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Reviews and Reports

THE MUSIC OF ALBAN BERG by Douglas Jarman

Faber and Faber, 1979 (£17.50)

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'The following book is not a biography,' Dr Jarman cautions in his preface. That he needs to do so is a comment on the current state of the literature of music. While 'Life and Works' volumes abound, entire books devoted to serious discussion of a single composer's oeuvre are comparatively rare. This, the first full-length study of all the mature work of one of the major composers of the 20th century, is particularly welcome.

Its chapter divisions are as follows: 1. 'Introduction': a review of Berg's output, unfinished projects, circumstances of writing, chronology (14 pp.); 2. 'Pitch organization in the early and "free" atonal works' (65 pp.); 3. 'Twelve-note techniques' (67 pp.); 4. 'Rhythmic techniques' (28 pp.); 5. 'Formal structures' (48 pp.); 6. 'Conclusions': largely concerning Berg's numerology and passion for symmetry (19 pp.). Appendices include a 'Catalogue of Berg's works and manuscripts' and synopses of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*; there is a bibliography and an index. A reviewer can always, if he can do nothing else, pick holes in an index, but it is worth while pointing out that a fairly considerable slip-up has been made in this one: all the entries that should have come after 'Verdi' (including, on a spot-check, 'Wagner', 'Waldberg', 'Wedekind', 'Weill', 'Westergaard', 'Whittall' and 'Zemlinsky') have gone missing. One or two other entries have gone astray too.

Despite Jarman's perfectly lucid style it is not an easy book to read. This comes about, I think, for two main reasons, the first of which is the organisation of the material. To have arranged it along topic lines was, in my submission, a clear mistake. The corpus of works is too small for this to be necessary and too disparate for it to be successful. Although Jarman tries hard to draw out links between pieces — and I'm not trying to deny they're there — still I am far more impressed by their differences, as I think anyone must be who steps back from the material and looks at it in perspective. An opera is quite simply different from a song or a string quartet, and to deal with all three in the same stretch of writing produces all kinds of imbalances. As things stand, material on individual works is scattered through the book (for example, substantial discussions of the *Lyric Suite* occur in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), and to understand the argument in a later chapter one must retain information from, or refer back to, earlier ones. This really does not make for a text that is simple to follow. A more straightforward arrangement of the material along the lines of a work-by-work discussion would have been more appropriate.

The second difficulty the average reader faces is the level at which the argument is pitched. In order to get much out of it, he must already know the music fairly well and have a pile of scores at his elbow. Naturally these are desiderata for the full appreciation of any analysis, but here they are virtual necessities. I am not against texts for specialists — far from it — but I don't think it was Jarman's aim to produce something that exclusive, nor, given the sort of thing he writes about, do I think it need have been the case. More music examples and more direct reference to them might perhaps have helped.

However, even if the reader does have to work at the book rather harder than might have been necessary, there is a great deal to be gained from the effort. While Jarman brings

no profoundly new approach to bear upon the music, he does provide an excellent synthesis and development of those approaches that to date have proved of value. Yet though I find the analyses to be sound and useful on the whole, some parts of the conceptual and terminological framework employed do worry me, and it is to a few of these issues that I shall be devoting most of the rest of this review.

The following passage, concerning the third of the Four Clarinet Pieces, Op. 5, occurs on p. 25 and may serve for an example. 'The reordering of x [a six-note collection] when it appears in the piano part at the beginning of the third piece, for example, produces an augmented triad, while the continuation of the clarinet phrase, at bar 1 of the same piece, outlines a diminished seventh chord. Both formations, which have already appeared at the end of the second piece, spring from the fact that the total content of xy [an eight-note collection including x] can be ordered in such a way as to form a chain of ascending or descending thirds...' (I should mention that though we are given music examples to show us xy , we are not shown the beginning of the third piece nor the manner in which xy is stacked in thirds.) In the first place, the logic is askew. 'The fact that xy (a collection of the type 0,1,2,3,5,6,7,9) can be strung out as thirds (octave repetition is necessary to achieve this) is not a sufficient condition for the formation of an augmented triad and a diminished seventh from an eight-note collection; for example the type 0,1,2,3,5,7,8,10 can be arranged as a chain of thirds but contains neither a diminished seventh nor an augmented triad. Hence the logic is invalid. Yet even if it had been valid, the teleological argument (the one 'springs from' the other) has no place in such a description of relations among note-collections: it is not a matter of cause-and-effect but of tautology. This is a persistent error of thought, and a particular snare for the analysis of music. The appearance of an explanation is given when in fact there is none.

