

9-1994

## The Music of Edmund Rubbra, by Ralph Scott Grover (review)

Julian Onderdonk

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, [jonderdonk@wcupa.edu](mailto:jonderdonk@wcupa.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/musichtc\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/musichtc_facpub)



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Onderdonk, J. (1994). The Music of Edmund Rubbra, by Ralph Scott Grover (review). *Notes, Second Series*, 51(1), 152-153. Retrieved from [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/musichtc\\_facpub/40](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/musichtc_facpub/40)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Visual & Performing Arts at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Theory, History & Composition by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact [wressler@wcupa.edu](mailto:wressler@wcupa.edu).

A hot tip: The Sorabji Archive, now five years old or so, is the only source for those wishing to acquire photocopies of the music and the composer's writings, whether published or not. The address is: Easton Dene, Bailbrook Lane, Bath BA1 7AA, England.

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN  
Philadelphia

**The Music of Edmund Rubbra.** By Ralph Scott Grover. Aldershot: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 1993. [xvii, 625 p. ISBN 0-85967-910-1. \$74.95.]

Since the critical revisionism of the 1950s and 1960s, British musical scholarship has been torn between its progressive leanings and the embarrassing facts of its conservative past. That period saw the downfall of Ralph Vaughan Williams's reputation, and witnessed the beginnings of a concerted attempt to raise British music out of a presumed provincialism into a larger internationalism. Benjamin Britten, and later Michael Tippett, proved to be the favorites in this critical reassessment, while previously "central" figures like Arthur Bliss and Edmund Rubbra lived on, still composing, in increasing obscurity. To be sure, the music of these more "conservative" figures still received some attention, but almost always in a diminished context, and usually with that air of special pleading so disastrous to sympathetic reevaluation.

In its sheer volume and wealth of detail, Ralph Scott Grover's *The Music of Edmund Rubbra* signifies a bold attempt to assert Rubbra's importance in twentieth-century English music. The first survey ever to appear on the composer's oeuvre as a whole, it assays the music in a big way, discussing his large output with remarkable thoroughness. The book is divided into chapters that examine the works by genre, beginning with the symphonies and orchestral music, progressing through the concertos and chamber music, and ending with discussion of the choral music and the songs. Its comprehensiveness (evidenced by the inclusion of 278 music examples) extends to the nature of the analysis as well, which only rarely lapses into mere description. Drawing freely on Rubbra's own writings and on interviews he held with the composer, Grover demonstrates an awareness of Rub-

bra's working methods and of its evolution over his career. He also makes frequent use of the Rubbra literature, printing sizable portions not only of performance and record reviews, but of scholarly essays as well.

The pity is that this excellently thorough book displays on nearly every page a defensive awareness of Rubbra's secondary stature. Like so many other studies of "minor" British composers, *The Music of Edmund Rubbra* begins from the premise that its subject has been accorded a "scandalous neglect" (p. ix) and that there is a need to make amends. Fair enough. But when this then becomes the book's "argument," the result is that the author's commentary becomes imbalanced and his claims for the composer exaggerated. Nowhere is this tendency more apparent (and more galling) than in Grover's defense of Rubbra's "intuitive approach" to composition—his preference, fascinating in itself, for an essentially unmapped-out method of musical continuation. It is precisely this intuition, we are told, which permits Rubbra's "imaginative recognition of the possibilities inherent in his material," one which "causes his music to unfold with that inevitability that makes one realize its course could not have proceeded differently" (p. 31). So extravagant a claim is gratuitous, and serves only to raise doubts about the author's credibility—a circumstance especially unfortunate in that such assertions overshadow the occasional detached assessment. (Grover, to be fair, can be directly critical of Rubbra.) Where Grover really goes too far, though, is in the treatment of the Rubbra literature, which he blatantly slants. Nearly every negative review of Rubbra's music lacks "understanding and sensitivity" (p. 187), and is greeted with "the contempt it deserves" (p. 65). Sympathetic reviews, on the other hand, are always "well thought out" (p. 99), "thorough and thought-provoking" (p. 170), or "perceptive" (p. 188). In so loading the dice, Grover belies his claim to have produced an "objective study" (p. 592), and undermines the book's intended aim—to spark sympathetic interest in Rubbra and to open an unprejudiced dialogue about the composer.

