

Parry's Due: An Approach to His Music by Michael Trott

100 years ago, on 16 October 1918, Great Britain was still preoccupied with war, and the Armistice was almost a month away. Most of the key figures in British music attended a memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral for Sir Hubert Parry, who had died nine days previously at his Sussex home. The stewards had difficulty finding places for some, so packed was the Cathedral. The reason was clear: from late Victorian times, Parry had been an outstanding figure in the musical world: a prolific composer, a significant writer on music, an educator and administrator, but also a music scholar and free-thinker, whose keenness of vision was an inspiration to his many students and whose humility and integrity endeared him to all who met him.

A century on, a common attitude to Parry is conceding that he was a most agreeable man and a fine musical educator and that a handful of his works are outstandingly good but judging the rest as dull and frankly rather commonplace, unworthy of exploration. Why, people wonder, did Parry not leave us more works of the stature of, say, *Blest Pair of Sirens* (described by Gerald Finzi as 'one of the supreme fusions of voice and verse')? This attitude is a pity, for there are great rewards for those who persevere in exploration of Parry's significant output of compositions. There are surely more than a handful of great works: besides the universally applauded *Blest Pair*, *I was Glad*, *Jerusalem* and the *Songs of Farewell*, there are, for example, the fine *Ode on the Nativity*, the impressive *Symphonic Variations* and the best of Parry's songs. Parry had the necessary attributes of a great composer: a proper compositional technique (he taught composition at one time); appeal to a wide cross-section of the musical public; a substantial output (in most musical forms) and a distinctive personal voice. Yet there is something in that common reservation about much of his music.

Overcome by distractions?

The explanation of Parry's dullness, that he was over-worked is a tempting one, since it is beyond doubt that he took on too much during his last third of his life. Alan Dickinson, Professor of Music at Durham University from 1946 to 1964, wrote an article on 'The Neglected Parry' in *The Musical Times* in April 1949, concluding that 'the lifelong crusader against musical dissipation was himself overcome by too many calls on his attention to keep the inner fire alight.' But in the 1970s the composer and Parry biographer Bernard Benoliel and the musicologist Malcolm MacDonald (1948-2014) made a study of Parry's works to divide them into 'inspired' and 'uninspired' categories. (Their aim was to assess the judgment of Parry's contemporaries with a view to promoting underestimated works, and this led happily to some enterprising Parry recordings in the 1990s.) When one considers the works they consigned to the 'uninspired' category (*Prometheus*, *Beyond These Voices There is Peace*, *Judith*, *De Profundis*, *Saul*, Symphonies 1 and 2 and *War & Peace*), it is not apparent that composition of these works corresponded to periods in Parry's life when there were exceptional difficulties or distractions - it is noted that none comes from Parry's noteworthy 'Indian Summer' period - or that he was impelled to write them by factors imposed on him rather than by inspiration. We may not agree with the Benoliel/MacDonald evaluations, but it does seem that Parry is an uneven composer. (Unevenness is an attribute of many well-known and loved composers, such is the nature of inspiration.)

Parry's dullness lies surely not in his scoring. Elgar told Vaughan Williams at the 1922 Three Choirs Festival that Parry's music 'could be scored in no other way'. In a broadcast in 1948 to mark the centenary of Parry's birth, Gerald Finzi, who had catalogued Parry's music, agreed, and Herbert Howells resented the 'loose critical scorn that has been directed at Parry's scoring' (*Music & Letters*, April 1969).

If we believe it is lack of musical colour that holds Parry back, we should read what he said himself on the subject: 'The real function of colour in music is to enhance human susceptibility to what has to be said by other means, such as melody or harmony. But these latter require some mental activity to discern and are most welcome in their higher phases to those who want merely pleasant feelings' (*Style in Musical Art*, Macmillan, 1924).

Moral battle

We are now getting warm in our search. Observe the disdain for 'those who want merely pleasant feelings'. Parry's aim was not to ravish his listeners' aural senses but to uplift. He did not write music for popularity - his copyist, Emily Daymond, recalled his saying of his Fourth Symphony, 'People liked it so absurdly, I thought there must be something wrong with it.' Awareness of this puritanical streak in Parry's character cannot, of course, elevate his music in popular estimation, but it allows a fuller appreciation of his works in the knowledge that his musical gifts sometimes blossomed in spite of his personal traits as well as because of them. If we fail to recognise the moral battle Parry set himself in his art, we fail to recognise his achievement in its broadest artistic terms. His fear of just giving people 'pleasant feelings' seems extraordinary to us in the twenty-first century, but we should remember that Parry was born in the mid-nineteenth century to a high-minded father and witnessed the tragic consequences of his beloved brother Clinton yielding to intoxicating pleasures (alcohol and drugs). Music for Parry was a great moral force. In his Parry Centenary broadcast in 1948, Finzi reminded people of Vaughan Williams's assertion that Parry made no distinction between a moral and artistic problem and that it was wrong to him to use musical colour for its own sake or to cover weak material with harmonic device. Finzi thought we should therefore not look for 'the nervous vitality and glowing lyricism of an Elgar, or the opulence of a Strauss, or the refinements of a Ravel'. For Finzi the dullness that we perceive in Parry's music is the 'equability' that was the inevitable result of the fusion of 'Parry the Puritan' and 'Parry the man of feeling'. Finzi contended that Parry projected his ethics through his music, and this habitual bending of music towards a high purpose often detracted from its value as music alone.

