

found existing gamba music too limited in quantity or too easy, and may have developed this technique as one of his improvisatory tools' (p. 157).

The most famous composer of the Berlin School was C.P.E. Bach, whose three gamba sonatas (arguably the most familiar to modern players) were written during his time in Berlin. Again, the virtuosity of the work must be associated with a gifted player, and leads again to an association with Hesse. O'Loughlin continues to show his familiarity with the work as a player with detailed discussions of the fingering of a complex passage of double stops (his example 7.25) from the D-major sonata.

The book concludes with a very thorough 'Thematic Catalogue of the Works of the Berlin School for Viola da Gamba.' This appendix is an important tool to support O'Loughlin's desire to inspire players of the viola da gamba to discover the music of the composers discussed in his book. O'Loughlin states that he hopes this study will encourage people to publish, perform and record this fine repertoire. O'Loughlin's own familiarity with and passion for the gamba music of the Berlin School shines through the study, and his contribution to our knowledge of a previously ignored repertoire is important. We sincerely hope it does inspire players of the viola da gamba to investigate this music further, and to introduce it to modern audiences through scholarly editions, concerts and recordings.

### ***Helen Fry, Music & Men: The Life and Loves of Harriet Cohen***

Stroud, UK: History Press, 2008

ISBN 0750948175. 320pp. Hbk, 16 plates, ill.

### ***Sonia Orchard, The Virtuoso***

Pymble, NSW: Fourth Estate, 2009

ISBN 9780732288075. 327pp. Pbk.

#### **Reviewed by Suzanne Cole**

The days when academics could hide in their ivory towers are, for better or worse, largely gone. There are now increasing pressures, both from within and without universities, to engage with the broader community. Here at the University of Melbourne we are encouraged to embrace equally each strand of the 'triple helix' of teaching and learning, research and 'knowledge transfer',<sup>1</sup> and academics are urged to make their work available in ways that are accessible to the non-specialist. The University's School of Graduate Research includes a Writing Centre for Scholars and Researchers, which offers workshops and mentoring programs specifically designed to encourage writing for general audiences, launched with a session entitled 'Abandon footnotes, all ye who enter here!'

The government's new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) funding model now also recognises creative works as research. I suspect that the next few years will see the development

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<sup>1</sup> According to the University website, 'Knowledge transfer is a term used to describe the University of Melbourne's relationship and engagement with the broader community', <http://www.knowledgetransfer.unimelb.edu.au/content/pages/about-knowledge-transfer>.

of a fuller understanding of the relationships, and differences, between practice, practice-led research and the more traditional forms of arts and music research, but there can be no doubt that we will see a shift in the types of research being conducted in the arts, and that there will be less emphasis on the traditional scholarly monograph or learned journal article aimed at a small audience of one's peers as the primary research output.

With this in mind, I wish to review two recent books on music that are not the kind of specialist academic book typically reviewed in journals such as *Context*. The first is Helen Fry's *Music & Men: The Life and Loves of Harriet Cohen*. This book has footnotes aplenty. It is not, however, a specialist music text, but is published by the History Press, who proclaim themselves to be 'the UK's largest local and specialist history publisher'.<sup>2</sup> The second is Sonia Orchard's recent novel, based on the life of the Australian pianist Noel Mewton-Wood, *The Virtuoso*. This book falls firmly within the category of creative works, yet the acknowledgments at the end provide a list of archives and books consulted by Orchard in her attempt 'to be faithful' in recording the events of Mewton-Wood's life. She also acknowledged the help and support of her PhD supervisors – the book was written as part of a PhD in Creative Writing at RMIT – and the financial assistance of an Australian Postgraduate Award.

The subjects of the two books under review have much in common. Harriet Cohen and Noel Mewton-Wood were active as pianists in mid-twentieth-century London; both were known for their performances of contemporary repertoire; and both were outsiders in various ways: Mewton-Wood as an Australian and a homosexual and Cohen as a Jewish woman. In both books, the subjects' musical successes are given full, if somewhat uncritical, recognition, but it is their tortured private lives that have captured the authors' interest.

