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THE NEW OXFORD HISTORY OF MUSIC Volume X:  
THE MODERN AGE 1890-1960, edited by Martin  
Cooper  
Oxford University Press, 1974 (£9.50)

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I shall make it clear from the outset that I consider Volume X of the New Oxford History to be, at best, a work of indifferent quality. There is, I suppose, still sufficient room in the world for a few more mediocre surveys of 20th century music, but unfortunately NOHM X is not just a run-of-the-mill affair whose failings may be charitably allowed for. It is, after all, intended to be the definitive British work of scholarship on the period; the required reading of a generation of music students. Like any book with 'Oxford' in its title it goes out into the world with its circulation and status guaranteed. This pre-ordained importance makes imperative the maintenance of the highest standards for 'Oxford' books. 'Duty' is not a particularly fashionable concept at present, but nevertheless those responsible for this substandard volume have been negligent of a very real duty towards their readers.

However, to begin with the good news: one of the most fortunate features of the volume is the choice by the NOHM editors of 1890 as its terminus a quo. Histories of 20th century music have been inclined to take the '20th century' label too literally, regarding 1900 (or, for the finicky, 1901) as their legitimate opening date, with the result that the events of the critical previous decade are generally dealt with in a brief resumé - a summary of the state of play before hastening to get on with the game itself. Thus it is that the close attention which NOHM devotes to the period prior to the First World War is very welcome. The most valuable contribution which the volume has to offer to students of music history is Gerald Abraham's treatment of the years 1890-1914. This falls under two headings: 'The Apogee and Decline of Romanticism' and 'The Reaction against Romanticism', a division which works very happily without resorting to Procrustean methods, though it is inevitable that a number of composers should straddle the two. Abraham's account is lucid and his music examples are particularly full and aptly chosen.

To have covered the same period yet again in Martin Cooper's chapter on the 'Stage Works: 1890-1918' may be felt to be excessive. Opera and ballet do indeed form an important category during this period, but it is doubtful whether anything has been gained by their divorce from the context of the previous two chapters. Cooper's account is not, in any case, of a sufficiently high standard to justify its separate existence.

Mosco Carner's 'Music in the Mainland of Europe: 1918-1939' is by far the longest chapter in the book - over 150 pages. I am inclined to think its scope too wide for a single chapter: such a large number of composers, employing a wide variety of techniques and pursuing disparate ideals, have to be accommodated that the picture one gains of European musical activity of the period is very hazy.

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Peter Evans's contribution, 'Music of the European Mainstream: 1940-1960' deals with what, by its nature, is a far neater topic: the widespread adoption of serialism during these years provided a closer approximation to a common language and aesthetic than had yet arisen in the century. It has inevitably been this chapter more than any other which has suffered from the protracted delay in the volume's arrival in print. The wide acceptance of Babbitt's terminology has made Evans's use of "Basic Set" and "Retro. Inv. transposed" as labels in his serial analyses seem curiously quaint and *ad hoc*. His generous footnote citations have also been made to look incomplete by the appearance over the last ten years of a number of important articles dealing with the period.

The remaining three chapter divisions have been made upon a geographical basis. Two of these - 'Music in the Soviet Union' by Gerald Abraham and 'American Music: 1918-1960' by Richard Franko Goldman (USA) and Gerard Béhague (Latin America) - are easily defended as separate categories by virtue of their cultural independence from the European mainstream. The third, 'Music in Britain: 1918-1960', is less satisfactory. I am sensitive to the obligations of NOHM as a British institution towards British music, but I cannot see that it is best served by being discussed in isolation from the rest of European music. Arthur Hutchings's account gives a prominent position to a fair number of lame ducks who would not stand up to serious scrutiny if examined within a broader context. His chapter is perhaps the most disappointing, making the least effort to come to a fresh assessment of its material.

The most manifestly absurd contribution, however, is Béhague's survey of the music of Latin America, which is little more than a breakneck scramble through a list of composers' names. Out of a total of exactly 700 pages of text, only four are given over to Latin America; *Music in the Modern Age*, edited by F. W. Sternfeld (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973) devotes 25 pages out of 421 to the same topic.

