

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Andrew Ford, *Try Whistling This: Writings about Music* (Black Ink, 2012),

One would have to be tone deaf not to thoroughly enjoy this book. The author, Andrew Ford is a composer, writer, and broadcaster, who presents *The Music Show* on the ABC Radio National. The collection in this book consists of a few reviews, essays and scripts from his radio series *Music and Fashion*. He regards himself as primarily a composer, and that is his justification for writing about other people's music.

It is with *Music and Fashion* that the book begins, and this first chapter raises many of the questions that are examined in the chapters that follow. What makes some music fashionable; what is the difference between art and entertainment, if there is a difference; or how much a listener may be influenced by publicity and the fame of a performer. Ford concludes that 'great music can be fashionable and fashionable music can be great, but ultimately these concepts are unrelated' (76).

'Modernism' is followed by a chapter on 'Beethoven, the Moderniser'. This juxtaposition illustrates the skillful way in which Ford has placed the chapters so that there is a natural progression that allows the book, as a whole, to flow. The subsequent chapters are devoted to different composers, or performers and Ford highlights one aspect of the composer's work so that for those are not steeped in, for example, the entire opus of Mahler, will not feel daunted by the chapter 'Mahler's Secret Operas'. The more likely effect is to send them to listen to Mahler's music with a new, or fresh, ear.

Ford is not above the titillating details in some musician's life. Toscanini for example, insisted on his lovers sending him 'monthly tokens in the form of handkerchiefs dipped in menstrual blood. He called them diaphanous veils and holy shrouds' (118). This is learned from a collection of Toscanini's letters, which also reveal that 'he was an idealist, a perfectionist, a martinet' (118). Surely the latter is more relevant to assessing him as a conductor.

To what extent should we judge music through the circumstances of the lives of the composers? Shostakovich is rarely mentioned without reference to his relationship with Stalinist Russia, yet Ford claims that 'if Shostakovich's music is great enough for us to be listening to it a hundred years after his birth and thirty-one years after his death, it is not because it represents a sustained attack on a communist dictatorship' (106). Music stands above the tragedies and trivia of a composer's life.

Some of the most interesting chapters in this book were those on the less well-known composers, especially Australians. Having led a sheltered life I had no idea of the scandals around the life of Malcolm Williamson, nor of his amazing output. David Lumsdaine is not well known in the country of his birth, although he composed and recorded what could be called truly Australian music, combining soundscapes and birdcalls. 'The sounds of Lumsdaine's Australia is as rich and multilayered as the sounds of the rainforest or bush' (232).

While much of the writing is about what is loosely termed 'classical music', musicians such as Bob, Dylan, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Hoagy Carmichael are given a place. Nor is there any sense that they do not belong.

Ford writes to teach and explain music. His style is light and full of humour, and I found myself laughing out loud as I read, but that does not disguise the depth of his knowledge that he wishes to share. While a critic should be able to make an objective judgement about any composition or performer the listener's response to music is individual.

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Subjectively a listener brings something to the music as well, so that it is the three way process between composer, performer and audience. Ford tells us that ‘true listening is collaborative. We bring not only our attention and our concentration, but also our imagination ... In a way, what we listen for in music is where we fit in’ (318).

Emily Sutherland