue (there are many more later: in 1922, for example, Paul Le Flem ranked him 'one of the best pianists of our time' – and remember who else was active then); and as one progresses through the book, the story becomes ever more astonishing. 'The basic facts of Rummel's life would suit a Hollywood film', Timbrell states, somewhat optimistically: a screenplay along these lines would soon invite incredulity.

Johann Walter Edward Rummel – American despite the name and his Berlin birth, on 19 July 1887 – was a grandson of Samuel Morse, inventor of the eponymous code; he later took in his

grandfather's name, concertizing as Walter Morse Rummel. He was a student of Godowsky, a grand-student of Liszt, a friend of Pound, Shaw and Yeats. He enjoyed a passionate, three-year affair with Isadora Duncan, which ended when he transferred his attentions to Duncan's daughter, Anna. His third wife became the mistress of Leopold III of Belgium, with Rummel's consent. He took to Steiner's anthroposophy and claimed in all seriousness to have discovered the site of the Temple of the Holy Grail – indicating an unworldliness that was later to prove his undoing.

Though he seems not to have bought into the Nazis' racism (in 1921, living in Munich, he had been infuriated by the anti-Semitic attacks on Bruno Walter, chief conductor of the opera there, in the Nazi newspaper, *Der völkische Beobachter*, and had given shelter to Jewish refugees in Paris in 1932–33) the influence of his pro-Nazi third wife, Francesca Erik, appears to have pushed him into the arms of the Germans. He repeatedly endorsed the Nazis' anti-modernism (in 1941, for instance: 'We are witnessing a complete change in the public who, weary of the artifices and deceits of a modern pseudo-art, as well as of modern pseudo-artists, demand a human and wholesome art' – straight *Goebbelsgespräch*). He played in occupied Europe with the active support of its conquerors as well as inside the Reich (his last known war-time recital was in the Grosses Konzerthausaal in Vienna in November 1944), he made pro-Nazi glorious-dawn statements in the press and on the air and he voluntarily acquired German citizenship.

Small wonder that at war's-end he came under investigation by the FBI – late in 1945 he blithely turned up to play for the occupying American troops but was blacklisted by the authorities. The years after the War were spent performing where he could, from a base in the south-west of France. He died on 2 May 1953, when a rash of obituaries garnered him the last press attention he would command for another half-century, until Timbrell's researches bore this fruit.

A 77-minute CD with the book confirms the sterling qualities of Rummel's pianism. Opening with three of his 25 Bach transcriptions, and continuing with Liszt, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin and Mendelssohn, it reveals a player who manages to combine a calm and dignified manner with a sense of spontaneity; his tone is warm and the textures limpidly clear, not least because of his awareness of colour.

The principal shortcoming in Timbrell's book is that his interest in Rummel the man and pianist does not extend to Rummel the composer. Granted, the loss of all his large-scale works (a *Song of the Virgin Mother* for voice, strings, flutes, harp and trumpet, 1910; a *Poème* for violin and orchestra, 1922; *Invocation to the God of Earth* for contralto and orchestra, 1929; a piano concerto, *SOS*, based on the distress call of his grandfather's code, 1931–34; a Requiem for contralto, double chorus and orchestra, 1934; and a *Cantata for the City of Lyon*, 1946–47) puts assessment of Rummel as musical architect and orchestral technician beyond us. (It seems that in his later years, down on his luck, he would leave his scores as IOUs in hotels, with the intention of reclaiming them when he could afford to settle the bill – and, of course, he never could.) Rummel's four chamber scores (a warmly received violin sonata of 1907–8, a piano trio, *Divine Youth*, of 1909, a 1910 string quartet, *From the Depths*, and an *Impression* for violin and piano from around 1934) are likewise missing. Yet there are around 40 published songs – sung in their day by the likes of Teyte, Nordica, Anderson, Steber, Gerhardt, Slezak and McCormack – and four suites for piano. But Timbrell goes nowhere near them: there's no discussion of Rummel's style, no indication of its influences and qualities, not a music example in sight – his compositions aren't even indexed.

It's still a fascinating tale, but this major omission means that Timbrell's improbable discoveries also bring disappointment, like a magnificent meal prepared with insufficient salt. Don't let that stop you reading it, though.

Martin Anderson

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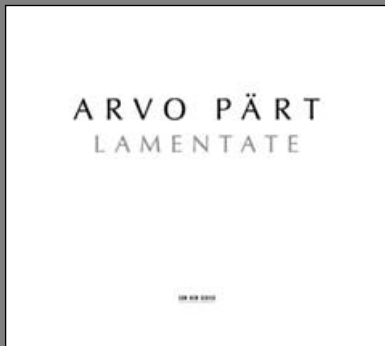
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