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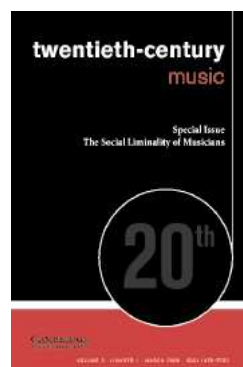
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### Alison Latham, ed., *Sing, Ariel: Essays and Thoughts for Alexander Goehr's Seventieth Birthday* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), ISBN 0 7546 3497 3 (hb)

DAVID BEARD

twentieth-century music / Volume 3 / Issue 01 / March 2007, pp 150 - 154

DOI: 10.1017/S1478572207000370, Published online: 27 February 2007

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S1478572207000370](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1478572207000370)

**How to cite this article:**

DAVID BEARD (2007). *twentieth-century music*, 3, pp 150-154 doi:10.1017/S1478572207000370

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**Alison Latham, ed., *Sing, Ariel: Essays and Thoughts for Alexander Goehr's Seventieth Birthday* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), ISBN 0 7546 3497 3 (hb)**

Assembled within the covers of this bulky volume, which is fronted by an image of the composer standing next to a cornfield near, one assumes, his Cambridgeshire home in Swaffham Prior, are the contributions by various friends, colleagues, former students, and family members in celebration of the life and work of Alexander Goehr. The contents are fairly evenly divided between those chapters dealing directly with Goehr's music and others concerned with more general subjects of interest to him. Those reflecting Goehr's wider interests include Amira Katz-Goehr's rather cryptic discussion of the *Analects* of Confucius, and Simha Arom and Jean Khalfa's brief examination of music and meaning. Other, more general thoughts are presented in Geoffrey Poole's chapter on the relationship between composer and society, Nicholas Cook's survey of issues in notation and performance, which compares Western examples to those of the Chinese *qin* repertory, and Iain Fenlon's investigation of the reception history of Monteverdi in Italy at the time of Mussolini. In all of these essays no specific links are made to Goehr's music, although the reader is indirectly encouraged to make them. For example, George Benjamin's focus on the setting of canon exercises as a central tenet of Goehr's teaching methods suggests a parallel to Goehr's own compositional need, noted by Stephen Plaistow in another chapter, 'to measure himself against a discipline, some standard, a mastery achieved by others' (100).

Interlaced between the book's chapters are several short messages from Simon Rattle, Elliott Carter, Oliver Knussen, Daniel Barenboim, Steve Martland, Sue Knussen, and Milton Babbitt. Although the desire to include as many voices as possible is, presumably, intended to reflect the diversity of Goehr's interests, to my mind this results in a frustrating diffuseness. Most of the essays are fairly short, usually less than ten pages, whereas those by Fenlon, Cook, and David Drew weigh in at sixteen, seventeen, and forty-six pages, respectively; a more select number of contributions of more equal length but with enough space to develop ideas sufficiently would have been preferable.

The symposium is headed by an honest and revealing essay by Robin Holloway, 'Alexander Goehr at 70'. Though at times prone to passing rather frank judgements, including a description of the early works as 'painstaking and audibly laborious' (1), Holloway manages to convey not only the imaginative breadth of Goehr's music and interests, but also many of the key issues that might profitably be explored in future studies. Clearly, Goehr has come a long way since the last symposium on his music.<sup>1</sup> Where the early works responded in various ways to the incongruous mixture of Boulez and other Darmstadt-related composers, as well as Messiaen, Schoenberg, Eisler, and Prokofiev, by 1980 the prevailing image 'was monolithic and Germanic – "Goehr the Progressive" – the selfconscious [*sic*] and ambitious

1 Bayan Northcott, ed., *The Music of Alexander Goehr: Interviews and Articles* (London: Schott, 1980).

heir to a mainly instrumental mainstream stretching back via Schoenberg to Brahms, thence to the Viennese Classics' (1).

