



## Two earthly powers

Music was Anthony Burgess's first love

**PAUL GRIFFITHS**

**THE DEVIL PREFERS MOZART**

On music and musicians, 1962–1993

**ANTHONY BURGESS**

Edited by Paul Phillips

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**T**HAT SOMEONE SHOULD WRITE both words and music at a fully professional level is not necessarily so extraordinary. It was the norm in many cultures, including those of Europe until the Renaissance, when the two arts began to acquire separate practitioners. Even since, some artists have proved proficient in both domains, from Berlioz, Wagner and Schoenberg to Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Patti Smith. In all these cases, though, the words and the music have been directed to the same goal: an opera, a song. Much rarer are composers who have published imaginative literature, as Arnold Bax did under the pseudonym "Dermot O'Byrne", and writers who can boast of their symphonies, as Anthony Burgess does - among a great many other things - in this compendium of articles and reviews he devoted to his first love: music.

Perhaps Robert Schumann could squeeze into this small company, on account of the poems and novel drafts that he wrote as a teenager before he committed himself fully to music. Burgess went rather the other way. As he said in an interview with a French music magazine that is translated in this volume, composing "was my major activity until the age of thirty-six". This is borne out by the

collection's editor, Paul Phillips, in his earlier study of Burgess and music, *A Clockwork Counterpoint* (2010). It was indeed in 1953 that Burgess, who had been composing steadily without receiving any income from his music, was challenged by his wife, Lynne, to produce a major saleable work or give up. He began an opera, abandoned it, then, by turning its libretto into a short novel, *The Eve of St Venus*, found his new path, even if another three years were to pass before he had a novel published.

He could not, however, quite stop the music coming. Not only did it give him subjects, subtexts and forms for many of his books, he also found himself often reaching for staff paper to throw off some bagatelle and give release to his composing instinct. Meanwhile, as a musician turned writer (if never completely), he came to be asked for articles on music, starting in 1962, when *A Clockwork Orange* came out, with the first of his several contributions to the BBC's informative weekly *The Listener*.

The present collection begins with this first essay, which addresses one of Burgess's abiding topics: music's place in literature, past and potential. He identifies just three novelists in English as having dealt seriously with music: Samuel Butler, James Joyce and Aldous Huxley, all of whose names, but of course especially Joyce's, recur in later writings. He also advises that novelists still have much to learn from music. "Novels in sonata-form, rondo-form, fugue-form are perfectly feasible"; they can have slow movements and scherzos, modulations and recapitulations, presentations of themes and free fantasias. *Napoleon Symphony*, based on Beethoven's *Eroica* and still more than a decade ahead, is already present in outline.

Anthony Burgess, 1987

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Two years after this debut in musical journalism, 1964 brought an inevitable and always welcome opportunity to write about Shakespeare, in a review for the *Musical Times* of a "Shakespeare in Music" anthology. Fuelled by his enthusiasm for Elgar's *Falstaff*, Burgess takes a rare flight from his usual mode of plain speaking dusted with rare words, puns and neologisms:

This astonishing symphonic poem achieves the ultimate penetration. The form is literary in that it follows the *Falstaff* story (though the two brief interludes reach a dimension no purely verbal art could touch); the themes themselves derive from that pre-articulatory region where the image trembles between music and poetry.

Burgess's rhapsodic response here is to a musician's transmutation of literature in close complementarity to how he wanted novelists to transmute music: both form and content are recreated in a new art.

He took a very different view when he saw composers using verbal structures to substitute for the formal types - the above-mentioned sonata, rondo, fugue and so on - that could no longer be sustained after regular tonality had been abandoned. Writing in 1976 for *High Fidelity* magazine on "Music at the Millennium", he was clear about this:

The looked-for synthesis at the end of the millennium is a composer of personality strong enough to create an individual language out of the century's three main heritages - the diatonic, the serial, and the polytonal - without the aid of literary texts [his italics]. One makes this last condition because the urgent formal need of the music of the future is the development of structure analogous to Beethovenian symphonic structure: musical argument at length.

The synthesis never came, of course, but the structure was there all along, even in the works of composers Burgess refers to warily (Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen), as well as those of one he appreciates with less reserve - "Perhaps the most considerable of contemporary composers, Luciano Berio" - who, we learn, once asked him for a libretto. It is a pity that, on the evidence here, Burgess never crossed paths with a musician who shared his Lancashire upbringing and rough yet supremely accomplished artistic manners: Harrison Birtwistle.

Not judged at the time to be contemporary in quite the same sense, the composer who keeps buzzing into Burgess's sights is Benjamin Britten. Though far apart in home territory and social level, they were close in age, Burgess just over three years the younger, and they grew up with the same influences bearing on them as composers: Stravinsky, Bartók, Berg and Hindemith among European masters, together with jazz and what used to be called the "peppermint tonality" of the period's light music. But of course their careers in music went very differently. Britten, trained at the Royal College of Music, became the young star of British music as soon as he produced his *Sinfonietta* at the age of eighteen. Burgess at this moment was teaching himself composition at the Rylands Library, and had still not made it when double that age.

