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BOOK REVIEWS

Jonathan Harvey: Song Offerings and White as Jasmine by Michael Downes. Ashgate, £35.00.

Published around the time of Jonathan Harvey's seventieth birthday, and written by one of his most knowledgeable advocates, this short book offers close readings of two of the composer's most approachable scores, each centering on a solo (female) singer with instrumental accompaniment. The main analyses, liberally illustrated from score and geared by track and timed references to the accompanying CD, can serve as superior liner notes, to be consulted during listening. But they also benefit from being studied separately from the listening exercise. Downes deepens the narrative of his own response to the music by way of illuminating reference both to Harvey's sketches and to comments from the composer which supplement those already published in other interviews and essays.

The choice of *Song Offerings* (1985) and *White as Jasmine* (1999) invites an exercise in comparing and contrasting in which Downes can be informative even when not managing to rise above the conventions of a musico-literary genre that makes possible confident assertions like this: 'our ears have become so attuned to A flat 1 that we instantly register the significance of this'. Too much of this and readers who can't honestly apply the authorial 'we' to themselves might easily lose heart, and interest, which would be a pity. But Downes is right to take every opportunity to indicate (though not to over-emphasize) the persistent and productive role of centred, hierarchic pitch structures in Harvey's musical thinking. It is more difficult to decide how best to contextualise such topics without being either too heavily technical or too simplistically hermeneutic.

The book embeds its pair of close readings in an overview of Harvey's entire development as a composer, with two general chapters (44 pages) and a 21st-century postlude (16 pages) framing the two analyses (64 pages). This is an entirely defensible strategy, to the extent that Downes is providing the first in-depth study of the composer to appear since John Palmer's monograph about *Bhakti* (2001), and given that the only earlier overview is my own brief – and dated – Faber Handbook (1999). Only readers who might value a more penetrating technical contextualisation of *Song Offerings* and *White as Jasmine* in terms of theories of interval cycles and 'twelve-tone tonality' (George Perle) or of pitch sieves (Xenakis) – with the unstable, filtered symmetries that result – are likely to sense a missed opportunity. So distinctive and intricate is Harvey's response to the whole evolutionary spiral of post-tonal modernism, and so challenging is his use of electro-acoustics to explore the science of the spiritual – as a kind of 'techno-theology', perhaps – that the widest theoretical and critical frameworks are needed to shed maximum light on all the multiple resonances that radiate outwards from the uniquely personal textual and gestural materials of works like those considered here. It is also easy to underestimate the sheer strangeness of the sound-worlds conjured up in Harvey's later compositions (including *White as Jasmine*), when what can be categorized (however tentatively) as 'non-Western' spirituality intersects with the possibilities engendered by the progressive computer science practised at IRCAM. For Harvey that intersection has been profoundly liberating, as if the doom and gloom inherent in 'classic' modernism has been definitively and permanently overcome. And basic compositional techniques of the kind Downes specifies, particularly when using sketch-based evidence, are all the more important since Harvey has been able to turn them to such different expressive ends than those of Xenakis, Grisey, and other comparable composers.

It might seem that only the deeply religious, whether Christian or Buddhist, can acquire the confident certainty evident in the familiar lines from T.S. Eliot with which Downes concludes his text: 'The end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time'. But for many in the late-modern age, it is more a matter of exploring without any clear certainty as to what knowledge, if any, 'the end' will provide. That Eliot's fervent rhetoric is the very reverse of a modernist manifesto could simply indicate the deep uneasiness of associations between religious belief and contemporary compositional techniques. On the face of it, Harvey's continued interest in ambiguity and multivalence (especially when involving the shadowy coexistence of intervals and spectra) allows a degree of 'uncertainty' to enter the aesthetic aura of his most characteristic work. Nevertheless,

one of Harvey's singular achievements is to make what 'should' be uneasy seem engaging and even joyous. And Michael Downes's text, for all its self-imposed constraints, is able to convey this quality with notable authority.

Arnold Whittall

Lord Berners: Composer, Writer, Painter by Peter Dickinson. The Boydell Press, £25.00.

Lord Berners (1883–1950) was a notable polymath: a composer of renown, author of five novels and two memoirs, accomplished painter and celebrated eccentric. It was as plain Gerald Tyrwhitt, diplomatic attaché in Rome during the 1910s, that his music – incisive, iconoclastic, ultra-modern and chic – first gained attention. The unlikely inheritance of an ancient barony in 1918 made the now Lord Berners an even more intriguing character. He abandoned the Foreign Office for a life of pleasure: foreign travel, good food and high society. Berners' wide circle of friends included the Sitwells, the Mitfords, Evelyn Waugh, Cecil Beaton and John Betjeman.

Unusually cosmopolitan for an English composer, Berners had breathed the cultural air of Rome and Paris at this heady, chaotic time. His early music has echoes of Schoenberg, Debussy, Casella and, above all, Stravinsky, with whom Berners formed a long-lasting friendship. In later years Stravinsky often stayed at his house when in England and described Berners as 'a composer of unique talent'. Into the 1920s Berners progressed from his aphoristic early style to more expansive ballet scores in collaboration with choreographic luminaries George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton. These ballets mark a stylistic retrenchment to a tonal idiom and genial neoclassical manner, which is always elegant and exquisitely made, but lacking the previous spark of individuality. Meanwhile Berners painted – staging two solo London exhibitions in the 1930s – and wrote. His large output of books during the Second World War was partly because despondency and depression left him largely unable to compose.

