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## The Music of Herbert Howells, edited by Phillip A. Cooke and David Maw (review)

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*Music* (The World of Music, 12) [New York: Chanticleer Press, 1950], 36, 45, and 51).

Herbert and Barlow argue that military music should be seen as an artistic movement in its own right (p. 3). They write that “the march became important in the late nineteenth-century music and . . . contributed to a style that was seen as quintessentially British” (p. 13). Despite the artistic and nationalistic significance of this genre, however, Herbert and Barlow include only one music example and two facsimiles of marches, and they offer no music analysis. This is regrettable since they have a rich repertoire to pick from: the military pieces listed in appendices 2 and 3 (pp. 287–301) would have been a good starting point, as would the repertoire in Carl Boosé’s *Military Band Journal*, published from 1846 (mentioned by Herbert and Barlow on p. 186). The repertoire of other military band journals could also be analyzed (see for example, those mentioned in James C. Moss, “British Military Band Journals from 1845 through 1900: An Investigation of Instrumentation and Content with an Emphasis on Boosé’s *Military Journal*” [D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2001]). Would the music analysis of military marches reveal stylistic differences between the march, grand march, quickstep, and other military pieces? Would a comparison of these marches with marches in art music demonstrate how one style informed the other? What stylistic traits make a march “quintessentially British” (p. 13) versus, say, American? These are all questions worth exploring.

This well-researched book, “aimed at music, military and cultural historians” (p. 12), will surely also appeal to wind band and military history enthusiasts, Anglophiles, and *dix-neuviémistes*. Marching in step with the authors, there is much to learn about a period during which the military and its music were omnipresent in the lives of British citizens at home and across the British Empire.

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**The Music of Herbert Howells.** Edited by Phillip A. Cooke and David Maw. Woodbridge, Suffolk, Eng.: Boydell Press, 2013. [xxi, 360 p. ISBN

9781843838791. \$90.] Music examples, illustrations, tables, appendix, bibliography, index.

Herbert Howells (1892–1983) is best known as a composer of Anglican church music. He wrote over thirty settings of the Morning and Evening services, not to mention some fifty anthems, motets, and Masses, works frequently heard today in English and American churches. Yet, as this new book on Howells is at pains to point out, his career as a “church musician” began as a kind of sideline midway through his life. A prodigious talent and the favorite pupil of Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music (RCM), he made his initial mark with large-scale chamber and concert works, and throughout his career produced a steady stream of keyboard music for piano and clavichord (the latter an outgrowth of his interest in early English music). Professor of composition at the RCM from 1920, tireless adjudicator at university examinations and music competitions throughout the country, a fixture at the annual Three Choirs Festival (where a number of his works were premiered), Howells was a pillar of the English musical establishment. Even so, it seems that he never quite measured up to expectations. The big works—the symphonies, the operas—never materialized, and it was the uncertain reception accorded his orchestral works and concertos in the 1920s and 1930s that prompted him to turn to the established church, where his smaller-scale liturgical offerings found a ready audience.

The argument could thus be made that Howells, like Gerald Finzi (as portrayed in Stephen Banfield’s biography of Finzi), embraced the model of the “minor English composer”: content to work in the shadow of more important figures, avoid the compositional limelight, and concentrate on the creation of exquisite miniatures instead. Some of the essays in the volume appear to endorse this view insofar as they focus on Howells’s songs, services, and smaller-scale keyboard music. But this is to misread the intention of these essays, and indeed of the book as a whole, which pointedly treats Howells as a major, not minor, artist whose music is worth examining using the analytical techniques and research

methods of mainstream musicology. Thus Paul Andrews subjects Howells's thrice-written String Quartet No. 3 (In Gloucestershire), to a sophisticated source analysis that reconstructs the complex compositional history of the work and makes shrewd critical judgments about the relative merits of the different versions. (Andrews's now-standard catalog of Howells's works concludes the volume.) David Maw employs the most up-to-date analytical techniques of modern-day music theory to uncover the stylistic influences and formal innovations of Howells's "phantasy" works. (This genre, loosely modeled on the Tudor and Jacobean fantasy, was the brainchild of the twentieth-century chamber-music enthusiast W. W. Cobbett, who funded a long-running competition for such works.) Fabian Huss makes an equally convincing case for the oboe and clarinet sonatas while focusing in more generalized terms on large-scale compositional strategies of repetition and contrast. Lewis Foreman's crisp survey of the early orchestral music refreshingly highlights Howells's colorful orchestral palette, gleaned from his close study of Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky.

The essays on the slighter genres, cited above, are no less thorough. Jeremy Dibble dissects the solo songs and uncovers a remarkable subtlety of motivic interconnection and tonal argument. Lionel Pike's detailed bar-by-bar analysis of the motet *Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing* reveals a mind-boggling unity of design. In her study of the Six Pieces for organ, Diane Nolan Cooke nicely toggles back and forth between generalized discussions aimed at the nonspecialist and the detailed technical analyses of the professional musical theorist in order to explore the "dialectic of technique and aesthetic" (p. 39) at the heart of Howells's complex yet accessible music. Paul Spicer's study of melisma in selected songs and church works makes stimulating claims about the centrality of this technique to Howells's personal style. Phillip A. Cooke undertakes a detailed harmonic and timbral analysis of the Gloucester and King's College, Cambridge services to affirm that these moody and introverted works represented something "wholly new" (p. 87) in English liturgical music. Cooke's discussion, in a second essay, of Howells's church music of the 1960s and 1970s is

equally persuasive, though attempts to fit the music into the framework of Joseph Straus's "disability and late style" theories seem somewhat forced. Still, the effort to engage with contemporary musicological currents is striking.