There are no sour grapes, however, when he refers to Britten in these pages. Back on the subject of composers sustaining their music with words, he remarks that "without literature, Britten would have only an arpeggio of a 13th [note] to exhibit", which is perhaps a little harsh. On the other hand he singles out the part of Oberon in Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a fine testament to Alfred Deller's singing, and he is obviously fascinated by the War Requiem. Watching television for *The Listener* in August 1964, he witnesses a performance of this work from the Proms and concludes: "I have admired this music intensely ever since Coventry [where the première took place in May 1962], but I am beginning to feel that it is more decorative than expressive" - terms he used in other contexts for musical settings that failed to absorb the words to the extent of replacing them.

Three months later, on the same assignment, another telecast of the piece prompts him to identify what he finds wrong:

But the work seems to lean heavily on certain extrinsic factors - the visual bombardment by the large forces employed, the sense of space in the physical disposition of those forces, the reverence to which we're predisposed because of the poignancy of the theme, the majesty of the liturgy, and the aura of sacrificial hero - apart from intrinsic poetic greatness - which surrounds Wilfred Owen.

To offer a critical assessment of the War Requiem has, at this stage, become a sort of blasphemy.

This is the only case where he is acting as a music critic, rather than as a genial yet perspicacious observer of the scene, but his conclusion is very much to the point.

From the mid-1970s, Burgess was called on to observe much more frequently. Punk rock was dismissed, together with any suspicion, however ridiculous, that it arrived as an outcome of *A Clockwork Orange*, published a decade before the term was spoken of. Even Stanley Kubrick's film (1971) came long before the brief punk era, and displayed an elegance unrelated to - and far more threatening than - the work of the Sex Pistols. But Burgess's abhorrence was more general. Though bewitched by the songs of his youth, he had no time for the music even of "three young men singing and strumming guitars (not very well) to the percussive accompaniment of Ringo Starr, whose charm was great but whose talent inconsiderable". In an *Evening Standard* piece of 1990 (those were the days), from which this book takes its title, Burgess resists the fear expressed by Cardinal O'Connor of New York that heavy metal is demonic - not because he thinks it benign, but rather benighted. "There is in pop or rock", he writes, "a watery neutrality that can only be given a semblance of meaning by being equipped with a heavy monotonous beat." In conclusion: "The Prince of Darkness is an intellectual and he likes Mozart".

It was also in the mid-1970s that Burgess took off again as a composer, and the brief section of notes on his own works begins here. He wrote his Third Symphony for the University of Iowa's orchestra, starting it in December 1974 ("one page of the score contains evidence of Christmas bibulosity - mild obscenities written in Arabic script") and completing it the next year "along with the draft script for the next James Bond film, *The Spy Who Loved Me*. I do not think there is any evidence of inter-influence". In 1979 he surprised Yehudi Menuhin with the gift of a concerto, which neither Menuhin nor anyone else has so far played. What little of his music has been recorded lies in the domain of light music or inhabits a clogged medium (guitar quartet). It suggests nothing of the abundance, the range of reference, the humane comedy, the satirical edge and indeed the formal daring of his novels.

We find Burgess's bravado and good humour rather in these writings. If there is often a healthy dose of the first person singular, so much the more Burgessian. Stanley Sadie, editor of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, was outraged that the *TLS* should have consigned his project's twenty volumes to a reviewer who could start with several paragraphs of personal reminiscence and lament the absence of an entry on a harmonica player (John Sebastian). Burgess might have retorted that in this and his other copious musical writings of the 1980s (fifty of the seventy-five items in *The Devil Prefers Mozart* come from that decade), he was writing to entertain as much as to inform - and writing not for scholars, but for people engaged, as he had been, in self-education. In that respect his review is bang on the money.

Fulfilling so many commissions, he was bound sometimes to repeat himself. A Handel tercentenary tribute for *Corriere della sera*, published on February 22, 1985, quickly comes to a string of anecdotes: "He would hurl a kettledrum at a stupid leader of the orchestra, kick a hole in an out-of-tune double bass, throw a temperamental soprano out of the window."

(This is one of several articles not previously published in Burgess's original - or, in some cases, at all.) Two days later readers of the *Observer* could find, similarly positioned: "The stories of his physical ebullience in the service of bad temper are well-known - the hurled kettledrums, holes kicked in double-basses, castrati thrown out of windows." But it doesn't matter if it was a lone diva abruptly ejected or a bevy of stalwart emasculates. It is in the writing's energy, not its doubtful tales, that we meet the man being honoured, as well as the man honouring him.

Self-contradiction has the same innocent exuberance. Burgess was surely intending to be provocative when he told *The Times* in 1981 that music, "as an art dedicated to plumb the depths of the human soul ... ceased to exist at about the time of the death of Mozart". Why, then, one might ask, did he spend so much time examining and extolling Beethoven? At least the red rag worked. Hans Keller, Burgess's most faithful antagonist, took the bait, and we have his letter to the editor here to prove it.

