

ROB BARNETT

Compiled by David C F Wright DMus

Rob Barnett is, or was the editor of the British Music Society quarterly newsletter and the classical music editor of Musicweb International whose webmaster is Dr Len Mullenger.

This is a compilation of what people have said and put in writing from the ordinary music lover to professional musicians.

Barnett is not a musician. He has told me that he does not play any instrument and cannot read music and so one wonders how he can be the editor of two music journals. He would not know what a semibreve was if he sat on one!

I know nothing about microbiology and so there is no way I could be the editor of Microbiology Weekly or write articles on this subject. I am not qualified.

One has to be fair. Barnett is an enthusiast and he works hard for the BMS and because he tries to cram everything into his limited time his reviews of CDs are often short and do not contain relevant and essential detail to promote them.

His review of Boult's first recordings of the Vaughan Williams's symphonies did not tell us what the sound quality was like, or which version of the magnificent Symphony no. 4 was played. In many of his reviews, he does not discuss the music but lists works that he would like to see recorded which is irrelevant. He writes that there is a most urgent need for a recording of Holbrooke's First Choral Symphony.

He does not know what he is talking about. He reviewed my friend Gerard Victory's *Ultima Rerum* and if he had bothered to read the sleeve notes he would not have made such glaring errors.

He makes shocking mistakes and does not check his writings, and when people write to him pointing out his mistakes he takes offence. He argued that Josef Holbrooke's Symphony no. 1 was Homage to Edgar Allan Poe. It is not. It is a four movement work in homage to Wagner, Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Dvorak.

He claims that Holbrooke's Piano Concerto no. 1 is a masterpiece. To begin with it is not a concerto. The composer called it a poem for piano and orchestra. Call it a concerto if you want, but most concert pianists and other musicians state it is an awful work. And it is!

Barnett says that Holbrooke's Cello Concerto can be thought of as a companion to the Dvorak and Lalo Concertos. A companion suggests friendliness and compatibility and, perhaps, of similar and equal work.

He obviously has a passion for Holbrooke and states that the finale of his Symphony no. 4 has a touch of Kodaly about it. I cannot see or hear it and I have a score and know much of Kodaly's work. Will Barnett supply the bars numbers in the Holbrooke and the work of Kodaly also with bar numbers so we can see the touch of Kodaly?

But to return to Holbrooke's Cello Concerto. I speak as a musician and have to say that the Dvorak concerto is a very fine work. I like the Lalo but it cannot compare with the Dvorak. They are not companions. The Holbrooke Concerto is rather ordinary. The American cellist, Lynn Harrel, has said that there are only two great cello concertos, those by Dvorak and Dutilleux.

(See my article on [Holbrooke](#)).

I was criticised for reviewing CDs of music that I did not like and that criticism was probably fair. Barnett, however, gets away with such criticism. He writes that the Viola Concerto of Quincy Porter left him cold and yet its dedicatee spoke of it being a warm and glowing work. Obviously, Barnett does not understand the work. I wrote that a work of Elgar left me cold and nauseous and I received abuse. Barnett can do it; nobody else can!

Here are some of his miscellaneous quotes:

Obviously Dvorak was influenced by Benjamin Britten.

Liszt was not a great composer and he certainly did not understand the piano.

Does the first movement of this Arnold Cooke symphony take 11 minutes and 10 seconds or 11 minutes and 11 seconds?

This composer was born in 1849 and died in 1799.

Wait for it. Sibelius's Pohjola's Daughter was influenced by Charpentier's Impressions of Italy.

Arthur Benjamin's Romantic Fantasy is Delian! (That statement is crass stupidity).

He writes about a new CD of music by Bruno Maderna

“Wisps and chards of ideas ebb and flow dreamily, or pelt down like hailstones... includes lanky and muscular ideas... the final track groans and blares as if evoking some terrifying black and boiling planet... section 3 assaults the ears... this rages with all the searing qualities of vitriol...”

