TLS

Date 18 March 2011

Page 4,5

clipShare
newspaper licensing agency

Sight and sound

HUGH WOOD

Elaine Gould

BEHIND BARS
The definitive guide to music notation
704pp. Faber. £65.
978 0 571 514 56 4

The question "Does he or she read music?" suggests that some barrier exists that shuts out those on the other side of it from the exercise of a private language. This is a completely false assumption. Notation is auxiliary to the performing arts, but not always necessary to them. (For a painting is, in a sense, its own notation, and so is a novel.) Look no further than the figure of Irving Berlin, to many the greatest writer of popular song that ever lived; he did not read music. Behind him is the whole of the pop world and most of the jazz. Only with big-band jazz and its arrangements must the notation of music be in any way prescriptive; otherwise the notation of given bass patterns does no more than faintly recall the figured and unfigured bass lines of the Baroque era.

Folk song in its natural state relies entirely on aural tradition and on the inventive powers of individual singers and their memories. When, in the opening years of the twentieth century, Cecil Sharp in the Alleghenies, Vaughan Williams in England, Percy Grainger in Lincolnshire, and Béla Bartók in Hungary began to preserve folk traditions by reducing them to notation, they were sometimes disconcerted by a folk singer's response to a request to sing a song for the second time (recording techniques were then in their infancy). For he would sing the song differently, and take pride in doing so. It would have been an impoverished, indeed incapable, exponent who would sing exactly the same song twice. This argues a radically different conception of the art of music; not as a fixed procedure in infinite repetition, but as something freely re-created in order to be continually brought into being. We should at least recognize that much of the world's music takes place not in accordance with a predetermined set of rules and instructions.

Nevertheless, musical notation is central to Western music. It has existed since the very early Middle Ages and, steadily growing in precision and sophistication since then, has determined the whole nature of the art. From a series of approximate marks to guide singers in their pitches rather than their rhythms (neumes), to systems rather like a shorthand, specifically for various instruments (tablatures), there gradually emerged the crotchet and the quaver and all the other symbols with which we are familiar today. The four-line plainsong stave gave way to the five-line stave; clefs proliferated, some of them now simplified out of common usage, but still to be found in the manuscripts of Bach and Mozart (and Wagner's tenors continue to sing from a tenor clef). With the advent of equal temperament and the greater range of keys that it made practicable came more key signatures. But the defining moment had already come with music printing, which regulated music from *c*.1600 onwards.

Thereafter, the process was one of ever closer definition. Auxiliary marks such as dynamics, tempo, phrasing began to proliferate. Composers became more precisely demanding and specific; the score of Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* (1926) seems overcrowded with stipulation if you compare it to any score by J. S. Bach 200 years before.

Editors had long since imposed themselves: Carl Czerny's edition of the *Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues* in 1838 goes far beyond anything that Bach could have conceived of, and rather reflects the habits, wishes and ideals of early Romanticism. Artur Schnabel's edition of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas displays the accumulated experience of a distinguished executant of a later age, but he is careful to distinguish his own contribution from the

Copyright material. This may only be copied under the terms of a Newspaper Licensing Agency agreement or with written publisher permission.

For external republishing rights visit www.nla-republishing.com

inheritance of previous editions. For by the early part of the twentieth century, musicians were moving into the era of the *Urtext* – the absolutely objective and unadorned presentation of what the composer intended, with nothing added and nothing subtracted.

The *Urtext* sounds like an admirable consummation of attitudes towards notation. But its ideals can be seen to be based on a fallacy. The realization of music in performance depends on the most delicate and intricate of minuets being danced between what appears on the page and what the performer presents on the concert platform. This is what we mean by "interpretation", and it proclaims the absolute sovereignty of the live performance, which can never be the same twice. Notation is a beginning not an end. Sometimes, in a half-way house towards improvisation, composers alter details even after the piece has made a public appearance. Chopin is a notable example – and it is of course significant that he was a performer-composer.

