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WORDS
ABOUT MUSIC
An Anthology
John Amis and
Michael Rose



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John Amis
and
Michael Rose

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also by John Amis

AMISCELLANY

Taking therefore those precepts which being a childe I learned, and laying them together in order, I began to compare them with some other of the same kinde set downe by some late writers: But then was I in a worse case then before. For I found such diversitie betwixt them, that I knew not which part said truest, or whome I might best beleeve. Then was I forced to runne to the workes of manie, both strangers and Englishmen . . . But what labour it was to tomble, tosse, & search so manie bookes, & with what toyle & wearinesse I was enforced to compare the parts . . . I leave to thy discretion to consider: and none can fully understande, but he who hath had or shall have occasion to do the like . . .

THOMAS MORLEY *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* 1597

Foreword

You could say that this anthology has been in preparation for a hundred years. For fifty years each of us has been immersed in music: playing it, listening to it, composing it, singing it, talking about it, writing about it – and reading about it. Reading biography, criticism, analysis, history, gossip, fiction, poetry: all the kinds of words about music that we could lay our hands on.

The original idea was a book of musical anecdotes. But the more we thought about that, the more difficult it seemed until, happily, the matter was decided for us by Norman Lebrecht, whose *Book of Musical Anecdotes* would certainly have put anything we produced straight out of the market. In any case, we had already begun to feel that there might be more satisfaction in something wider in scope, mainly drawn from our own memories (with the necessary prompting and verification): a sort of ragbag of prose, poetry, criticism, letters, humour and anything else that tumbled out of the residue of the years.

Of course, it's been done before – but perhaps not quite in this form, and not recently. Eric Blom's *Music Lover's Miscellany* is over fifty years old, and Arthur Jacobs's *Music Lover's Anthology* over forty. Others have been more specific in intention: Jacques Barzun's *Pleasures of Music* was essentially literary; Sam Morgenstern's *Composers on Music* limits itself as its title suggests; Hans Gal's *The Musician's World* concentrates entirely on letters. Our aim was more general: we deliberately cast the net as wide as possible, to include whatever we had enjoyed or been struck by for no better reason than that we had enjoyed or been struck by it, and were guided by no worthier purpose than a wish to share good things with other people.

Above all, it is a completely random selection. And that really is where our difficulties began: what sort of shape to give the random. Chronological? Not interesting enough – all those early misspellings in one bunch, constant arguments about which came before what, modern stuff all together at the end. Alphabetical? Dull. Categorical? Better, except that it could be tedious to get, say, all the criticism in one fell swoop and, given the variousness of the material we wanted to include, it might often be difficult to decide on one category rather than another. All the same, variety seemed to be the clue, and the idea emerged of a sort of snake form, in which the pieces simply led on

through categories which act, however, as general signposts to the reader and do not unduly fetter the authors.

Of course, there were problems: the snake tended to coil round on itself and pass by the same place twice. Is Liszt playing the piano a portrait or a performer? Or Ailred of Rievaulx a churchman or a critic? And where would you put the following note, which John Christie printed on the front of the 1935 Glyndebourne programme:

Patrons are earnestly requested not to flash TORCHES during the Performances. It is aggravating to the rest of the audience but intolerable to the Artists. It is much worse than 'walking behind the bowler's arm' at cricket.

In the end, some pieces resisting classification, or at least organization, were included in a final section as a sort of ragbag within a ragbag. As a result, although we realize that this is a book for dipping into rather than for continuous reading, we hope that there is generally some sense of leading the reader on, and when there isn't – well, that the change of key is an acceptable one.

We have derived inspiration (and pinched a few ideas) from fellow anthologists like Frank Muir and John Julius Norwich, and many other friends and readers have helped to identify vague memories. We thank them all, and we hope that they, and you, will enjoy meandering through the result as much as we have enjoyed chopping it up and piecing it together on our kitchen tables.

JOHN AMIS, MICHAEL ROSE

Editors' Note

Minimal source information is given at the end of each extract – enough to lead the curious reader to the full details given in the main source list at the end of the book. The dates at the end of each extract are generally those of the publication from which it is taken. However, where they *precede* the title they refer to the date of the incident quoted.

Music is the eye of the ear

THOMAS DRAKE 1616

Music is a secret and unconscious mathematical problem of the soul

GOTTFRIED WILHELM VON LEIBNIZ 1714

Music is that which cannot be said but upon which it is impossible to be silent

ANON. attributed to Victor Hugo

[Music] is a method of employing the mind, without the labour of thinking at all, and with some applause from a man's self

SAMUEL JOHNSON quoted by Boswell 1785

Musick is the thing of the world that I love most

SAMUEL PEPYS *Diary* 30 July 1666

The Nature of Music

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In all the twenty volumes of the latest edition of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (as Charles Rosen pointed out in his review of the *New Grove* in the *New York Review of Books*) there is no entry for 'Music'. Perhaps with reason: attempts to define music have invariably raised twice the number of questions that they have answered, and bear about as much relation to a Beethoven symphony as a lobster quadrille. Vaughan Williams's 'Music's a rum go!' is fine because VW was fine, but it gets us no further than Santayana's 'Music is essentially useless, as life is' – though it must be admitted it's a good deal less depressing. Shakespeare, being a poet, got round the problem very cleverly:

Preposterous ass! that never read so far
To know the cause why music was ordained!