What has emerged since, however, leads Holloway to re-explore and, to some extent, reassess the earlier music, not least in the light of early signs of later interests. The *Little Symphony* (1963), a work Boulez refused to conduct, is described as an early indication of the possibility of opening up 'fruitful relationships to the past without sinking into stylistic subservience' (2). Baroque revivalism was signalled in *Psalm IV* (1976), and a return to Renaissance music was first mooted in the paraphrase of Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* for solo clarinet (1969). In the 1980s and 90s these interests generated some of Goehr's most stimulating work to date, including . . . *a musical offering* (J.S.B. 1985) . . . , *Behold the Sun* (1985), and *Arianna* (1995). Holloway's retrospective of Goehr's music finds evidence of 'traditional' English lyricism, oriental subjects, East European folkloric style, and a greater affinity with the music of Schoenberg and certain Old Testament Judaic stories – as revealed in such works as *Naboth's Vineyard* (1968), *Sonata about Jerusalem* (1971), *Babylon the Great Is Fallen* (1974), and *The Death of Moses* (1992). As Holloway reminds us, Goehr, when recalling his birth in Berlin in 1933 and the fact that his father, Walter Goehr, studied with Schoenberg, declared that 'Schoenberg is *my Moses* and I am one of his people too' (3). For the present reader, this statement resonates, in a broader cultural sense, with the sentiments of the eponymous Jewish emigré in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, whose emerging understanding of his own past and that of his family begins to make sense of the feeling he experienced as a six-year-old – 'that some meaning relating to myself lay behind the Bible stories I was given to read'.<sup>2</sup>

If earlier discussions of Goehr tended to focus on the music rather than the composer, issues relating to the composer's identity are more frequently cited, though not fully explored, in this new book, in particular the notions of Goehr's music as a cultural crossroads and Goehr himself as a continuation of earlier expressions of difference. Often these ideas emerge between the lines, as, for example, in Christopher Wintle's observation that Goehr senses an 'ill-at-ease quality' in Schoenberg's serial music (297), stemming from an internalized aesthetic conflict. Elsewhere, Jonathan Dunsby in his discussion of *The Law of the Quadrille* (1979) notes that Goehr, like the subject of Kafka's poem, is a 'frank outsider', unable to pass by the gatekeeper whose declamatory voice forms the bass of the musical fabric, below the piano. This particular critical approach is continued in the observation that Goehr, like Schoenberg, possesses a 'recurrently unsmiling countenance [. . .] drawn from his personal experience of what it is like to be a musician always slightly out of line' (176).

Michael Wolpe and David Drew find more remote analogies in the lives of Bach and Busoni. Drew's focus on Busoni is explained by remarks made in an earlier published essay by Goehr titled 'Manchester Years',<sup>3</sup> in which he noted the existence of a 'Busoni cult' at the former Royal College of Music in Manchester while he was a student there, between 1952 and 1955, as well as a more general 'alternative musical culture' that extended to an interest in

2 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001), 76.

3 In *Finding the Key: Selected Writings of Alexander Goehr*, ed. Derek Puffett (London: Faber, 1998), 27–41.

Skrjabin, Van Dieren, and Sorabji. Drew explores Busoni's place in Berlin, his exchange of views with Schoenberg, and his complex and contradictory personality in which Jewish ancestry and a belief in Italian nationalism are mixed with anti-Semitism and a passion for German musical styles. Drew even seems to propose a broader theoretical and cultural exchange in the nexus of Busoni's *Wesen und Einheit der Musik*, Schoenberg's *Style and Idea*, and Goehr's *Finding the Key*.