Harriet Cohen is an excellent subject for a biographical study aimed at a general readership. She was not only a talented pianist, but was captivatingly beautiful (to which the many illustrations in the book bear witness) and the long list of men who succumbed to her charms included the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald, H.G. Wells and Albert Einstein, as well as any number of musicians. But the love of her life was the composer Arnold Bax, and it is her relationship with Bax that lies at the heart of this book. Bax fell in love with Cohen, more or less at first sight, in 1913, when he was a married 30-year-old father of two and she was an 'elfin' 17-year-old student at the Royal Academy of Music. Although they remained lovers until Bax's death in 1953, they never lived together and therefore conducted an extensive correspondence over four decades, which is now held in the British Library, and which was only made available to scholars in 1997. This is an extremely rich resource, and Fry draws upon it very heavily: indeed, the book is largely a patchwork of excerpts from the letters stitched together with Fry's commentary. A straightforward edition of selected letters between Bax and Cohen may, however, have produced a more satisfying (and useful) book. As it is, the letters and the commentary often seem to be working against each other, the letters suggesting a much darker and less romantic tale than Fry's slightly breathless prose would have us believe.

The cover blurb claims that this is 'one of the greatest love stories of all time', and that the letters 'are among the most explicit of any written during the time and are staggering for their passion and poetry.' The letters are certainly frank, but I seriously doubt whether they would

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<sup>2</sup> [www.thehistorypress.co.uk/home.html](http://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/home.html).

rate amongst the 'most explicit of the time'. We read, rather more times than seems entirely necessary, of Bax's fascination with the 'soft pink petals of [Cohen's] beautiful breasts' (p. 86) and his wish that his mouth was upon her 'dear white body' (p. 141), but the overall effect is cloying and vaguely adolescent rather than passionate and poetic. I have read some of the original letters in the British Library and, while they certainly contain a lot of this sort of thing, Fry seems to be somewhat fixated on Bax's mammary obsession.

Rather more disturbing, though, is the decision to present the relationship between Bax and Cohen as a tale of deathless love. Although Bax moved out of the family home in 1918, his wife Elsa refused to grant Bax a divorce, and for reasons that are not adequately explained Bax was not prepared to live with Cohen until the marriage was legally dissolved (72). Harriet never gave up hope that one day they would be able to marry. When Elsa finally died in 1947, however, Bax married not Cohen, but another woman, Mary Gleaves, with whom he had also been having an affair for the previous twenty years. Bax didn't even have the decency to inform Cohen of the situation: she read about Elsa's death in a newspaper a year later. Shortly afterward, Cohen severely damaged her right hand, severing an artery and damaging the tendons. Although she did ultimately play again, her career was derailed for many years. Officially, she 'slipped' while carrying a tray of glasses: Fry, however, certainly entertains the possibility that it was a failed suicide attempt.

This is only the most extreme indicator of what appears to have been a disturbingly dysfunctional relationship from the very beginning. It is quite clear that Bax pursued the adolescent Cohen and that at first she resisted: in January 1915, she wrote: 'Have patience with me. Hasn't it taken me months and months to get to love you' (p. 35). The significant age difference combined with Harriet's extreme youth when they first met suggests that there was a potentially morbid inequality in their relationship from the start, which is reinforced by Bax's childish nicknames and his constant references to Cohen's youth: 'my love to you dearest child of fancy' (p. 31); 'her child's-mouth like some half-opened flower' (p. 47). Occasionally Cohen protested: in July 1917 she complained 'O if you had only written to me as a woman and not as a rather spoilt child I would not have had these horrid doubts and tortures' (p. 55).

For Harriet was perpetually subject to doubts, tortures and thoughts of suicide, which Fry argues, somewhat inelegantly, were 'prescient for events that unfold in May 1948'. In May 1916, Cohen wrote: 'I'd almost feel like drowning myself'; in August of the same year: 'sometimes I think drowning wouldn't be such a bad idea' (pp. 44–45). Yet rather than seeing this as a sign of the price that Cohen was paying for their illicit relationship, Fry attributes it to 'emotional instability.' After years of ill health, Cohen was diagnosed with tuberculosis: she spent 1926 and most of 1927 in a sanatorium in Switzerland, although the first symptoms had appeared in 1917. Again, Fry blames this, rather than the untenable nature of the relationship with Bax, for Cohen's 'periods of emotional and psychological instability' (p. 50).