But the first English music critic met it head on:

And grant that a man read all ye books of musick that ever were wrote,
I shall not allow that musick is or can be understood out of them, no
more than the tast of meats out of cookish receipt books.

And one has to say that, of the two, one's sympathies are with Roger North.

Nor is the purpose of music, or its effect, any easier to pin down. We all know that it soothes a savage breast, and Bacon tells us that, generally, it 'feedeth the disposition of spirit which it findeth' which is probably true but isn't necessarily a recommendation. Jane Austen considered it 'a very innocent diversion, and perfectly compatible with the profession of a clergyman', but then Jeremy Collier, only a little over a century earlier, felt so differently that it is hard to believe that they are talking about the same subject:

Musick is almost as dangerous as Gunpowder; and it may be requires looking after no less than the *Press* or the *Mint*. 'Tis possible a publick Regulation might not be amiss.

It doesn't help the Galway fan to be told by Theophrastus that 'the sound of the flute will cure epilepsy, and a sciatic gout' – nor a promenader listening to Mahler Eight that 'Musick helps not the tooth-ach' (George Herbert).

Is Auden's summing up, in the end, the only one that can't be questioned:

'Music can be made anywhere, is invisible, and does not smell?'

It is a subject on which there is little unanimity.

*Yet, see page 207.

Now, what is music? This question occupied me for hours before I fell asleep last night. Music is a strange thing. I would almost say it is a miracle. For it stands halfway between thought and phenomenon, between spirit and matter, a sort of nebulous mediator, like and unlike each of the things it mediates – spirit that requires manifestation in time, and matter that can do without space.

We do not know what music is. But what good music is we know well enough; and even better, we know what music is bad. For of the latter our ears receive a larger quantity. Musical criticism must accordingly base itself on experience, not on *a priori* judgments; it must classify musical compositions only by their similarities, and take as standard only the impression that they create upon the majority.

Nothing is more futile than theorizing about music. No doubt there are laws, mathematically strict laws, but these laws are not music; they are only its conditions – just as the art of drawing and the theory of colours, or even the brush and palette, are not painting, but only its necessary means. The essence of music is revelation; it does not admit of exact reckoning, and the true criticism of music remains an empirical art.

HEINRICH HEINE *Letters on the French Stage 1837*

Though this is not in Hesiod,
Music was stolen from a God:
Not fire but notes the primal giver
Paid for with helpings of his liver
And virtuosi of the earth
Outsang the Gods who gave them birth.
When Orpheus plays we meet Apollo,
When there's theology to swallow
We set it to music, our greatest art,
One that's both intellect *and* heart,
There war and peace alike depict us
(Drums and trumpets in the Benedictus) –
It sang beneath the Grecian boat,
It kept Pythagoras afloat,
It suffered poets, critics, chat
And will no doubt survive Darmstadt;
This brandy of the damned of course*
To some is just a bottled sauce,
Its treasons, spoils and stratagems
Aleatory as women's hems
Yet beauty who indulged the swan
At death completes her with a song
And Paradise till we are there
Is in these measured lengths of air.

PETER PORTER 'Poems for Music' 1969

*See page 144.

I used to be much more fascinated by the pleasures of sound than the pleasures of smell. I was enthralled by them, but you broke my bonds and set me free. I admit that I still find some enjoyment in the music of hymns, which are alive with your praises, when I hear them sung by well-trained, melodious voices. But I do not enjoy it so much that I cannot tear myself away. I can leave it when I wish. But if I am not to turn a deaf ear to music, which is the setting for the words which give it life, I must allow it a position of some honour in my heart, and I find it difficult to assign it to its proper place. For sometimes I feel that I treat it with more honour than it deserves. I realize that when they are sung these sacred words stir my mind to greater religious fervour and kindle in me a more ardent flame of piety than they would if they were not sung; and I also know that there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two. But I ought not to allow my mind to be paralysed by the gratification of my senses, which often leads it astray. For the senses are not content to take second place. Simply because I allow them their due, as adjuncts to reason, they attempt to take precedence and forge ahead of it, with the result that I sometimes sin in this way but am not aware of it until later.

Sometimes, too, from over-anxiety to avoid this particular trap I make the mistake of being too strict . . . But when I remember the tears that I shed on hearing the songs of the Church in the early days, soon after I had recovered my faith, and when I realize that nowadays it is not the singing that moves me but the meaning of the words when they are sung in a clear voice to the most appropriate tune, I again acknowledge the great value of this practice. So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer.

