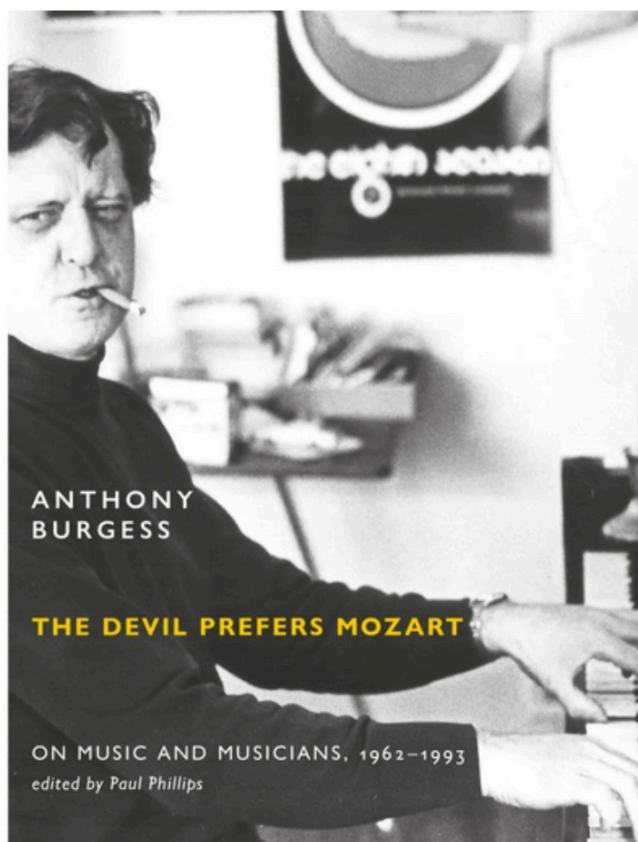


CULTURE



The Many Notes of Anthony Burgess

REVIEW: 'The Devil Prefers Mozart: On Music and Musicians, 1962-1993'
by Anthony Burgess



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Anthony Burgess wrote 2,000 words a day. Finished copy, mind you, not drafts. This would have put him in the middleweight division of the 19th century, when heavy hitters like Charles Dickens and Honoré de Balzac set the pace. Burgess was in many ways a 19th century writer, but he lived in the 20th century. The longer it went on, the less writers wrote, probably because there was something more interesting at the movies or on TV.

Graham Greene, Burgess's frenemy and fellow exile in the south of France, stopped his working day at 500 words, even in mid-sentence, and poured out a gin and tonic. Burgess, having streamlined his practice by starting on the iced gin after breakfast, kept going. He wrote journalism in the mornings, and then, when mind and liver were nicely lubricated, fiction in the afternoons. He is not known to have taken any exercise beyond walking to the pub.

Burgess devoted his evenings to music. He was the son of a pub pianist, and his wartime service included some nocturnal action as pianist with the entertainment section of the British Army's 54th Division. Instead of unwinding by bashing out a few standards at the old Joanna, he sat in an easy chair, drank more gin, and composed some 250 pieces of music, some quite substantial: chamber music, solo works for piano, a ballet suite, some film music, a James Joyce musical (*Blooms of Dublin*). He did this without an instrument, out of his head in the fullest sense.

"I wish people would think of me as a musician who writes novels, instead of as a novelist who writes music on the side," he said. The University of Iowa Symphony Orchestra commissioned and performed Burgess's "Symphony in C" in 1975, and several more recent recordings are in print. His music is strongly influenced by Claude Debussy, and the modern English school, notably Frederick Delius (who was influenced by Edvard Grieg and Richard Wagner), Sir Edward Elgar (who was a kind of English analogue to Gustav Mahler), and the folksy locals William Walton and Ralph Vaughan Williams. In music as in print, Burgess was 19th-century England under Continental influence.

Writers' reputations tend to dive after their deaths. Burgess smoked himself to death in 1993 at age 76. A biographical savaging by Roger Lewis misfired: Burgess was a fantasist, so a biography exposing his deceits and conceits actually affirmed his imaginative power. His reputational lark, musical and literary, has slowly ascended, though it never descended in France, for the French correctly understand Burgess as having the soul of a Catholic philosopher and Continental anarchist, tragically displaced into the body of an English hack. The University of Manchester, his alma mater, is reissuing the Irwell edition of the complete works. The British press Carcanet has already reissued a new selection of Burgess's journalism (*The Ink Trade*) in 2018 and then two volumes of poems.

Burgess hacked together some essays into *This Man and Music* (1982), but most of the pieces in *The Devil Prefers Mozart* have not been seen since their rushed debut in newspapers and magazines and their rapid departure for trash cans and the trays of parakeet cages. The editor, Paul Phillips, sorts his selections by theme and chronology, thus replicating the typical experience of reading Burgess, which is like being trapped in a lock-in with an encyclopedic philologist who is drunk on language. Burgess, George Steiner wrote, was "fiercely competitive and ambitious," but he "almost never lacked generosity." That generosity showed itself as "a kind of playfulness" with his material, and made it "among the most stimulating of our time."

