Transposition

Musique et Sciences Sociales

7 | 2018

Le prix de la musique

Joanna Bullivant, *Alan Bush, Modern Music, and the Cold War: The Cultural Left in Britain and the Communist Bloc*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/2215>

DOI: 10.4000/transposition.2215

ISSN: 2110-6134

Publisher

CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Electronic reference

Pete Dale, « Joanna Bullivant, *Alan Bush, Modern Music, and the Cold War: The Cultural Left in Britain and the Communist Bloc* », *Transposition* [Online], 7 | 2018, Online since 15 September 2018, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/2215> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.2215>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

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- 1 Radical politics and radical aesthetics: how closely are they linked? This question is spectral to Joanna Bullivant's excellent book on the communist composer Alan Bush, in my reading. Does a composer with a strong commitment to radical social change, such as Bush, need to shock and/or challenge the audience with experimentation, dissonance and/or ostentatious novelty of some kind? Alternatively, are there other (and perhaps more subtle, nuanced) ways of navigating the aesthetic path whilst nonetheless retaining a recognisable commitment to the ambitions of the left?
- 2 These questions are spectral in that Bullivant does not explicitly ask them; and yet, throughout the text, they implicitly arise and are considered in different ways. Take the analyses of Bush's 1936 *Concert Piece for 'Cello and Piano* (pp.40-5), for example. Bullivant draws our attention to 'the tensions between his radical rhetoric and its realisation in practice' in the piece: at a specific bar, Bush offers us 'a violent, palpably modernist passage' but elsewhere we might find an 'immensely nostalgic, lyrical quality' (p.45). The lyricism of the latter passage 'leaves a suggestion of doubt about Bush's agenda', Bullivant suggests. Her attention to detail in regard to the notation she offers is excellent; the modernism of the former passage, relative to the nostalgic later passage, can be clearly seen. A question arises, nonetheless: is the 'agenda' of Bush, about which Bullivant finds herself in 'doubt' when she encounters the nostalgic/

lyrical passage, an agenda for musical or social change? Overall, *Alan Bush, Modern Music, and the Cold War* gives a clear picture of a man with an absolute and unshakeable commitment to communism. It would seem, then, that Bullivant comes to 'doubt' Bush's agenda in an aesthetic rather than a political sense. She is entitled to do this, of course, but here and elsewhere I would argue that she could have wrestled in more depth with the theoretical question of the relation between the aesthetics of modern music and the political ambitions of a communist such as Bush.

- 3 Alan Bush, for those who are unfamiliar with his work, was a British composer whose lifetime spanned the bulk of the twentieth century. Also bearing in mind that Bush was a committed communist from 1935 onwards, it is not surprising that his fortunes varied in terms of critical reception during the course of his life. Bullivant's book indicates that, essentially, Bush's leftism was not a major impediment to modest success prior to the War, and that the BBC actually offered 'unprecedented chances for Bush to use his expertise in Soviet music and international popular song in the service of British wartime culture' (p. 98). The latter opportunity arose after Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941: immediately prior to this, in March of the same year, the BBC had effectively blacklisted Bush for a short period, with Vaughan Williams writing an open letter in support of Bush (p. 96); but, of course, things changed once the Soviets were allies of Britain. However, the *rapprochement* was short lived. Bullivant informs us of 'wranglings' with the BBC in the 1950s (p. 182) and, more directly, that 'Bush's music was often rejected by individuals and organisations as contrary to their aesthetic and political values' (p. 244). The BBC reports which she looked at as part of her research 'are littered with discussions of musical autonomy and the ideological content of the works' (*ibid*).
- 4 Bush's later work was well-received on the Soviet side of the 'iron curtain' after World War II but it is fair to summarise that his overall success was limited compared with other composers of the period. He has fallen as a somewhat obscure historical figure within British composition when compared to, for example, Tippett and Britten. A vital question is, was this due to some inferiority of compositional skill/imagination or, alternatively, was it Bush's political radicalism which hindered his career? Bullivant wrestles with the essence of this question in her Introduction, raising some very interesting points and queries. 'Just as Bush sits uneasily within British modernism', Bullivant writes, 'he remains problematic as the subject of a rehabilitated picture of Western communism' (p. 10). The former difficulty arises because Bush was not a straightforward modernist but, rather, a composer who tempered aesthetic avant-gardism with an appetite to communicate with audiences which might not readily accept the radical experimentalism of modern music. The latter difficulty arises because Bush was no communist dilettante but, rather, a card-carrying party member with a seemingly unshakeable willingness to defend, for example, the post-war actions of the Soviet Union (Bullivant criticises him for 'naivety' in this regard (p. 137)).
- 5 But which was the bigger problem for Bush's career? Certainly he was watched, as a communist, and had his ambitions 'quashed by MI5' (p. 101). He fell victim to a 'crackdown on communists' within the BBC in 1948, 'a curtailment of the most significant facet of his wartime career' namely his work for the corporation (p. 138). However, it is not impossible for an outright communist artist to be critically-acclaimed, particularly once they have died; Brecht being an obvious example. Moreover, the difficulty for Bush, Bullivant's book seems to indicate, was not just political but also, and crucially, a

variable aesthetic position he intermittently adopted. Bullivant draws our attention to 'criticisms [of Bush's music] and unflattering comparisons' with Berg and a 'conception of Bush's work as essentially un-modern' (p. 179). The author shows that Bush's modernist tendencies varied, in practice.