Between the two world wars music underwent a variety of changes, looking forward and also back. The challenge to tonality as a form-building factor, the twelve-note technique, neoclassicism, the integration of folk sources – all these were managed without a gross overhaul of notational methods. But after 1945 a much more radical review of the whole nature and scope of music took place and notation did not escape this revolution. Indeed, in darker moments one wonders whether the forty years between 1950 and 1990 will not be chiefly remembered for the enormous reckless extension and reformulation of notational needs and the invention of new symbols to satisfy them. On the one hand there developed a demand for ever more exacting specifications – especially in questions of rhythm – which threatened to outrun the capabilities of all but the most accomplished or specialist players (and those of their listeners). For instance, it's difficult for any but a highly and perhaps rather narrowly trained choir to make a decent choral sound in tune while tackling a work like Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955–6). On the other hand, there was the opposite: a type of notation that suggested rather than stipulated, that was undemanding, that loosened any adherence to a laid-down text.

There are passages that allow, or rather require, such freedoms in string quartets by Peter Maxwell Davies and Witold Lutosławski, written in the early 1960s. Elsewhere, players were, in effect, set a series of multiple choice questions; and to choose to make each performance different became part of the object of the music. Harrison Birtwistle's *Verses for Ensembles* works in this way. There was also a reinstatement of the approximate. The tricky switch from mathematical exactitude to a cult of vagueness, from architectural outline to cloudy intimation, could not be made without skirting paradox. And yet György Ligeti achieved it, when he cultivated an exact and fully controlled notation in order to give the impression of inchoate masses in motion. The relation of some of these recent phenomena to the instincts of our folk ancestry must be obvious.

At this late – and problematic – moment in the long history of music notation, a remarkable book has appeared. *Behind Bars*, by Elaine Gould, may have a jokey title, but its contents are magisterial and its publication is an important event. The book's protean nature makes it difficult to describe in a couple of sentences. It is, firstly, a comprehensive thesaurus and accurate categorization of every aspect of notational practice as it exists today. It can be read as a manual of instruction as well as a source of information and it has a prescriptive tone. This sounds daunting. The best way of introducing it is to compare it to *Hart's Rules* ("for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford"), and it stands up well to the comparison. What the venerable *Hart's Rules* (conceived in 1864 and going through many editions until *New Hart's Rules* appeared in 2005) does for the literary, publishing and printing world of words, *Behind Bars* sets out to do – and succeeds in doing – for the musical one. Just as *Hart's Rules* is meant "for compositors and readers", so *Behind Bars* is designed for composers, copyists and music

Copyright material. This may only be copied under the terms of a Newspaper Licensing Agency agreement or with written publisher permission.

For external republishing rights visit www.nla-republishing.com

editors. It shares the same kind of benign authority, and much of its beguiling charm. Like *Hart's*, it could become the cult reading of enthusiasts who do not directly need it for their work.

It is a practical book. It follows without question a long-ago teacher's sour but just observation that notation is not a vehicle for self-expression but a means of communication. It is copyists and editors who make the musical world work. They are so much more than the profession's foot soldiers, as they are often counsellors, advisers and friends of those who create the music that passes through their hands. They will find in *Behind Bars* a judicious and all-embracing exposition in the finest detail of the right and wrong way to do their job, or (equally welcome and valuable) a confirmation that their present practice is correct. Nor does the prescriptive edge over into the negatively dogmatic. Alternative practice and survivals of an older era of notation are presented, recognized and judged. The book is, after all, based on a lifetime's experience obviously dominated by two ideals: order and clarity.

The composer will find himself even more deeply indebted. He will not be able to read more than a couple of pages of this book without coming across the mention and discussion of familiar problems that he will encounter in the course of a morning's work, the solutions to which are here identified and definitively ruled upon – whether it be the correct placing of a slur or the best notation of complex rhythms. If he wants to communicate with his audience in the most direct and unproblematic way, and incidentally to spare his editor and copyist their nursemaid-like attentions, then a quick look at Gould on Notation may well become the most immediate resource in helping him to do so.

