

WALTON-BRITTEN, a musical north-south divide? (AB)

Arthur Butterworth

Now that Walton's centenary year has arrived there has been interesting critical comment in the past few weeks; from the drab and dour musical waste lands of the north, with its clapped-out mills, steel works, derelict coal mines, flat-voweled choral societies forever bogged down in 'Messiah', or Priestley-like perceptions of yet another performance of 'Elijah', to say nothing of that disgusting noise made by brass bands that so nauseated Sir Thomas Beecham, all of which – like nasty PVC double-glazed window frames in Victorian terrace houses to be observed in such dreary places as Cleckleywyke – have been overtaken by the even nastier sounds of nightly soap opera theme music. From the opposite corner in this debate, should one say south of Watford, where life is really lived to the full: greenfield industrial estates with vast computer-age business parks, modern service undertakings, International conglomerates, snazzy glittering neon-illuminated fast food outlets, boutiques, executive car parks, sleek glass-walled offices of financial service, all enhanced by a cultural night life of opera on an internationally prestigious scale, jet-setting world-class conductors, soloists, intellectually superior cognoscenti, fashionable dinner parties and the like. (No cheap replacement double-glazing here; the plastic comes already built in with the modern detached, double garaged, landscaped property) a different view (the estuary-English perception, as it might be) is taken, the rival claims of Britten is lauded by Norman Lebrecht.

So what is the situation in reality? Certainly both writers make perceptive comment and each imbues his assessment with a credibility born of long and wide experience. Norman Lebrecht has made some sensational exposures in recent years; probably in essence they have been true, and have opened the eyes of most of us not having the privilege of Lebrecht's own contacts in the musical world. On the whole I am inclined to think that his kind of journalism has about it something of the sensational demands of the tabloid press. This has, admittedly, often aroused some of the nonchalant apathy of those who claim to have an interest in music and cultural matters generally. On the other hand I do not generally resort to the tabloid-press kind of journalism so characteristic of Mr Lebrecht. Instead he writes in an informative, elegant way, reminiscent of his great Mancunian predecessors in the field of journalism: Samuel Langford, C.P.Scott, Herbert Thompson and Sir Neville Cardus.

Walton's widow herself has been inclined to write rather in the manner of a gossipy socialite reporter in the biography of her husband. This has not done Walton's cause all any good.

Some of Britten's literary acolytes have often done much the same. I take issue with Lebrecht though, for his way of pointing out things about Walton which seem to be of such little musical relevance (no matter that such revelations might often titillate). He rightly makes comment about the way Walton seemed to fall on his feet as a result of that quite remarkable championing by the Sitwells, and all the privilege that it led to. Britten was hardly less fortunate: in the first place he would seem to have come from an already more privileged social background, and although he is said not to have enjoyed Gresham's School, at Holt, Norfolk, it cannot have been without its advantages.

It is a matter then, for each of us to form a personal assessment based on what we have individually experienced of these two rival composers as practical musicians, their attitudes towards the performers who in various capacities, worked for them: singers, conductors, soloists and orchestral players, and of course how we individually respond to their quite different musical voices. Both of them had distinctive styles, the kind of personal originality that all creative artists strive to attain.

I am not a fan of opera, (years ago I flatly turned down an invitation to consider joining Covent Garden Orchestra - not for me playing in the pit -my realm has ever been the concert hall), so that Britten's considerable achievement in this field, which seems to send opera buffs into such spasms of exaggeratedly 'precious' emotional convulsions, those 'raves' about world-class (much over-rated and

vastly-overpaid) singers, leaves me quite unmoved; I hardly give a fig for the whole tribe of them. Britten's orchestral style, though individually original, has never appealed to me all that much either: a bit spiky, dry and lacking any heart-warming quality. On the other hand Walton (and not at all because he was born in Oldham, less than five miles from where I myself was born) has ever had found a resonance in my own musical responses I find enormously stimulating and exhilarating. Some music has that inexplicable lump-in-the-throat tide of rising emotion. Walton (and Britten hardly ever at all) rarely ever does this for me. Walton has an outdoor, mid-1930's aura for me; that exhilarating - though with hindsight ominous time -that I recall from boyhood.

Although earlier in this commentary I took issue with Lebrecht for making so much out of Walton's affairs with the women in his life, I must say that for my part I feel this is a far more natural source of inspiration than that morbid obsession Britten had with other men. Although it is now so sensitive an issue, and politically incorrect, or said to be unacceptable for comment, I still feel there is something not quite right about homosexuality: I am always uncomfortable with the unnatural association of homosexuals or lesbians; they seem to me to be warped in some way, no matter that they are so often said to be sensitive, inspired, pure-minded, creative, and all the other high-minded jargon phrases. If Britten had perhaps written at least something inspired by a normal man-woman relationship instead of all this 'male victim' gush that seems to go like an ineradicable thread through his music, perhaps I would have taken to him more. Whereas Walton evokes the real human relationship with its agonies and ecstasies: the violin and viola concertos especially so,

I only had the very briefest personal encounters with both Walton and Britten: In neither case did I find them attractive as people. Unlike Vaughan Williams, one of the nicest and kindest of great men, both Walton and Britten exuded a feint, though indefinable air of arrogance and superiority in dealing with the musicians who 'sat below the salt' -the patient and willing orchestral players who served them so well.

Though commentators and critics will probably be self-assured as to predict just what the attitude of a future generation will be - as Norman Lebrecht seems to be so cock-sure about Britten - I cannot offer any firm opinion other than to say that, for all his personal arrogance, and unsmiling haughtiness when I came into brief contact with him, I believe that, despite all these shortcomings, so-called lack of genuinely new inspiration, there remains for me something quite individual and truly unique about Walton. For me he is infinitely more significant than Britten. After all he comes from a place where they really do know how to make music, despite all the clapped-out mills and flat caps.

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