

Sarah Collins, *The Aesthetic Life of Cyril Scott*

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Reviewed by David Pear

Collins's book, its frontispiece showing a handsome, young Cyril Scott (1879–1970), follows the adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' We might today use the words 'dandy,' or even 'foppish,' to describe the lanky teenager, characteristically wearing a boater, who stares out at the camera holding a flower delicately in his left hand. Even at this young age, is he just a poseur? Does he have the substance and stature to navigate the many and hard decades that will be in front of him? With this image, Collins sets the scene for her intellectual challenge: a two-part analysis and evaluation of the life and aesthetic thinking of a figure caught uncomfortably between Romanticism and Modernism. This photograph comes from 1896, as the young Scott was starting to find his distinctive artistic voice. In the following two decades, as Collins goes on to show, he would lay down the defining characteristics of his long life's output, not just in the field of music, but in areas of health, psychology and the occult. He would have many early successes, but ultimately has not been seen as one of history's winners. Scott today lurks in the third tier of British musical figures, with a similar stature to such contemporaries as Joseph Holbrooke (1878–1958) or York Bowen (1884–1961).

While the glories of Victoriana and the world-changing tragedies of World War I are now well described, if not even sometimes over-exposed, the 'long decade' of glossy Edwardiana, 1901–1914, is often neglected. Yet it was in that long decade that Scott's set of values were consolidated and confirmed, as also with his Frankfurt Group of musical colleagues. In those earliest years of the twentieth century, too, the Frankfurt Group of composers—including Balfour Gardiner (1877–1950), Roger Quilter (1877–1953), Norman O'Neill (1875–1934) and Percy Grainger (1882–1961), as well as Scott—cut their distinctive aesthetic and cultural teeth, and laid down the track for their subsequent, post-War successes and (more often) failures. Their distinctive mix of sound and verbal arts, homosocial attitudes, and views on creative inspiration arose against a broader background of generally liberal social values. While Scott, in his anonymous *Autobiography of a Child* (1921), listed five key guiding principles—'music, melancholy, apprehension, sex and the Church' (p. 20)—Percy Grainger in 1911 listed an overlapping five—sex, race, athletics, speech and art. Interestingly, while music, art and sex were common themes, these two figures would across a lifetime clash over religion and approach to life, with the muscular Grainger forever goading the wan Scott to push his own barrow more energetically.

Collins's book, however, is not primarily about Scott as musician, or even about his music. Rather, music is one of several frames by which she accounts for his changing aesthetic stance. As the first sentence of the book clarifies, this is a 'cumulative tapestry of a series of intellectual threads' (p. xi). After her earlier chapters, which clarify and reassess many of the characteristics of the public and private man, with very informative passages about his early work with poetic translation and his several anonymous books about the

occult, Collins's goal is to compare what Scott said in theory with what he actually did in practice (Chapter 7). Her conclusion is that there was a direct interrelationship 'between his spiritual activities, his aesthetic thinking and his musical output' (p. 219) and that he did by 1933 develop an 'occult theory of musical affect' and formulate a mature model of the 'artist prophet' (p. 223). But, despite the interrelationship, Scott did not effectively bring all these threads together himself. Rather Collins's study is useful in considering 'a reflexive relationship between Scott's literary and musical work' (p. xxix), and, more importantly, through her study, 'it will certainly become clear that a reading of Scott's music through the lens of his aesthetic theory can reveal a range of stylistic choices that, if not spiritually motivated, certainly became spiritually consecrated within his developing system of thought' (p. xxix). This book is, then, as important for what it tells us about evolving aesthetic thought over the many decades of Scott's life, as for what it says also about specific aesthetic aspects of Scott's life and works.

Was this book worth the effort? The question does need to be asked, as the Scott that Collins inherited for doctoral investigation back in 2006 was a marginal figure, known to a small band of British-music enthusiasts. He was almost completely lost to the worlds of twentieth-century philosophy, psychology or health, to which he once contributed. Collins's book has not changed those interim judgements of history, but rather its excellent scholarship has provided context and explanation as to why his star so faded during the second half of his lifetime, and since. Scott presents as less of a side-kick to the more famous Percy Grainger, and as more an original and interesting thinker than has been hitherto understood. He, like so many of his generation, was caught up in that Edwardian bubble that was well and truly pricked by World War I.

A crueler world then emerged in which their late-Romantic values, however daring or 'indulgent' they might have appeared in the over-spill of the nineteenth century, found little resonance. Studies like Collins's are needed because they explain that pervasive melancholy of the members of a 'lost' generation, which—as in Scott's case—sometimes found affirmation of their own continuing significance, or 'genius,' in their contemporary rejection. Interestingly, her work throws new light on what was more, or less, original in the output of other Frankfurt-Group composers, suggesting that Scott, through chronic understatement of his own originality, may have surrendered too much to the claims of others. But this book is not likely to result in significantly increased interest in his music or republication of his writings. In that regard, Collins's work does not give cause to question the full-stop that so many have placed upon Scott's legacy.

The Aesthetic Life of Cyril Scott is very well produced by Boydell Press. Its carefully chosen photographs, like the frontispiece, underscore visually many of the book's themes, none more so than the cover photograph, which shows a middle-aged Scott, still similarly attired as he was as a youth, but now his hands are bony, with two rings on his left and a cigarette nonchalantly hanging from his right. The only surprise in the book is a sprinkling of trivial typographical errors that should have been caught at the proof-reading stage. These, however, do not distract from a fine, illuminating study of a minor figure, whose historical fate we can now much better understand.