Fry repeatedly lets Bax off the hook for his appalling behaviour towards all the women in his life (Elsa, Cohen, Mary Gleaves and the many others that are hinted at). On page 27, after recounting Bax's marriage and the birth of his second child (just weeks before he met Cohen), Fry claims 'Bax found the ties of family life difficult and often needed periods away from his family. Solitude was necessary to him as a composer and poet.' Cohen herself was no saint, and Fry does not gloss over her numerous affairs with other men. Yet the evidence of the

letters suggest that Cohen was considerably more committed to their relationship than Bax, despite his regular protestations of love, and it is hard not to see Bax's marriage to Gleaves at the ultimate betrayal.

Despite the book's title, Cohen's musical career receives fairly superficial attention. My interest in Cohen stems from her role in promoting early English keyboard music, and this aspect of her career is given only the most cursory attention. The closing claim that 'she did more than any other artist-musician to revive sixteenth-century Elizabethan music' (p. 294), really can't be justified, but is typical of the uncritical approach to musical topics. This is, perhaps, forgivable: Fry is not a musician, but an historian with a background in Jewish studies. (One of the odder manifestations of this is that almost all the quoted reviews of Cohen's performances are taken, not from the musical or daily press, but from the *Jewish Chronicle*.) Fry notes in her acknowledgements that 'more than one volume could have been written about [Cohen's] life.' This is undoubtedly true, and it is unfortunate that the title of this particular volume does not more accurately reflect the focus on Cohen's relationship and correspondence with Bax. Perhaps, however, *Music & Men* will inspire someone to undertake a more satisfying examination of the many fascinating issues, musicological and otherwise, thrown up by the life and loves of Harriet Cohen.

Sonia Orchard's novel *The Virtuoso* is a very different type of book from Fry's but, despite the much more extensive musical trappings, it is also concerned primarily with a passionate but deeply flawed and unbalanced sexual relationship. The story is narrated by an unidentified young man who develops an obsessive passion for the Australian pianist Noël Mewton-Wood. Mewton-Wood, who made his London debut as a precocious seventeen year old in 1941, had a brief but successful career, specialising in the works of modern composers—Hindemith himself considered Mewton-Wood the 'leading performer' of his *Ludus Tonalis*—before committing suicide at the age of thirty-one.<sup>3</sup>

The fictitious narrator falls in love with Mewton-Wood after hearing him perform Beethoven at the Queen's Hall under Sir Thomas Beecham. The two enjoy a brief liaison, but Mewton-Wood soon moves on while the narrator continues to obsess about him from afar. In an interview, Orchard explained that she constructed her novel from the perspective of the 'fictional and very unreliable narrator' as a means of dealing with the essential unknowability of her subject, Mewton-Wood.<sup>4</sup> As a literary device this is quite effective, but it also sets up a constant tension between the real life events and the fictional narrator.

When first released, Orchard's book enjoyed a publicity campaign that would make the academic musicologist weep with envy. She was interviewed on the Radio National Book Show and by Margaret Throsby on ABC Classic FM; the book was widely reviewed, including in *The Age*, and was serialised on the Radio National Book Reading.<sup>5</sup> The heavy promotion on the ABC may be partially explained by the CD, also entitled *The Virtuoso*, of Mewton-Wood playing some of the music discussed in the book that was released on the ABC Classics label to accompany the book, but the reviews are almost universally positive. Jo Case, in the *Reading's*

<sup>3</sup> Cyrus Meher-Homji, 'Mewton-Wood, Noel', in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* <[www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com)>.

<sup>4</sup> Jacinta Halloran, interview with Sonia Orchard <[www.readings.com.au/interview/sonia-orchard](http://www.readings.com.au/interview/sonia-orchard)>.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Book Show', 4 May 2009; 'Morning with Margaret Throsby', 10 Feb. 2009; Lucy Sussex, *The Age*, 1 Feb. 2009, 'Book Reading', 25 Jan.–19 Feb. 2010.

