



Words on music

Liz Thomson

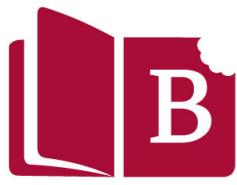
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A propos of nothing in particular, Nicola Christie was sounding off in the Independent yesterday (2 February) about programme notes, the sort you read if you're sitting in the Royal Festival Hall waiting for the man with a white stick to strike up the band. 'The language of classical music has got itself into a fix,' she begins, as though the words musicologists have long used to discuss Wagner's use of leitmotif in The Ring or Elgar's treatments of the theme from which his Enigma Variations take flight were invented last year. 'How and why did it become established that this sort of description is the best introduction to a piece of music?' she asks, as the conclusion to an opening paragraph in which she has attempted vaguely to parody the long-established language of musical discourse. Other art forms don't do it, she argues - although a few pages back in the paper, Michael Glover was decoding 'the symbolism, style and story' of Titian's Diana and Actaeon. It is true, of course, that many programme notes - as with books, films, news reports and blogs - are found wanting and do indeed read like bad A-level papers. But many are illuminating, and a note that sets the piece in its historical and musical context and then goes on to offer a brief analysis - a recurring theme here, an audacious modulation there, some unusual instrumentation - can add greatly to the enjoyment of a concert, particularly if there's a work you don't know. Anyway, no one is forced to buy a programme, and it's perfectly legitimate simply to lose oneself in the music, responding emotionally but not intellectually. So much for programme notes. What's long concerned me is that so few publishers these days publish any music titles and fewer still maintain a music list. Even Faber's efforts, under the excellent Belinda Matthews (wife of composer Colin Matthews) is much diminished (or in diminution, as a musicologist might say), most of the backlist having gone first out of print and then elsewhere. Macmillan offloaded Grove to OUP (whose music books now mostly come from the US), which meant that their various spin-offs died a death. The BBC, Dent, Gollancz - whose excellent list was presided over by Livia Gollancz, a former first horn with the Halle - have long gone, the ground ceded to the likes of Ashgate and CUP.

Of course none of the books they once published were bestsellers, but many had long shelf-lives (Charles Rosen's *The Classical Style*, Donald Mitchell's *The Language of Modern Music*, Walter Piston on *Orchestration*, for example), fixtures on music degree courses which enjoyed a readership among keen amateur musicians as well as professionals. They were books that *needed* to be published - but where is such musical scholarship now? Where, I wonder, do music students go these days? Online to find a secondhand copy, probably. Or perhaps merely to the library and the bar. And it's true that there are now some music degree courses - or perhaps more accurately degree courses that include music - for which it's not deemed necessary to be able actually to *read* music.

The problem of course, is that the language of musicology is a *lingua franca* for musicians alone. To the musically illiterate, it might as well be Chinese. And let's not talk about actual written examples! *Scary*. True, some textual analysis is dry-as-dust - but then so too is some literary biography. There have been some great writers on music - among them, Hans Keller, Deryck Cooke (who, incidentally, wrote about 'the futility of music criticism') and Wilfrid Mellers, who scandalised academia by writing a book on the Beatles. All of their work was engaging and thought-provoking and enlightening (and in Mellers' case, sometimes wide of the mark, but what a great advocate he was). Leonard Bernstein's wonderful essays were collected in several volumes.

These days the publication of any serious book on classical music demands a fanfare, which is why it was so



wonderful when David Cairns' study of Berlioz won the Samuel Johnson and Alex Ross the *Guardian* First Book Award with *The Rest Is Noise*. And why Weidenfeld deserves an ovation for publishing Daniel Barenboim's *Everything Is Connected*, in which the pianist-conductor wrote: 'A nation's constitution could be compared to a score and the politicians to its interpreters', going on to make an analogy between fugue and 'the Israeli and Palestinian narratives [which] exist in the same state of permanent interconnection as... the subject and countersubject of a fugue'. Barenboim, co-founder with the late Edward Said of the West-East Divan orchestral project, believes that 'the education of the ear is perhaps more important than we can imagine, not only for the development of each individual, but for the functioning of society, and therefore also of governments.'

Programme notes are a part of that education. Which is why, whatever Christie may think, they matter.

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