

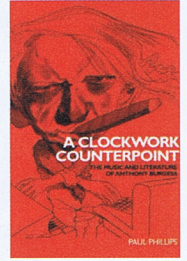
IN PRINT

This Man and Music: A Clockwork Counterpoint

Has there ever been a more maddening personage than Anthony Burgess? The author of *A Clockwork Orange* and some fifty other books was also a prolific composer, but save for the growing grace of YouTube, the bulk of his music remains undocumented. If Paul Phillips' ambitious study doesn't quite seek to right that wrong, it at least puts Burgess and his multi-disciplined work in perspective.

A Clockwork Counterpoint is a thorough, much-deserved retrospective, taking up the near-impossible task of pinning down its subject's legion inscrutabilities and investigating the thousands of pages of prose and scores that are part of the Burgess puzzle. Occasional missteps aside, the book, even when it gives off a less incisive, cocktail-party vibe, arrives where it seeks to go. Being a musicologist, Phillips need not stoop to *ex post facto* psychobiography; instead he lays Burgess bare, never rushing to judgment but also not ignoring the man's less savory or competent side.

Which leaves us with Burgess's frustrating legacy. His is the bathetic tale of a hyper-educated man who pressed his celebrated erudition and protean production capacity into service... of himself. Seen in a kinder light, he presages the auto-reflexivity of the postmodernists. In a harsher one, he was an arrogant, pugnacious and inflexibly self-aggrandizing master who never produced a masterpiece — and certainly not a musical one. His penchant for condescension, braggadocio and half-truths leaves the real story, if there happens to be one, in dire need of Apollonian piecing-out. He even opined about the most prosaic details of compositional method: he insisted, on the one hand, that "professional composers" (a group in which he both did



A Clockwork Counterpoint: The Music and Literature of Anthony Burgess
Paul Phillips
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and did not count himself) use a pencil (he used a pen), and on the other, that real composers do not write at the piano (he never wrote at the piano — unlike, say, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Ravel, Debussy or Wagner). But one does not listen to a composer's method or technique, so Phillips does Burgess the respectful turn of examining his music *qua* music.

Ultimately, *A Clockwork Counterpoint* captures the heartbreak of the all-too-human artist by simply lining

up the unmitigated facts of his life — though "facts" are tough to pinpoint in the case of Burgess, who in his own autobiographical writings felt little fidelity to them. Burgess's *catalogue raisonné* of unperformed pieces, works written shipboard for maritime orchestras, projects unrealized, contracts unsigned, lost manuscripts, apocryphal tales and bravura self-justifications gives an impression of this brilliant man as more an angry failure than a wealthy household name.

Had he not composed in pen, not submitted his work for publication straight from the typewriter, and set less store in word counts, semiotic games and the idea that composing notes and words were inherently the same thing, one wonders what kind of monstrous genius he might have become. — Daniel Felsenfeld