

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Watt, *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography*

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Reviewed by Paul Rodmell

Paul Watt's biography of the critic and musicologist Ernest Newman is a welcome addition to literature on music in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The disparity between the vast number of published words by Newman—which must surely run well over a million—and the amount of critical attention paid to him by academics is striking. Newman was undoubtedly one of the most influential Anglophone music critics of his time, perhaps *the* most influential, and a serious although undoubtedly flawed musicologist. Yet, despite the rapid growth in the last thirty years of academic interest in British musical culture, Newman's life and work has remained largely unscrutinised. In one sense this is inevitable: Newman remained active as a writer almost up until his death in 1959, and it required some temporal distance to be able to look back at his work with something approaching the intellectual objectivity he himself valued throughout his career.

Mindful of the extant work covering Newman's life (there are two 'biographies,' both of them flawed, the first, by Henry Farmer, to the extent that it was rejected by all companies to which it was submitted and remains unpublished, and the other, by Newman's second wife, Vera, issued only with great reservations and a degree of charity by Putnam in 1963, plus a considerable number of other works, including Paul Watt's own doctoral thesis, which cover various aspects of Newman's life and writing), Watt has been faced with a significant challenge as to how to navigate around these in order to provide the reader with a sufficient sense of Newman's work and personality, while not duplicating substantial amounts of material from elsewhere, or getting side-tracked by trivialities. It is arguable as to whether one ever needs a 'breakfast, dinner and tea' chronology of events in any biography, but this seems less appropriate for Newman than for many others: what makes him interesting and worthy of

examination is his writing. Given this, the challenge is to provide enough contextual information to explain how Newman's attitudes were formed and then sustained or modified over time. As Watt himself notes, Vera Newman's biography tends to give much of the domestic information anyway so, while that study is flawed, enough work has been done in that area already.

Consequently, Watt's book is a judicious balance of personal information about Newman—most of which focuses on incidents in his life that had a direct impact on his published writing—and a survey of the highlights (and undoubted lowlights) of Newman's career as a critic and author. Accordingly, the study proceeds in a generally chronological manner, but chapters deal with areas of activity rather than time periods, resulting in some movement backwards and forwards (this is principally true of the chapters covering his work at the *Sunday Times* and his writings on Liszt and Wagner). This approach is successful and one gains far more than one loses through an issue-led structure than a strictly chronological one as the Liszt and Wagner material undoubtedly coheres better for being treated as discrete subjects.

Watt does not set out to provide a comprehensive survey or commentary on Newman's output—indeed, given its extent, this would be impossible—but rather to highlight some of Newman's most interesting or controversial writing and to explain (as opposed to justify or support) it. Newman was nothing if not contentious or antagonistic; one of the most striking features that comes across from Watt's study is how provocative Newman could be, often, it would seem, simply to get a rise out of his targets or readers. As Watt himself states, 'one of Newman's lifelong strategies as a critic was to mediate polarised opinion, to debunk one or both sides of the argument, and to then put forward his own interpretation, criticising his readers for their ignorance in the process' (p. 55). This is undoubtedly what made his column in the *Sunday Times* such essential reading for many, but also led almost to his undoing in his biography of Liszt.

Inevitably, in any book of this nature, the reader may find that they would like to know more about something, or less of something else. Overall, this study strikes a measured and sensible balance. Many musicians may be unaware of Newman's interest in freethought and rationalism, but these early pursuits undoubtedly had a profound effect upon his values and criticism; Watt explains these aspects of Newman's life in Part I of his study without getting bogged down in abstract detail and it becomes increasingly clear through Part II how important these were to Newman, even if he abandoned writing about them comparatively early in his career. Personally, I would have liked to have known more about Newman's work for the *Birmingham Daily Post*, his thoughts on women in music (p. 52) and Oscar Wilde (pp. 53–4) but the obvious riposte for the latter two is that one can go and read Newman's articles for oneself; amongst the book's positive attributes is an extensive Appendix listing all the articles by Newman mentioned in the text, with comprehensive referencing. I had similar thoughts on Newman's writings on British music (although this receives good coverage) and his dislike for contemporary French music. Conversely, some of the background detail, for example on the role of George Weissenfeld in the publication of *Pseudo-Philosophy at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1897) in Chapter 4, and George Bernard Shaw's disagreement with John Robertson (p. 202) might have been condensed.

The book is extremely well written, referenced, and produced, and shows an exemplary attention to detail. Slips are few and far between and perhaps the more noticeable when they occur as a result; I could not help smiling when I read that neither Newman nor Mimi wanted

to kill Siegfried (p. 179), as surrealist images of Puccini's consumptive heroine wielding an axe in the Rhineland forest flitted through my mind.

Perhaps mindful of Newman's own advocacy of believing in rational and objective observation and assessment, despite so often conspicuously failing to deliver it in favour of something much more polemical, Watt himself refrains from making all but the mildest appraising comments on Newman's work until the final chapter, when he comes off the fence and offers a more fulsome view of Newman's strengths and weaknesses. Given the subject of the book, this is almost certainly a good call, although I confess that I would not have objected to a little less detachment earlier on, especially when Newman's cantankerous nature and hypocrisy when he hardly lived up to his own values of objectivity and rigorous research was so clearly illustrated. Nevertheless, Paul Watt has done scholars a considerable service, this being the first book to place the whole span of Newman's career and the most significant parts of his writing in both context and continuum. This is certainly not the last word on Newman—and I do not for a moment suppose that the author intended it to be so—but it provides a hugely useful resource for anyone wishing to know more about him, to have an overview of his writing, and to delve further into the career of one of Britain's most engaging but also provocative writers on music.

About the Reviewer

Paul Rodmell is a Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Birmingham (UK). His research focuses on British music and musical culture of the nineteenth century, and he is the author of monographs on Charles Stanford (2002) and opera in the British Isles in the period 1875–1918 (2013).