

SIR JOHN BARBIROLI

David C F Wright, DMus

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Sir John Barbirolli is part of the British establishment in music and so to cast doubts upon him as a conductor or as a musician would be deemed to be attacking the establishment, or of being a traitor. People will not countenance that he was a poor and inadequate conductor, and anyone who makes such a claim will be ostracised and treated with both contempt and hatred and subject to verbal abuse..

One of Barbirolli's great loves was the music of Elgar and Sir John often said that "anyone who does not love the music of Elgar is neither a musician nor a music lover but an imposter!" That is both a threatening remark and a dictate. It is completely absurd as well. There are many professional musicians who have analysed the music of Elgar in depth and proved that it is seriously lacking in skill, technique and content. But, then, Elgar is part of the establishment, and no proof of his poor compositional procedures and of his inability will be entertained. And that is burying one's head in the sand and not facing up to the truth.

The insincerity and hypocrisy in music, like that in other arts and media presentations, often makes the hopeless composer out to be a genius and ignores the true geniuses. The same is true of some performers and conductors.

I have just listened to Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5, known as The Emperor, in a performance conducted by Barbirolli. The pianist is the brilliant Romanian, Mindru Katz, who, sadly, later died on stage in Istanbul also playing Beethoven, the tempset Sonata. The piano playing is truly beautiful, full of contrast and probably the best performance you will ever hear of this glorious work from the pianistic point of view. But Barbirolli's conducting is shockingly bad. He does not understand Beethoven. His orchestral tuttis conflict with the style Katz has introduced. Often the pianist introduces a theme which is then repeated by the orchestra without the piano. Barbirolli's repeats are so diverse that it sounds like a different piece altogether and creates confusion.

Before I am condemned for these remarks it must be stated that very many musicians and well-known pianists agree with this appraisal and we can't all be wrong.

I am not a Mahlerian but I followed Barbirolli's performance of Mahler's Symphony no. 5 in the score. His performance was at total variance with the score. The tempi were all wrong and many of the instructions in the score were totally ignored or abused. I referred the matter to four Mahler experts and, without collusion, they all said that it was a dreadful performance.

Barbirolli was simply awful at difficult or challenging music. His performance of Stravinsky's Concerto for strings is appalling. The character of Stravinsky is not there and the central movement is played like slush and not like Stravinsky. The composer hated the performance.

On the other hand, Ralph Vaughan Williams dedicated his Eighth Symphony to "glorious John" which might convey the concept that Barbirolli was a respected and good conductor in the eyes of some. The facts of the matter are that this dedication and accolade was a means to get the Symphony performed. It is a trick many composers employ.

Daniel Barenboim had an admiration for Barbirolli but he was only in his twenties at the time and very inexperienced and immature. He flattered Barbirolli. They were both nauseating toadies as were Elgar and Britten and that is proof of a seriously flawed character. There was a lot of correspondence about Barenboim's fulsome comments about Barbirolli and that correspondence produced many writers giving examples of Barbirolli's poor conducting

Barbirolli's assistant with the Halle Orchestra was chain-smoking George Weldon. Sir John signed contracts to perform certain works including new ones but he was unequal to the 'modern' works and would get Weldon to do them. This is an established fact. It is futile for anyone to disagree with this. Barbirolli was hopeless at conducting difficult and challenging music. He wanted the money, he signed the contracts but he



broke them very often. He was very limited in what he could conduct, hopeless at advanced music and nauseating with his sycophantic love affair with Elgar said, "No good music has been written since 1934!" The significance of this remark is that Elgar died in 1934.

If a famous musician said that Stockhausen was a brilliant composer and if you did not like his music you were neither a musician nor a music lover there would be an outcry and yet Barbirolli said it about Elgar and also said that no good music had been written since 1934.

Barbirolli was born in London on 2 December 1899 of Italian and French parents. He took up the cello and studied at Trinity College London and the Royal Academy of Music. He was a member of the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1916 but then served in the Army. After playing in a string quartet he formed his own string orchestra in 1924. He was appointed to the staff of the British National Opera Group in 1926 and conducted at Covent Garden in 1926. From 1933 to 1936 he conducted the Scottish Orchestra in Glasgow and then went to the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra from 1936 to 1943 taking over from Toscanini who was then approaching 70 years of age.