Secondly, the use of the terms 'augmented triad', 'diminished seventh', and 'thirds' in an atonal context is highly suspect. Because we have ready-made names for certain collections it is tempting to use them, but that temptation should be avoided. One danger is that by privileging certain collections by such names we overlook or ignore what might possibly be more important collections simply because they have no names. Another is that by so describing these collections we bring inappropriate responses to them from our experience of tonal music. A term like 'thirds' is particularly suspect in an atonal context. By what criterion are we to judge in atonal music that interval-classes 3 and 4 together form a unified category? They might, but so might interval-classes 2 and 3 taken together, for which we have no name. Better to ditch the old terminology and adopt that from the Babbitt-Perle-Forte tradition which is far more efficient and, in actual fact, is quite easily and quickly grasped. Let it be understood that I am not calling for a mere transcription of comprehensible, familiar English into a less familiar integer notation. It isn't a matter of transcription, it's a matter of changing our conceptual frame through the use of a medium that is comparatively neutral and hence, unlike tonal terminology, doesn't prejudice too many issues.

Jarman makes fairly frequent references to 'tonal implications' in Berg's music. Nowhere, though, are we given a satisfactory definition of what we are to understand by tonality. Perhaps that is a lot to ask. But some clear statement of intention might have allayed my suspicions that many of these 'implications' are of a very weak order indeed. Take for example the discussion of the twelve-note

construction of the first movement of the *Lyric Suite* (pp. 82-84), where it is stated that 'the most important characteristic of the set is not the interval sequence but its harmonic and tonal implications'. I would submit that no twelve-note set examined in the abstract implies tonality more strongly than any other; it is the way the set is *used* that counts. In support of his argument, Jarman quotes Berg, who wrote that the set has 'two symmetrical halves... first half in F major, the second half in B or C flat major'. It is true that the first six pitch-classes of the set may be fitted into the scale of F major (and C too, for that matter), but tonality is not primarily about content, it's primarily about voice leading. (Otherwise Beethoven could never have written in the Lydian mode.) And voice-leading resides not in the set but in its compositional realisation, and this Jarman does not discuss.

Indeed I wonder whether this business of 'tonal implications' isn't altogether a red herring. We may make a philological study of an English poem and discover what elements in it derive from Norman French or Anglo Saxon, but it would be inappropriate to talk about its having Norman French or Anglo Saxon 'implications'. We simply say that it is a poem in English, to be understood entirely within those terms.

That Berg himself thought of his set in terms of F major and C flat major is of course important. (Though we should remember that with terminology lagging behind practice, what he thought and what he was constrained to say might not have been the same thing.) But it is important only to the degree that the composer's foibles are reflected in and elucidate the music. To the extent that they stand outside the music they cease to be important and are instead merely interesting. It is interesting, for example, to know that Berg was under the erroneous impression that this set was the only possible all-interval set. (Jarman, in his distaste for order relations, does not mention this feature.) Interesting, but not fundamentally important because it tells us nothing that explains the music. For the statement about the F major — C flat major hexachords to be of importance, it is necessary to demonstrate that at some point — any point — the music is actually in those keys. No demonstration is forthcoming.

The theory that Jarman is presenting us with here and elsewhere is essentially one of production (albeit an incomplete one): we have a very good picture of how the composer set about his task (though we are given little detail apart from the initial stages). Now that is an interesting kind of theory, but it's not, I think, an important one. What is required is a theory of the product: just the music as we have it, regardless of how it came into being. That's both an interesting and an important kind of theory. A third kind of theory, and perhaps the most important, is that of consumption — how we hear the music — but that I for one find comparatively uninteresting.

Discussion of twelve-note music too often stops at the point where Jarman leaves it, having done little more than examine the set in a highly idealised form. What we need in order to approach the reality of the work is such information as — and this just taking the pitch domain — the actual series-statements employed (transposition and aspect), their order, overlapping and perturbation, their distribution between horizontal and vertical dimensions, registers used and contours outlined, verticals produced between different sets, the importance (or otherwise) of aggregates and invariant subsets. And then there are pitch relations articulated by the other dimensions of the music. Of course this is out of the question for more than a few works in a book of this scope, but it's only after an examination of the detail that we can give more abstract statements credence.

These reservations are not trivial, but they do not seriously deflect from the fundamental usefulness of the book. Jarman has set down the base line from which further study of Berg's music will proceed.