

Disappointing—and unlikely to stimulate concertgoers

Anthony Hopkins, *The Concertgoer's Companion. Volume 2: Holst to Webern. 358 pages. J M Dent and Sons. £15.*

IT WOULD be easy simply to accept this book because Anthony Hopkins is well known for his easy-going and enlightening analysis in sound and print of classical music. That would be doing potential readers a disservice since the book shows signs of being rather expediently put together.

Some 90 works by 25 composers are analysed in varying degrees of detail and in easy to read prose. However, no origin is given to the material in this book but it reads like a reprinting of a series of programme notes. This need not be a drawback in itself but such a source would partially explain why the chapters, or articles, tend to be descriptive rather than stimulating or insightful.

Hopkins treads no new ground and though he touches on the importance of film in setting an image of classical music for millions of people (the examples given are *Elvira Madigan* and *Brief Encounter*), potentially rich subjects like this are not developed.

His protestations in the introduction to the contrary, the choice of works and composers is idiosyncratic to say the least.

"Some readers," he writes, "may feel frustrated that the choice is not adventurous enough, but to a certain extent I

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have inevitably had to assume that some recollection of a work exists in the mind, however vague that may be."

Presumably he is referring to those privileged few who attended the same concerts as the ones that he wrote the programme notes for, otherwise we must have a nation of music lovers who have a recollection of Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* and we all remember Lutoslawski's *Concerto For Orchestra* well.

Hopkins' accuracy cannot always be trusted. In discussing Charles Ives's magnificent, evocative *Three Places in New England* he first writes that the first movement contains "a tune known at the time to every American child" but neglects to identify it and then goes on to say that we hear a version of *Marching to Georgia*.

Further, "the opening phrase appears quite openly on a solo clarinet." Either Hopkins has not heard *Three Places in New England* or he does not know *Marching Through Georgia*. In addition to which the clarinet phrase in question contains some intervals similar, if anything, to the third phrase of the song, not the first.

One gets the impression at times of second hand knowledge, of someone writing prior to hearing the works in question.

Where value for money is concerned, it might be worth investigating Edward Downes's fine collection, *Guide to Symphonic Music* (published by Walker and Company,

New York, and available on special order through Blackwells, Oxford, for about £20), in which he analyses nearly 500 compositions.

Here is Hopkins on the opening of Shostakovich's *Symphony No 5*: "The beginning is intensely serious, with cellos and basses leading off with a strongly marked rhythm that is at once copied by the violins"

Which is sort of all right, without telling you what the music "sounds" like. Here is Downes on the same passage:

"The first movement opens with a boldly jagged theme reminiscent of the subject of Beethoven's *Great Fugue*, Opus 113. Initiated by the double basses in octaves, it is immediately imitated by all the violins in powerful octave sonorities."

Where Downes scores, I think (in addition to his far more liberal musical examples), is not only in actually giving the reader a sense of what the music sounds like ("powerfully jagged") but in also stimulating thought.

In comparison to Hopkins' disappointing book I should mention David Ewen's *The World of Twentieth Century Music* (don't be put off by the title, he discusses Elgar, Rachmaninov, Strauss and Puccini as well as Cage and Stockhausen — 150 composers, over 1,200 works, at £13.95) because it is a model of how a concertgoer's companion should be written including the 60 pages of an index. Downes has 15 double column pages of index.

Anthony Hopkins' *The Concertgoer's Companion*, does not even bother with an index.