*Monthly*, is typical: 'As elegant and assured as its starring character, it seems astonishing that this pitch-perfect novel is the author's first fictional outing.'<sup>6</sup>

Despite this near universal acclaim, however, I did not like this book. This is partly because I had so little sympathy for the snobbish, irritating narrator and his pathological obsession with the elusive Mewton-Wood, but mostly because I found the characters, and indeed the entire milieu, unconvincing. I simply don't believe that even at parties attended by Benjamin Britten people say things like:

The secret of all the great artists is of pouring the infinite into the finite. And the task for us is to learn to discriminate, to acquire a fine spiritual palate so as to appreciate the true and beautiful, to find that every day is crowded with a thousand beauties (p. 37).

Mewton-Woods' casual observation, shortly before the two young men fall into bed for the first time, that 'We adore the story of Tosca because we relate to her romantic spirit' (p. 56) is equally unconvincing.

Orchard, unlike Fry, is obviously musically literate, and has been described as 'an accomplished pianist ... with an Associate Diploma in Music qualification',<sup>7</sup> and the book is full of lengthy musical passages. Several key points in the relationship between Mewton-Wood and the narrator take place during musical performances, which are described in meticulous detail. The narrator's first meeting with Mewton-Wood, for example, takes place at a party at which they play Schubert's D-major Rondo duet together: 'I'd climb up to a B and trickle straight down, and moments later he'd descend to the A; then again, soon after I'd rise to the E and he'd skip down to the F sharp.' Over a page of description later:

Our parts converged for the final A major chord of the episode (my right-hand third finger on C sharp and his left-hand third finger playing the A just above), and that's when it happened: our little fingers touched each other, not at all awkwardly, but ever so lightly, like a gentle gazing of lips.

After another full page of description we finally reach 'the closing affirmations—D-D-D-D!', and the first date has been agreed upon.

Writing about music is notoriously difficult but, even as a musically literate reader, I did not find the detail in such passages particularly meaningful; one can only wonder what the general reader would make of them. Perhaps the goal is not, however, an understanding of the actual music, but to provide a sense that we have been given a glimpse into another more sophisticated, if largely incomprehensible, world.

In addition to the archival collections that she consulted during her two-month research trip to the UK, Orchard's 'Acknowledgments' section includes secondary sources that 'were of great help' such as Harold Schonberg's *The Great Pianists* (1963), George R. Marek's *Beethoven: Biography of a Genius* (1970) and biographies of Schumann and Tchaikovsky from the Omnibus Press Illustrated Lives of the Great Composers series. Their influence is felt in the many biographical anecdotes that are scattered throughout the book. Almost immediately after the passage just quoted, for example, the narrator moves from Schubert into an extended account,

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<sup>6</sup> Jo Case, review of Sonia Orchard, *The Virtuoso* <[www.readings.com.au/review/the-virtuoso-sonia-orchard](http://www.readings.com.au/review/the-virtuoso-sonia-orchard)>.

<sup>7</sup> Halloran, interview with Sonia Orchard.

lasting over two pages, of the courtship between Robert and Clara Schumann (the narrator seems, somewhat implausibly, to see himself in the latter role), culminating in Robert's gift to Clara of the *Fantaisie* op. 17. Like the descriptions of the music, there is a great deal of technical detail: Clara 'lifts her hands to the piano and begins, her fingers close to the keys, playing the chords from the wrist, just as her father always taught her' (p. 51). Once again, however, it is unclear exactly what purpose this serves, apart from demonstrating the musical knowledge of the author.