The appointment of Barbirolli to succeed such a great conductor may give the impression that Barbirolli was in the same class. That is a false premise. The fact was that the ultra-conservative management of the New York Orchestra knew that Barbirolli would only conduct the standards and, for example, not the 'modern rubbish such as Boris Godunov', which Toscanini conducted in 1913.

To say that Boris Godunov is rubbish is outrageous. It is a tremendous work.

The New York management appointed Barbirolli on the understanding that he would only conduct the well-known and 'easy' works. Years later, Toscanini lamented the appointment of Barbirolli by rightly saying that Sir John had no vision, could not meet any challenging new work and had no sense of adventure. There is also the account of Toscanini reacting to Barbirolli's performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 6. The great Italian conductor said that Barbirolli did not understand five-four time. It is not 2 + 3 or 3 + 2 but 5.

It reminds me of the story that Stravinsky told us of a passage in one of his ballets which is marked five-eight. A conductor asked him if it was 2+3, or 3+2. Stravinsky replied, "It is five. ONE, two, three four, five, ONE, two, three, four, five and, if there is a bar starting with a quaver and the rest is silent, it is one quaver and four quavers rests. That is correct!" Music colleges would refute this, but Stravinsky is perfectly right!

Despite what Evelyn Rothwell said the New York orchestra did not like Barbirolli and it is completely untrue and unfair for her to say that he was more successful than Toscanini. If Barbirolli was successful it was because he pleased the manager of the orchestra, Arthur Judson, since he lived in his back pocket. The libellous remarks that the Barbirolli made about Toscanini are nothing short of evil.

The New York critic, Olin Downes, spoke for the orchestra and the people in expressing Barbirolli's gross inability as a conductor. American composers and other musicians found his conducting all over the place and hoped he would not perform their works.

Of course, it will be argued that a conductor can conduct what he likes and has the right to decline to conduct some items. But, with Barbirolli, he did not keep to his contracts and had it not been for George Weldon many works would never have been performed. This proves beyond doubt that Weldon was a far better conductor than Barbirolli, since Weldon could perform difficult works whereas Barbirolli could not. Weldon was also very fine in standard repertoire.

The members of the New York orchestra did not like Barbirolli nor did the general public and this was for purely musical reasons. The universal assessment was that Barbirolli lacked the musicianship and skill of Toscanini, that Barbirolli lacked dynamism and that his Beethoven was not even as good as mediocre. These are well documented facts.

Michael Kennedy, who writes a lot of nonsense, says that Barbirolli elevated the Halle Orchestra lifting it to new heights. That simply is not true. When Barbirolli took over this orchestra in 1943 it was in remarkably good shape since they had the excellent Hamilton Harty as conductor from 1920 to 1933 and in the next decade had many guest conductors such as Beecham and Sargent all vastly better all-round musicians than Barbirolli ever was.

When Stanislaw Skrowaczewski took over the orchestra in 1984 he undid all the failings that Barbirolli had set. Skrowaczewski lifted morale and took the orchestra back to the great days under Harty and improved upon that. Now the Halle had Skrowaczewski on the podium, not an often drunken and useless figurehead to whom the orchestra paid little or no attention. Listen to Skrowaczewski's Shostakovich Fifth and how

brilliant that is. No Barbirolli recording or performance comes anywhere near to that. That is undeniable. I have many letters from the members of the orchestra who confirm this. Are they all wrong?

Kennedy also says, or implies, that Barbirolli extended the repertoire of the Halle Orchestra and that this was remarkable. But that is a misleading statement. To extend the repertoire of an orchestra means to introduce new works, that is to say music of living composers and premieres. He was inadequate and, indeed, defective in new music.

While some conductors specialize in types of music no major orchestra can exist only to perform established repertoire.

Barbirolli reacted to the fact that he never conducted difficult or modern works and so, to save face, he began to concentrate on early music and arrange them for a modern orchestra. He looked to Elizabethan composers and also composers such as Corelli, Purcell and Pergolesi. As Stanley Sadie said, "Barbirolli did not re-arrange these pieces. He deranged them!"

