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Robin Holloway: *On Music. Essays and Diversions 1963-2003*
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Is there a composer alive today who does not publish his prose? Hardly, I'd say. While Hector Berlioz and Robert Schumann were the first composers to achieve prominence as critics (thoroughly justified, of course), it is nevertheless primarily to Richard Wagner, as with so much else, that we owe the subsequent compulsion of the creative artist to convey to a supposedly willing public his views on life, the universe, everything. This compulsion has perhaps inevitably been strongest in Germany, where even musicians with nothing to say have still insisted on saying it, and often at great length. The 'collected silences' of Wilhelm Furtwängler as published by Brockhaus,[1] the many-paged, twin-volumed but slim-of-content musings of Wolfgang Rihm (financed by Paul Sacher of course, *Gott habe ihn selig*) or even, closer to home, Michael's rubbish when Schott's wouldn't Tippett,[2] – these do look fine on one's bookshelves, and if only their paper were a bit more absorbent, one could usefully put them behind one too. But why do fine minds insist on doing what others do better, instead of doing what they do better themselves? Oh, if only Stravinsky could have leased Robert Craft to his contemporaries. Just as he had an unerring knack of knowing what to take from his musical ancestors Pergolesi, Tchaikovsky and others, so the old goat managed to acquire as his amanuensis one of the finest critical minds of his day.

There are exceptions, of course – those composers whose occasional published thoughts cast real light on the creative process, both their own and that of others (Ferruccio Busoni, Arnold Schoenberg and especially Bernard van Dieren come to mind; and, in our present time, Alexander Goehr, Ronald Stevenson or – for quite different reasons – John Cage). Those composers for whom dealing with words is as natural as writing notes are exceedingly rare. But as even the most casual reader of *On Music: Essays and Diversions* will rapidly establish, Robin Holloway is one of them. In his Preface, Holloway readily admits that writing *about* music has for him at times functioned as an *Ersatz* for actually writing it, when the musical springs were dry, as it were; sometimes, even, 'a period of exuberance opens up both together, as if they flowed from the same source' (p. XII). While comparisons are awkward, there do seem to the present writer to be certain correspondences between Holloway's notes and his words, suggesting that the source is in fact always, and most definitely, the same. Both his orchestration and his prose possess a brilliant veneer and a colouristic intensity, though what at first glance might seem to be surface display often reveals itself, upon closer inspection, to be real substance. The virtuosic turns of phrase, the puns, the wonderfully opinionated metaphors are (almost) never just for show, but carry a fine punch.

Holloway's way with words has probably been facilitated by the necessity of producing them every month since 1988 for his column in the *Spectator*. If I may adapt the Straussian metaphor of which Holloway is himself fond: once a cow gives milk, she will continue producing every day as long as you don't stop milking her. The *Spectator* is indeed the largest single source for the more than 400 pages of writings gathered here (which constitute, *nota bene*, the selected, not the complete, prose of the author). German academia distinguishes carefully and neatly between that which is musical journalism and that which is 'proper' musicology – with the implication, of course, that the former is comprehensible but flimsy and throwaway, while the latter is heavier and for long-term consumption. If there is a single major difference between the Germanic and the Anglo-Saxon musicological traditions, then it is surely that this distinction between 'high' and 'low' has long been blurred in the latter (though this has changed for the worse in recent years, perhaps not least on account of the German-influenced trends emanating from the academy in the USA). In the volume under review here, there is no obvious distinction in style or content between Holloway's monthly journalistic pieces and those written as contributions for 'musicological' tomes, except for the greater length and detail of the latter, and the occasional example amongst the former of an abrupt close that might betray the exigencies of writing to a tight deadline. But why should real scholarship be difficult to understand? And why should intelligibility preclude original thought? Holloway possesses the rare gift of being able to express concisely and lucidly what is otherwise ostensibly complex. My favourite example in this book comes from the two pages on Schoenberg that he wrote for the *Spectator* in 1988, in which he sums up what so many of us have so often felt, but still struggle to define:

> The problem in brief is the complete discrepancy [in Schoenberg's dodecaphonic music] between horizontal (linear, melodic) and vertical (harmony, both accompaniment and overall architecture). In tonal music the two were absolutely fused. Schoenberg's twelve-note music is still composed upon tonal premises, but the notes no longer make sense except in mere rationality of construction, and their actual sound is excruciating, with constant overloading and tension without resolution . . . Schoenberg's 'reluctant revolution' gets [things] the wrong way round: grammar before speech, a body with skeleton and organs on the outside. It is the blueprint for a grammar only deceptively related to the actual language of music . . . He was the first of many to say that what he did was 'necessary'. But it wasn't: it was uncalled-for, artificial, idiosyncratic, arbitrary and not a little crazy.

(I am here reminded of a dear, late friend who once said 'Schoenberg claimed that his generation didn't understand him, but that his grandchildren would. Well, I know his grandchildren, and they don't either'. And who can blame them?)