The Devil Prefers Mozart overflows with crosscut links between the arts, musical curios and curiosity, false modesty, and immodest falsity. This is a superb brick of a book, from the cover photo (A.B. at the piano in black polo neck, stinking cheroot wedged between his teeth, lavish comber running amok) to the index (random sample: Vanbrugh, John; Varesco, Giambattista; Vaughan Williams, Ralph; Verdi, Giuseppe; Vicious, Sid (John Simon Ritchie). As you know, one of those five wasn't serious about music. That would be Vanbrugh, the architect. You can tell Paul Phillips is serious about music, too. Apart from being a music professor at Stanford, he gives Sid's real name.

As hardly anyone is formally educated in music these days, let alone the history of classical music, *The Devil Prefers Mozart* is the education we have all missed. Phillips has sorted Burgess's mountain of copy into five peaks. The first, "Musical Musings," is composed of longer essays on writers and music, food and music, Shakespeare and music, and so on. "When we hear Lady Macbeth telling her recalcitrant lord to 'screw your courage to the sticking place,'" Burgess writes, "the reference is evidently to the tuning of a lute, the small agony of a delicate technical act." Burgess links this to *Troilus and Cressida*, when Ulysses compares disorder to "the untuning of a string," and concludes that Shakespeare "physically *heard* the tuning and in it was aware of the unholy jangling of what had been the music of the spheres."

Evidently? Who knows. But Burgess, as usual, has picked up on something that no one else has spotted, and run off with it. I knew that *Love's Labour's Lost* and *King Lear* contain do-re-mi melodies. I did not know the one in *King Lear* supplied the first four notes of the "Warsaw Concerto," written by Richard Addinsell for the 1941 film *Dangerous Moonlight*. Burgess knew this, or at least believed he knew it, which is much the same thing for a novelist.

Had Burgess not been getting *Earthly Powers* to the press in 1983, he might have worked in a reference to David Bowie's "Let's Dance," whose lyric supplied the name of Bowie's Serious Moonlight tour of that year, thus connecting Bing Crosby ("What Would Shakespeare Have Said?") to *King Lear* via the "Warsaw Concerto" and David Bowie (with whom Crosby duetted on "The Little Drummer Boy"). We can infer this because Burgess wrote very perceptively about the nostalgia of the Beatles ("at the end of a long tradition of Lancashire singers," their songs as "singable as the songs of the old provincial musical halls") and the cultural literacy of the Sex Pistols (the blunt razor blade is "one of the properties of Nineteen Eighty-Four" and punk "uses the old British working-class argument that you cannot have education without money").

Part II ("Composers and their Music") is a chronological survey from Shakespeare's contemporary Monteverdi ("He was using unprepared discords in his vocal writing ... a man trying to present images of order in an age notably disordered") to Stravinsky ("the opening folk-theme of the 'Princesses' section of 'The Firebird' became, in 1946, a slow foxtrot"), and the black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: "I knew Samuel Coleridge-Taylor before I knew Samuel Taylor Coleridge. My father strummed the 'Petite Suite de Concert' on the piano. Pier bands would play the 'Othello' suite."

This sets us up for the central section, "Burgess and His Music," in which Burgess reviews himself, generally awarding an A-plus. He believes that "Symphony in C" is English in that "a writer of words can to some extent disguise his cultural origins, but a spinner of notes never." It was begun in Siena in December 1974 ("one page of the score contains evidence of Christmas bibulosity—mild obscenities written in Arabic script") and finished in April 1975 in a Holiday Inn in Georgia, along with a draft script for *The Spy Who Loved Me*. There is, Burgess asserts, "no hint of interinfluence." As *The Spy Who Loved Me* contains an Egyptian interlude, as Burgess saw the truth as an impediment to good copy, and as no English writer of his time was more interinfluential, this may not be true. Not that it matters.

By his third symphony, Burgess has realized that "Music, though it conveys nothing but itself, has a precision which I, the word-man, had forgotten existed." This may be true, and it does matter. Burgess now confidently tells an interviewer from *Melodie* magazine that "English poetry is based on musical periodicity; French poetry is based on the number of syllables. As a result, English poetry is very close to music, and French poetry is very distant from it."

