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Musical Diaspora in the works of J.B. Priestley

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Abstract

However the elderly author was underselling himself. Priestley, was an important figure in twentieth century British intellectual life, wrote widely about music, displayed a detailed knowledge and understanding of classical music, and some more popular forms. Music played an important role in key novels, plays and non-fiction, often acting as a way of unleashing or illustrating human potential, or at the other end of the scale signifying human weakness. And Priestley wrote well about music too, bringing a novelist's touch to the subject. There are various investigations on J.B. Priestley's life and work including appraisals of his books, social and political compositions and commitment to English culture. A portion of these examinations have remarked on Priestley and scene, particularly his connection to Bradford and provincial Yorkshire.

Keywords: Classical, Music, Novel, Play, Non-fiction, Bradford, Yorkshire.

Introduction

J.B. Priestley had an incredible enthusiasm for music. Priestley's previously paid distribution was a 'topical production' *Secrets of the Ragtime King*, distributed in London Opinion on 12 December 1912. He got a guinea in installment and furthermore picked up the valuation for his dad who, while no master on jazz, was glad for his child's appearance in print. Thinking back more than 50 years after the fact, Priestley reviewed an upsetting motivation for the article. He depicted how he and his companions, who generally invested their energy getting a charge out of the melodic assortment of Bradford, would now and again travel to Leeds when they terrible events' that might happen and that politicians and historians 'do not keep their ears open in the right places' [1].

Review

Priestley could also be more considered in his approach to the mass society than he sometimes seemed. As a writer who coined the term 'Admass' to describe post war society, Priestley often offered a withering critique of Americanized mass culture, which he described as 'the great invader' [2].

However he could also offer a deeper analysis. Towards the end of *English Journey* (1933), Priestley reflected on the different England he has seen on his journey, including 'Old England' which had beauty but had long ceased to earn its living, 'Nineteenth Century England' which had seen social division, poverty and environmental destruction, and modern England of by-passes and new leisure pursuits. Priestley argued that the latter belonged 'more to the age itself than to this particular island', and had been born in America. Care needed to be taken as you can easily approve or disapprove of it too hastily and it was essentially democratic. However its cheapness was 'both its strength and its weakness' and it lacked 'zest, gusto, flavor, bite, drive, originality' [3].

Priestley's mixed feelings about the emerging mass culture was also apparent when he viewed the rise of television in the 1950s. In *Journey Down a Rainbow* (1955) he produced a witty and acerbic account of the opening of Houston television station KTRK in 1954, which he suggested served 'whatever brand of treacle the mob currently prefers' [4].

However, Priestley, who had presented his popular BBC radio 'postscripts' broadcasts during the war, wrote for BBC television and after its opening in 1955, Independent television, and he could be positive about the new medium, even going so far as to suggest that he preferred writing for television than the theatre [5].

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It is important to express that Priestley wrote frequently about music in an engaged in and interesting way. Music played a role in many of his novels, his plays, and his memoirs and nonfiction. He promoted his own chamber concerts, wrote an Opera libretto, as well as an account of a tour of Florida with the London Symphony Orchestra ^[6].

He was also an assiduous listener to music for most of his life, and was an amateur musician. Bradford offered a rich musical experience for the young Priestley. Although smaller than Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, he suggested Bradford 'devoted more time, money and attentive appreciation to music than most industrial towns.' Something he put down to the relative wealth to size of the city, Yorkshire's love of music and the influence of German-Jewish merchants who migrated to the area ^[7].

The musical world of Bradford was captured in fiction in one of Priestley's best novels, *Bright Day* (1946), where he 'made a musical family a symbol of magical attraction' ^[8].

Priestley also wrote about classical music in his nonfiction writing. For example, *Particular Pleasures* (1975) had a variety of interesting pieces on various classical composers, alongside Elgar. These included Berlioz, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Faure, Debussy and Mahler. On Berlioz's 'Symphonies Fantastique' ^[9], Priestley suggested that the first three movements were uneven, however the fourth which was inserted from an unpublished opera, he found more effective and powerful. 'I feel it has nothing to do with the Paris of the 1820s, when it was first composed'. He continued 'It is prophetic sound. It is dreadful music, removed from all compassion, of the modern totalitarian state, marching the whole human spirit to the place of execution. And this was genius at work, warning us in time' ^[10].

The English (1973) offered a sophisticated history of the nation's music, challenging the German view that Nineteenth century England was a land without music. Instead Priestley pointed out the importance of Church music from the fifteenth century, madrigals in Elizabethan and Jacobean homes, Purcell, ballad operas, and the popularity of Handel's *Messiah* in the West Riding in the years before 1914. This was a land full of music ^[11].

Articles from the *New Statesman*, collected in *Outcries and Asides* (1974) began with praise of 'music of any quality' which 'is too good for us' ^[12]. Meanwhile *Delight* (1949) offered a number of musical insights including a tribute to the great conductors he had seen. Of Richter, Walter, Toscanini and Beecham he wrote 'my dear *maestros*, in spite of wars, bombs, taxes, rubbish and all, what a delight it has been to share this world and age with you!' ^[13].

In Priestley's last published volume of autobiography he played down his musical knowledge, suggesting he was only vaguely musical. He recalled playing music when younger, and then becoming 'a fairly early gramophone enthusiast', who as well as listening to records when he finished writing, attended many concerts. Sadly he admitted that this was no longer the case and 'now in my eighties I have moved away from music' ^[14].

Priestley's output was prodigious. In addition to novels, he wrote criticism, articles for magazines and journals, plays, film scripts, social histories and autobiographies. *English Journey* is a special form of travel writing that drew attention to the condition of England. He was also well-known for his radio broadcasts, especially his popular Wartime *Postscripts* of which Churchill disapproved. He

contributed much to social and political thinking and his work after the Second World War has been discussed in relation to utopian ideals. He was interested in philosophies of time that were discussed at length in *Man and Time*. Priestley has been described as a socialist although his political affiliations were somewhat idiosyncratic. He was involved in the Common Wealth Party and was active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from its inception. Recognition of Priestley's importance as a writer and commentator on England has been maintained since his death. His plays are frequently performed and some of his major work has been re-published including *Bright Day* and the *Postscripts*. A recent article in *The Guardian* pointed out that he is a 'man who is surely ripe for a wider rediscovery' ^[15]. The main justifications for such a rediscovery are the quality, breadth and extent of his contribution to English letters.

He was awarded an officers' scholarship to study at Trinity Hall Cambridge where he read history and political science ^[16].

While a student he wrote articles for the *Cambridge Review* on a variety of topics. Although he considered lecturing he decided to move to London and develop his career as a writer. At first he lived in Waltham Green, then Chiswick in the Chilterns but following his early success he moved to Hampstead and then Highgate. He later lived on the Isle of Wight and then near Stratford-upon-Avon. His fame as a writer was established by *The Good Companions* in 1929 and a number of other successes followed, notably *Angel Pavement* in 1930. These successes were achieved despite two tragedies in his life: firstly the death of his father in 1924, and then his wife eighteen months later ^[17].

Conclusion

Therefore, Priestley writings is more significant than a binary high or low cultural validation of classical music, dismissal of more popular musical forms. He was often critical of jazz and ragtime, but more positive about popular music that was produced in, reflected, and empowered the individual and community. Priestley's writings on music marked a genuine attempt at understanding the role of music in culture, and contributed to his democratic critique of the mass society.

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