

Preface

The story goes that upon Andrew Davis's appointment as Chief Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1989, he stated that one of his aims would be 'to do something about Hugh Wood'.¹ At that time, Wood had some thirty scores to his name, with a reputation for composing music that is lyrical, passionate, densely argued and expressively intense. In 1977, he was appointed lecturer in music at Cambridge University, and was (and remains) well known as a broadcaster and writer. What, then, did Andrew Davis feel was to be done? A long-time admirer of Wood's music, Davis was doubtless referring to the scarcity of that music in orchestral programmes throughout the country during the late 1970s and 1980s. Quite simply, for a composer of Wood's stature, the neglect of his music was inexplicable.

The first half of the 1990s saw an upturn in Wood's fortunes. In January 1990, Wood was one of the featured composers in the Park Lane Group's Young Artist series; later that year Andrew Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra revived *Scenes from Comus*, the work with which Wood made his name at the 1965 Proms. The following year, Davis conducted what was only the third performance of Wood's magisterial Symphony (1974–82), and then gave with Joanna MacGregor the premiere of Wood's Piano Concerto Op. 32, one of the highlights of the 1991 Proms season. In 1993 Tasmin Little and the BBC Philharmonic gave the first performance in twenty years of Wood's Violin Concerto (1970–72), and Collins Classics released a recording of the Piano Concerto. 1993 also saw the Chilingirian Quartet give the first performance of Wood's Fourth String Quartet Op. 34; two years later, the Chilingirians released a recording of all four of Wood's numbered quartets, reflecting his major contribution to this genre. But by the middle of the decade, there was a steady drop in momentum; the European premiere at the Last Night of the Proms of Wood's *Variations* Op. 39 notwithstanding, the frequency of performances of Wood's music was steadily decreasing.

Few contemporary composers can lay claim to continued success; the story of Wood's music in the 1990s is by no means exceptional in this respect. But the growth and decline of Wood's representation in concert programmes in these years took place against a background of consistently favourable press notices. By the end of the decade, Wood's status was such that reviewers could confidently draw on a limited repertoire of positive descriptions without fear of contradiction. Thus we find phrases such as 'this most thoughtful of composers',² 'one of our most craftsmanly composers',³ and 'one of our most distinguished composers'⁴ appearing with predictable regularity. The adjectives are well meant, but ultimately their blandness – forced, no doubt, by the pressures of deadlines and word limits – show a refusal to

¹ Michael White, 'In from the cold', *The Independent* (8 September 1991).

² Geoff Brown, 'Thorns on the Lark', *The Times* (10 February 1999).

³ Paul Driver, 'Uncool, Britannia', *Sunday Times* (20 September 1998).

⁴ Paul Driver, 'On Record', *Sunday Times* (21 October 2001).

engage with Wood's music; it is regarded as self-evident that he is a composer that demands our respect. In this light one could interpret Stephen Pettitt's description of Wood as a 'grossly underrated composer' – written at a time when Wood's music was enjoying a comparatively high profile in concert halls – as a comment that is aimed less at the general opinion of Wood's music (which was mostly positive), but rather the uncritical manner in which this opinion was formed.⁵

We are coming to the nub of what I term the 'Hugh Wood problem'. It is true that Wood's music has never been modish. When his peers in the 1960s were exploring serial modality, transformation techniques and ritual drama, Wood was honing his lyrical expressiveness and frankly Romantic impulses in works such as *Scenes from Comus* and the Cello Concerto. When the pendulum of musical fashion swung back to the simplistic and the overtly tonal, Wood continued to challenge his audiences with densely wrought counterpoint knitted together with rigorous motivic, and sometimes twelve-note, working. Nevertheless, Wood's music has enjoyed a certain amount of success over the last four decades, but it remains 'grossly underrated' – that is, it suffers from a lack of critical engagement.

Writing in 1993 of music by Wood and his Cambridge colleague Alexander Goehr, David Fanning touched on this problem, noting

how historical they now seem, how distant in their earnest complexities from the values of today's musical scene, which may of course be precisely their strength, if you take the view that most recent contemporary music has sold its soul to commercialism. And I wouldn't for a moment deny that there is beauty and deep feeling in them. Still, I do wonder if such works aren't destined to be more respected than loved.⁶

The respect that Fanning mentions looms large in the reviews cited above, and suddenly we might wonder if 'thoughtful', 'craftsmanly' and 'distinguished' are euphemisms for 'distant from the values of today's musical scene'. Returning to the reviews, our suspicions are confirmed: Wood's music uses 'old-fashioned 12-tone technique with incandescent sincerity';⁷ it is written in a 'lean, post 12-tone, conservative idiom';⁸ and, elsewhere, we find its 'post-Schoenbergian idiom ... seems particularly old-fashioned'.⁹ Despite favourable reviews, Wood's output is considered well-meaning but irrelevant to the concerns of our time. What these concerns are, and why this should be, have never been stated clearly: critics seem unable to see the Wood for the trees.

The Hugh Wood problem, then, is how one is to engage critically with a substantial body of music that, for all its passion and conviction, remains on the margins of the contemporary canon for largely political reasons. Thus when describing Wood as 'one of the most unjustly neglected of contemporary British composers', Michael Kennedy ventured that this was 'perhaps because he has remained loyal

⁵ Stephen Pettitt, 'Thrills from the Punch and Judy man', *The Times* (26 June 1993).

⁶ David Fanning, 'Such Distant Memories', *The Independent* (6 March 1993).

⁷ Driver, 'On Record'.

⁸ Driver, 'Uncool Britannia'.

⁹ Gerald Larner, 'Reviews', *The Times* (20 July 1999).

to Schoenbergian precepts'.¹⁰ That is, Wood's neglect stems not from low quality, but rather his adherence to 'old-fashioned' values. But one should be wary also of special pleading on behalf of the Unjustly Neglected, a sizeable body of composers that surely by now outnumbers the Justly Acknowledged (along with the Bafflingly Popular) by a large factor. In speaking of Frank Bridge, Wood noted that a neglected composer

may well be rehabilitated for the wrong reasons. The tendency is for his virtues to be overpraised since they were lacking in those who neglected him; the reasons for neglect to be extrapolated to form a critique of the musical society. The composer himself becomes a symbol. But that doesn't necessarily mean he's a very good composer.¹¹

I believe that there is more than a grain of truth in the suggestion that Wood's neglect is in part due to the musical values he espouses. And I also believe that a musical society in which these values are marginalized is somewhat the poorer as a result. But there is space within any society for different belief and value systems to co-exist, and it should become clear from the content of this book that Wood's music, and the values it embodies, is of a vitality that is deserving of a more central position in our understanding of contemporary music. And by this, I mean to say that he is to be considered at the very least a good composer; it is my hope that what follows will suffice as an introduction to a body of work that for too long has remained in the shadows.

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¹⁰ Michael Kennedy, 'Classical CDs', *Sunday Telegraph* (28 October 2001).

¹¹ Hugh Wood, 'Frank Bridge and the Land Without Music', *Tempo* 121 (1977): 7–11 (p. 8).