The editor of a history of 20th century music inevitably finds himself in a quandary when deciding upon his chapter divisions: the story of music in this century has been so involved that no single criterion - be it division by country, period, genre, or stylistic movement - will result in tidy, watertight compartments. However, the piecemeal compromise adopted by NOHM X of a mixture of all four of the above criteria has produced an extremely ill-balanced and unwieldy result. The more straightforward schemes adopted by Sternfeld and by Austin in his *Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966) assist towards a much clearer picture of the century: Sternfeld's is a country-by-country account with a separate chapter for the inconveniently cosmopolitan Stravinsky (Stravinsky suffers badly from the arrangement of NOHM X, spread through four chapters and receiving an uneven treatment); Austin's format is somewhat more complex, presenting a chronological arrangement centred upon

a few key figures.

This major weakness in the structural planning of NOHM X is clearly the responsibility of the editor, and is just one of the ways in which Martin Cooper has failed in his responsibility. Clarity and consistency of thought are surely the first requirements in an editor, but these are qualities in which Cooper appears to be singularly lacking. Take the following sentence from his own chapter:

*Already in Petrushka, and even in Zhar-ptitsa, Stravinsky had exploited with brilliant effect the clash of triads whose tonics lie an augmented fourth apart (C-F sharp) - a bitonal effect already used by Ravel for the cadenza of his Jeux d'eau (1902); in The Rite it is Stravinsky's methodical insistence, at the opening of the 'Cercles mystérieux des adolescentes', on a chord consisting of a dominant seventh on E flat and a chord of F flat (E) major, rather than the chord itself, that was novel. (p.199)*

The quotation supplies an example of the clumsiness with which Cooper is capable of writing: the convoluted sentence structure, the mixture of tenses, and the repetition of the words "chord" (in two senses) and "effect" produce a result so confused that it requires several readings to uncover the intended meaning. And once that meaning has been absorbed, it becomes apparent that the muddle goes deeper. The superposition of a pair of common chords does not constitute "a bitonal effect" (except in such a very loose sense that no educated musician has any business using): one does not hear, for instance, the 'Petrushka chord' as a conflict of tonalities, but as an entity which derives its characteristic effect from the particular distribution of its pitches. The same C-F sharp polychord can be used in a context as remote from polytonality as a Gershwin song, Dere's a Boat dat's Leavin' where it occurs as a rather exotic supertonic chord.

Another problem highlighted by this quotation is the language in which titles are given. This, of course, affects Stravinsky more than any other composer. It seems to me quite silly to talk of The Rite at one moment and 'Cercles mystérieux des adolescentes' at the next: 'Mystic Circles of the Young Girls' is equally evocative and far clearer. (Whichever language is preferred, the identification of the section is, in any case, entirely wrong: the section that opens with this particular polychord is 'Augurs of Spring/Dances of the Young Girls'. Later on the same page the 'Sacrificial Dance' is mistaken for the 'Glorification of the Sacred One'.) And I wonder how many readers immediately recognised Zhar-ptitsa as the Firebird? It is of course perfectly correct to give a work its original title at its first mention, but the use of the Russian at this juncture is needlessly obscure. What seems to me quite clear is that if a work originally had a Russian title, I do not think it is asking too much that it should appear either in Russian or English, but not French. Nevertheless,

The Rite and The Nightingale crop up in all three languages in various places in the volume. The Wedding appears always as Les Noces, with no mention of either the Russian or English titles. Indeed, on p. 216 a musical quote from that work is given with a French text underlaid, while the commentary (Carner's) discusses the syllabic setting of the Russian text! Reynard suffers similarly. (Incidentally, this plurality of usage extends even to within the English language: witness the forms Firebird, Fire-Bird, and Fire Bird which occur at various places.)

Stravinsky has been sadly misused in one way and another: Carner quotes several times from the Chronicle of My Life, with varying degrees of accuracy - the quotations on pp. 214, 218, 222 are all incorrect. Stravinsky's "everything should revolve about the melodic principle" is subtly perverted into "everything evolved round the melodic principle". The page-reference given to the quotation on p. 220 is wrong - p. 210 instead of p. 205; five pages difference may not seem a great deal, but it took me over an hour of diligent searching, in a book I know quite well, to locate the correct page. Furthermore, while the bibliography to the chapter gives the currently available 1962 (New York: Norton) edition of the work (re-titled An Autobiography), Carner makes his references to the out-of-print 1936 (London: Gollancz) edition, the pagination of which differs considerably from the more recent version. Nowhere is any indication made that Chronicle of My Life and An Autobiography are one and the same. Further bibliographical confusion reigns over the details of the Poetics of Music given on pp. 223, 708, 718.

