

The Oxford Companion to Music. Edited by Alison Latham. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xi, [3], 1434 p. \$84.95 ISBN 0198662122

In the preface to his first edition of the *Oxford Companion to Music* (1938), Percy A. Scholes expressed the hope that the “five or six years of unremitting labour” he had devoted to its preparation would prove to have been well-spent. His single-volume, highly personal encyclopedia, aimed at the “experienced and well-instructed professional musician” and the “attentive and intelligent general reader” alike, became one of Oxford University Press’s best sellers, going through nine editions in his lifetime. A tenth edition by his last assistant, John Owen Ward, was published in 1970 and was itself reprinted at least four times.

Scholes was probably the last of that breed of British encyclopedists and lexicographers whose personal dedication in their relentless quest for comprehensive information and knowledge continue to enrich the minds and the hearts of the inquisitive to this day. While he had numerous assistants, paid and unpaid, to help with the clipping and filing and typing, and while he consulted with many experts in various fields of musical knowledge, Scholes wrote the *Companion* himself. According to Ward in his preface, “the only articles farmed out were those on tonic sol-fa, which he could never quite manage to his own satisfaction, and the

plots of the operas, which he found too boring to engage his attention.”¹

Alison Latham frankly acknowledges that this is no longer possible given the broadening of the field into interdisciplinary studies and world music on the one hand and more specialization on the other. She also acknowledges that she had two predecessors to whom she is indebted – primarily and obviously to Scholes, whose scope and mission she has endeavoured to carry forward, and to Denis Arnold who edited the *New Oxford Companion to Music* published in 1983.

Arnold’s edition was a major departure from the first *Companion*, although he too expressed his intention of adhering to Scholes’s basic principles. Arnold even reprinted some of Scholes’s material, such as the long and detailed article on “Colour and Music,” but he also excised much of what made the Scholes *Companion* so personal and quirky, but which, today, might be deemed politically incorrect or, at best, Eurocentric and patriarchal. He

¹For further reading on Scholes’s methodology, see my article, “An Unsung Treasure at the National Library of Canada: The Percy A. Scholes Collection,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 41, no. 1 (January-March 1994): 53-65.

expanded considerably the scope of the work, both geographically and chronologically, and included more coverage of women composers and performers. The *New Companion* was double the size of the first and appeared as a two-volume set which proved to be less popular. Although he wrote much of the new material himself, Arnold engaged the assistance of some 90 authors whose contributions are identified.

Latham has followed this now-common practice and assembled her own team of contributors. She inherited some from the Arnold edition, but she was also able to draw upon experience and acquaintances from previous editing work – such as *The Musical Times* and the *Grove Concise Dictionary of Music* – to provide updates, revisions and new material. In an interview published on the Oxford University Press Web site [≤www.oup-usa.org/musicbooks>](http://www.oup-usa.org/musicbooks), Latham admits that it was not possible to impose personality on the work. The choices of what to include and what to omit were made not from personal preference, but from practicality.

Oxford University Press wanted to revert to the one-volume format of its other companions and obviously a great deal of the previous edition had to go. The most apparent space-saver was the elimination of all the pictorial illustrations except for line drawings attached to entries on instruments. Also gone are the opera plot synopses which were prominent features in both Scholes and Arnold, and probably much more since the publisher claims that seventy percent of this edition is new material. But this claim must be taken with the

proverbial grain of salt; it depends on how one interprets “new.”

Latham has attached contributors' initials to all but her own entries, or to anonymous entries from previous editions. Revised entries bear both the original author's and the reviser's initials. The key to the initials indicates the new contributors in bold face to distinguish them from previous authors, but one must go to the key to determine what is new and what is not, unless of course it is a revision. Here is an example of why I question the above claim. The chanced-upon entry for “diddling” is attributed to Kenneth Chalmers, but, upon cross-checking the term in Scholes, I found the new entry is almost verbatim except for a different transliteration of a Gaelic term (*puirt-a-beul* instead of *port à beul*). In fact, the Scholes entry is slightly more informative, even if the competitions mentioned by him no longer take place. Then I looked in Arnold and found the entry, including the new transliteration and a brief parenthetical clarification of “diddle-di-dee,” but more honestly without attribution to indicate that it came from the Scholes edition. Quibbling? Perhaps. I do not envy the editor having to depend to a great extent on others, and in a work of this size and nature it would be impossible to check everything.

