

BOOK

REVIEWS

A CLOCKWORK COUNTERPOINT:

THE MUSIC AND LITERATURE OF ANTHONY
BURGESS BY PAUL PHILLIPS.

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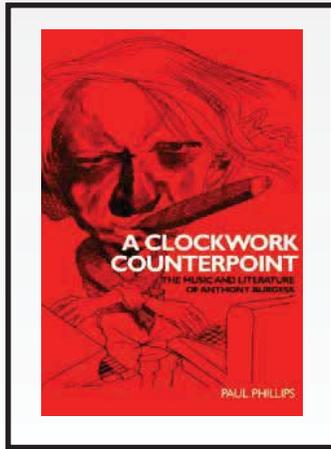
By Mark N. Grant

"The obscurity created by the wrong kind of fame"—a wonderful phrase coined in 1955 by conductor Richard Franko Goldman to describe a pitfall suffered by some very successful artists. For example, Samuel F. B. Morse wanted to be memorialized as the accomplished painter he was, but history remembers him as the inventor of the telegraph. Arthur Sullivan thought he would be remembered for his serious concert works, but posterity knows him only as W. S. Gilbert's collaborator. Even Shakespeare, some have argued, thought he would be remembered more for his sonnets and lyric poetry than his plays.

This "obscurity created by the wrong kind of fame" was a cross borne by a person who was one of the most famous writers and one of the most obscure composers of the last 50 years: John Wilson, better known to the world as Anthony Burgess (1917-1993). Suppose from the age of 12 your life's ambition was to be a well-known composer, but life had other plans. After sedulously creating scores for the drawer for years while married to an unmusical wife and working as a schoolteacher, at age 39 you suddenly are a first-time published novelist three years after the BBC turned down your *Passacaglia*

for Orchestra. Then, book by book, slowly but steadily, you become a well-known writer. At 54 you abruptly become a celebrity when one of your least favorite of your own novels is made into an extremely notorious motion picture. As a byproduct of this sudden fame, the world (sort of) discovers you are also a composer, and in your remaining 22 years, you (now remarried to a music-loving wife) for the first time enjoy professional performances, some very modest income as a composer, and a long-delayed fulfillment. Yet even after your death people still don't seem to remember or care that you were a composer. A good one.

Unlike Paul Bowles, Anthony Burgess did not split time periods of his life between the two muses. When I meekly asked him during Q&A at his 92nd Street Y lecture appearance in New York on May 10, 1988 how could he possibly do both at the same time, Burgess looked perplexed by the very question (why would it be any problem, his face seemed to hint) and then replied that he simply wrote during the day and composed at night. After a percentage of profits from his biggest hit, the 1971 Stanley Kubrick film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (about which he had mixed feelings), Burgess became wealthy



and could have afforded to stop writing to support his family and concentrate full-time on composing, especially now that most of the organizations who requested (or, more rarely, commissioned) his late pieces covered the copying and musician hire costs. But no, in the last two decades of his life Burgess published another 30 books while composing another 80 major musical works. It's as if he were two Georges Simenons, one a writer and one a composer. In fact, his astonishing musical fecundity alone from the age of 60 to 76 may be unique, comparable at least in quantity to Leos Janacek's similar age period.

According to this fascinating book by conductor/composer/musicologist Paul Phillips, Burgess composed everything in ink in final draft, in the neat hand of an autographer, rarely revising except to re-orchestrate to someone's order, and never used the piano while composing. "Professional composers compose in pencil, erasing as much as they write. I am foolhardy enough to set everything down in ink, evading errors as though I were performing a surgical operation," Burgess remarked. He wrote his books similarly, "producing a quota of finished pages each day and always proceeding without amending what had come before," says Phillips. Burgess claimed to consistently write 1,000 words a day of prose seven days a week. He composed a set of 24 preludes and fugues for piano, a cycle lasting 90 minutes, in a matter of a few weeks in 1985. Yet he never learned to drive.