Viewed from a larger perspective, however, it is possible to see the faults of Grover's book as a reflection of the unique

predicament of British musical scholarship. Its special pleading is as much the product of Grover's personal enthusiasm for Rubbra's music as it is of his frustration over the peripheral status accorded British music as a whole. This is the real context in which to view his inflated claims for Rubbra's compositional method. The insistence that composers "can create important works which rely more on intuition than on a thought-out plan" (p. 73, emphasis added) is a defense, not just of Rubbra, but of the viability of compositional approaches alternative to central-European models. Arguably, the book's exaggerations and indiscretions are themselves the product of the uncertainty and insecurity that have long marked the British musical scene.

In this respect, the highlighting of the Rubbra literature gives the book an added dimension of which Grover is possibly unaware. The many printed reviews and critical assessments of Rubbra, most of them dating from the 1930s through the 1950s, tell us less about his music than they do about the conservative British musical establishment that dominated those years. Again and again we read reviews praising Rubbra for being "simple and direct in expression" (p. 86), for being "sincere" (p. 118), for eschewing "today's violent and exotic fashions" (p. 147), for not letting "sophistication blind him to feeling" (p. 85). As a document of that critical ethos—one that goes a long way towards explaining the music that twentieth-century Britain has produced—*The Music of Edmund Rubbra* is a fascinating sourcebook of the period. The irony is that Grover has not adequately measured the effects of that critical legacy, nor of his indebtedness to it.

JULIAN ONDERDONK  
New York University

**William Walton: A Source Book.** By Stewart Craggs. Aldershot: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 1993. [xiii, 333 p. ISBN 0-85967-934-9. \$69.95.]

Anyone who has felt the exhilaration of the First Symphony, who has been entertained by the wry satire of *Façade*, or who has exulted in the splendor of *Belshazzar's Feast* must find the relative void of scholarship on William Walton, one of Brit-

ain's greatest composers, most perplexing. Walton was certainly a major figure in twentieth-century music, but because he wrote in a comparatively conservative idiom he has received much less attention from scholars than the quality of his music might warrant. That situation may change as we depart this century and can view it without the ideological blinkers that have often obscured our vision in the past.

This change in perspective will be aided by the enterprising and assiduous efforts of scholars like Stewart Craggs, who has performed yeoman service with his sourcebooks on British composers, the most recent of which is devoted to Walton. (Craggs is already well known to devotees of British music for his bio-bibliographies on Richard Rodney Bennett [1989], John McCabe [1991], and Arthur Bliss [1988], all published by Greenwood Press.) Nor is this his first foray into Walton studies. His thematic catalogue of Walton's works (*William Walton: A Thematic Catalogue of His Musical Works*) was published by Oxford in 1977 and appeared in a second edition in 1990. This new source book provides a perfect complement to the earlier catalogue and promises to lay a useful foundation for future scholarship in the field.

In his foreword to Craggs's book, the eminent Ralph Vaughan Williams authority Michael Kennedy praises the author's "terrier-like persistence and pertinacity in tracking down facts and manuscripts, and unflinching devotion and enthusiasm for the man and his music" (p. xi). That devotion is evident in the painstakingly thorough treatment of the subject.

The book commences with a chronology listing the dates of significant events in Walton's life, his works, and their premieres. Even casual perusal of the chronology reveals interesting details, such as his meeting with George Gershwin in May 1925, the performance by Hindemith of the Viola Concerto in Berlin in January 1930 (with Walton conducting), and his lunch with the Queen (as a member of the Order of Merit) in November 1977.

The ensuing chapter on manuscripts and first editions is exhaustive. Craggs was aided in his work by the fact that the lion's share of these manuscripts were in one location when he prepared his catalogue. Of particular interest is the chapter on his correspondence. Walton insisted that he was