So how does Canada fare? Not well, I'm afraid. The best that can be said is that there *is* an entry. But it is a brutally chopped-down version of George Proctor's lengthy and elegant article in Arnold. Revised by Paul Griffiths, a New York-based writer and critic and a major contributor to Arnold, it has

become a sketchy and disjointed overview which jumps from a first performance of Harry Somers' *Louis Riel* in 1967 to the next generation of Montreal composers (Bouliane, Provost and Vivier), ending rather surprisingly—and abruptly—with the following statement:

Vivier's singular music has received more widespread attention than that of any other Canadian composer (italics added).

Even if this were true – and I'm not sure that it is – why is there no mention at all of younger composers from the rest of Canada? And while it might be considered reasonable to omit composers of this generation on the grounds that they have not yet stood the test of time, I did come across an entry for an English composer, Thomas Adès (b. 1974), who is unknown to me and is not mentioned in the article on England. What were the editor's criteria in this regard? Or indeed for revisions in general?

For comparison's sake, I checked the entry for Australia which had a similar length and layout to Canada in Arnold. I found that Australia fares much better. Reduced from five pages to two, it retains its subdivisions and ample reading list, while Canada is reduced from five to one page, without sub-headings, and with a minimal reading list of four publications: the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, Helmut Kallmann's and Tim McGee's histories, and *Oh What a Feeling : A Vital History of Canadian Music* by Martin Melhuish, a decidedly light-weight treatment of the pop music scene.

A better choice would have been the same author's *Heart of Gold : 30 Years of Canadian Pop Music* (1983). And what of Mark Miller's *Miller Companion to Jazz in Canada* (2001) and Robert Thérien and Isabelle D'Amour's *Dictionnaire de la musique populaire au Québec 1955-1992*, not to mention Carl Morey's *Music in Canada: A Research and Information Guide* (1997)?

To be fair to Latham, one of her innovations has been more individual entries. Of the twenty-four composers named in the Canada article, thirteen have been given entries of their own: Archer, Beckwith, Champagne, Freedman, Garant, Papineau-Couture, Pentland, Schafer, Somers, Tremblay, Vivier, Weinzwieg, and Willan. The others are included in the index of "people who are referred to in this *Companion* but who do not have their own entries" (pp.1399-1434). The only Canadian performers mentioned are Glenn Gould and Oscar Peterson, and only Gould has an entry. But Latham explains at the outset that she was constrained to limit entries on performers to "artists who are no longer alive and who had significant influence on composition and performance."

A corrected and revised edition of this *Companion* should take care of some of the problems mentioned. And perhaps a Canadian might be called upon for advice. He or she would know at least that the National Museum of Man has changed its name!

But enough said on shortcomings. The joys of browsing led me to a more

positive outlook. The final entry in Scholes is "Zymbalum" (p. 1128), Arnold ends with "Zyklus" (p. 2011), and Latham with the same entry (p. 1398). Glancing upward for her final biographical entry – Ellen Taaffe Zwillich, American composer – my eye was caught by "Der Zwerg," an opera by Alexander Zemlinsky. Not finding an entry for it in either Scholes or Arnold, I compared the composer entries. Scholes gave Zemlinsky quite short shrift, almost dismissive; Arnold's entry by Paul Griffiths is somewhat better, but has no reading list; while the Latham entry by Tim Ashley is quite extensive, with two references to substantial further reading. And therein lay proof of the need for new editions of encyclopedias. Times and styles of expression change, emphases shift, new writers, composers and scholars emerge, and the cycle of a living art continues. One may mourn the dropped entries or the absence of a personality like Scholes. But remember, he was born 125 years ago and was very much a creature of his time when eccentricity and individuality were acceptable, even admirable, characteristics. Alison Latham and her team are firmly planted in the twenty-first century, however wistfully they may look back on a more gently permissive era. They have a world of information at their fingertips, and they speak with the authority of a vastly larger perspective. They are therefore

not easily forgiven errors or imperfections. In general, they have done a good job with an almost impossible task.

So my advice is to keep your Scholes – you will still find information there that can be found nowhere else – and keep your Arnold too, for its broader coverage and for the illustrations which give it more of the look of the old *Companion*. But Latham's return to the single-volume format makes it more viable for quick consultation. Some readers will like the prominent section breaks for longer survey articles on subjects such as major composers and periods with shaded margins or pages respectively; others will find them disruptive and patronizing. It is beautifully printed and much easier to read than Scholes, and not that expensive either. So do consider adding Latham to your collections. Keep a working copy at the reference desk for that quick first response to a desperate telephone call, or for your own browsing pleasure during quiet moments. All things considered, it is a companionable *Companion* and would make a handsome Christmas present for your favourite music-lover.

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