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### British Musicology in Personalities: Paul Griffiths\*

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**Abstract.** The article makes a brief overview of the history of British musicology, which had many outstanding exponents starting from the late 17th century, most of them enlightened music lovers of one kind or another. Among the factors that have influenced the development of musicology in Great Britain to varying degrees are performance practice, the numerous societies of music lovers, and the close connection between musicology and journalism. The name of Paul Griffiths, who holds a degree in biochemistry from Oxford University and is not a professional musician, occupies a prominent place in British musical culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The present article examines various areas of Griffiths's creative activity: criticism, musicology, literature, and librettistics. It also presents a list of Griffiths's monographs, most of which are devoted to the history of modern music and its creative spirit. Excerpts from some of the musicologist's studies are provided. The conclusions include reflections on the phenomenon of brilliant amateurs, "non-academic" musicology, and the unique character of British music studies.

**Keywords:** British musicology, British criticism, Paul Griffiths, amateurism, modern music

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### British Musicology: Origins and Traditions

In Great Britain, the history of musicology can be dated back to the end of the 17th century. According to Grove's Dictionary of Music,<sup>1</sup> considered as one of the most authoritative encyclopaedic sources in the field of music, musicology in Great Britain was formed on the basis of long-standing and well-developed traditions in the country. This includes the use of various instruments for music-making and their collection, research in the field of acoustics, performance of early music, as well as the collection and study of folk songs. [1] One of the key features of the historical development of British musicology consists in its close connection with music criticism. The formation of British music scholarship is also characterized by the active role played by music journalism, whose consistently high standard and inimitable elegance of style has been a constant feature of media space since the 18th century.

Grove's eminent forbear, Roger North (1653–1734), though a lawyer by education, was a keen amateur musician, who studied music in all possible forms and angles at that time: performance, theory, aesthetics, pedagogy, and questions concerning temperament. The series of important treatises published after his death included *The Muscull Grammarian*, *Cursory Notes of Musicke*, *The Theory of Sounds*, *An Essay of Muscull Ayre*, and others.

Later, other significant figures in British musicology emerged. Among them, we may mention John Hawkins (1719–1789) and his five-volume work of 1776, *General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, as well as his contemporary Charles Burney (1726–1814),

who wrote *General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* in the same year.

Musicology in the 19th century, as represented by Walter Howard Frere (1863–1938) and Edmund Horace Fellowes (1870–1951), mainly focused on the study of church music and the Elizabethan era. In 1844, the journal *Musical Times*, which still exists today, began publication.

The fact that these and many other researchers were not professional musicologists is another distinctive feature of British musicology, of which amateurism or dilettantism has long been an integral part. On the one hand, this is a consequence of historical development and tradition, in which the numerous amateur musical societies must be included as important components of the social existence and development of music in Great Britain; on the other hand, it is a result of the absence of professional musicological education in the country until the end of the 19th century.

The authors of the article *Musicology in Great Britain Since 1945* (David Fallows, Arnold Whittall, John Blacking, Nigel Fortune) highlight as a key factor that the concept of “scientific musicology” did not exist due to “the minimal role of members of university music departments in what little scholarly activity there was.” [2, p. 38] Even in the second half of the 20th century, music departments at universities were headed not by musicologists, but mainly by composers. [Ibid., p. 55]

### Griffiths – Music Critic and Musicologist

Among the great musicological personalities of the past century, which include Anthony Carey Lewis (1915–1983), Jack Westrup

<sup>1</sup> *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* was first published in Britain in the late 1870s. Its founder, George Grove (1820–1900), an engineer by education, was a prominent figure in British musical life at that time, whose music journalism and editorial work led to his appointment as the first director of the Royal College of Music.

(1904–1975), Gerald Abraham (1904–1988), Thurston Dart (1921–1971), and many others, the figure of the exceptionally interesting and multifaceted researcher Paul Griffiths (b. 1947) stands out.

