



Anthony Burgess, photographed in France in 1987

A lovable show-off Nicholas Lezard

The Devil Prefers Mozart: On Music and Musicians, 1962-1993

by Anthony Burgess, edited by Paul Philips
Carcanet, £30, pp. 577

Anthony Burgess, a professional to his fingertips, knew how to write an arresting first sentence. The *locus classicus* is his opening to *Earthly Powers*. But try this for size, a lapel-grabbing start of a piece about George Walton in *The Listener*:

Waking crapulous and apothaneintheloidish, as I do most mornings these days, I find a little loud British gramophone music over the (a) bloody mary and (b) raspberry yoghurt helps me adjust to the daily damnation of writing.

Apo-what? I have just enough Greek to know that it's something to do with death; a helpful footnote reminds us that 'ἄπο Θανάτῃ Θέλω', or 'I want to die' are the closing words of *The Waste Land*'s epigraph. I doubt the readers of the *Listener* in 1968 were given a footnote, but then maybe they didn't need one.

Music was always Plan A for Burgess: 'Neglect of my music by the orchestras of the Old World was what mainly turned me into a novelist,' he says, perhaps tongue in cheek, for he tells other origin stories about his career elsewhere, about a performance of his Third Symphony at the University of

Iowa. I have heard some of Burgess's music and while I can't remember what it was, I do remember I wasn't all that impressed. It owed more to Weber than to Webern and I am no fan of the former. There are some writers on music who are so good – Hans Keller on Haydn's Quartets, Charles Rosen on Beethoven, this magazine's Michael Tanner on opera – that they can change the reader's taste which would otherwise have been *non disputandum*. I thought Burgess was going to do that to me when I read his thoroughly engaging piece about Handel. (Another great opening sentence: 'He was a big man, given to corpulence, of immense strength and uncertain temper'.) But all it did was make me think better of the man than of his music. I heard his Firework Music a day later on Radio 3 and still didn't like it. But so what? Burgess writes so well about everything that mere agreement seems irrelevant.

As it happens, Burgess had no beef with Webern – Cage and Stockhausen were more his bugbears – and once gently chided Yehudi Menuhin for never having played Berg's Violin Concerto. Menuhin, in a letter printed here, very sweetly replied that he had, 'quite often', and this seems to have started a friendship between them. Burgess wrote a Violin Concerto for him and he loved it, so what do I know? One of Menuhin's letters quoted here contains the mind-boggling words: 'We will be in Monte Carlo in the summer of '78, and if I may give you a few tips on the violin I shall be delighted!' 'I' indeed. (And how poignant to see Men-

uhin's Highgate address at the top of his letters. I have, or had, a programme for the Highgate Choral Society's 1974 Christmas concert which Menuhin signed for me. I only had the faintest idea of how close I was to greatness.)

That said, most of the lines that produce an exclamation mark in the thought bubble above the reader's head come from Burgess himself, as you would expect. I know he never wrote a dull sentence, not even in his reviews – especially not in his reviews, because he loved explaining with enthusiasm – but I think he went to town in his music pieces. He was a show-off and this is why we love him. 'Plenty of musicians hear the dropping of Worcestershire pippins in *Falstaff*.' I am not entirely convinced, but again, so what? It's a lovely turn of phrase, and writing it may have made the daily damnation of writing a little less painful. In a review of a book about countertenors he naturally digresses on castrati ('properly *evirato* – devirilised or emasculated'). 'The image of papal shears snipping off testicles to ensure the continuation

of a fine boy's voice is not strictly accurate,' he says, and that's an image no one's going to forget in a hurry.

But much as Burgess liked his fun, he was also very interested in the nuts and bolts, as well as the para-musical aspects of the musician's life:

I should like an account of what a virtuoso earns, how much he pays his agent and the taxman. From every artist's autobiography one looks for the immediate artistic problems and their solution; one is always given mainly a journey, unfinished or otherwise.

(The title of Menuhin's autobiography was *Unfinished Journey*.) Burgess is no snob: the line 'for my part I do not think we shall need another book on the hurdy-gurdy for a long, long time' might seem condescending but it is not. Just. He concludes a summary of the plot of the *Ring* cycle, which of course he loves, with the words: 'The age of capitalism is dead, but so are the gods and the planned race of heroes. It has all been rather a waste of time.' As you can see, he could do endings as well as beginnings.

Whoever at Carcanet had the idea of collecting all Burgess's writings about music – the editor Paul Philips himself, I presume – deserves a medal. Many of these pieces have appeared in other collections of Burgess's journalism but plenty of them have resurfaced for the first time. Thankfully the failure of the British Library's online catalogue has prevented me from doing some tiresome research as to which these are. One can just

get stuck straight in. I don't think I can conceive of a more enjoyable book being published this year, and it's only February.

The violence of exile

Alex Clark

My Friends

by Hisham Matar
Viking, £18.99, pp. 464

Hisham Matar's third novel is, among its many other virtues, a paean to reading widely; to imagining literature as not, in the narrator Khaled's words, 'a field of demarcations', but as a great river that connects and animates 'the entire human event'. Reading is how Khaled – exiled from Libya when his part in the anti-Gaddafi demonstration at the country's embassy in St James's Square in April 1984 made a return to Benghazi impossible – lays the foundations beneath his precarious life in London. Carrying with him his father's copy of Abual Ala al Ma'arri's *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, an 11th-century precursor to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he ponders the links between Stendhal and Mahfouz, Borges and Conrad. In the land of the imaginary, he finds something more concrete and sustaining than the tattered reality he is now forced to navigate.