In 1951 he conducted a premiere the Symphony no. 1 by a British composer. It was rehearsed extensively but the Barbirolli performance was a flop, due exclusively to Barbirolli's incompetence, and it almost destroyed the composer. The composer offered it to Sir Adrian Boult who performed at the Malvern Festival and it was a great success. Does this indicate that Boult was a superior conductor?

Richard Arnell's Symphony no. 3 is a splendid piece and lasts about an hour. To everyone's surprise Barbirolli undertook it. Great expectation was anticipated. The performance was given. It lasted about 45 minutes. Barbirolli had cut out 15 minutes of this magnificent symphony because he could not conduct those passages. They were too difficult for him. Norman del Mar performed it complete and without any problems.

This proves that Del Mar was a better conductor than Barbirolli, doesn't it?.

I have the score used by Barbirolli in front of me and can read his remarks. But I will exercise diplomacy and discretion and not publish his remarks.

Barbirolli also undertook the premiere of William Wordsworth's Symphony no. 2. At the first rehearsal, Sir John played it as if it were Elgar and the composer understandably objected. Then Barbirolli played it as if it were classical. The composer objected. Then Barbirolli wanted to cut the work because there is a passage in it that has two time signatures or metres and Barbirolli just could cope with that because he was such a poor conductor.

Furthermore, Barbirolli was dishonest and said that the piece was not good music and therefore not worthy of him and he refused to conduct it. The fact of the matter was that he was unequal to it.

This is not a case of blackening Barbirolli but telling the facts which are also recorded elsewhere.

The Symphony no. 2 by Wordsworth won first prize at the Edinburgh International Festival Competition in 1950 and Barbirolli was shown up.

Bill Wordsworth was incensed by Barbirolli's perfidy and was not going to let him get away with it. He composed his Symphony no. 3 and gave it to Barbirolli. There were no problems in the music and Barbirolli did perform it but it was a dreadful performance and Wordsworth believed that this performance ruined his career as a composer.

While Wordsworth was a charming, honest and modest man he could be sarcastic in a mocking way intending an insult. He once said to me that he understood irony. Therefore the dedication of his Symphony no. 4 'with affection' to Barbirolli was certainly not sincere. Barbirolli was useless at conducting this piece. It is not difficult to conduct but it was written for Barbirolli and the performance showed up his incompetence. Of course, one could rightly say that Wordsworth should have given up on Barbirolli but he was pressured with comments from others such as, "Barbirolli can't be all bad!"

The other problem was that Barbirolli was dependant on alcohol. At concerts and between pieces he would go off stage and have two double Scotches, one in each hand, which he gulped down. I have seen him do it. He was also a heavy smoker but then so was Weldon. But the drink affected Barbirolli and he often had no clue as to what he was doing. There are many testimonies to this including those from members of the orchestra.

He premiered a new British symphony, which, in itself, was a surprise, and in the same programme conducted Janacek's Taras Bulba. The performances were dreadful and Barbirolli was paralytic with drink. This was often the case and there are innumerable witnesses to this concert.

He was also a pompous and arrogant man. He insisted that he had discovered Jacqueline Du Pre and that she owed everything to him. I have these remarks from Barbirolli on a video. What Barbirolli said was

simply untrue. It was William Pleeth who discovered Du Pre and it was Tortelier and Rostropovich who helped her further.

But Du Pre was like Barbirolli in that she was also absolutely hopeless in modern works or difficult scores. Her performance of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no. 1 was so very bad it could have been played better by Stan Laurel, wrote one highly respected musician. A British composer wrote a work for her and had to have her playing without rests all the way through, otherwise she would have got lost.

I was having lunch with Sir Arthur Bliss one day and he was talking about a piece he had just composed. I asked him who he would like to premiere it. "Anyone," he said, "except Barbirolli!"

His Elgarian pomposity knew no bounds. He once told Solomon how to play a cadenza! Solomon never played with Barbirolli again and many soloists refused to do so. The exception was Kendall Taylor who was too nice a man to complain and there were other soloists who did all they could to keep the peace.

Some might say that for all these examples of Barbirolli's failures there are an equal number of successes but that does not prove to be true. I have letters from eight famous soloists in which they complain about Barbirolli's inability to understand some basic music features and what a dreadful accompanist he was. Are they all wrong?