He clearly does not like the music and is obviously ignorant about it. He has missed the plot.

Here are some of Barnett's quotes from a nine CD set of music by Marcel Landowski which are also bizarre

“The First Symphony fades away into stratospheric birdsong”. Look at the score Mr Barnett, the ending of the symphony is not like that at all.

Barnett says that the Piano Concerto no. 2 is ‘like Walton with aspects of Fauré, Bartok, Bernard Herrmann and French romantic cinema’.

‘His Trumpet Concerto is not like Hovhaness’ so what?

Then he goes back to a review of Holbrooke and mentions his great operatic trilogy Cauldron of Annwn. He talks about volume 2 of Hobrooke's piano music some of which ‘careers like a runaway pianola driven by Mussorgsky’.

What in the world does he mean? This is gobbledegook.

As to any work of Holbrooke being great is unlikely.

Then he writes about Fantoches being music-hall music mixed with Rachmaninov rhetoric. Again, what on earth is he talking about?

But other reviewers are remiss. One review on Dr Mullenger's site is of piano music played by pupils of Liszt, some recordings dating back to 1905. The reviewer did not tell us about the quality of the sound nor did he tell us that some of the works were incomplete whereas the sleeve notes suggested otherwise. These facts are essential to would-be buyers.

Another reviewer talks about music by the great Paul Kletzli ‘being for the rampantly curious only’.

And what does that mean?

But to return to Barnett. He jumps on the bandwagon of Lewis Foreman who complains that when William Glock was the Controller of BBC Radio 3 he prevented the broadcast of tonal works by living British composers in favour of the avant garde which is nonsense, absolute nonsense!

(See my articles on [William Glock – The Saviour of the Promenade Concerts](#) and [Sir William Glock, not avante garde](#))

Foreman also wrote that Alun Hoddinott was a gentle giant. He certainly was not. Foreman also said that Hoddinott's Clarinet Concert Op. 3 was jazzy. Hoddinott wrote to me to say that none of his works are jazzy.

In Cardiff, there was Cello Competition where Alun was the chairman of the judges and I was on the panel. The best cellist was a 22 stone girl with a disfigured face. She had an amazing technique and the best competitor. But she did not win. The girl that won did so because Hoddinott said that she had the nicest legs.

Alun could be incredibly difficult and he was certainly not gentle. Foreman is wrong.

Several of us were asked to contribute an obituary of British composer and the editor would choose one from the contributions. Barnett chose Lewis Foreman's and, to his credit, Foreman said he had never met this composer or spoken with him. Nonetheless, his obituary was full of mistakes. The editor, the wayward Rob Barnett, had he chosen another of the obituaries, Foreman's mistakes would not have been published. The other contributors knew the composer personally. This is not sour grapes. My article was good, but it was not the best.

Another review on Dr Mullinger's site spoke of Barbirolli being a great conductor.

That he was not, as members of his orchestra and others have testified.

(See my article on [Barbirolli](#))

I cannot see how any satisfactory review of a CD can be made without the music being well known by the reviewer or he has read the score. Can I review a book without reading it?

In one month reviews on Dr Mullenger's site, there was the recording of the month... Brahms's Piano Concerto no. 2. How could it be the recording of the month when the pianist took liberties with the score and some of the music was not by Brahms?

Of course, there will be people who will say that because Barnett is not a musician and cannot read music, it does not disqualify him from being an editor of musical journals.

This leads me to a review by Barnett about a symphony by Paul Creston. Barnett wrote that this performance was exactly as the composer wrote it. Rubbish! The performance left out the vital piano part. I have the score before me!

We all make mistakes and that includes me, but I now always check my articles and CD reviews before publication.

Now in the interests of fairness, I have to say that I was dismissed as a writer from this site. I was accused of taking swipes at Elgar and Britten, writing that Gesualdo was a triple murderer, and that one of his victims was a child, that Barbirolli was not a great conductor and that the piano parts of Eric Coates's songs were better than the vamping accompaniments of some of Schubert's songs.