There can be no doubt that Orchard has done a great deal of research in the preparation of this book. I enjoyed the description in the opening chapters of Hess's National Gallery concerts (Hess, incidentally, was one of the many women with whom Bax may have had an affair)<sup>8</sup> during World War II, which was full of interesting and convincing details, such as the honey and walnut, and crab mayonnaise sandwiches (although the question always hovers: is this fact or fiction?). But many of the anecdotes presented are such hoary old chestnuts—Peter Pears being found 'under Benjamin Britten' in reference works; Beecham haranguing his lady cellists about the instrument between their legs (p. 160)—that they actually jolt the reader out of the world that the novel is trying to create. The sheer density of the little factual nuggets with which the book is larded—Pears's dachshund was called Berta (p. 157); Kirsten Flagstaff knitting during rehearsals (p. 160); Schubert 'sitting alone in the schoolhouse where he worked, in the Rossau, just outside Vienna' (p. 44)—starts to resemble a type of musical name-dropping, and eventually serves to distract the reader from the central relationship and from Mewton-Wood, rather than adding to them. And despite her constant references to Britten, Pears and Tippett, to Mewton-Wood's championing of contemporary composers such as Hindemith, and indeed to his own unsuccessful attempts at composition, the music and composers that are discussed in most detail are Beethoven and Schumann, Tchaikovsky and Brahms. The accompanying CD is also skewed heavily towards the Romantics, with works by Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Weber and Beethoven. The only twentieth-century works are Bliss's Piano Concerto and Tippett's 'Remember your Lovers,' sung by Peter Peers. This preoccupation with 'the Great Composers' of the nineteenth century gives the novel a rather old-fashioned feel that works against, rather than adds to, the evocation of Mewton-Wood and his mid-twentieth-century milieu. In the end, it seems rather a waste that after all the time, money and obvious care that have been lavished on this book, we still know so little about the life and death of Noël Mewton-Wood.

Such criticisms are, however, completely at odds with the reviews of this book, and a work of fiction must be judged on its own terms. If, as is the case here, most reviewers found the characters and situations convincing ('pitch-perfect') and engaging, then the quality of the secondary literature consulted is hardly relevant. It does, however, suggest a more profound level of musical ignorance, even amongst listeners to ABC Classic FM and readers of the *Age* book reviews, than I would have expected. Perhaps the generally well-educated reviewers of this book really are interested in musical anecdotes about Robert and Clara Schumann's courtship, or Tchaikovsky's unfortunate marriage, or Beethoven's 'Immortal Beloved,' taken from forty-year-old trade books? Indeed, both *The Virtuoso* and *Music & Men*, in their different ways, are preoccupied with the romantic ideal of the great artist: Bax's appalling behaviour

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8 Fry, *Music and Men* 40.

towards the women in his life is justified by his need for artistic solitude; in the eyes of the narrator (whose personal inadequacies are paralleled by his failures as a pianist: he has, instead, to resort to writing articles about music!), his slender relationship with Mewton-Wood becomes a tragic, romantic saga through comparison with the thwarted loves of the great composers.

Of course novelists are perfectly welcome to write about whatever they like, from the kings and queens of England to the history of quantum physics to the life of Noël Mewton-Wood, and historians to write about musicians. There is, however, little likelihood that a novel about quantum physics would be seen as any kind of substitute for actual scientific research, or that physicists will be expected to present their findings to the general public in an equally appealing form. We need to be vigilant that in the rush to embrace creative works as research, we do not lose sight of the similar gulf that exists between popular treatments of musical topics intended for the general public and specialist musicological research that makes a genuine, original contribution to international scholarship.

### ***Liz Garnett, *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning: Gesture, Voice, Identity****

Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009

ISBN: 978-9-7546-6379-9. xiii+227pp. Hbk, bibl., index, ill., DVD

**Reviewed by Peter Campbell**

The dust-jacket of Liz Garnett's exploration of a facet of the socio-musical world provides an excellent summary of her aims. Choirs of different styles and from different traditions—contrast, for example, an English Cathedral choir with an American Gospel choir—not only sound different, but also look different; both the singers and their directors move differently, gesture differently and interact differently. Garnett explores how physical (or non-verbal) communication works in a musical context, asking if some gestural recognition is innate or if, at least in part, it is formed through a process of social convention and learnt behaviour.

This fascinating topic urges one to think about the practical consequences of placing a conductor from one tradition in front of a choir from another. Some purely musical elements (pitch, rhythm and rubato, for instance) may well survive intact, but many matters of style could well be lost, the suggestion being that we rely more heavily than might initially be thought on shared practice. The book is thus an investigation of 'the extent to which the connections between conductor demeanour and choral sound operate at a general level, and in what ways they are constructed within a specific idiom.'

Garnett's introduction sets out these questions such that the reader is drawn immediately into feeling it necessary that answers be provided. How do the body-motions and other physical indications of conductors from different choral genres actually differ? How exactly can their various 'gestural vocabularies' be described, and does the viewer (the chorister), or indeed the listener (the audience), perceive the music differently if he or she does not come from that background or (musico-cultural) tradition? Even if they do, might different levels