

# Reviews

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Stephen Banfield, *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer*

London: Faber, 1997.

ISBN 0-571-16269-X. pp. xiv + 571, index, bibl., 22 plates.

In June 1951, shortly after receiving the diagnosis of Hodgkin's disease, Gerald Finzi added to the preface of his *Catalogue of Works*:

At 49 I feel I have hardly begun my work  
My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun;  
And now I live, and now my life is done.

As usually happens, it is likely that new ideas, new fashions & the pressing forward of new generations, will soon obliterate my small contribution. Yet I like to think that in each generation may be found a few responsive minds... To shake hands with a good friend over the centuries is a pleasant thing, and the affection which an individual may retain after his departure is perhaps the only thing which guarantees an ultimate life to his works.<sup>1</sup>

As reviewer David McKie has noted,<sup>2</sup> sentimentality over Finzi's premature death has tended to shape our experience of his music, the latter marked, all too conveniently, by a powerful sense of sorrow and mortality. In this regard, Stephen Banfield has done Finzi a great service in his new book *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer*. Banfield's study, which thoroughly examines Finzi's biography and music, finally provides a more balanced context in which to consider the composer's achievements and significance.

To say that the book's publication was eagerly awaited is a substantial understatement. Within a few weeks of the composer's death in September 1956, his widow Joy had made arrangements for English musicologist Diana McVeagh to write the biography. With commendable courtesy Banfield simply notes that 'it has not yet appeared' (p.485). Finally, the Finzi Trust commissioned Banfield to undertake the task. Given the delays, one would be inclined to welcome the book for the mere fact of its existence, notwithstanding its contents. Suspension of critical judgement is, however, unnecessary. As we have come to expect from Banfield's excellent books *Sensibility and English Song* (2 vols; Cambridge: CUP, 1985) and *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1993), his study of Finzi's life and music is not only comprehensive and intellectually rigorous but also insightful and elegantly written. He achieves a balanced account which demonstrates empathy with his subject while avoiding the pitfalls of hero-worship. *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer* is marked by a breadth of scope which deftly encompasses the composer's artistic milieu, contemporary socio-historical

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Finzi, *Absalom's Place: Catalogue of Works* (ts., July 1941, revised June 1951).

<sup>2</sup> David McKie, 'Versions of Pastoral,' *Guardian* 21 Nov. 1997: 20-21.

issues, and Finzi's numerous extra-musical pursuits, as well as detailed and polished analyses of his compositions.

Banfield draws on a broad range of source material, most notably Joy Finzi's journal, contemporary criticism, Finzi's sketchbooks, and almost three-and-a-half thousand letters both to and from Finzi, which are carefully and usefully indexed by date and author/addressee. Extensive use of these letters and Joy's journal adds a richness and intimacy to Banfield's account, which is nevertheless well-balanced by his sharp critical appraisal. Perhaps the most notable example of this is his substantial quotation of correspondence between Finzi and fellow-composer William Busch in late 1938, concerning the rise of 'the Nazi tide.' This distinguished exchange focuses attention on an issue which Banfield marks as fundamental to the composer's life and self-image—the unexpected and hidden matter of his Jewish heritage.

'Finzi's relatives all belonged to respectable, prosperous and distinguished Jewish families that had been settled in England for several generations' (p. 2), Banfield writes at the outset. It is this paradox, the distinguished Jewish heredity of this most English of English composers (notwithstanding his surname), and the question of its influence upon his life and music, which underpins Banfield's narrative. For it sits strangely with what we know of Finzi. Stylistically conservative, his works broke no new ground. When they are viewed alongside his friendship with Vaughan Williams and post-war association with the Three Choirs Festival, his place in the English national/pastoral school is assured. Contemporary critiques regularly commented upon—or at least took for granted—his essential Englishness. Finzi lived not in London but at Ashmansworth in the Berkshire countryside, devoting himself to composition and a number of musical 'causes' such as the resurrection and promotion of works by Ivor Gurney, Hubert Parry, and forgotten eighteenth-century English composers. Together with his artist wife and two sons, he enjoyed an apparently charmed bucolic lifestyle, cultivating rare apple varieties, conducting a local string orchestra, and surrounded by innumerable cats. 'A land in which it seems always afternoon' is the way a contemporary critic described the composer's life.<sup>3</sup>