Another relatively minor but extremely annoying error is the frequent misdating of works. To fire a parting shot at the Cooper quotation above: the date of Jeux d'eau is not 1902, but 1901, as correctly given by Abraham on p. 101. I cannot claim to have checked more than a small sample of dates, but it becomes clear that Arthur Hutchings in particular is extremely careless in this respect. His main blunder in dating is to give 1935 instead of 1934 as the year of Holst's death, and he has even credited him with writing the Scherzo for orchestra in that year. Roughly half of the dates he gives to works of Holst, Vaughan Williams, and Britten are incorrect.

None of this catalogue of small errors and inaccuracies is likely to lead to a major misunderstanding if one proceeds with caution, though this indifference to accuracy on the small scale does not inspire confidence in the more important judgements of the volume. Accuracy is simply the easiest target that a scholarly publication has to aim for: to standardise titles, to give accurate quotations, to provide correct dates, need cost no more in time, space, or effort than jumbled titles, distorted quotations, and incorrect dates - these are chiefly matters of courtesy. Where NOHM X fails most seriously is in an altogether more fundamental area.

Symptomatic of this failure is the index,

compiled by G. W. Hopkins. Though not acknowledged as such it is an index of proper names only; in other words, there are no entries under atonality, caricature, electronic music, film music, neo-classicism, etc. This is an unaccountable departure from the practice of the other five volumes of NOHM that have so far been published, and a considerable impediment. But it does not require a very diligent search to discover that all but a handful of these proper names are those of composers. The implication, which is amply confirmed by the text, is that composers and compositions are the sole subjects of music history: performers, conductors, jazz musicians, popular-song writers, critics, instrument makers, musicologists, theorists, etc., are almost entirely ignored. Among the names which occur to me as those of people who have fundamentally shaped 20th century music into what it has been are: Louis Armstrong, Sir Thomas Beecham, Irving Berlin, Manfred Bukofzer, Pablo Casals, Arnold Dolmetsch, Duke Ellington, Wanda Landowska, Maurice Martenot, Charlie Parker, Cole Porter, Curt Sachs, Heinrich Schenker, Artur Schnabel, Cecil Sharp, Bessie Smith, Sir Donald Tovey. No room is found in the volume for any of these. One wonders if we have really progressed so very far from those execrable old-fashioned histories in which composers' names are printed in bold-face type.

If one were credulously to believe the account given by NOHM X, one would find that the importance of jazz has been solely as a source of ideas for straight composers, and would not discover that there had ever been such a thing as popular music. As for kulchur, the single feature which has most strongly characterised musical life in this century, setting it apart from past ages, is its awareness of and preoccupation with the music of other centuries; nowhere is this phenomenon paid serious attention to. NOHM X concentrates upon what is in reality an extremely narrow facet of musical activity and comes nowhere near answering questions like 'What is 20th century about 20th century music?' or 'How in this time of massive social and technological change does music reflect this change?' The view which the book presents, of compositions appearing out of a vacuum, would not be tolerated in a history of an earlier period, and, I sincerely hope, will soon be felt intolerable in histories of 20th century music.

If the objection is raised that all this is very well, but that the scope of the volume was limited by the space available, then I would reply that space is the last thing which the editor seems to have tried to save. I have calculated that one buys nearly 20 pages of space which has been left blank through miscalculation over the size of the music examples. This is quite beside the fact that the physical size (as opposed to length) of the examples fluctuates alarmingly, some being absurdly large. Moreover, the opportunity presented by the plates has been, for the most part, wasted. I remain to be convinced of the usefulness of black-and-white photographs of stage sets, and to have made a plate of Stockhausen's Zyklus (which is not referred to by the text) when it could have been

printed in the normal way seems quite pointless. The only pair of plates which tell at a glance what a thousand words could not are the theosophically-inspired cover to Skryabin's Prometheus and a poster for Tosca which neatly sums up the salacious sentimentality of Puccini.

All in all, a great opportunity squandered.

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