Burgess happily invites outrage, too, in some of his one-liners. On Delius: "His work is, when you come to think of it, a strange compound - death-urge, atheism, Übermensch, sex". On a concert programme of Schumann's *Rhenish* Symphony and Brahms's First Piano Concerto: "There was the thick brown sound ... sour oboes mixing with horns like an Exeter stew".

Paul Phillips fails to footnote this last commodity, for which we have to consult the Foods of England website: "Stew of cubed beef with onions and vinegar accompanied by herb suet dumplings". In all other respects, however, this edition is exemplary, offering not only footnotes, but also miniature essays providing context for pieces most of which evaded capture in Burgess's own collection of his journalism, *Homage to Quert Yuiop* (1986). The irrepressible scrivener would have to be gratified, though what he would value more, no doubt, is another of Professor Phillips's gifts to him: an entry in *Grove* as a bona fide composer. ■

## Motif man

The banker who became an art historian

EDWARD WILSON-LEE

TANGLED PATHS

A Life of Aby Warburg

HANS C. HÖNES

288pp. Reaktion, £25.

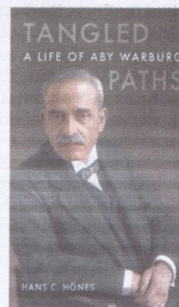
THE WORLD IN WHICH this biography opens saw itself on the edge of a nervous breakdown, driven to distraction by technology, the pressure of work and chemical stimulants, provoking an epidemic of mental health problems that in the case of our subject led to severe paranoia regarding viral infections. Were it not for the unfamiliar talk of "neurasthenia" and "degeneration", we might not realize that we are in *fin de siècle* Hamburg.

Through this unsettlingly familiar scene we follow Aby Warburg (1866-1929), the scion of a Jewish banking dynasty who renounced his birthright in favour of a quest to recover fragments of "eternal beauty" from the frayed and enervated wreckage of modernity. This he proposed to do through iconology, which he envisioned as a form of "delicate empiricism" applied to the minutiae of figural art, in which he believed the emotional experiences of past ages to have been fossilized. As an antidote to his own goddess age Warburg famously proposed that "God is in the detail".

Hans C. Hönes's masterly study is a sure guide to the faltering steps followed by Warburg in the

development of his "nameless science", during a life that variously embodied the spirit of the age and drew on his billionaire connections to struggle against it. The manic-depressive nature of his temperament was paralleled by an oscillation in his work between obsession with the universal laws of symbolic representation that he always felt he was on the brink of discovering, and renunciations of these in favour of historical positivism, digging in the archives for nuggets in a manner he likened to being a "truffle pig". Along the way Warburg flitted back and forth between the various fascinations of the age, from philological accounts of language as a "dictionary of faded metaphors" (in the words of Jean Paul) to brief periods of studying psychology and medicine in hopes of understanding the brain.

The biographer is intent, however, on removing the layers of varnish applied by previous hagiographical accounts to reveal the self-indulgence and narcissism that Warburg's temperament and resources fostered. His progress was not made any swifter by the ability to check himself into sanatoria and hotel suites for months at a time, whenever his hypochondria suggested it was necessary, or the fact that he could spend extended periods chasing down theories among the Pueblo cultures of New Mexico, or in Florence, without needing to commit to a stable academic career. His conviction that he was on the verge of greatness produced a spiral of self-sabotage, during which he developed a pathological fear of publication, anxious that premature revelations would allow others to steal



his ideas, and turned down academic appointments on the feeblest of pretexts, avoiding posts that he both thought beneath him and worried might expose him to public scrutiny he could not withstand. Instead he set himself against the increasingly professionalized world of German academia, seeing himself as an "intellectual private banker" who would use his archival discoveries and his ballooning library to seed the markets of thought.

Things came to a head during the First World War, when (like many German Jews) Warburg turned his skills and resources to the service of nationalist propaganda, and under the stress of it all descended into paranoid delusions of conspiracies against him, both domestic and geopolitical, that saw him confined for many years to hospitals.

During his last years Warburg was able finally to propose a structure to his life and work, which resulted in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a series of panels tracing through art history those repeated details that he had spent his life collecting. These he saw as *Bilderfahrzeuge* ("image vehicles"), survivals through time of past emotional experiences. The *Atlas* is at once brilliant and mad, an evidence board of motifs from across the history of visual culture, and Warburg himself the string that wound a constellated image between them. He was sometimes aware of this, knowingly comparing himself to Professor Teufelsdröckh in Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, who leaves behind him an apparently brilliant but ultimately incomprehensible Universal Theory of Clothes.

The events that followed on from Warburg's death - in which his library and its Jewish staff fled the Nazis to London, to set up today's Warburg Institute - saw his methods, ideas and collections form a central part of intellectual history up to the present day. The *Atlas* and the Institute are, in a sense, a fitting vehicle for his time-bound and timeless emotional experiences. ■

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