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THE MUSIC OF ALEXANDER GOEHR

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To some, Alexander Goehr is an enigma. They fail to understand why a composer once so daring, so radical, should now want to write tonal fugues and chaconnes – especially in such a cloistered, cosy environment as Cambridge. There is an incompatibility, a mystery in need of explanation. These people will probably be middle-aged: younger folk may be unaware that Goehr has been anything other than a member of the establishment. To them Bayan Northcott's collection of essays may arouse only a deferential respect.

But by the older, Goehr must surely be remembered as the catalyst of their generation, the man who seemed to have all the ideas. Ask Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies, Tony Gilbert, David Lumsdaine who led the way when they were students in the fifties, who kindled the flame, and they will unhesitatingly tell you it was Goehr. With his cosmopolitan background, charisma, and intellectual vigour he generated much of importance at the time. Among other things it must never be forgotten that, tentative though it is, his *Fantasia for Orchestra*, first performed in no less a place than Darmstadt, in 1956, gave to English music what was subsequently to become one of its most salient features – the structural monody. Out of the discussion arising from his *cantus firmus* technique there came, two years later, the much more sophisticated *Alma Redemptoris Mater* of Maxwell Davies. Since then the structural monody has been endemic.

However, side by side with the innovatory ideas lay the seeds of reaction to them. 'All art is new art and all art is conservative' was the slogan of Goehr's 1960 article in *The Score*¹ attacking the continental view that the only way forward was through 'the discovery of the single note'. What led Goehr forward was not the single note, but 'something that had to do with harmony', as he now puts it. This had already been evident in *The Deluge* (1957-58), but became increasingly so until in his television piece *Bauern, Bomben und Bonzen* of 1973 he derived his harmony not from a serial but a tonal matrix – a fragment of Schumann. But although 'harmony is the most important thing in music' it should only be regarded as a symptom of his conservatism. In itself, harmony is always necessary. The real issue, the issue that puzzles those of his middle-aged contemporaries who care, is why so many of the important radical ideas have been abandoned.

Inevitably the issue haunts this symposium; and yet none of the contributors dares to face it openly. The only critique comes from Robin Holloway, a former student who has made the grade and is presumably deemed diplomatic enough for the purpose. Three of the articles, Hugh Wood's survey of the choral music, David Drew's 'Why Must Arden Die?' (a short study of the opera), and Bayan Northcott's piece about the recent music, are reprints or revisions of previous publications. But the rest have been specially commissioned. They include Bill Hopkins on the piano music, Peter Paul Nash on the chamber music, Julian Rushton on the orchestral music, and Melanie Daiken on the *Triptych* (1968-70). Their pieces are descriptive – this book has no place for detailed analysis – but Bayan Northcott has made sure that none of them falls short of the competent. As well as his own article, he includes two interviews with Goehr and an excellent catalogue. What is lacking is an overall assessor, other than an editor, someone who can place Goehr more firmly in the culture of our time, someone who dares to tackle the big issue. But perhaps the most significant thing of all is the lack of enthusiasm. Only Melanie Daiken with her self-conscious, highly punctuated style, which seems to mirror the music she is discussing, imparts the feeling that it has really excited her on some occasion.

Nevertheless, if the reader wants a wider and deeper perspective he must turn to Robin Holloway. 'Goehr's central concern has been with a concept of music not as mystical stimulation or political exegesis but as a medium of ideas in itself, a human activity like reading a book.' Holloway argues that it is the notion of music as a quasi-linguistic phenomenon, a medium of ideas, the vehicle for something beyond itself, that limits Goehr as a composer. He can never yield to sound as such. 'A general picture emerges of a composer, very thoughtful and subtle, too self-conscious quite to trust to his truest intelligence which lies in his intuition.' But the

thoughtfulness and subtlety that starve the medium of notes and deprive it of sensuality – the sound as such – can turn parsimony to expressive advantage. It can become extremely poignant. Therein lies Goehr's strength. As an example, Holloway cites the Piano Trio (1966). 'Its first movement disperses and re-combines his typical "punctuation-mark" material through an ever-shifting range of possibilities to open up a form of cumulative power and perpetual surprise. And in the Lento his typical parsimony of notes actually produces the effect of abundance; material apparently limp and tentative is isolated in just these qualities until it achieves an extraordinary degree of inevitability – rock-hard yet tender and intimate – something comparable to Debussy's "chair nue de l'émotion".'

When Goehr achieves this condition it no longer matters that he tends to compose in concepts rather than sounds. His intellectual powers have transcended his limitations. Perhaps this is a clue to the enigma of him. To follow it, the reader should turn to the interviews where Goehr fills in the background to his work and discusses the people and ideas that have influenced it. He may be surprised how often Goehr refers to his father, the well-known conductor, once a pupil of Schoenberg. It is hammered home that Walter Goehr had a low opinion of his son's musical ability and did his best to discourage him from taking up composition. Whatever gifts he possessed they were not musical. Goehr needed guts, considerable will-power, and courage to withstand his father's scorn and overcome the obstacles he placed in his way. Even after he had established himself as a composer and, at long last, his father began to take an interest in his work 'this took the form either of extremely negative harangues about how bad he thought my pieces were, or grudging approval (which was the most one could ever get out of him).'

At this stage the reader may be bold enough to claim that he has possibly solved the mystery. Perhaps the whole of Goehr's efforts have been an attempt to gain his father's approval. Is it a coincidence that probably his most poignant piece is the *Little Symphony* (1963) composed in memory of his father? And is it also a coincidence that he, too, is a Schoenbergian? If he is not a natural musician, as his father claimed, then by sheer effort he has mastered those things that characterise one. But to do so he was forced to become conservative, a traditionalist. It will give him profound satisfaction to read Robin Holloway's remark that he has 'the ability to put together small elements into a larger grammatical order, that makes him, at whatever distance, a true heir of Haydn, Beethoven and Schoenberg.' But not only is he heir to the German tradition, by occupying the Cambridge chair he is also heir to the English tradition. Only musicians of proven ability receive this accolade. Nobody can say that Goehr has not triumphed over nature's reluctance to endow him with musical gifts. It is manifest that he has.

NOTE:

¹ 'Is there only one way?', *The Score*, no. 26 (January 1960), pp. 63-65.