The fact that this musicologist, critic, writer and librettist has no formal musical training is belied by the major contributions he has made to music scholarship. Griffiths, who studied at Oxford, is a biochemist by training. However, Griffiths's subsequent creative development was also informed by six years of music school, his study of the piano, and the passion for music developed during his student years, involving the absorption of all kinds of literature in the city library and attendance at concerts of the university Society of Contemporary Music.

Responding to an interview question about the start of his musicological career,<sup>2</sup> Griffiths recalls his university days, namely his first review, written for the student newspaper. During the 1970s he worked for the *Financial Times* and *Times* newspapers; it was probably the reputation he developed as a critic in these publications that enabled his subsequent path to success. Griffiths received his calling from the musicologist Stanley Sadie<sup>3</sup> (1930–2005), the editor of Grove's Dictionary of Music, who invited the young journalist to join the writing staff for the next edition. The twenty-volume *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published in 1980, became a landmark not only in the history of this long-running publication, but also in world musicology. As the authors of the above-mentioned article note, "...*The New Grove* has in fact given

British musicology a new focus, the effects of which should be felt for some years to come." [Ibid., p. 51] It could be said that for Griffiths, Grove became "his universities," in which he continued to study. The musicologist continues to collaborate with Grove's "empire" to this day in the form of new dictionary entries.

To date, Griffiths is the author of 20 monographs covering different periods and different personalities in the history of music, primarily in the 20th–21st centuries: *Modern Music: A Concise History from Debussy to Boulez* (1978), *Boulez* (1978), *A Guide to Electronic Music* (1979), *Cage* (1981), *Peter Maxwell Davies* (1982), *The String Quartet: A History* (1982), *Igor Stravinsky: The Rake's Progress* (1982), *Bartók* (1984), *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (1985), *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (1985), *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of the 20th-Century Music* (1986), *György Ligeti* (1992), *Stravinsky* (1992), *When Divas Confess* (1999), *The Sea on Fire: Jean Barraqué* (2003), *The Penguin Companion to Classical Music* (2004), *The Substance of Things Heard: Writings about Music* (2005), *A Concise History of Western Music* (2006), *Modern Music and After* (2010, Third Edition), *La musica del novecento* (2014).

Although many of his works have been translated into European languages, Russian is unfortunately missing from this list. Nevertheless, Russian musicologists working in the fields of New and Contemporary music are well acquainted with the prominent British critic.

<sup>2</sup> See.: Mendez M. *Writing Towards Music: a Conversation with Paul Griffiths*. June 30, 2016. URL: <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2016/6/30/writing-towards-music-a-conversation-with-paul-griffiths> (accessed: 24.01.2025).

<sup>3</sup> The legendary figure of Sadie was developed through his training as a professional musicologist, following which he went into music journalism; since the 1970s his name has been inextricably linked with that of Grove.

### Griffiths on Music and Musicians

While Griffiths's studies are of great interest to musicologists, some of his works are more prominent than others, at least in terms of the number of reprints. *Modern Music and After*, which was first published in the late 1970s, has already been reprinted three times with the author's constant additions. It would not be an exaggeration to state that all serious researchers of 20th century music have at least a cursory acquaintance with this book. In the introduction, entitled "Prelude," Griffiths immediately stipulates that he is setting out to write not a history of music in the post-war period, but rather "an account of a musical movement <...> a movement of radical renewal." [3, p. xvii] Covering all the leading composers of this period, including Soviet and post-Soviet, as well as the chronological structure and 100 musical examples, his work turns into a kind of map complete with the main routes for those traveling through 20th-century music for the first time and special detours for those already familiar with the beaten paths. To name just a few sections: *Silencing Music: Cage, 1946–52*; *Orchestras or Computers*; *Virtuosity and Improvisation*; *Holy Minimalisms*; *(Unholy?) Minimalisms*; *Spectralisms*, etc. Griffiths's magnum opus presents a thorough analysis of a number of works, full of vivid metaphors and curious analogies, sometimes involving logical leaps and bold generalisations.