With regard to Elgar, I produced irrefutable evidence of his navy blue knickers fetish, voyeurism and other deviations. With Britten, I produced evidence of his pederasty. The facts about Gesualdo are well known. I produced evidence about Barbirolli as a lousy conductor and how orchestras disliked him even when he was sober, and you have only to look at Coates's songs and compare them with some of Schubert's to see that what I say is correct.

What I wrote was correct and can be evidenced on all points.

Barnett can say that Liszt was a bad composer and did not understand the piano and gets away with it. He can take swipes at Maderna and Porter and get away with it. He was also vitriolic and unfair about Wolfgang Rihm, but what he wrote proved again that he did not know what he was talking about.

Here are some more examples of Barnett's nonsense:

York Bowen sounds like Tchaikovsky.

Leo Actor's Saxophone Concerto has an atmosphere of dark striving... the allegro molto pads along purposefully... the horn player has a tendency towards liquefaction... this is like Britten's Serenade... has jackanapes cheekiness...

(jackanapes are conceited and impudent people like Elgar, for example)

(liquefaction is when saturated sediment turns into liquid or when hard money turns into cash)

Orchestration was part of Mathias's DNA.

Dissonance-inclined Alun Hoddinott.

Mathias suggests the influence of Prokofiev and Bartok.

The singing in Liszt's *Die Seligkeiten* produced wonderful honeyed singing.

And consider the blatant errors in his review of the Richard Arnell string quartets:

The first quartet is a meditation between Fauré and early Tippett (utterly absurd)

The third quartet is a work of potential lyrical release (What?) with no hint of 12 tone music... not even a slight Bergian pepper (totally wrong... read the score: it is only ignorant people who degrade 12 note music... only the very best composers can work in this discipline)

To be fair to Barnett, this next example is a quote from another. The fifth quartet is a structural premonition of Britten's third quartet. Tony Arnell would have been furious at this inane remark.

The performances are acted performances... Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo? In a handbag!!!

The Sallinen symphonies (5 CDs)... Album is predictable enough; Noras recorded the Bliss Cello Concerto with smoking fervour (What? Was it a Manikin or Cuban?). Sallinen was modern yet definitely not post-romantic... music of stubborn heroics, discontinuous triumphs, terse, expressive ideas and a real lyrical proclivity. Cellular construction and iterative developments of ideas... steely silvery with a Sibelius tang.

John Ireland Piano Concerto etc. Concerto is a relaxed floral extravagance (is this the Tulip and Daffodil concerto or the Kew Garden Concerto?). The Legend is the stuff of Merlin's enchantments

Martelli's Symphony etc. A new Iron Age dissonance took concerts and the radio by the throat (a prejudicial and ridiculous remark). Martelli's symphony is achingly sincere work! (Sounds painful... pass the aspirin!)

Another contributor has sent in his comments on the inane ramblings by Barnett and added his own comments some of which are almost as hysterical. This contributor is a very well-known musician and composer who is very highly thought-of!

"Barnett says that the Violin Sonata no 1 of Luis de Freitas Branco is Delian. It certainly is not. Look at the score, Barnett. Well, that would not help... you can't read music can you? Why do you say such outrageous and untrue things? It only makes you out to be a complete ignoramus and the web site to be amateur, misleading and useless.

English Violin Sonatas CD review. Here is another irrelevant Barnett plea for sonatas by Reginald Redman, Percy Turnbull, Healey Willan, Corum and Gaze Cooper. What has this to do with the sonatas on this CD? And what about the Violin Sonata no 14 by Clarissa B Molestrangler?

(The music of) Elisabeth Maconchy shows evidence of influence of Grainger, Lambert and Falla. That is so unbelievably absurd! You can get free hearing-aids!