Khaled has been deprived of his identity. Treated in hospital for the gunshot wounds inflicted on him by an unseen force at the demonstration, he is renamed Fred to preserve his anonymity and, over the subsequent years, he becomes adept at conjuring up stories to assuage the fears and disappointments of his parents and sister – and the silent presence of the government eavesdropper – during painful telephone calls home. It is the extent to which he is a fugitive from himself as well as a repressive and vengeful regime that dramatises this insistently and powerfully understated novel, which nestles its metaphysical enquiries between the folds of stark and brutal political and social upheavals.

The novel's title indicates Khaled's desire for self-effacement. It is November 2016, and he is on a meandering walk home after having seen his friend Hosam on to the Eurostar to Paris, eventually bound for a new life in 'the ever, ever after' of San Francisco. Khaled's memories of their long association take us back to 1980, when he heard Hosam's short story about a man being gradually eaten alive by his cat read on the World Service in place of a news bulletin (for which final insult to the regime the newsreader is later assassinated at the Regent's Park mosque), and consequently through Libya's painful journey towards its turn in the revolutions of the Arab Spring.

His other friend, Mustafa, whom he meets at Edinburgh University – a nod to

another writer hero, Robert Louis Stevenson, in whose work Khaled finds 'the honest and vital momentum of nature' – is very different from the elusive, diffident Hosam. It is Mustafa who prompts Khaled's attendance at the demonstration, but also Mustafa who, understanding the value of material success, not least for the way it provides a good cover story for London life, works his way up the ranks of an estate agency. (There is an excellent sub-novel in *My Friends*, an almost nostalgic portrait of a capital city in which an impoverished émigré might create a tolerably secure life by dint of renting a shabby flat, courtesy of an indolent but benign landlord. Like Khaled's memories of drinking in Soho watering holes, eating cheaply and frequenting public libraries, it is a loving, but nonetheless elegiac, blast from the past.)

In their different ways, Hosam and Mustafa move forward, and we come to realise that their restlessness will gradually lead to a convergence. But Khaled is more problematically held fast by his exile. Matar's brilliance here – demonstrated previously in his fiction and in his 2017 memoir *The Return*, in which he wrote about his father's disappearance at the hands of the Libyan authorities – is to convey how individual character and traumatic events become so intractably welded together that they may make a person a witness to their own life rather than a participant in it. Behind each of his principal characters stands a father, waiting for his son to come home; none will be able to find the same route back. Remembering Conrad burning his father's letters when he got to England, Khaled remarks to Hosam:

It's an accomplishment, I think, a genuine achievement, to forget one's father. I would like to do that. To wake up one morning and commence life without giving him a thought.

Like Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, this is a frightening novel. Amid its philosophical explorations, the violence of exile and the terror of pursuit and discovery are never downplayed. Neither are the realities of suddenly severed personal lives; the sense of families separated over years, births and deaths occurring in absentia, is palpably wrenching. 'It is dependence that a sane mind should seek; to depend on others and be in turn dependable,' Khaled thinks,



as he places another compromised phone call home, and it is this that has been taken away from him, and from all those whose lives are so comprehensively determined by others. This is a novel that aims, in part, to give voice to their enforced silences, and does so admirably.

A tangled web Francesca Peacock

Wild Houses

by Colin Barrett
Cape, £16.99, pp. 288

Until now, Colin Barrett has made his name as an artist of the short story. Both his debut collection, *Young Skins* (2014) and *Home-sickness* (2022) won him acclaim for their depiction of rural Ireland. But his tales stretch beyond the constraints of their size, and his dispossessed drinkers, small-time crooks and depressed teenagers seem too large and real to have their stories end in a matter of pages.

Barrett's first novel, *Wild Houses*, is, then, a delight, with a wider space for his talent to spread and for his acutely observed characters to linger. In the first few pages he gives us a man whose tattoos appear like 'the pages of a medieval manuscript' and another whose face is 'blue-tinged as raw milk in a bucket'.

Even here, there's a sense that Barrett is pushing at the limits of his chosen form. The novel is in part a detective story. Doll English, the younger brother of Cillian, a small-time drug dealer, has gone missing in the west of Ireland, and over the course of one weekend his girlfriend Nicky and his family struggle to find him. Dropping clues (a missing trainer, a bomber jacket with the words 'Tequila Patrol' in gold lettering on the back), Barrett sets up *Wild Houses* as something of a 'whodunnit'. It's clear who has kidnapped Doll, but not why they want him.

Yet the storytelling could not be further from a humdrum crime mystery. This is less a plot-driven novel than a study of an intricate web of characters. Whether it's the reclusive Dev Hendrick (who, despite being 7ft, 'leaves an awful dainty mark on the world') or an old taxi driver who muses on the difficulty of prayer ('the trouble begins when God starts talking back') or a former drug dealer who relies on a miniature zen rock garden to stop him contemplating suicide, each are richly drawn and, it becomes clear, connected.

For all Barrett's commitment to chronicling the details of disempowered lives, there's something folkloric about *Wild Houses*. It doesn't spoil too much to reveal that at the root of this warfare between drug dealers is a magical lake which appears out of nowhere. Yet there's no whimsy. Like all dark folk tales, *Wild Houses* turns its storytelling to exploitation, broken promises and only half-happy endings.