This is in no sense a historical volume, nor is it backward-looking. Its main thrust is to lay down the ground rules of mainstream practice today, and they remain highly traditional; but it is not conservative in tone. What we have already identified as the notation explosion of the mid-years of the last century is recognized and largely absorbed into the general discussion. Phenomena such as note-clusters (Henry Cowell, Bartók), microtones (Xenakis), stress symbols and *Sprechstimme* notation (Schoenberg and others), polymeter and its attendant explications (Birtwistle, Carter), unvoiced and unusual sounds required from woodwind and brass and multiphonics (Crumb, Goehr, Benjamin, Ligeti, Adès) all appear to illustrate examples of their preferred notation.

The comprehensive nature of *Behind Bars* becomes ever clearer as one progresses towards a section called "Idiomatic Notation", in which not only the usual families of the orchestra – woodwind, brass, strings – are given individual treatment but also instruments like keyboard, harp and classical guitar. Each has its idiosyncrasies, and it could be said that these have multiplied over the past hundred years. The possibilities of the harp, for example, were revolutionized by Carlos Salzedo, although its unusual notation remains the same, and is clearly expounded here. Gould, in fact, effectively and usefully invades the territory of many books on orchestration here, offering not instruction but copious information about how new possibilities such as non-pitched sounds on the horn or key slaps on the trumpet are to be notated. In an equally up-to-date section on vocal music, it comes as no surprise to find a bow towards her great co-equal; on page 441, she cites *New Hart's Rules* on the question of syllabic division of words.

The penultimate chapter considers score layout, and though much of this is a welcome reminder of standard practice, it recognizes innovations made over the past century, too. And, honestly, who could disentangle on their own the arcane procedures of scoring for wind band or brass band without some help? Both wind and brass bands have a daunting array of transposing instruments and even reading the score is no task for the inexperienced. Finally, there is a section called "Freedom and Choice", in which certain avant-garde practices are discussed. It must be remembered that the conductor, or

Copyright material. This may only be copied under the terms of a Newspaper Licensing Agency agreement or with written publisher permission.

For external republishing rights visit www.nla-republishing.com

director of an ensemble, is the only person to see the whole picture. If he encounters music without bar lines or time signatures; if it features cadenzas or free movement inside a bar; if there are independent parts inside an otherwise regulated ensemble; if there are freely repetitive ostinati; if the music features time-space notation or stemless notes – then this section (in which all the foregoing features are discussed) will help him or her to react correctly to the composer's intentions. As with much of the rest of the book, it ensures that everybody will be singing and playing from the same sheet. This is the most difficult section of the book for the ingénu, and it is the most clearly and skilfully written.

By now it should be clear how many philosophical points about the necessary nature and function of notation this book raises. But is such a work of lapidary elegance and command too late? An old cliché might call it "the last word on the subject"; it is alarming to think that this could turn out to be the case, as the author acknowledges at the beginning of her introduction:

> In an age where computers can do it all for us, what need is there for expertise in, or even a working knowledge of, the principles of notation?

But she must know that technological innovation is beside the point. The automation that now assists the rapid and wide dissemination of musical material and (for example) the mechanized production of parts from a full score saves time, effort and (one supposes) money. It has nothing to do with the necessity of notation as a means of communication between human beings. That there exists a threat is undoubted: this book appears at the very moment when the BBC is encouraging teenagers to submit their music in a competition, even though they may not be able to write it down – somebody else will do that for them – and then to think of themselves as composers. Composition, notated or not, is more complicated than that. Meanwhile, we have in this book a plea for the survival of musical literacy. That this long-lived, still-evolving art and craft demands an exemplary order of dedication is made clear by Elaine Gould.

Empty Metaphor

The last room was a hall of mirrors
where my child stepped past.

Nineteen – about to be described
and yet to meet her explanation.

At the point of exchange
she became so unknown, so clear

that I could not tell glass from air.

LAVINIA GREENLAW

Copyright material. This may only be copied under the terms of a Newspaper Licensing Agency agreement or with written publisher permission.

For external republishing rights visit www.nla-republishing.com

Canon, with circular staves, from Richard Sampson's Motets (*c*.1516)

Copyright material. This may only be copied under the terms of a Newspaper Licensing Agency agreement or with written publisher permission.

For external republishing rights visit www.nla-republishing.com