Emotions outside his understanding

Composer, organist and teacher Alexander Brent Smith (1889-1950) wrote in 1926 that 'as a composer of manly, direct music, breezy music, music that demanded no great subtlety of wit or passionate sentiment, Parry will stand for ever beside the great composers' (*Music & Letters*, Vol.VII, No.3). But elsewhere, he too felt, Parry could be dull and he put this down to Parry's 'peculiar psychology and mentality'; Parry 'suffered musically from an excess of those very qualities for which he is justly admired - courage, strength, fearlessness, modesty ...', so that, while his manly personality could create works of strength, nobility and exalted sentiment, he was unable to express convincingly emotions that were outside of his understanding and sympathy, especially baser emotions.

Revealing attitude to Mahler

Parry's attitude to Mahler is instructive. In a retrospective of Parry in *The Musical Times* of November, 1918, the music critic Robin Legge (1862-1933) remembered 'the occasion of the production of a Mahler symphony at Queen's Hall ... when certain sections of the musical cosmos were endeavouring to raise Mahler to the dignity of an idol. Parry, who never lost an opportunity for hearing all that was new, however much he may have disliked it, broke into a circle of critics who were eagerly discussing the virtues of Mahler's music.' According to Legge, Parry delivered a 'lusty crack in the ribs for one of them, and the remark followed that "whatever you fellows may think of this music, at least it is the music of an ill-conditioned man." ' A quick-thinking critic might have countered: 'Why can't Mahler be ill-conditioned? He is a composer, not an ambassador.' Those who love Mahler's music are able to enjoy the range of human emotions, positive and negative, without feeling that moral judgment is called for. In Parry's view, however, music needs to express the aspirational, majestic, breezy, tender, exuberant (as his music ably does), not the morbid, self-pitying, sentimental.

Musical sincerity

In the first chapter of Parry's book *Style in Musical Art*, he elevates consistency of style in a work: 'Lack of fibre, lack of the power of persistence, prevents the maintenance of the high level of thought, and then comes the inevitable make-up - mere phrases decked in futile and superfluous ornament ... ' Parry applauds Bach and Beethoven for being 'passionately earnest'. In *The Art of Music*, Parry criticizes Meyerbeer for the lack of 'wholesome musical sincerity', even though his 'power of astonishing and

bewildering is almost unlimited'. So it is clear: Parry believes a prerequisite to musical composition is to condition oneself, to rid oneself of any bad mood.

Ethical motivation

Great music requires the blending of emotionalism and intellectualism with inspiration. The strengths of Parry's music reflect those of the man. Parry had the emotionalism (Finzi's 'man of feeling') and the intellectualism (just consider the many books and articles he wrote on music). The weaknesses of his music may involve the flagging of artistic inspiration but derive partly from the unreasonable ethical standards he set himself. It has been said that Parry projected his ethical ideas at the expense of his music. Parry had a pronounced moral attitude to all he did ('Parry the Puritan'). In his unpublished book *Instinct and Character*, he viewed with alarm music's ability to excite by what he called superficial effect. Art, he asserted, 'satisfies in higher natures the craving which makes lower natures resort to alcohol and drugs ...' When Parry wrote these words, surely he had in mind the moral collapse of his beloved brother, Clinton. It was this seminal event in his life, along with the loss of his mother soon after his birth (that probably unhinged Clinton in the first place) which led to Hubert's puritan outlook and a self-dissatisfaction that always dogged him, an unfortunate imbalance in his great character. Parry had deep reserves of love and charity, yet recoiled from excessive emotion, be it in behaviour or music. That he understood the mechanisms of music is beyond question, yet he composed 'with the handbrake on'. (The motoring analogue is apt, considering that Parry was a keen early motorist and loved speed.)

Moral earnestness

The different *mores* of our times make it difficult fully to appreciate Parry. Writing in the Three Choirs Festival programme book fifty years ago, Harold Watkins Shaw (1911-1996) wrote that 'in some respects modern views are ill-attuned to Parry's outlook ... his emphasis on moral earnestness, progress and idealism awakens little sympathy today.' True enough for the 1960s, perhaps, but should we now not make the effort to understand Parry?

Self-imposed reticence

Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, and Parry, Director of the Royal College of Music, had been friends and contemporaries, both composers and heads of musical colleges in the capital, both associated with the revival of British music in the late nineteenth century. On 23 May 1919 Mackenzie delivered an address on Parry at the Royal Institution. He referred to Parry's 'self-imposed reticence', but went on to talk of his 'manliness of style', 'boldly energetic and majestic measures', 'broadly sweeping melodies' and Parry's gentler side, especially seen in his songs. Here, it is suggested, lies our best approach to Parry's music: acknowledge the unusual and unfortunate self-censor within him but give him his due and recognise the strong aspirational (*Blest Pair of Sirens*), majestic (*I Was Glad*), breezy (the opening 'Allegro' of Symphony No.3 in C Major), tender (the 'Intermezzo' from *The Birds* suite) and exuberant ('Father Playmate' from the *Shulbrede Tunes*) elements in his music - even the uncharacteristic sensuous element (*The Lotos-Eaters*).

It is just possible to imagine an unrestricted Parry - glimpsed in the high peaks of his achievements - but would it have been the same man? Finzi expected Parry's music to endure by its kindling tenderness and 'Miltonic dignity', and that it has surely done.

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Michael Trott's book *Hubert Parry: A Life in Photographs* (2018) is published by Brewin Books. A review will appear shortly on MusicWeb International.