Griffiths's experience of many publications as a critic and journalist is probably what prompted him to publish the book *New Sounds, New Personalities*. [4] This is as much a fascinating read as it is an educational

one: the collection features interviews with twenty British composers whose work spans the second half of the 20th century. The publication exemplifies the more than two-century-old connection between musicology and music journalism in Great Britain. Having occupied a solid place in the musicological literature since the 20th century, the genre of "interview" represents a useful source and study tool for researchers by providing an opportunity to hear "the word of the composer about the music"<sup>4</sup>: *Dialogues* by Robert Kraft with Igor Stravinsky or *Conversations with Alfred Schnittke* by Alexander Ivashkin are just a few examples of journalism that actively "works" and influences the development of musical scholarship. Such first-hand accounts of how composers evaluate themselves, how they react to the public's judgments, as well as details of their creative process, represent extremely important information for researchers.

Each interview opens with a short introduction describing the setting in which the conversation takes place (often private spaces) and a brief account of the interlocutor's personal qualities, which helps the reader prepare for a meeting with the composer; to accompany them, there are photographs, some in informal settings: a smiling Alexander Goehr hugging a dog, or Peter Maxwell Davies in wellington boots and a chunky knitted sweater on the doorstep of his home in Scotland.

It is difficult to resist quoting a couple of the sparkling preambles: "Ferneyhough is our king over the water: teaching in Germany, and performed much more on mainland Europe than in England" [Ibid, p. 65]<sup>5</sup>; "Interviewing

<sup>4</sup> Natalia Maksimova defines this type of interview as "mental," in which reflection, formation and development of thought come to the fore. [5, p. 91]

<sup>5</sup> It can be suggested that the hero of the quote was certainly pleased with his conversation with the interviewer: the text of their conversation is given in full in Ferneyhough's recent monograph *Univers parallèles* [Parallel Universes]. [6]

Birtwistle is like trying to mate pandas. The creature is friendly but on the surface ponderous, though capable of sudden grace, exactness and surprise.” [Ibid., p. 186] The opening paragraph of the interview with Jonathan Harvey, in our opinion deserves to be quoted in full: “I meet Harvey at his publisher’s headquarters, where a small office is provided for us to talk before going on to a Stockhausen concert. The ambience is neutral, then, but coloured by the gentle melodies of his voice: the whole of his part in what follows really should have superscribed neumes in the manner of early chant notation. He himself, however, is satisfied with only a few minor changes to the wording.” [Ibid., p. 46]<sup>6</sup>

There is no single pattern in the structure of the conversations, with the exception of a number of recurring questions: about the beginning of a composer’s career, about how a piece is created, whether there are sketches, how often a composition remains unfinished, etc. Griffiths knows the music of his heroes well and does not get lost, for example, in a conversation with Dominic Muldowney, who himself asks his interviewer the first question: “How much of my music do you know, actually?” [Ibid., p. 160]

### Griffiths – Writer and Librettist

As a writer, Griffiths has also expressed himself in the form of short stories and novels. *Myself and Marco Polo: A Novel of Changes* (1989) — fictional memoirs of Marco Polo, dictated to his cellmate Rusticiano in Genoa prison. As is known, such memoirs have not

survived; thus, Griffiths presents his own, if not reconstruction, then a fantasy on the topic. *The Lay of Sir Tristram* (1991) paraphrases the story of Tristan and Isolde interspersed with episodes from the author’s personal love story and his meditative reflections. *Let Me Tell You* (2008) is a new take on Hamlet, narrated by Ophelia using a limited number of words from Shakespeare’s play. According to Ekaterina Okuneva, Griffiths is attracted “not just by the reworking of well-known plots, but also by the opportunity to reveal the invisible and inexpressible, hidden in the depths of the artistic text, to transform reality, to create space for countless interpretations.” [7, p. 18]