One apparent contradiction that the book at times confronts is that between Goehr's teaching methods and writing style, on the one hand, and his music and wider interests, on the other. Geoffrey Poole argues that 'the man and the music are vital and interesting precisely because they contradict the almost cloistered retrospective security of the essays' (265). Beth Wiseman, however, suggests that Goehr 'produces music often with a stern face, with a tone of wry detachment or bemused observation on the human condition' (309). A correlate of these two views is offered in John Deathridge's assessment of the opera *Behold the Sun*:

Goehr's almost Baroque, and hence magnificently untimely, frame of mind as a composer, with its emphasis on craft, da capos, ornamentation, strict formal coherence, theological high mindedness and an intense subjectivity definitely not to be confused with romantic or indeed expressionist sensibilities, is surely also [...] a warning about, and a corrective to, the scarring of artistic experience by corrupt practice in the modern world. (302)

Given recent interest in cultural forms that are resistant to single historical narratives, Goehr's intransigence and the apparent 'untimely' qualities of his music suggest that Latham's book is very timely. The fact that diversity and cultural richness should emerge, paradoxically, as elements that define the essence of Goehr's music highlights the intrinsic difficulty of pinning down those elements of his music that define it as his own. Often Goehr's signature is revealed in the details, the repeated sections or a 'twist of phrase, reiterative rhythm or harmonic piquancy that initially seems to stand apart from the musical argument', as Paul Driver notes (315). Wiseman suggests, in relation to *Sing, Ariel* (1989–90), that another marker is the tendency of Goehr's music to invite the listener to make associations 'like windows onto other landscapes, other lives, opening briefly then closing' (311). This is more fully explored by Driver, who is attracted to Goehr's ability to be 'master of the memorable moment, or as he would call it, borrowing an expression from Brecht, the "quotable gesture"' (315).

Through the book as a whole, a number of specific works, or parts of them, are subjected to 'close reading', focusing on at least one work from each decade of Goehr's career (with the exception of the 1950s). The more detailed essays, however, submerge the reader without offering a broader critical framework against which to measure their findings. In analytical terms, Goehr's music remains in desperate need of a suitable champion, one who can relate content, crucially, to style.<sup>4</sup> Several chapters draw on source materials. For instance, Silvina

<sup>4</sup> It is regrettable that Julian Anderson, the book's consultant commissioning editor, who has provided valuable notes to recordings of Goehr's music, does not contribute a more analytical chapter; his contribution consists of a short 'personal note', and an interview with Goehr concerned primarily with pedagogical issues.

Milstein, in her examination of the first movement (Praeludium) of *Schlussgesang* (1996), looks at sketches. Her study reveals a continued preoccupation with the working methods of composers who influenced Goehr in the 1950s. Milstein explores Goehr's reconception of Schoenberg's serial procedures, and the French principle of harmonic *litanie* (in which a single pitch level or pair of levels is continually reharmonized). She also discusses the oblique recomposition of an archetypal Messiaen chorale, as well as 'modally conceived shapes and harmonies of the types found in Debussy and early Messiaen' (131). Aaron Einbond's study of the fifth and sixth movements of *The Death of Moses*, however, fails to trace in quite enough detail the processes through which twelve-note chords, drawn from Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, are serially and tonally transformed.

The 'opening up of a possible dialectic between serial and quasi-tonal procedure' is also discussed in Bayan Northcott's essay on the *Little Music for Strings* (1963). Northcott argues that this idea, along with a 'restoration of exact repetition as a contrasting principle to the flux of perpetual variation ordained by total serialism', was progressive by intention but misconstrued in its time as reactionary (170). His essay also reveals an unusually counter-intuitive moment in the first sketch for the *Little Music*, whereby the freely invented opening material was recast as a twelve-note set. With regard to Goehr's music from the 1960s, Northcott finds a parallel in the 'just pre-modern idioms of such composers as Busoni, Skryabin and the young Schoenberg back in the 1900s', although Goehr's personal touch is present in the 'curiously vagrant, not quite tonal harmony and penchant for parallel 6ths' (170). Christopher Wintle's chapter on 'island formation' suggests further analytical parallels with the music of Schoenberg. This concept, which was the subject of a lecture Goehr delivered on Schoenberg's Fourth String Quartet (1936), concerns the insertion of 'new sonorities, rhythms and textures', a 'fleeting, spectral music' that creates the sense of a comma just before the entry of the second subject (293). It is regrettable that Wintle does not pursue this idea in relation to Goehr's music, but his consideration of the topic is valuable enough in itself.