A famous Welsh composer saw Barbirolli conduct at a concert at the Cheltenham Festival in which the first half of classics were very badly done and, after the interval, it was clear that Barbirolli had been drinking. He leaned on the podium, was very unsteady and the performances were shambolic.

I have corresponded and spoken with many members of his orchestras. Their universal judgment is that the orchestra did not need him as they knew the works so well and that all Barbirolli did was conduct and try to stay reasonably upright. He was always happy if the whiskey was available in the wings!

Barbirolli was also a nasty piece of work. He lampooned Beecham as an amateur and said that he lacked integrity. Sir John was so full of himself that he often said that composers should not conduct their own music as they could not conduct, they were only composers.. He admired Britten as a conductor but this was because they had cowardice in common in that they left Britain when the Second World War was imminent. Sir John wrecked the marriage of Vladimir Horowitz by circulating the story that Horowitz was gay and was not the virtuoso he claimed to be. Barbirolli was scathing about Rachmaninov and criticised his playing whereas the truth was that Barbirolli was the worst accompanist-conductor. At Rachmaninov's funeral, Barbirolli looked into the open coffin and laughed and said that this was the best performance that he had seen Rachmaninov give. This was a deliberate malicious statement. Barbirolli was harsh about Heifetz. But again, this was jealousy. Any musician that was greater than Barbirolli he hated and that meant almost everyone.

The height of his megalomania was shown in his attitude to a really great conductor, George Szell who used to go out with Evelyn Rothwell and proposed marriage to her. Barbirolli was furious since his sights were set on her. The Barbirollis began a hate campaign against Szell and the venom they displayed was absolutely unbelievable. However, Szell went on to become a very great conductor and Sir John fumed about this regularly.

Like Michael Kennedy, Barbirolli bragged that he had turned the Halle Orchestra from a poor ensemble into a brilliant orchestra. He did not like soloists in his concerts since the audience came to see him. He threatened to resign over this issue using his Elgarian vanity and emotional blackmail. As several players in the Halle have said, "Our finest hour was not under Barbirolli!"

Barbirolli used to call the string section in his orchestra PBS (poor bloody strings) and at sectional rehearsals, he called them JB's sexuals. While there are always exceptions, there is no doubt that orchestral players did not take to him and for musical and technical reasons, and I have a sheaf of letters from musicians including members of orchestras which Barbirolli conducted which testify unanimously to Barbirolli's lack of musical skill and ability.

During his tenure with the Halle he was also principal conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra from 1961 - 1967 but he still remained the stick-in-the-mud conductor.

In a television interview, Barbirolli said, "When you listen to the performances with my orchestra you will hear the best performances ever. I am clearly the best conductor." I have this on tape. What conceit!

He was also dishonest and a liar in his insatiable quest for self-promotion. He bragged that he had discovered the great French violinist Ginette Neveu and that her success was exclusively due to him. I have these remarks recorded on tape from his own mouth. Neveu was already a star and an award winning soloist

before Barbirolli knew anything about her.

However, he is an establishment figure. He was knighted in 1949 ten years after he married his second wife the oboist, Evelyn Rothwell. He was made a Companion of Honour in 1969 and died the following year.

But do these honours mean anything? The pop group The Beatles were given OBEs and, as a consequence, other recipients sent theirs back. Elton John was knighted because the Princess of Wales liked him. A man two roads away from me is a dustman and, because of that, has a MBE.

One of Sir John's innumerable flaws as a conductor was her persistent failure in matters of balance and I am not just referring to his drinking but the balance of sound between instruments. In a recording, sound engineers could put it right but in live performances he was simply hopeless at getting the balance of sound between members of the orchestra.

Sir William Walton said, "Barbirolli is the most consistent conductor we have. With him we can guarantee dreadful performances every time!"

I once asked Sir Malcolm Arnold about Barbirolli. "I don't know him since I am a musician. Is he the Italian chef down on Hackney Marshes?"

There is further proof that Barbirolli was a poor conductor but these proofs will suffice, but people would rather believe a beautiful lie than an ugly truth!

And before readers get their knives out, let me re-emphasise that all the content of this article is evidenced from many sources and is true. I am just repeating what many others have said as well as speaking from what I have observed and know. I am not blackening his character. He did that for himself.

A famous conductor who had been discussing Barbirolli said, "Why do we make stars out of third rate musicians?"

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