This, then, is my present state. Let those of my readers whose hearts are filled with charity, from which good actions spring, weep with me and weep for me. Those who feel no charity in themselves will not be moved by my words. But I beg you, O Lord my God, to look upon me

and listen to me. Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a problem to myself, and this is the ailment from which I suffer.

ST AUGUSTINE *Confessions* c. 400

St Augustine's view is a profoundly personal one, and strictly Christian at that. The principle of Harmony as the foundation of the Universe is very much older, and originates with Pythagoras who,

having ascertained that the pitch of notes depends on the rapidity of vibrations, and also that the planets move at different rates of motion, concluded that the planets must make sounds in their motion according to their different rates; and that, as all things in nature are harmoniously made, the different sounds must harmonize; whence the old theory of the 'harmony of the spheres'.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable 1870

It is proportion that beautifies every thing, this whole Universe consists of it, and Musicke is measured by it.

ORLANDO GIBBONS *The First Set of Madrigals* 1612

For I shall enter in a large sea of the praise of Musicke, and call to rehearsall how much it hath alwaies bene renowned among them of olde time, and counted a holy matter: and how it hath bene the opinion of most wise Philosophers, that the worlde is made of musike, and the heavens in their moving make a melodie, and our soule is framed after the verie same sort and therefore lifteth up it selfe, and (as it were) reviveth the vertues and force of it selfe with Musicke. . . .

Doe ye not then deprive our Courtier of Musicke, which doth not onely make sweete the mindes of men, but also many times wilde beastes tame: and who so savoureth it not, a man may assuredly thinke him not to be well in his wits.

Behold I pray you what force it hath, that in times past allured a fish to suffer a man to ride upon it through the tempestuous sea.

We may see it used in the holy temples, to render laud and thanks unto God, and it is a credible matter that it is acceptable unto him, and that he hath given it unto us for a most sweete lightning of our travailes and vexations.

So that many times the boysterous labours in the fields, in the heat of the sun, beguile their paine with rude and carterly singing.

With this the unmannerly cuntrye woman, that ariseth before day out of her sleepe to spinne and carde, defendeth her selfe and maketh her labour pleasant.

This is the most sweete pastime after raine, winde and tempest, unto the miserable marriners.

With this doe the verie Pilgrimes comfort themselves in their troublesome and long voyages. And oftentimes prisoners, in adversitie, fetters and in stockes.

In like manner for a greater prooffe, that the tunableness of musick (though it be but rude) is a verie great refreshing of all worldlye paines and griefes, a man woulde judge that nature hath taught it unto nurses for a speciall remedie to the continuall waylings of sucking babes, which at the sound of their voice fall into a quiet and sweete sleepe, forgetting the teares that are so proper to them, and given us of nature in that age, for a gesse of the rest of our life to come.

BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE *The Book of the Courtier* 1561

*Water and Air he for the Tenor chose,
Earth made the Base, the Treble Flame arose,
To th'active Moon a quick brisk stroke he gave,
To Saturns string a touch more soft and grave.
The motions Strait, and Round, and Swift, and Slow,
And Short and Long, were mixt and woven so,
Did in such artful Figures smoothly fall,
As made this decent measur'd Dance of All.
And this is Musick.*

ABRAHAM COWLEY 'Davideis' 1656

Music is what unifies

SEU-MA-TSEN 145-87 BC quoted by Stravinsky in *The Poetics of Music*

It is my temper, and I like it the better, to affect all harmony; and sure there is musick even in the beauty, and the silent note which *Cupid* strikes, far sweeter than the sound of an Instrument. For there is a Musick where ever there is a Harmony, order or proportion; and thus far we may maintain the Musick of the Spheres: for those well ordered motions and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the Ear, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony. Whatsoever is harmonically composed, delights in harmony; which makes me much distrust the symmetry of those heads which declaim

against all Church-Musick. For my self, not only from my obedience, but my particular genius, I do embrace it: for even that vulgar and Tavern-Musick, which makes one man merry, another mad, strikes in me a deep fit of Devotion, and a profound contemplation of the first Composer; there is something in it of Divinity more than the Ear discovers: it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed Lesson of the whole world, and Creatures of God, such a melody to the Ear, as the whole world well understood, would afford the understanding. In brief, it is a sensible fit of that harmony, which intellectually sounds in the Ears of God.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE *Religio Medici* 1643

From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony
This universal Frame began:
When Nature underneath a heap
Of jarring Atomes lay;
And could not heave her Head,
The tuneful Voice was heard from high
'Arise, ye more than dead!'
Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,
In order to their Stations leap,
And MUSICK's pow'r obey.
From Harmony, from heavenly Harmony
This universal Frame began:
From Harmony to Harmony
Through all the Compass of the Notes it ran,
The Diapason closing full in Man. . . .

GRAND CHORUS

As from the pow'r of Sacred Lays
The Spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator's praise
To all the blest above;
So when the last and dreadful Hour
This crumbling Pageant shall devour,
The TRUMPET shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And MUSICK shall untune the Sky!

JOHN DRYDEN 'A Song for St Cecilia's Day' 22 November 1687