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THE MUSIC OF WILLIAM WALTON, by Frank Howes

OUP, second edition, 1974 (£3.00)

In this revised edition Frank Howes has kept largely to the 1965 text, with the addition of a chapter on the eight works written since then, some minor biographical points, a list of works (replacing the outdated discography) and some new illustrations. Howes' sympathetic account, written in a vigorous prose style, presents individual pieces of critical analysis, laid out in the usual manner - orchestral works, concertos, chamber music and songs, operas and the like. In his introduction Howes mentions his debt to some fairly recent analytical methods, especially those of Reti and Walker, and has attempted to blend this sort of analysis with some discursive commentary in the classic Tertian manner.

In trying, to his credit, to be as objective, open minded and sympathetic as possible, Howes has laid little stress on critical assessment or on portraying a complete picture of the essence of Walton's musical style. The final chapter, entitled 'Style', bears witness to this. It is efficient and perceptive only on a superficial level. For any judgements on Howes' part, one has to look for implications in the character of his prose style. For instance he does not directly say that the First Symphony is a far greater achievement than the Second. Yet comparing the fugal finales especially, Howes' commentary, while in both instances analytically sound, is shot through in the section on the First Symphony with a certain metaphorical flair lacking in the rather routine analysis of the finale of the Second. One can see similar situations in the chapter on the choral music (Belshazzar's Feast as compared to the Gloria for instance) and in the chapter on the concertos (the organic unities of the Violin Concerto as compared to the more contrived unity in the Cello Concerto). Without actually mentioning the so called 'falling off' in much of Walton's later music, Howes, through his prose style, has implied its existence. Among the later works only the Hindemith Variations receives the same sort of treatment as the early masterpieces.

Howes underplays the questions of influences and approach to composition, both of which are of vital importance to a complete understanding of Walton's music. Although he mentions the debt to Sibelius and Roussel in the First and Second Symphonies respectively, Howes does not draw any conclusions in depth as to Walton's musical character and the nature of the influences that affected his style. No mention is made of his early studies of Stravinsky (especially Petrushka) the concertos of Prokofiev and the music of Elgar, Debussy and Ravel. Being far from fluent and reaching public attention at a comparatively early age must have been a daunting experience for the young composer, especially as he had had little experience in handling the large forms that his commissions required. There is evidence in each of his large scale works that he was using a conscious model to overcome any lack of self confidence. His love of parody also meant that he could easily draw on other composers' music and assimilate it into his own style - and not in the parody pieces alone. The concertos are formally and thematically closely linked with Prokofiev's early concertos (the first

three for piano and the second for violin especially) and Elgar's two essays in that form. The debt to Petrushka is noticeable in the opening of the Sinfonia Concertante, written originally as a ballet for Diaghilev using forces similar to that of the Stravinsky piece; Beethoven's Ninth is the model for Walton's First Symphony, rather than Sibelius' Fifth, to which superficial reference is made in the first movement only; Puccini and Verdi are in the background of the opera Troilus and Cressida. Whether these conclusions are correct is of little importance. It is more important to say that Howes does not attempt to draw any conclusions of this nature at all.

On page 237 Howes makes the following statement, which in my opinion is very wide of the mark:

"Of his originality it is enough to observe how difficult it is to trace any affiliations in his music. There are occasional traces of other men's music - an echo of Elgar, a flavour of Sibelius, a rhythmic hint from Stravinsky, a near-quotation from Rimsky-Korsakoff (or Rossini), but these incidentals signify nothing since they are only superficial traces not hereditary features."

No attempt is made to place Walton in the historical perspective of 20th century music. Neither does Howes go into detail about Walton's compositional motivations. Since the first version was published new material has been unearthed on this subject, especially by Walton himself, that would make a fascinating addition to the stylistic analysis.

The new chapter itself is somewhat disappointing. As it stands it is rather unbalanced, too much space being given to the Capriccio Burlesque at the expense of the major orchestral work of the period, the Improvisations on an Impromptu of Benjamin Britten. No analysis of this work is given. Howes resorts to a page of padding. No mention is made of the superb Battle of Britain music, and only a sentence is given on the Sonata for Strings. It would have been interesting to have a comparison between the Sonata and its original, the String Quartet in A minor. My opinion is that this chapter was added for the sake of completeness rather than out of any real conviction. A more successful way of discussing the later works would have been to incorporate them into the existing chapters. Apart from this chapter the book achieves its aim as an analytical introduction to Walton's music. Perhaps, however, its aims were not set high enough. The opportunity of producing something new and more all-embracing for the revised version was not taken up. Obviously there is still a great deal of scope for a second book on Walton(1).

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Note

- (1) Gillian Widdicombe is at present engaged in preparing the 'official' critical biography of Walton (Ed.).