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MUSIC SINCE THE FIRST WORLD WAR, by Arnold Whittall
Dent, 1977 (£7.95)

BARBARA WINROW

One should not, it is said, judge a book by its cover. But though the score of *Circles* which decorates the dust-jacket of *Music since the First World War* was no doubt chosen for its looks (Berio actually occupies less than two per cent of the text) the straightforward, explicit nature of the title does give a foretaste of the businesslike and systematic way in which Arnold Whittall sets about the somewhat daunting task of giving a reasonably comprehensive account of the vast assortment of music written over the last 60 years. This approach somewhat resembles that of the dedicated naturalist: collecting, describing, classifying — all with an air of enquiring interest and sincere objectivity. Whittall is

more concerned to present his material in its own right and in an orderly sequence than to use it as fuel for or ammunition against any particular thesis. Having grouped his selected composers into broad categories, he works his way steadily through 50 of them, one by one, taking their main works in what is generally speaking chronological order and giving quite detailed analytical treatment to certain particularly interesting or representative examples.

All historical writing, since it implicitly aims to illustrate new situations in terms of receding ones, is faced with the embarrassing problem of where to start. Quite apart from the circumstance that *Music since the First World War* and Jim Samson's recently published *Music in Transition: A study of tonal expansion and atonality, 1900-1920*¹ complement one another rather happily in their choice of period, Whittall's selection of 1918 (the year of Debussy's death and already sufficiently removed from the present for there to be no more than a handful of people alive with a mature memory of it) as a starting point is at least as rational as the turn of the century would have been. As Whittall says in his preface, 'To begin a discussion of modern music in that year is clearly not to begin at the beginning', but it was a point at which the threads had to be picked up again after the European cataclysm and music stood on the threshold of the burst of '-isms' that would characterise the middle two quarters of the century. Any composer who continued to use the tonal language or bases of construction (and a considerable number did, in various ways and in varying degrees, so continue) could hardly do so in unquestioning acceptance but was compelled to find anew his own justification for them.

Whittall devotes Part I, 'The Survival of Tonality', to this group, using for 'tonality' fairly broad criteria, embracing virtually all structurally significant polarity or tension between certain pitch centres, such as Lendvai's theory of the 'axis' system in Bartok's work. He identifies Nielsen's 'most powerful technique' as 'the harnessing and directing of forces which at first create ambiguity, until they become agents of resolution'. Vaughan Williams he describes as having 'strong roots in a language in which a modality and thematic character closely related to folk music were brought into fruitful confrontation with the much more dramatic resources of modern tonal chromaticism'. In this section Stravinsky and Bartok are each given a complete chapter; other composers are discussed in the course of one chapter on 'Opera' and two on 'Symphonic Music'.

Part II, 'Twelve-note Music', deals with a movement which, as one of the most explicitly logical and coherent of the century, is readily amenable to Whittall's systematic approach and analytical flair. He quite simply devotes one chapter to each of the Viennese Three and a further one to 'The Spread of Serialism' which continues the saga of Stravinsky and follows up with Sessions, Gerhard, Dallapiccola and Babbitt. He brings out with admirable lucidity the different forms that serial, like tonal, language can assume in the hands of different composers and also the important distinction between atonality and athematicism.

In Part III, entitled more obscurely 'From Past to Future', he comes up against the real problem of imposing order on the flourishing 20th-century jungle. This jungle, it is true, provides a rich and colourful area for the naturalist collecting mixed specimens: Whittall's individual accounts, though in many cases only brief précis, are still generally apt and shrewd. But while it is a paradise for those who want to discuss artistic and philosophical theory, it is much less amenable to the broad, straightforward classification which formed the background to the individual studies of Parts I and II. Part III may be seen as a collection of all those composers who defied classification in the previous two Parts — and who largely continue to defy it here. Nevertheless, at least a gesture is made in the direction of categorisation by grouping the very diverse material into three chapters, namely 'The Radical Aesthetic' (Satie, Varese, Cage plus brief mentions of Partch, Riley, et al), 'Three Individualists' (Tippett, Messiaen, Carter) and 'Seven Europeans' (the Rest).

It is impressive that throughout this marathon tour Whittall unfailingly maintains his quasi-scientific blend of detachment from and dedication to his material. In spite of the widely differing amounts of space devoted to composers (some have a chapter or more to themselves, some a few lines) he never takes a partisan stand. Rather he attempts to present each composer from the point of view of that individual's own terms and aims, almost as though he were

writing testimonials — necessarily honest but avowedly positive in intention. In the preface he says that 'Omissions are obvious and extensive . . . the most detailed attention is given to those who work is complete and whose importance is incontestable'. I think however that this requires some qualification. In the light of the title of the book, I should say that the only really obvious total omission (apart from a brief mention in the Introduction) is the whole scene of jazz and pop; the most serious partial one is electronic music, which receives little more than a passing mention. These arise, almost inevitably, because as an analyst his natural field of operation is the composed score. This is almost certainly also a contributory factor in his allocation of 'the most detailed attention'.

It is the fact that Whittall is essentially an analyst that is really the key to the whole work. Within the framework of individual studies much of his detached neutrality dissolves and he analyses with fascinating skill and enthusiasm to reveal the structure of the work as he clearly 'feels' as well as 'sees' it. As he himself says of his own discussion of *Oedipus Rex*: 'Like any interpretation of facts, this summary is clearly a "slanted" one. . . . but it does isolate what I believe to be a factor of special importance'. This tends to make the book easier reading in individual sections than as a whole — which is not to say that any of it is easy in a 'popular' sense (in spite of the reasonably plentiful musical illustrations, the reader needs scores to follow the analyses adequately) or that it is not a very valuable, logical and welcome collection of material as a whole. It is written, as the author says, particularly for 'advanced students and the approach is, primarily, a technical one'. It has all the characteristics of a good text-book, with clear comprehensive indexing and a useful, selective bibliography. Though the book leans slightly towards being a collection of linked essays, this means that any loss of the sense of a propelling overall 'narrative' or argument is strongly compensated for by the facility with which particular topics may be found. One small but very useful point is the unusual thoroughness and consistency with which dates are quoted at the first reference to a new composer or work.

It is in fact a surprise at the end to find that such a wealth of material has taken less than 300 pages. For the remarkably small amount of space it will take up on the shelf this book should prove a rewarding investment for anyone with a serious interest in the musical scene of his own century.

NOTE:

¹For a review of this see *Contact 18* (Winter 1977-78), pp. 28-31.

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