Georgian Minatures. (The work by) Nasside is stock and hoarse writing redolent of Shostakovich's string quartets and Bartok at his most turbo-charged and insolent. This is fanciful, untrue and ridiculous. What does he mean?

Translation please... the work by Nasside is rough, grating, harsh, lacking in intensity, and aromatically suggestive and emitting the fragrance of Shostakovich. Bartok is insolent being insulting, contemptuous and displaying effrontery.

(The work by) Bardanashvili is really a pumped up assault.

His review of Finnish piano music has some factual mistakes. Why doesn't he check things?

The Sibelius Violin Concerto is played by Vengerov on his cherry-sweet violin. Yuck! What are the failures of this performance? There are plenty. Barnett ignores them.

Music by Cage and Noncarrow is described by Barnett as patter, rattle, click, resonate, mesmerising, clang and ring!

plink plunk music
with bustling blizzard of metallic showers
bitterly horror-struck acceleration

What does this mean? What does it tell us about the music? Does it tell us what style the composer uses? Is it aleatoric? But then, would Barnett know?

(The music of) Koppel owes something to Debussy and Fauré. That is almost as daft as saying that Mozart sounds like Stockhausen!

Azerbaijani Piano Concertos. Here Barnett gives us a list of works he likes including some by Rimsky Korsakov, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Freitas Branco, Biarent, Herrman and Rosza but this is nothing to do with this CD. He is padding out a review because he has nothing to say of any worth about the music on the disk!

He describes one work as flashy with machine-gun gamboling. Gamboling is leaping like a horse, playful, engaged in a frolic... with a machine gun? A frolic with a machine gun?

Why does he not write about music and in music terms?

The reason is obvious. He is not a musician! He says little or nothing about the music because he knows nothing and therefore he thrusts us into his preferences and hobby horses and a mode of language so irrelevant and frankly ridiculous!

In his review of the piano music by Paul Juon, he speaks of the music as Malacca-cane twirling, the Godowskian spray of notes, mercurial yet ramrod dignity, minutely note-pecking and a turbo-charged music box! A Formula One music box!!!

Of the Mennotti's Violin Concerto, he writes that it is a triumph in cantabile. He wants to look at the score!

What writes about Delius is excruciatingly absurd. He says that Delius's music is the closest instrumental approximation to the human voice yet liberated from the limitations of breath control. Unlike me, he is not a teaching of singing and therefore I can say he is out of his depth and does not know what he is talking about. He is very good as infecting bilious attacks on the innocent!

He writes that he loves a Delius piece. The work in question is an uneventful and inactive work.

When he talks about Bernard Herrmann, he speaks of a growling and purring sound and that his music suggests Britten. Barnett is the man who said that Britten influenced Dvorak.

Of Debussy, he writes of the well-calculated balance between diaphanous clarity and translucent warmth. How many readers are going to instantly understand what he is saying?

Novak, born 1957, is bitingly detailed according to Barnett and then he speaks of caramelised Berg. Can you buy this on the confectionery counter at Asda? At least, Berg was a musician Mr Barnett, and one of the very greatest composers!

Now, wait for it. His review of the Beethoven symphonies conducted by Wyn Morris he describes them as traditional Golden Age stuff where Morris rejects HIP strictures. That is not funny! In fact it is offensive.

It also makes the Musicweb. International look so stupid, rather like A Night at the Apollo or the insane Keith Lemon on Celebrity Juice.

Surely the owner of this site must realise this and know that such inane and useless reviews diminish his site. No wonder, it is called the Morecambe and Wise site!

Barnett removed some reviewers from his site because they showed him up and those reviewers knew what they were talking about!

He is an enthusiast and, no doubt, means well and it is not our desire to humiliate him. Not at all. He does that himself. He should cease from writing reviews and being the editor of the reviews on the site.”