He also tries to learn the guitar, fails, but still manages to squeeze out the flamenco chords to accompany Molly Bloom's reminiscences of Gibraltar in *Blooms of Dublin*. He quotes Berlioz ("one has to be able to play the guitar before one may dare write for it. I cannot play the guitar"), then writes a guitar concerto that attempts to reverse-engineer the Andalusian instrument into the lute music of John Dowland ("whom Shakespeare admired"). He keeps composing for guitar:

"Stravinsky said that he loved Bach because you can smell the resin on his strings and taste the reed of the oboe. You cannot, as some atonalists have tried to do, convert the guitar into plastic. The physicality of the guitar is matched by one's sense of its history—from the Elizabethan lutenists to the greasy-haired flamenco thugs."

He's right. If you write about music, you're writing about musicians. If you're writing about musicians, you're writing about maniacs. Is Burgess also right that "after the great, stable age of Haydn and Mozart," music "began to be a kind of inarticulate literature," because musical form was "no longer dictated by the conventions of a stable society, themselves deriving from the binary rhythms of nature: it became literary form applied to the spinning of notes"? He has a point here too: Words took over sounds in the program music of Berlioz, just as words scrawled themselves on the canvases of Picasso and Juan Gris, and still scrawl over screens as subtitles. Burgess was a master word-spinner in the age of literary note-spinners. No one since Wagner wrote so many words and so much music, and so much about music in the modern age, as Burgess did.

The fourth section, "Performers and Performances," is a time capsule of reviews. The multiple errors in Burgess's review of Yehudi Menuhin's autobiography lead Menuhin to send in corrections (he has, despite what Burgess thinks, played the Berg Concerto, and even recorded it with Boulez). Most of us would be humbled and leave it at that, but Burgess's nights with the 54th Division and days at the typewriter render him immune to shame. He takes Menuhin's correction as an invitation to a private correspondence.

After the habitual Burgessian complaint about taxation, which is why he lives in Monte Carlo, he informs Menuhin that he has bought Josephine Baker's old piano, that he has taken the University of Iowa by storm, and has picked up the violin again. He even sends Menuhin, a master teacher, a practice study, part of the still-in-development patent Burgess system for elderly violinists, then dusts off the score of his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra and dedicates it to Menuhin.

"We will be in Monte Carlo in the summer of '78," Menuhin replies, "and if I may give you a few tips on the violin I shall be delighted! What is your new system all about?" Menuhin proposes to debut Burgess's concerto in Monte Carlo. He notes that Burgess's score is dated "Gibraltar, Summer 1945" and "Monaco, July 27th, 1979," so that gives him 34 years to fix a date for its performance. Paul Phillips's typically thorough footnotes fill out the background. Burgess and Menuhin met in 1964, as guests on a BBC television program. Menuhin never did get around to playing the Concerto, and to this day it remains unperformed. This is a tragedy.

The last section, "Opera," brings us back to words. "Literature becomes music," Burgess writes, noting that Shakespeare became the posthumous librettist of "the process that turned rococo opera into 19th-century music drama." Can music become literature?

Written form pursues a narrative, but musical form varies upon a theme. The composer, or the better sort of improviser, must balance variation, whose latent logic is the drive to atonality and then incoherence, with musical form. The writer does something similar, but written form is simpler. You can, and Burgess did, see written dialogue as contrapuntal. You can, and Burgess did, mash two voices together, though it's hard for the reader to follow. But you cannot write two separate voices at once, which is what musical counterpoint is. You can only describe counterpoint technically, or describe its emotional effect.

Martin Amis divided novelists into two kinds. Some write as though language maps onto reality. Others admit that language, like Burgess finishing off a Guinness in a smoky pub, sees the world through a glass darkly. The first kind sell better but they can be dull; Cyril Connolly compared the rat-a-tat, limited rhythms of Ernest Hemingway to dried peas rattling in a tin. The second can be more interesting to read but also tend to elaboration; James Joyce, like Burgess, was a musician. Joyce loved opera and lived in Italy for a while. Burgess (who idolized Joyce) loved opera so much that his second wife was Italian.

When Anthony Burgess met Jorge Luis Borges, they bantered in Old English. This is understandable, as their names had the same medieval etymology. Burgess said he was the Borges of the Anglo-Saxons. This was true in that Burgess was a multilingual game-player, and a writer of novels and journalism who, though born in Lancashire, believed that his Catholicism made him, like Borges, a displaced Mediterranean. But did that make Borges the Burgess of the Latins?

Elgar might be the English Mahler, but it makes less sense to call Mahler the Elgar of the Austrian Jews. The more you look at words, and the more languages you learn, the less real language seems. It starts to become like music: an invisible floating architecture. Writing about music means defining it and pinning it down. This requires technical knowledge. To really read about music, you need to be able to read music. To really write about it, you need to be able to read music and play a bit too. Burgess had all this, and he knew, as anyone who has trod the boards knows, that you must entertain at all times. He also sought the truth about the sounds that lie beyond words.

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

by Anthony Burgess, edited by Paul Phillips

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