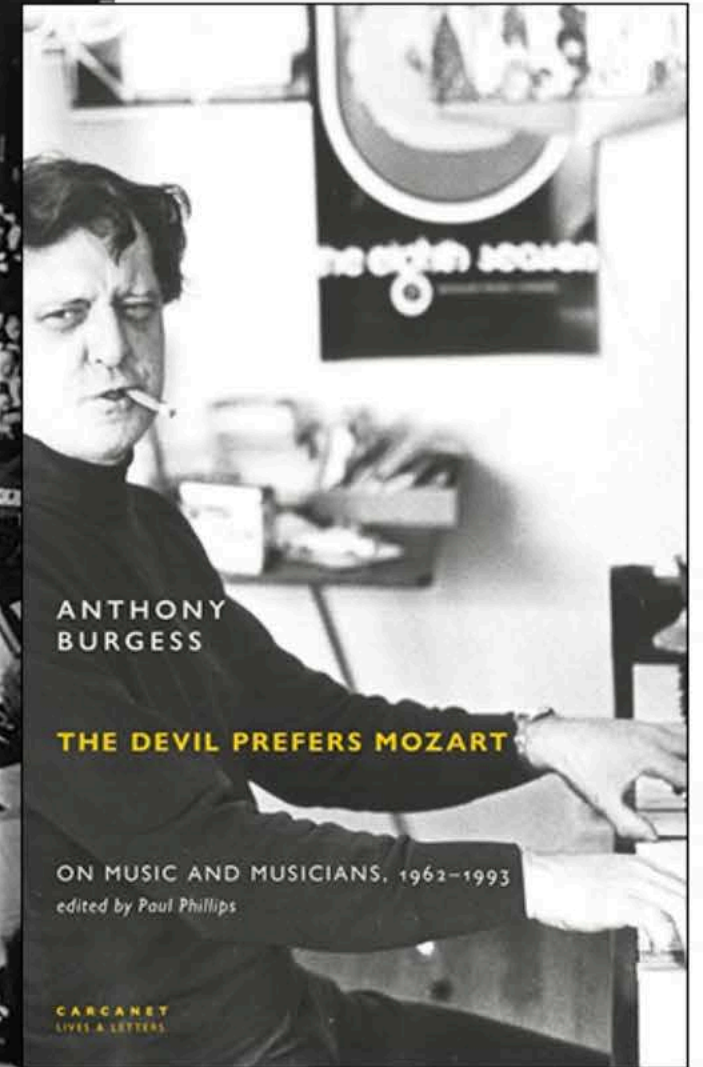


FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

Book Review

Dangerous vagueness

JONATHAN TAYLOR excavates the paradox that underlies Burgess's ambivalent attitude to music



NAZI ASPIRATIONS: Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in a "work-break" concert at AEG in February 1941, organized by the Nazi Strength Through Joy program *Photo: Bundesarchiv/CC*

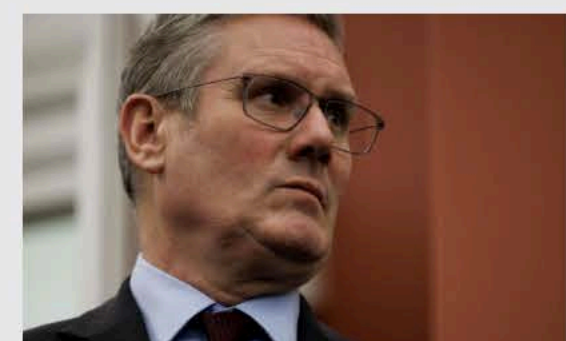
The Devil Prefers Mozart: On Music and Musicians, 1962-1993
Anthony Burgess, Carcanet, £30

In old age, one of violinist Yehudi Menuhin's mottos was: "My life has been spent in building utopias." Author, musician and critic Anthony Burgess might be said to have done the opposite, given that his most well-known creation is a work of dystopian fiction. Yet Burgess later disavowed *A Clockwork Orange*, and wanted to be seen instead as a serious composer.

In *The Devil Prefers Mozart*, a fascinating collection of the author's musical writings, brilliantly edited and contextualised by Paul Phillips, Burgess often seems to aspire to Menuhin's utopian condition. In a review of the violinist's autobiography, for example, he cites Menuhin's life motto approvingly, and declares in response: "In Britain's present cacotopia may he continue to rule an enclave of virtue and beauty."

As many people have pointed out, though, the problem with utopias is that they are subjective: one person's utopia is another's dystopia; and sometimes, utopia and cacotopia might even co-exist within the same person's vision.

OTHERS LIKED



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THE NO CEASEFIRE, NO VOTE MOVEMENT IS GROWING RAPIDLY

WEDNESDAY 16TH MAR 2022
WHEAT

THURSDAY 22ND FEB 2024
ORWELL GOT IT WRONG

THURSDAY 22ND FEB 2024
GAZA CRISIS THREATENS COMMONS SPEAKER

For the culturally conservative Burgess, most of the musical world, beyond enclaves like Menuhin's, is now a cacotopia: "As a moronic sub-art, an anodyne for adolescents, [music] subsists... As an art dedicated to... the disclosing of heavenly visions, it ceased to exist at about the time of the death of Mozart."

Music under Mozart, Burgess claims, is "a lost utopia," through which "the glory of a tranquil state was affirmed." Admittedly, that state happened to be "the Austro-Hungarian empire – [an]... ancient dead tyranny," yet somehow it still (paradoxically) represented an ideal moment in which music had a clear "social function."

In different forms, this founding dichotomy – between, on the one hand, a utopian vision of music and, on the other, a tyrannous reality – haunts Burgess's musical writings. No doubt the dichotomy has its roots in the second world war. While Burgess's musicology is part of a tradition that harks back, via George Bernard Shaw, to the Victorian age's idealisation of music, inevitably this tradition has been fractured by 20th-century trauma:

"Victorian musicians accepted that a symphony... could attain a vision of sublimity [and] morality. Our views of the morality of music have changed... since 1945 and the beginnings of the revelations of the true depths of Nazi infamy. George Steiner... wonders at the mentality of the death-camp commandant who could, after a day supervising the liquidation of Jews, go home to weep tears of pure joy at a broadcast of a Schubert trio or a recorded Schumann Lied."

For Burgess, the principal battleground for this paradoxical "mentality" is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony – as fans of Burgess's novel (and Kubrick's movie) *Clockwork Orange* might expect. "Beethoven and Schiller were saying something that made equal sense to the Nazis and the democracies. The Ninth was protected from the start from being political because of [its] very vagueness." Such music is dangerous because "it has no real human content." Its very vagueness, lack of overt meaning lends it to political slippage, ambivalence.

This ambivalence at once excites and concerns Burgess: "The Nazis could hear in the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony an expression of Nazi aspirations. Those aspirations are no more present in the music... than are visions of Christian democracy or of white supremacy in Smith's Rhodesia, which used the Ode to Joy as a national anthem."

It is also, of course, Alex's anthem in *A Clockwork Orange*.

As both idealist and cynic, utopianist and dystopianist, Beethovenian rebel and adolescent malchick, proto-punk radical and anti-punk conservative, tyrannous purveyor of ultra-violence and ecstatic slooher of music's heavenly visions, Alex is a kind of allegorical embodiment of all the dichotomies which fracture the author's attitudes towards music.

These dichotomies remain unreconciled to the end of Burgess's fiction and non-fiction alike. In the later 20th century, it seems, both heaven and hell, God and the Devil prefer Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert.

Jonathan Taylor's most recent book is Scablands and Other Stories (Salt, 2023). He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Leicester.