After his death Berners disappeared into the usual obscurity. The pianist and composer Peter Dickinson kept the flame alive with a Purcell Room recital in 1972 – his account of John Betjeman's involvement is one of the most entertaining passages in the book. He also edited the collected piano and vocal music. But there was no further serious attention until Berners' centenary in 1983, when Dickinson presented a Radio 3 documentary featuring interviews with many of those who knew the composer personally.

Extended transcripts of these interviews make up the main part of this book, which is neither biography nor musicology, but rather a compendium of Berners source material not available elsewhere. There is an interview with the composer Gavin Bryars, who spent several years researching a biography he never wrote; his research notes, as well as Dickinson's tapes, were the basis of Mark Amory's 1998 biography. So the present book has a somewhat uncertain identity, much like its subject: sandwiched between the Amory biography and a recent PhD on Berners which, Dickinson hints, will eventually spawn a book-length study.

But for a humble miscellany *Lord Berners: Composer, Writer, Painter* is a handsome book – beautifully presented, scrupulously edited and authoritative – courtesy of generous funding by the Berners Trust. There are 55 colour-plates, mostly of Berners' paintings. These are scattered widely in private collections, making this the largest selection seen together since 1936. Mostly conservative landscapes in the style of Corot, they are charming but unremarkable. Professor Dickinson's scholarship is thorough, almost to a fault: footnotes, conveniently running down the sides of the pages, sometimes outweigh the body text. These, and some otiose appendices (an incomplete catalogue of Berners' LP library, for instance) pad out what is essentially a thin, if beautiful, book.

Much of the Berners legend is based on his fabled eccentricity. Dickinson is able to confirm some stories while putting others to bed. So, yes, Berners did dye the pigeons at his country estate to add 'a tropical touch to this wintry country' but he didn't, in spite of Stravinsky's claim, serve meals where each course had foods of a single colour. No, he didn't have a piano in the back of his Rolls Royce, but he did have a compartment under the driver's seat for a clavichord, which he took round on his European tours.

Lord Berners' fame as a wit is somewhat undermined by some of the rather limp instances recalled here, but there is a wonderful account of the skewering of a po-faced William Walton. Berners was in the habit of including thinly-disguised characterizations of friends and colleagues in his books and Walton became nervous when he heard Berners was including a composer in his next novel. Walton went so far as to have his solicitors write to Berners: 'Will you kindly respect Mr Walton's wishes by not using his name… in this novel?' Berners replied to Walton:

> You surely don't imagine that your personality is sufficiently interesting to appeal to me as a literary theme.

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> If you insist on trying to thrust yourself into my novels in this fashion, I shall be obliged to apply for an injunction to restrain you from doing so.

He then followed up to Walton's solicitors:

> I am shortly bringing out a book called *Ridiculous Composers I have known*. If your client, Mr William Walton, should consider it necessary to see a copy before publication, will you kindly tell him to apply to Messrs Constable?

Some interviews are disappointing. The longest is with Robert Heber-Percy, Berners' young 'friend and companion' from 1932 onwards, and heir to his estate. He comes over as jovial but superficial, intellectually out of his depth in respect of Berners' cultural pursuits. This exchange is typical:

> PD: Constant Lambert has said that he was deeply serious about his music, and after the main guests had gone then they'd play and talk about the music. Do you remember that pattern?
>
> RHP: I probably went to bed … He did a lot of serious stuff that I was left out of, luckily. Probably he realised that my brain wouldn't take it in.

Surprisingly good is the interview with Richard Rodney Bennett, apparently included for no more specific reason than a general enthusiasm for Berners. But Bennett proves an astute judge of the work, speaking of Berners' 'early music and how extraordinary it was' but how 'I don't think he could have carried on doing that without becoming a sort of naughty middle-aged composer – a bit tiresome'. This captures perfectly Berners' aesthetic dilemma in the 1920s.

After the publications of the last decade Lord Berners can no longer be described as neglected. His books are all in print; his paintings can now be evaluated, thanks to this book; his music is almost all available on CD, although rarely heard in concerts. The interviewees agree unanimously that it is as a composer that Berners' reputation must stand or fall. And, for all Professor Dickinson's devotion, Berners is, and will remain a marginal figure. As the admirably even-handed Richard Rodney Bennett concludes:

> I think he was a quite individual minor talent of extraordinary charm and – I can't say importance – but somebody who'll always be a pleasure to go back to … I think Berners' most important music is the most eccentric, the small-scale pieces … If I say 'a minor composer' I'm not putting him down. There are minor painters who are magical, but will always remain minor painters, not part of an important mainstream. I think this applies to Berners.

But perhaps His Lordship is entitled to the final word, in his self-penned epitaph:

Here lies Lord Berners

> One of the learners.
> His great love of learning
> May earn him a burning
> But praise to the Lord!
> He seldom was bored.

Bernard Hughes

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