From a slightly different perspective, Stephen Plaistow presents a revealing, pianist's account of the piano work . . . *in real time* (1988–92), a piece that draws on aspects of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, Op. 120 (1819), and, according to Plaistow, 'hovers in a state of grace between regions of academic orthodoxy and deep reflection' (100). Rhythmic modulation obscures the use of twelve different tempos following a concern to express Messiaen's belief in absolute, real-time structures. This perception-based concept of structures that are not counted or contained by bar lines finds an intriguing, if drier, complement in Anthony Gilbert's study of rhythmic proportions in the Op. 11 *Suite* for six instruments (1961).

Aside from Holloway's opening essay and several others, many of the contributions to Latham's book demonstrate an almost wilful indirectness – a quality that he 'likes to remind' his daughter, Lydia Goehr, to use when writing about family matters (211) – both in terms of their content and a tendency, in some cases, to circle around the music. A case in point is David Drew's essay, which either assumes too much prior knowledge of the composer and his music, or is addressed so directly to Goehr that it threatens to exclude those beyond the

circle of family, friends, colleagues, and others whose obvious gratitude and warmth towards the book's dedicatee – for, *inter alia*, his teaching and guidance – is not matched by greater focus or a sense of inclusivity. In some ways, the book takes Goehr too much on his own terms, reflecting the tendency for overly detailed or tangential argument that Derrick Puffett noticed in some of Goehr's own writings.<sup>5</sup> The book's principal weakness is its failure to bring a consideration of subjects that interest Goehr into more integrated dialogue with discussions of his music, a feature that reflects the composer's own predisposition, as observed by Poole, to remain 'curiously uninterested in what we are supposed to bring to, or abstract from, our listening' (264). In general, the value of this collection of essays, as Driver argues of Goehr's music as a whole, resides more in its 'quotable moments' and fragmented themes than in any single contribution.

DAVID BEARD

twentieth-century music 3/1, 154–159 © 2007 Cambridge University Press  
doi:10.1017/S147857000382 Printed in the United Kingdom

**Michael Kennedy, *The Life of Elgar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ISBN 0 521 81076 0 (hb), 0 521 00907 3 (pb)**

'Come let me read the oft-read tale again', enjoins Matthew Arnold in his poem 'The Scholar Gypsy'. Readers may find that Arnold's invitation comes to mind as they peruse a volume recently published by Cambridge University Press, *The Life of Elgar*, by the distinguished music critic Michael Kennedy. Even though the author acknowledges that 'since my *Portrait of Elgar* appeared in 1968, a mass of documentation about him has been published' (x), those who admire Kennedy's earlier book can be reassured that, while many new facts concerning Elgar's life and music are presented in a lively fashion, in this latest traversal of Elgar's life neither the author's point of view nor his method is changed appreciably. Indeed, Kennedy has skilfully subsumed with an admirable thoroughness the researches of Jerrold Northrop Moore and Julian Rushton, among others, into his unwavering admiration for Elgar's achievement.

Kennedy's career is itself a testament to the sort of determination that enabled Elgar to transcend his provincial origins and achieve national prominence. Kennedy's youthful friendship with the elderly Vaughan Williams proved to be profitable to both men. Kennedy gained a mentor who encouraged his forays into music criticism and scholarship, while Vaughan Williams – always wily in detecting those whose gifts might be useful to him – sagely gained a disciple whose devotion and alacrity ultimately helped to shape his posthumous reputation. The fruits of this relationship – Kennedy's useful catalogue of Vaughan Williams's oeuvre and his invaluable *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* – constitute a lasting

<sup>5</sup> Puffett, 'Editorial Note', in *Finding the Key*, p. xii.