

BRITISH MUSIC AND MODERNISM, 1895-1960, EDITED BY MATTHEW RILEY (LONDON AND NEW YORK: ASHGATE, 2010) ISBN 978-0-7546-6585-4 (HB) £115, (LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2016) ISBN 978-1-1382-4602-7 (PB) £39.99 [MICHAEL SHERBORNE]

If modernism is characterised by complexity, fragmentation, and a willingness to challenge expectations, then Messrs Taylor & Francis seem to have mastered the neglected art of modernist book-pricing. The book under review originally appeared from their Ashgate imprint at £65 (I am using British prices, with apologies to readers elsewhere), but as noted above, the price has since risen to £115, which works out at a remarkable 35p per page. However, their own website and some others discount it back down to around £80. (Beware the second-hand store in Texas, incidentally, which wants £146.67, plus another £7.02 for shipping to the UK.) The paperback edition, under the Routledge imprint, has meanwhile been discounted to £27.99. Downloading it as an e-book would still set you back £39.99, except that their website offers it at a £4 reduction, while also mysteriously proclaiming that it is available ‘from £20’. This may be a reference to their rental terms (no, I am serious) of £20 for six months’ access or £24 for twelve. In short, if you want to purchase this book, you had better set aside a few hours for some serious shopping around.

What you will finally get for your money is fourteen academic articles which consider how a number of British composers responded to modernism during the period from 1895 to 1960. These include Elgar, Holst, Walton, Vaughan Williams, and Frank Bridge, as well as figures who may be less familiar, such as Walter Leigh, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Humphrey Searle. The editor explains in his introduction that, while few British composers fully committed themselves to modernism, many used it as a source of formal innovations. In fairness to them, he points out, modernism was a varied and evolving phenomenon, not an unproblematic force for artistic progress. Britain’s relatively stable history – no invasions, no revolutions, some degree of constitutional reform – muted demand for a continental-style overthrow of norms, artistic or otherwise. Riley’s nuanced view of the British scene, though not maintained by every contributor, strikes me as a refreshing contrast to the heavy-handedness of much literary criticism, which has tended to treat modernism as simply a Good Thing that all writers of merit should have embraced.

What has all this to do with the subject of H. G. Wells? As you may have guessed, the book contains a chapter (by Riley himself) devoted to Wells’s 1936 science fiction movie *Things to Come*, loosely based on his book *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), and Arthur Bliss’s accompanying music. Wells wanted the film to be a radical work of art in which dialogue, pictures, and music were totally integrated. ‘Sound sequences and picture sequences were made to be closely interwoven’, he explained. ‘This Bliss music is not intended to be tacked on; it is part of the design’. Wells told the composer that he wanted ‘a complete sensuous and emotional synthesis’. The depiction of a world war, the collapse of civilisation, and the creation of a Utopia by a scientific elite was to be an inspirational feast for the senses, not a run-of-the-mill drama with long-winded dialogue and static camera shots. In practice, the ideal of the Wagnerian ‘cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*’, as Riley calls it, was not properly realised. Only for the ‘rebuilding of civilisation’ sequence did the film-makers fit the pictures to the music as Wells had wished. Significantly, many people regard this as the best part of the film. Due to the impractical nature of many of Wells’s ideas and the high cost of filming, conventional working methods prevailed, the script was heavily cut and the music was edited to fit the action, some sections discarded, some restructured, some buried under dialogue. Privately, Wells regarded the finished film as ‘pretentious, clumsy and scamped’, and, overall, cinemagoers have agreed with his evaluation.

In Riley’s article, ‘Music for the Machines of the Future: H. G. Wells, Arthur Bliss and *Things to Come*’, Wells’s ambitious concept gets more credit than Bliss’s score. Perhaps forgetting his earlier caution, Riley chides the composer for too shallow an engagement with modernism. He concedes that the soundtrack music is ‘technically competent’, but finds it derivative of Wagner, Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, and Stravinsky. Yet he goes on to describe some of these echoes as ‘allusions’, which suggests a rather more constructive view, one in line with those critics who praise today’s film music by the likes of John Williams, Hans Zimmer, and Danny Elfman precisely for channelling Strauss, Tchaikovsky, and Orff. Perhaps Bliss just came up with postmodern eclecticism before his time.

Riley has an impressive understanding of Wells, at least up to a point. He is able to quarry Wells’s *The King Who Was a King* (1929) for an account of the author’s cinematic aesthetic, and to cite both

'Scepticism of the Instrument' (1903) and *Anatomy of Frustration* (1936) on Wells's commitment to the ultimate reconciliation of art and science. Yet he overstates Wells's totalitarian leanings (understandably so in the context of *Things to Come*), sees no modernist characteristics in any of Wells's writings (not even the early science fiction?), claims that Wells believed Utopia could only be achieved through global catastrophe (in fact he thought it likeliest to come about through the growth of international institutions, but knew catastrophe worked better in stories), and misleadingly calls *The Shape of Things to Come* 'a five-volume history of the future' (rather than a single volume in five sections). Overall, however, Riley makes a good case that Wells's approach is more formally interesting than Bliss's. Sadly, in the last analysis, he concludes, such 'dazzling play of music, light and motion' as Wells and his collaborators did manage to achieve served as a way to conceal the film's dubious politics. We are asked to gawp at the rebuilding of civilisation and forget to ask who controls it, who benefits, and who suffers.

Readers will be aware that *Things to Come* and its music have been the subject of another sophisticated discussion recently, in a sixteen-page Wells Society occasional paper by Eric L Fitch. The Fitch analysis supplies considerably more detail than Riley on the development of the music and the different versions of the suite that were subsequently released on record. While Riley states that the film's music editor Lionel Salter partially recomposed Bliss's music before the soundtrack recording was made, Fitch drills down a little further and tells us that it was actually the musical director Muir Mathieson, conducting the score with a baton in one hand and a stopwatch in the other, who made all the decisions which Salter implemented and these entailed cuts and reallocations rather than rewriting. Salter's only 'recomposition' was to insert the crash of a gong whenever there was a change of scene, in a slightly desperate attempt to conceal the abruptness with which Bliss's music was cut and a new section brought in.

If you want a thorough account of how the music was developed, therefore, you will find everything you need in Fitch's clear and informative booklet. If you want cultural context and some analysis using extracts from the score, then Riley's article is certainly worth your attention, too.