

CD REVIEW 120 / BOOK REVIEW 1

WILLIAM WALTON. *Behind the Façade*. Susana Walton.
OUP (1989). ISBN 0-19-282635-2. Paperback.

Having both read and been disappointed by Michael Kennedy's book *A Portrait of Walton*, I turned to Lady Walton's book with high expectations.

I am becoming increasingly alarmed at the omission of vital facts from biographies and the way some writers get away with omitting essential facts. It is rather like an embittered, wealthy old lady who wants to cut out of her will a once much-loved relative.

I wrote to Michael Kennedy about his failure to include in his book the vital fact that Walton studied for two years after the Second World War with Humphrey Searle. I sent him much evidence of this with a very polite letter but he replied with a churlish letter and returned my letter torn into tiny little pieces. Walton's studies with Searle led the Lancastrian to adopt a less tense and overwhelming texture as seen in his *Johannesburg Festival Overture* and the splendid *Symphony No 2*, noted for its clarity.

Kennedy confuses Leslie Heward with Leslie Howard and has a bar of 4/4 time with five equal crotchets. Both these elementary and stupid errors are in his book. He also asserts that Walton was Elgar's successor and, while Walton said little, he loathed that ridiculous concept. In the book *British Composers in Interview* by R Murray Schafer (Faber 1960) Walton states that the greatest composer of the 20th century was Shostakovich and, in private conversations he added, "and, at the other end of the spectrum, there is Elgar!" Elgar was a despicable and hateful man. He heard Walton's *Viola Concerto* performed by Hindemith and dismissed it as rubbish and called it the murder of the viola. He was more interested in visiting the lavatory and finding out the horse-racing results. Lady Walton refers to this.

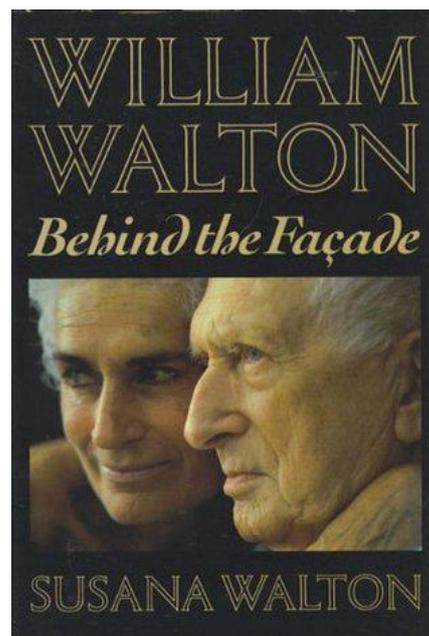
Walton had a difficult relationship with Britten but, then, everybody did. At a reception in Leningrad, a chamber group played Britten's *Simple Symphony* and Walton's voice was heard above the music saying, "Oh, not that awful piece again." The LSO were greatly amused and endorsed his sentiments.

Lady Walton misquotes Arnold Bax on page 36, as confirmed by my friend, Aloys Fleischmann. Walton recalled what

Walter Legge said of Britten, "He only has to fart and someone will record it." Lady Walton tells the story of how Britten and Pears dressed as choirboys for George Harewood and Marion Stein's wedding and, since they looked so ridiculous, people began to laugh.

In 1947, Walton was so incensed by the exaggerated publicity given to Britten's new opera *Peter Grimes* that in a local music shop he picked up a large photograph of Britten and put it neatly on a chair face down. Lady Walton expresses her disgust at Britten and Pears sharing a double bed and of Britten's petulance and rudeness to which many can testify.

The author's frankness is either revealing or unwise. She recalls Britten asking her husband if he were interested in little boys. It is true, and yet people want not to accept it, that Britten was very sexually interested in boys. And if a paedophile is someone who has a sexual interest in children, whether or not there is sexual activity, and that is what my *Oxford Dictionary* says, then one cannot conceal Britten's true and utterly repulsive character.



Lady Walton is not right about the argument over royalties when her husband wrote his Impromptu on a theme of Britten. It was Britten who told his own publishers to obtain royalties from Walton's publishers, OUP from the use of his theme. I am not aware of any other composer who has behaved like this.

There is a lot in this book which is too candid to be comfortable. Lady Walton talks of the contraception they used; how Walton was a terrible flirt and liked looking at the knees of the ladies in the orchestra. There is also a lot of boring information about what the author wore, what she cooked and what she did. We even have some details of rows between them. She also makes some exaggerated statements. For example, on page 82, she writes that the Symphony No 1 was the first fruits of Walton's relationship with Alice, Lady Wimborne which followed his failed relationship with Baroness Imma von Doernberg.

I am concerned with Lady Walton's writing about her husband's dislike of Zoltan Kodaly. Sometimes the book reads like mere gossip and loses its credibility.

Myths arise about composers. I was shocked to hear Michael Berkeley in the BBC Television's series Masterworks state that Walton liked brass bands and used two in Belshazzar's Feast. It simply is not true. There are no brass bands in the score. A brass band is composed of cornets, flugelhorns, saxhorns, euphoniums, trombones, bombardons and perhaps saxophones. No such instruments appear in the score.

It is gratifying to read of the Walton's friendships with Paul Hindemith and Hans Werner Henze. Hindemith is a great composer but sadly maligned and out of fashion. Henze is also a fine composer and upstaged Britten by using W H Auden as his librettist for Elegy for Young Lovers and The Bassiards. Britten was furious as a result and typically unreasonable.

The curious relationships Walton had with the Sitwells is brought to life as is the distinguished poet, Siegfried Sassoon's financial backing to Walton which kept his head above water.

The author fails to acknowledge all who helped her in this book including John Veale's contribution of Walton writing a fugue in the Symphony No 1 on page 86.

The account of Walton's death and cremation is not is the best of taste. It is indiscreet.

(953)

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright DMus 1999. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.