

# Larger than life

by Michael Glover



Anthony Burgess: ‘Testy, peppery, pugnacious, swingingly opinionated’.

Alamy/PA

**The Devil Prefers Mozart:  
On Music and Musicians, 1962-1993 ANTHONY BURGESS**  
(CARCANET, 578 PP, £30)

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**ANTHONY BURGESS** went at the writing life headlong – there are more than 60 books to his name. Yet he didn’t begin until he was well into his thirties. Why? This book, a fat compendium of his writings about music, from essays to reviews, from programme notes to potted biographies, helps us understand. In short, he was a failed composer who resorted to mere words because, well, he found that he could earn a living by them and, frankly, to push words along also felt like the less taxing option.

Burgess was born in Manchester into a family which was half musical – his father played the piano in cinemas and clubs. His son caught the itch. He learnt the piano too. His knowledge of music’s history was learnt in the local library, where he devoured *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in its entirety. Why only half musical though? Burgess often wrote during his lifetime that his mother had been quite a famous music hall singer, but all that was a lie to bolster his musical credentials, as Paul Phillips, the editor of this book, makes clear. Phillips, who has been digging into the Burgess archives for years, has turned into a bit of a Burgess himself. Now and again he takes a potshot at his hero, especially when he catches him out telling a porky – when, for example, he creates a fictionalised version of his mother based on a Lancashire-born prima donna of the same name.

This book is often Burgess at his racily journalistic best: testy, peppery, pugnacious, swingeingly opinionated. He never minces his words, he is never a half-hearted fencesitter. He lays bare his loves – the sonorities of the Elizabethan Age, for example, the qualities of George Bernard Shaw as a music critic – and his hates too. Hans Keller, once also a famous music critic, was a pet adversary. Needless to say, Burgess at his best is wonderfully entertaining. He likes the largethan-life in more than one sense. One of the best pieces in the book is a delightful appreciation of Handel, who was big in every direction. Burgess reminds us of one fact that is seldom mentioned these days: that the *Music for the Royal Fireworks* was commissioned by the king to celebrate Butcher Cumberland's massacring of the Jacobites at Culloden. He is excellent on Wagner too. I can think of no other writer who could have summarised the entire, convoluted plot of the Ring Cycle quite so well or so pithily.

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The tale of the reception of his own music – and he tended to write more and more of it as he aged – was not quite so happy. Being an oddity himself, he liked to do surprising things, such as composing classical music for the harmonica. The great Larry Adler accepted what Burgess had written for him with respect, but never actually performed it. There are still various unperformed Burgess scores out there. Any music impresarios listening into this by any chance?