This vision of Gerald Finzi has also been favoured by the Finzi 'industry,' and promoted only too successfully by 'Friends' groups in both Britain and the US—the Finzi, as Banfield notes, of 'ruminative miniatures, the Classic FM Finzi of Eclogues and Preludes and Elegies and Romances and Rhapsodies, of Friends' newsletters and Three Choirs lunches and songs sung winsomely by ex-lay clerks' (p. 493). Record companies have certainly sustained this English pastoral version, packaging Finzi picturesquely behind Turner's images of English fields. Fundamentally, the composer himself probably preferred this view. His closest friend Howard Ferguson claimed that Finzi 'was always insistent that he was thoroughly English.'<sup>4</sup> Yet Banfield asserts that 'it is time to stop hearing [Finzi] as he heard himself and take a deeper sounding, a longer view. The myth has run its course and needs replacing' (p. 496).

A good portion of the first chapter is accordingly spent fleshing out Finzi's fascinating ancestry, and this emphasis on heredity and in particular the questions of identity stemming from the composer's Jewish background and the extent of its ongoing impact on his life are evident throughout the text. The chapter 'Finzi's War' concentrates this issue, describing a period of crisis in the composer's life associated with the ascent of Nazi Germany; Banfield writes:

He had forged his complete, watertight identity as the English freelance composer...He had been wholly assimilated, and had 'married out' with the effect that his children

<sup>3</sup> 'Reviews of Music,' *Music & Letters* 33 (1952): 93.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Ferguson, personal interview with Megan Pricor, 16 Nov. 1995.

would no longer be Jewish... Yet Hitler's voice was telling him more and more hysterically that he himself was still a Jew' (p.257).

Given that Gerald's elder son Christopher believes Judaism had no impact on his father, and also given that any Jewish manifestation in his life or works has remained unobserved until now (even Howard Ferguson was not told and never guessed his 'secret') it may seem fair to challenge Banfield's attention to this issue. Yet why should the questions not be asked? 'How are we to understand,' he writes, 'the Gerald Finzi whose mother's family consorted with the Rothschilds, whose father's earned the encyclopaedia entry "noble Italian Jewish family" detailing ancestors back to the middle ages, and whose continental intertwinings evidently took in the likes of Garibaldi?' (p. 494). Similarly intriguing is Gerald's destruction of his mother's (somehow incriminating?) personal papers in September 1938 when war seemed imminent (p. 259), and the 'secret hiding cupboard' which he had had built between his music room and library at Ashmansworth (p. 240). The point is that we, with Banfield, are left to wonder:

If only a provisional estimate of this man, his music... is possible, we are left with someone who, for all his charm and attraction and containedness and elegiac sweetness and reassuring Englishness is at bottom a cultural enigma.... One thing is certain: his identity... was not the watertight unitary one he would have himself and us believe.' (p. 495-96)

Banfield's analysis of the compositions is deft and sure. Moreover his examination penetrates the music on numerous levels—encompassing theoretical, stylistic, historical and interpretative concerns—which will secure its value as a reference for musicologists and performers alike. The richly detailed, fluent and erudite style which marks Banfield's purely biographical commentary also enlivens his discussion of the music, aided by numerous musical examples. Joy's journal entries, and Gerald's sketchbooks and letters are all used to unveil the process, not just of composition itself, but also of the promotion, performance, reception and influence of his music. In this book, the 'life' informs the 'works' and vice versa.

For all the questions it raises yet leaves unanswered, or perhaps because of them, *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer* is an exemplary scholarly work, a satisfying large-scale study of an admittedly small-scale yet undeniably valuable musical entity. During Gerald's final days, Joy Finzi kept a moving account of events in her journal. Her entry on 28 September 1956 simply concludes 'The shadow has fallen.' The forty-years' absence of a comprehensive biographical and musical study of Finzi ensured his continuing obscurity. Banfield's study is thus, in the most literal terms, illuminating. Both its achievement and its challenge lie in the fact that the Gerald Finzi revealed in this light is not quite the one we expected.

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**Title:**

Stephen Banfield, Gerald Finzi: An English Composer

**Date:**

1998

**Citation:**

Prictor, M. (1998). Stephen Banfield, Gerald Finzi: An English Composer. Context: Journal of Music Research, 15 & 16, pp.113-115

**Persistent Link:**

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