Such currents inform the remaining essays as well, which focus engagingly on biographical and cultural context. Jonathan White examines the works Howells wrote under the eye of the notoriously conservative Stanford and concludes that the young composer consciously or unconsciously suppressed his own progressive tendencies in deference to his teacher. Pathology looms larger in Jonathan Clinch's essay on the failed Second Piano Concerto (1925), a work whose brash mixture of romantic and modern styles confused contemporary critics and impelled the defensive Howells ever afterwards to downplay his early ambition. Clinch's second essay, on the unfinished but endlessly tinkered-with Cello Concerto, invokes writings on musical hermeneutics and clinical psychology to interpret the solo cello part as a kind of self-portrait of the composer's unrelenting grief over the death of his young son Michael from bulbar poliomyelitis in 1935. Mourning, indeed, lies at the heart of Byron Adams's wide-ranging essay on Howells's masterpiece *Hymnus Paradisi*, a close biographical and psychological reading that relates the catharsis of grief expressed in that work to the formalized rituals commemorating the war dead in interwar Britain. Adams's conclusions about Howells's embrace of "the communal over the personal" (p. 304)—his tempering of romantic "expression" with impersonal "detachment"—are nicely complemented by Graham Barber's beautifully-written, if more obviously traditional, style study of the distancing effect achieved by Howells's use of the sarabande in many of his elegiac works.

The overall high quality of the book does not prevent a certain unevenness in its individual offerings, a perhaps inevitable consequence of having thirteen different contributors. Even so, a stronger editorial hand might have streamlined a few overlong and/or prolix offerings (by White, Maw, and Diane Nolan Cooke) and limited the unnecessary biographical asides that Spicer, the author of a valuable 1998 life of Howells, inserts into his essay. More serious

is the inconsistent application throughout of terms like “word painting,” “mannerism,” and “impressionism.” The looseness with which this last term, in particular, is used may be the legacy of the late Christopher Palmer, a pioneering Howells scholar whose fascinating but scattershot book *Impressionism in Music* would appear to cast a long shadow here (London: Hutchinson, 1973). Another, if smaller, concern is the limited usefulness of some of the analytical essays. Huss, Maw, Spicer, both Cookes, and Barber really contribute to our understanding of what makes Howells’s style unique. But because they are not properly rooted in historical context, Dibble’s and especially Pike’s observations possibly reveal more about these authors’ ingenious analytical skills than about Howells’s actual compositional procedure.

More surprising, given the book’s strenuous efforts to be up-to-date, are the appearance of the old tropes and self-congratulatory shibboleths of the first generation of writings about the so-called “English Musical Renaissance.” Thus Howells’s “long, soaring phrases [mirror] the shape of the interplay of ribs in stone-vaulted [cathedral] roofs” (p. 110), while a thumbnail sketch of nineteenth-century Anglican church music history treats everything before Stanford, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and of course Howells, as amateurish and clumsy (pp. 87–89). Lip service is frequently paid to Howells’s Tudor and Jacobean influences but only Barber offers any real technical and analytical evidence to back up the claim. Hardest to swallow are the many assertions that Howells’s “mystical” and “pantheistic” temperament relates to his Celtic family background, a completely unsubstantiated claim that likewise originates in Christopher Palmer’s work.

Where the authors successfully distance themselves from cliché is in their vigorous affirmation of Howells’s modernist credentials. But here they merely exchange one set of assumptions for another. “Modernism” has always been a suspect agent in the nationalist-dominated historiography of twentieth-century British music, and the effort to elucidate Howells’s highly evolved and complex harmonic and contrapuntal idiom and so redeem him from his “traditionalist” label marks a real step forward. The problem is that the book goes

too far in this direction and often overlooks (or makes insufficient reference to) what truly is consubstantive about Howells’s music—its fundamentally tonal orientation, its largely conventional approach to form and genre (even despite some striking structural “deformations” identified by Maw and Huss), and its unrelentingly emotional and expressive nature, even in works embodying an anti-romantic aesthetic. In this, the authors reveal a susceptibility to the still-dominant narrative of modernist criticism that views cutting-edge musical technique as the best, if not the only, measure of artistic value and achievement. Nor is it a coincidence that the word “modernism” is pointedly capitalized throughout the text. Valuing this aspect of Howells’s music above all, the book ultimately undervalues his creative engagement with more traditional techniques and the unique blending of styles and aesthetics that result.

But again, perhaps this is the necessary price of raising Howells’s profile from the relatively low position it currently occupies. It is certainly the consequence of bringing the study of his music into the mainstream of contemporary musicological scholarship. In this respect, *The Music of Herbert Howells* represents real progress in our understanding of this intriguing composer.

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**The Cambridge Companion to Michael Tippett.** Edited by Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones. (Cambridge Companions to Music.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. [xxxi, 299 p. ISBN 9781107021976 (hardcover), \$104.99; ISBN 9781107606135 (paperback), \$34.99; ISBN 9781107453852 (e-book), \$28.] Music examples, illustrations, tables, chronology, works list, bibliography, index.

*The Cambridge Companion to Michael Tippett* is a welcome, if unexpected, addition to a series that has typically focused on securely canonized composers or broader topics. However compelling Tippett might have been as a composer or person, he simply does not inhabit the cultural position of