Both literarily and musically, Burgess was one of the 20th century's most extraordinary autodidacts. He was an intellectual outsider, from working class Manchester, not London, not the product of Eton or Harrow or Oxbridge. His parents were part-time musicians and he grew up lower middle class, attended Catholic schools in Anglican Britain, got a B.A. from the university in his hometown while playing cocktail piano, arranged music for an army dance band while serving in the war. He never studied composition with a great teacher, and later applied to the Royal College of Music but failed the entrance exam when Herbert Howells "faulted him for not recognizing a Neapolitan sixth chord." Nevertheless, merely from self-studying scores and textbooks on harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration, he acquired the skills to compose some 250 opuses in all musical genres (an output far larger than that of most full-time composers) and a fluent, masterly feel for the orchestra – a gigantic reproof to the silly notion that legitimate composers can only be midwived and wet-nursed by Ph.D.-granting university music departments.

But the obscurity Burgess fell into is a cautionary tale about the necessity for networks – academic, professional, collegial – for a composer to hit the radar. Even Ives (who unlike Burgess paid big bucks out of pocket for musicians to rehearse his pieces) had a devoted network of promotional epigones in Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and others. Burgess's only network proved to be his late fame as a writer, by which time people took Burgess the composer as a gifted musical hobbyist. Even his friend Yehudi Menuhin, who introduced Burgess to Princess Grace and praised the violin concerto Burgess wrote for him, reneged on the promised Monaco performance.

I have listened to 10 CDs (mostly private recordings) of Burgess's mature music (most of the early manuscripts are lost). How does it sound? Well, as the aforementioned Richard Franko Goldman once said in praise of the typical Robert Russell Bennett arrangement, "One never has to worry as to whether or not [Russell's chart] will work. It just always does." Or as Deems Taylor put it, "Does the music seem to run under its own power?"

A CLOCKWORK COUNTERPOINT

Remarkably for a composer who had scarcely ever heard his orchestration played until the age of 58, Burgess's music always sounds well. While not every piece is on an equal level of inspiration (whose oeuvre is?), if you've ever read disparaging comments about what a duffer Anthony Burgess was as a composer, trust me: you can discount them as either malicious or ignorant. He occasionally borrowed from himself and recycled themes from previous or unfinished works, but so have many other composers. Particularly impressive are his 35-minute *Third Symphony* and the 11-minute *A Manchester Overture*, both of which give Bax, Walton, and even Britten a run for their money; also the 26-minute *Mr. Burgess's Almanack* for chamber symphony, the 25-minute cantata *Song for Saint Cecilia's Day* for SATB chorus, orchestra and organ, the Second Guitar Quartet, the Piano Concerto, etc. Usually Burgess's music is tonal, frequently with mild dissonance, but occasionally he goes outrightly atonal.

As a former pub pianist, Burgess was also proficient in jazz and commercial styles. Having started but not completed a couple of operas, he wrote a couple of musicals: *Trotsky's in New York!* (late 1970s, unperformed) and *Blooms of Dublin*, his own adaptation of *Ulysses* broadcast on BBC radio in Ireland on the Joyce centenary in 1982. (Burgess not only wrote the book, music, and lyrics himself, but wrote the orchestrations for the 31-piece band the BBC allowed him.) Burgess was one of the few writers who ever tried to emulate Finnegans Wake in prose, notably with the multi-lingual pidgin-Russian argot "Nadsat" the characters speak in *Clockwork Orange*. Edmund Wilson, reviewing *Finnegans Wake* in 1941, compared an early draft of a passage from *Finnegans Wake's* "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter with Joyce's final draft of the same passage and criticized Joyce for not staying with the less portmanteau language of the earlier draft.

Whereas the logodaedalic Burgess, in his book *Re Joyce*, "improved" a passage from "Anna Livia Plurabelle", cheekily introducing even more complicated wordplay than Joyce himself had settled on in the final draft. Yet *Blooms of Dublin* is straightforward entertainment, with plenty of good tunes: part Victor Herbert operetta, part jazzy Broadway, part English music hall. The rumba melody of its Act Two song "Gibraltar" sounds almost like a quotation of "Speak Low" from Kurt Weill's 1943 musical *One Touch of Venus*; Burgess had earlier tried to adapt into an opera the story upon which *One Touch of Venus* is based.