Two of the latest novels by the British writer are *Mr. Beethoven* (2020) and *The Tomb Guardians* (2021); their gripping plots demonstrate the breadth of the author’s imagination. *Mr. Beethoven* was written for the 250th anniversary of the famous composer’s birth. In an account that is loosely based on Beethoven’s correspondence, Griffiths sends his hero on a fictional journey to America to write an oratorio on the Book of Job.<sup>7</sup> The novel *The Tomb Guardians* is built on a dialogue between an art history professor and his friend, who discuss several Renaissance paintings depicting four guards guarding the tomb of Jesus.

Griffiths was no less successful in his efforts as a librettist and opera writer. *The Jewel Box, or, A Mirror Remade* (1991) is a pasticcio opera based on the music of Mozart’s unfinished operas *Lo sposo deluso, ossia La rivalità di tre donne per un solo amante*

<sup>6</sup> In the preface to the entire book, Griffiths notes that he sent his subjects transcripts of the conversations in advance for approval: some left the interviews untouched, while others thoroughly and meticulously edited the texts.

<sup>7</sup> It is a matter of great curiosity that, in 1823, the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston wanted to commission an oratorio from Beethoven, even though these plans did not come to fruition. This reliable historical fact thus becomes the starting point for Beethoven’s counterfactual journey across the Atlantic as set out in the novel.

[The Deluded Bridegroom, or The Rivalry of Three Women for One Lover] and *L'oca del Cairo* [The Cairo Goose]. *Aeneas in Hell* (1994) represents a kind of prequel to Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* with song and dance episodes from the composer's theatrical scores.

In 1996, the Chinese-American composer Tan Dun wrote the opera *Marco Polo* based on Griffiths's novel and subsequent libretto (for more on this, see: [8; 9]). In the same year, Elliott Carter invited the British author to be the librettist for his opera *What Next?* (1996). In 2013, the Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen wrote a song cycle of the same name based on the texts from the novel *Let Me Tell You*, for which he was awarded the prestigious Grawemeyer Award three years later (for more details, see: [7]).

Let us add to this incomplete list translations of Japanese plays for the Noh theatre, as well as the disc *There Is Still Time* (2004), recorded together with the American cellist Frances-Marie Uitti, known in large part for her invention of the technique of playing the cello with two bows.<sup>8</sup> The bravura performance of Griffiths reading the texts of plays accompanied by a cello or complete silence features different voice tones, emotional states, and improvisation.

### Griffiths and Music

Although Paul Griffiths exemplifies the phenomenon of brilliant amateurism, this is not something limited to British musicology. He is an example of a “non-academic musicologist” who sought to push academic boundaries and spread knowledge about music beyond them: “I suppose I didn't have an academic audience in mind because somehow I've never accepted — despite all the evidence — that serious writing on music was destined only for university libraries. The reader I imagine, where books on music are concerned, is the reader I am and was: someone keenly interested in the topic, untrained, and with no easy access to an academic library.”<sup>9</sup> Griffiths's scientific works have long been cited by academic musicologists.

In her essay *What is Musicology?*, published on the British Academy website in 2020, Cambridge University professor Catherine Ellis repeatedly, as a kind of refrain, reiterates the thesis “Music is good to think with.”<sup>10</sup> After reading Griffiths's works, I would like to conclude by expanding on this phrase: “When applied to the music described by Griffiths, these reflections are transformed into an understanding of its essence.”



<sup>8</sup> When he received the offer to collaborate with Uitti, who initially asked Griffiths for permission to use his texts, he did not imagine that he would be the reader himself: “...since she can play the cello with two bows, it seemed obvious she'd be able to speak at the same time.” Mendez M. *Writing Towards Music...* Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Mendez M. *Writing Towards Music...* Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis K. *What is Musicology?* URL: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-ismusicology/> (accessed: 24.01.25).

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