Music and Politics in Thirties Britain: Raise the Standard High, by John Morris, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, x + 254 pp., £85 (hardback), £28.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781350271227, £26.09 (eBook), ISBN 9781350271258

This is an ambitious but flawed book about an important and timely topic: the relationship between culture and politics during a period of economic turbulence and ideological fracture. In his previous monograph, *Culture and Propaganda in World War II: Music, Film and the Battle for National Identity* (I. B. Tauris, 2014), John Morris examined British initiatives to instrumentalise the arts for political ends between 1935 and 1945. Conceived as a 'companion' (p. 10) – or, one might say, a kind of prequel – to that earlier volume, *Music and Politics in Thirties Britain: Raise the Standard High* focuses on classical music in Britain in the year 1934, primarily through the lens of its extensive coverage in newspapers and periodicals. The subtitle has a double meaning. On the one hand, it alludes to both the Nazi Party's 'Horst Wessel Song' and the enduring left-wing anthem 'The Red Flag'. The phrase thus invokes the profound ideological conflicts of the age and the rallies and other such public events at which music became most conspicuously politicised. On the other hand, it also refers to a widespread concern in interwar Britain with raising *musical* standards – be that in relation to composition, performance, listening, mediation or employment opportunities – and so to broader questions about cultural politics and national prestige, in an era of intense anxiety about how modernism, capitalism, democracy and technology were transforming 'high' art.

The book is organised along thematic lines. The Introduction establishes the broad historical context, partly by exploring how British cultural elites responded to the growing popularity of jazz. Chapter 1 discusses media technologies and institutions, focusing primarily on the BBC. Following Chapter 2's account of the geneses of new symphonies by Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton, Chapters 3 and 5 offer more general overviews of developments in concert culture and public debates about music. Although in these parts of the book politics as such sometimes fades quite far into

the background, questions of power and ideology do arise more overtly elsewhere. Chapter 4 examines British reactions to increasingly ominous developments in Nazi Germany. Finally, Chapter 6 shows how a preoccupation with protecting and renewing national culture shaped discourses about music across the political spectrum, including within both the British Union of Fascists and the Communist Party of Great Britain. In this chapter especially, we see how concerns about music's role in British identity and public life played out not only through lofty conjectures about 'national style', but also in more policy-oriented (if no less ideologically driven) debates about proposals to enforce protectionism in the labour market and to create a national ministry for culture, steps which their proponents claimed would alleviate the hardship into which many professional musicians had fallen in the early 1930s.

Rather than embrace the arbitrariness of focusing on a single year, Morris sets out to demonstrate that 1934 was 'a special year for British music' (p. 235). Unfortunately, one of his main ways of pursuing this aim – one which disrupts the flow of the Introduction especially – is simply to list things that happened in 1934, a strategy taken to its most unconvincing extreme when the reader is informed about musicians who happened to have been *born* that year (p. 12). As this questionable style of argumentation exemplifies, the book's approach is more descriptive than analytical, in ways that can make it a bewildering read. Abundant factual information and quotations accrue, but often without a clear sense of how they relate to larger frameworks or narratives. At times, proximity to primary sources strays into a lack of critical distance. Chapter 1's lengthy digression into the BBC's activities in South Africa (where the author, who grew up in the UK, has resided for many years) might have been framed quite differently had it been informed in any way by postcolonial theory and historiography. Later, in response to the composer and conductor Constant Lambert's hair-raising assertion (in his influential 1934 book *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline*) that 'most jazz is written and performed by cosmopolitan Jews', Morris blithely suggests that back then 'even respected figures … could be controversial, by today's standards', but that, nonetheless, 'we can accept his [Lambert's] right to mention an uncomfortable notion' (p. 210). Although, to be clear, Morris does identify and critique

antisemitism in less ambiguous terms elsewhere, for a book written about a period of catastrophic persecution and violence against Jewish people, this half-hearted attempt to defend blatant prejudice feels clumsy, at best.

Such misjudgements notwithstanding, *Music and Politics in Thirties Britain* speaks in many ways to prevailing concerns in current research on music in early twentieth-century Britain. Issues and contexts arising in the book are also addressed in recent work by musicologists including Byron Adams, Joanna Bullivant, Ross Cole, Sarah Collins, Daniel Grimley, Kate Guthrie, Matthew Riley, Florian Scheding, Catherine Tackley, Laura Tunbridge and Alexandra Wilson – to name just a few. However, even though some of them have written about the same individuals and events as Morris, none of these scholars appears in his bibliography. In general, apart from a brief and somewhat perplexed response to J. P. E. Harper-Scott's work on Walton (at pp. 85–87), and excluding information mined from composer biographies and institutional histories, Morris engages strikingly little with scholarship by music specialists. As a result, some musicologists may raise a sceptical eyebrow at the claim on the book's back cover that it 'treads new ground' in its examination of 1930s Britain through 'the little-known aspect of music and politics'.

I do not wish to downplay the considerable original research here, particularly as regards the use of contemporary press reporting. But especially given the effort that has gone into the project in that respect, it is a shame that the presentation is far from perfect. Misspellings (especially of non-English names and titles) are frequent, as is misplaced punctuation. The writing is at once digressive and strangely repetitive (some restatements of factual information and quotations appear within just a few pages of each other), and the approach to referencing is sometimes inconsistent. In one slightly alarming passage (pp. 82–84), the footnotes simply stop coming altogether, even for quotations. Despite Morris's evident enthusiasm, the problems with framing, focus and copyediting consistently hamper communication with the reader and thus ultimately prevent *Music and Politics in Thirties Britain* from doing justice to its rich subject matter.

Notes on contributor:

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