Barnett's reviews are nonsense. He says little or nothing about the music, the performances, sound quality, faithfulness to the score but introduces works he wants to hear and have recorded, praise works that are poor and uses verbal diarrhoea.

We asked two exceptionally prominent musicians to comment on Rob Barnett's reviews published on the internet in the week before Christmas 2011 and we set out their professional verdicts below:

“In his review of Pettersson's first two symphonies, Barnett makes irrelevant references to Elgar and his 'not bad' piano concerto. Mr Barnett, Elgar's Piano Concerto is really a dreadful work and Elgar simply could not write for the piano. He could not write an allegro... for example he marks the first movement of his tedious violin concerto as allegro... crotchet equals 100. That is not allegro but moderato. It is generally accepted that allegro starts at about crotchet equals 120, but usually 130.

Barnett goes on to describe Pettersson's songs as accessible in the Bjorling way. While Jussi Bjorling was an incredible tenor, I and my fellow professional colleagues cannot see the connection because there isn't one.

When reviewing Vaughan Williams's *Flos Campi*, a glorious work, he describes the viola playing as auburn, amber and russet. I wonder what he would make of Debussy's *Girl with the Flaxen hair*!

Now for all you experts on words, Barnett describes Hanson's orchestral music as being similar to Respighi's *afflatus*... What, I hear you say!

He talks about Herold's piano concertos, but the main thrust of his inadequate review is a plea for recordings by nine other composers which pleas are irrelevant.

He then discusses Howard Hanson as a conductor and describes Roger Sessions's *Black Masters Suite* being from a granite school. Stone me! I knew Sessions, a great musician, and he would also be dumbfounded by such a stupid remark and set his dogs on this reviewer!

In wishing Richard Rodney Bennett a happy 80th birthday, which we all endorse, he speaks of one of his works as smoking ochreous melancholy... rounded with a sleep! He also says that R R Bennet swam into his vision. Was this at Rhyl or Skegness? You have to admit that this is gobbledegook.

Barnett's review on Pfitzner on *Capriccio CAP 5092* is full of errors and waffle. How does he get away with such tripe?

Oh dear! He writes that the composer Longo was unfamiliar both to him and Musicweb International. David Wright wrote a review of Longo's works many years ago on this site and I have a copy.

David Wright was criticised for his comments about Schubert, Chopin, Elgar, Britten and Barbirolli, although what he said was right in every instance, and yet Barnett blasts at Bruno Maderna's piano concertos on Naxos. He describes them as mildly Bartokian, which is mistake number one and also downright ridiculous, and says that the works are abstruse and thorny. He goes on with his vicious attacks calling the music being gongs, drums, rattles, clatters, discontinuity, plinks and plonks, tom tom noises and spitting metallic tizzing and with obsidian clashing and tolling.

Obviously Barnett does not like modern, intellectual and clever music because it is beyond him and shows another aspect of his serious limitations. Another reviewer was dismissed for 'knocking' Elgar on this site, but Barnett can knock Maderna and it is acceptable! This is hypocrisy!

He once asked me what key Webern's Symphony was in!

His reviews are akin to going to the doctor who misdiagnoses a condition and, subsequently, puts the patient through endless distress and unnecessary surgery!

How can he be the classical editor and edit the reviews on this site which site has lost any credibility it has or, rather, might have had! Barnett has to go and the site has to use reviewers who know the music and can talk about it!"

His reviews are highly entertaining but utterly laughable. Professional musicians rightly say that he talks a lot of rot and reduces MusicWeb International to a despairing low level.

I know many professional musicians who dread Barnett reviewing their CDs. Some who have their CDs reviewed by Barnett are incensed.

Whatever reaction there is to this article, it is not intended to be an attack but to call for relevant and meaningful reviews in which the music on the CD is discussed accurately. This website is often a cause for ridicule for the reasons given and suffers from inadequate information, irrelevancies, lack of musical detail, personal bias and error often in a language that is absurd.

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