"The writing of a three-hundred page musical work is more laborious than the merely literary person is able to appreciate," Burgess wrote. "A desire to avoid the labour to an end unrealisable in performance led me eventually to prose composition, which I have always seen as an analogue to symphonic writing...In a symphony many strands conjoined, in the same instant, to make a statement; in a novel all you had was a single line of monody. The ease with which dialogue could be written seemed grossly unfair. This was not art as I had known it. It seemed cheating not to be able to give the reader chords and counterpoint. It was like pretending that there could be such a thing as a concerto for unaccompanied flute...I still think that the novelist has much to learn from musical form: novels in sonata-form, rondo-form, fugue-form are perfectly feasible."

While receptive to modernism and innovation, Burgess always maintained a strong reverence for the grand tradition. "During a six-week residency at SUNY-Buffalo in the spring of 1976," according to Phillips, Burgess was "disheartened by students in the English department who regarded most great literature of the past as irrelevant." Wrote Burgess, "I was made to feel even more old fashioned when I took a tape of my Iowa

symphony to the music department. The head of the composition section was a Bronx man [Morton Feldman] who spoke of dis and dat and de woiks of Beethoven (the mention of the name provoked a delicate sneer among the students..." Burgess not only viewed rock music as trash, but, even more, the respectful scholarly treatment of rock and roll music irked him.

It would be hard to imagine a more sympathetic, knowledgeable, yet objective advocate for Anthony Burgess's music than Paul Phillips, who conducts the Brown University Orchestra, the fine Pioneer Valley Symphony Orchestra in Massachusetts, and guest conducts elsewhere. Most of Burgess's music was never performed during his lifetime, and still hasn't been, but Paul Phillips has conducted and studied more of it than any other musician in the world. His book neatly condenses a panorama of tasks into one succinct, lucidly written volume. It gives a thumbnail biography of Burgess, so one can sidestep the too verbose, worthlessly malicious Roger Lewis biography or the more responsible but music-deficient Andrew Biswell biography. It provides a complete overview of the music, with excellent structural analyses, textual program notes, and graphic musical examples of most of Burgess's major scores. It, too, offers useful plot summaries and interpretations of Burgess's major literary works. And lastly, it brilliantly elucidates the purely musical organization of many of Burgess's literary works, while also shedding light on the literary construction of some of his musical works (several are based on alphabetic motifs). No other scholar has been such a diligent exegete of Burgess's unique efforts to interrelate the two processes of composition, literary and musical, which were poorly understood by literary scholars during his lifetime, as Phillips points out.

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Mr. Phillips's book also conveniently cross-indexes just about everything you'd want to have at your fingertips: there is a general index, an alphabetical index to Burgess's literary works, an alphabetical index to Burgess's musical works, a complete annotated chronological list of the music (eighteen pages!), a Burgess bibliography, a discography, a filmography. The chapter endnotes are a pleasure to read. This magisterial book is obviously the fruit of many years of labor and research and has been wisely designed as a permanent ready

reference. You have to go David Drew's handbook on Kurt Weill to find something comparable about a composer. In *A Clockwork Counterpoint*, Burgess has finally met his reverse Charon in biographer Paul Phillips, someone to ferry his composer's soul from oblivion back to life. Now all we need are more performances and commercial recordings of the music!

A \$500 fee in 1971 (when he was 54) from the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis to compose incidental music for their production

of *Cyrano de Bergerac* was the first money Burgess ever earned for composing music, and not much more followed. But by the end of his life he was a multimillionaire from the proceeds of his writing, owning "three condominiums in Monte Carlo plus homes in Switzerland, France, and England." Less than three weeks before his death of throat cancer in 1993, Burgess replied to a newspaper interviewer's question: "Has music brought you more satisfaction and benefits than literature?"

"Generally, yes." ■

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