Holloway's loves and dislikes are writ large in this book – almost half of it is devoted to 'The Austro-German Mainstream', with a definite emphasis on the High and Late Romantics. The two main essays on Wagner, originally written for opera guides produced by English National Opera, remain an excellent introduction not just to *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal* in particular, but to the composer's art in general. The pieces on Richard Strauss tackle head-on the problems of 'tastelessness and tedium' (p. 104)

in his music. It is perhaps unfair to tease out the *mieux mots* from Holloway's highly differentiated discussions of *Salome* and *Elektra*, but I hope I might be forgiven for singling out the description of the former as a 'red-hot mix of gold and slag' (p. 121) or of the climax in the recognition scene in the latter as sounding 'like the work of a Mantovani of genius' (p. 124).

Holloway has serious doubts about Hofmannsthal's suitability as a librettist and the directions in which he pulled his collaborator – but how could Strauss not capitulate when faced with the sheer seductiveness of Hofmannsthal's language, coupled with the younger man's remarkable intellect? If Holloway's advocacy of *Capriccio* (to a libretto by the composer himself) does not quite convince the present writer that is indeed 'Strauss's most delightful and perfect opera' (p. 149), he at least makes one wish to return to the work to check for oneself. And it is perhaps most of all in his detailed examination of Strauss's orchestration that we are reminded that the author here is also a composer. Even when he offers a simple description of what is happening in the score, one feels that Holloway is on the inside looking out, rather than the reverse.

The article on Berg's *Lulu*, although over twenty years old, remains one of the finest examinations of the perplexities and disconcertions in which the work abounds, while the chapter on Othmar Schoeck sheds light on a more elusive representative of late-Romanticism – Holloway's paragraph on Schoeck's opera *Massimila Doni* ('like late Henry James in music' – p. 176) once more hits the nail on the head. But while he does not hesitate to praise, provoke or castigate, nor does Holloway become predictable. There is thus a remarkably percipient, even favourable piece on Stockhausen's *Inori*, a page-and-a-half on Satie's *Socrate* that mimics its subject by saying much with little ('…Satie's miracle here, like Christ's at Cana, is to make his listeners *totalement ivre* on water alone…'). The chapters on Britten, Chabrier and Fauré are similarly felicitous. Again, Holloway the composer provides insights that a musicologist otherwise might not. Probably only someone who has himself grappled with the problems of writing for the harp could discern the instrument's influence on Benjamin Britten thus:

> Total chromaticism is beyond its diatonic structure... Such narrow limits exactly suit an ear exceptionally sensitised to every inflection of every note, and a usage latent in his earlier harp-writing… increasingly permeates his later music whether or not the harp is literally present. For harp-tuning is an analogy for the way his harmony moves and a metaphor for the way his mind works. (p. 220)

Holloway's unfailing admiration for the music of Alexander Goehr and his detestation (his own word) of almost all Schnittke are less easy to share, at least by the present writer. But even when Holloway's emotive adverbs and adjectives come in a torrent, as in the latter article, provoking a knee-jerk reaction of disagreement in the reader, there is no denying the guilty pleasure one still gets while reading them.

If there is one issue that shines through all his prose, it is Holloway's concern with notes themselves and what they have to say. This comes across most clearly when he deals with notes that do *not* say what they were intended to. More than once, he discusses

> … the large question of evaluating music whose basis of appeal is grounded in extramusical circumstances [such as] compositions that emerge from, and in some cases directly express, political oppression... with most of Shostakovich, the content [that audiences] locate is a projection of what they know of its circumstances.

Holloway goes on to discuss contemporary music that deals with 'big' religious or humanitarian topics (the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Aids etc.), pointing out that 'sincerity is not in question. But the hard truth… is that sincerity does not guarantee quality… Artistic value is not an 'extra' even in a threnody for Chernobyl. Without it, message or vision are wishful thinking' (p. 294-5). And, in another article, written at about the same time: 'what else is there to go on, in works of art, but their artistic workmanship – in music, the actual notes? All human experience can be encompassed and expressed in music's actual notes, when they show themselves to be capable of containing what's entrusted to them' (p. 298). Holloway's belief that art matters, that it is no ornament, but a fundamental element of our being, will be shared by most of his readers, no doubt; but rarely is that belief expressed so powerfully and convincingly as in these four-hundred-and-odd pages. And the more he insists on the power of notes, the more Holloway also impresses upon us just how vital words are, too. They can unmask hypocrisy and sham, and they can set us free by urging us to think for ourselves, instead of just acquiescing in all we read or hear.

Claridge Press is to be commended for publishing this book; it is only regrettable, but perhaps inevitable, that Holloway says almost nothing in these pages about his own music (which of course can, and does, speak eloquently enough for itself). The most fitting close for this consideration of Holloway's prose is to be found in his enthusiasm for an encyclopaedic compendium discovered in his youth, and whose sentiments I am compelled to share with regard to his own book:

> Again and again as I idly dip for pleasure, I'm surprised by the perfect formulations, impeccably expressed, that have proved starting points for exploring all kinds of music, starting points, that turn out, when expanded by experience, to be some kind of arrival point too… there is scarcely a page without illumination… [p. 425]

[1] Apologies to Heinrich Böll and Dr Murke.
[2] Ditto to Gerard Hoffnung.