- 6 Bullivant suggests that Bush attempted 'a curious synthesis of the theories of Caudwell, Hindemith and Schoenberg' (p. 160) but failed to live up to his 'rhetorical claims for a perfect synthesis' of this type (p. 174). Nonetheless, she shows in detail that there is a 'continuity' between a work such as Bush's 1929 *Dialectic for String Quartet* ('the high watermark of his modernism') and the *English Suite* of 1945-6 (ibid). The author demonstrates, through detailed analysis of the pieces in question, that Bush did not drop modernism purely through fidelity for the diktats against 'formalism' which emerged from Stalin's Soviet Union after the war. On the contrary, Bush's compositions had demonstrated an interest in folk song prior to 1948 (p. 150) because 'English folk song, depending on the type, could prop up bourgeois culture or sound the keynote of popular resistance' (p. 147). Bush came to see the communist composer's task as 'breaking down the age-old division between learned or art music on the one hand, and folk or popular music on the other' in order to 'break down the class divisions which these musical divisions have symbolised and helped to perpetuate' (p. 149). Bush wanted to 'heal the breach between serious and popular music' (p. 175).
- 7 Bush's interest in popular music waned with arrival of the Beatles (p. 221) and Bullivant implies that Bush was amongst the communists who were 'horrified by the course of popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s' (p. 223). He made 'concessions to the spirit of post-war popular music' but also felt 'discomfort' at its nature (p. 226). In the end, Bullivant proposes that his music was 'profoundly modern' (p. 244) but she does wonder whether he had given due consideration to 'building a repertoire that was both politically and *musically* new and distinctive' (p. 68, emphasis retained).
- 8 Does that aesthetic novelty have to be tied to political questions? The fascinating thing about Bush is that he seems not to have felt this necessary. He wanted music that 'encouraged engagement' (p. 74) and thus wrestled with 'tensions between his [modernist-orientated] aesthetics and what was achievable in practice, and between his impulses towards desire for tradition and desire for innovation' (p. 75). He found means by which 'those with little or no musical training could participate in musical activities' (p. 81). This reviewer recalls my own father, a poorly educated print worker in the 1940s and Communist Party member with no musical training, speaking of participation in singing activities led by Bush as a positive and enjoyable experience. Perhaps Wilfred Mellers made a fair critique of Bush's 1940s programmes of 'sophisticated' music with 'simple and direct songs' as being 'utterly disparate' to a problematic extent (p. 62). Might it not be the case, however, that what we find here is not an aesthetic disadvantage (at least from a modernist's standpoint) but a political gain?
- 9 Joanna Bullivant has given us a good deal to think about with this excellent book, in regard to the tensions between modernist aesthetics and radical politics. She is critical, and rightly so in this reviewer's opinion, of JPE Harper-Scott's Badiouian dismissal of jazz, minimalism and pop as music which 'simply rejects the principle of emancipated dissonance outright', implicitly querying his suggestion that 'increased saleability' is all that drives the rejection in question (p. 12). Alan Bush, were he alive, would presumably have pointed out that increased *engagement* of the masses with the

concerns of the left can also be increased when dissonance is tempered with traditional musicality. Certainly Bush dared to label Schoenberg's music as 'arid and hysterical'; and yet the former also very much admired the latter, nonetheless (p. 35). Bush trod a careful line between modern music and leftist politics, as Bullivant's shows us. His case is fascinating and her book invaluable food for thought, for those who seek a subtle navigation between the tensions of radical aesthetics and radical politics.

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Pete Dale studied at Sunderland Polytechnic 1989-92. On graduating, he played in several indie/punk underground bands (Pussycat Trash, Red Monkey, Milky Wimpshake) and set up the cult DIY label/distributor Slampt which ran very successfully between 1992 and 2000. Taking up school teaching in 2001, Pete completed an MA in Music (2005) and then a PhD at Newcastle (2010) whilst simultaneously working as a teacher. He took an early career fellowship at Oxford Brookes in 2012, subsequently becoming Senior Lecturer in Popular Music at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2013. His monographs include *Anyone Can Do It: Tradition, Empowerment and the Punk Underground* (Ashgate, 2012), *Popular Music and the Politics of Novelty* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) and *Engaging Students with Music Education: DJ Decks, Urban Music and Child-centred Learning* (2017). Pete is associate editor of the *Punk & Post-Punk* journal and a founding member of the Punk Scholars Network.