THE POOR PRINT

REMEMBERING BOWIE:

'I'm not a pop star… I'm a blackstar'

Alex Waygood

Monday morning, 0th week, Hilary Term 2016. A text wakes me at 7:47am. That's about five hours before I usually get up. Groggily, I spot something from my mum about Bowie flash across the screen, and roll back into bed. I resolve to read it later; presumably she's just heard his new album. Three hours later, I'm up, David Bowie is dead, and the world is in shock.

It's difficult to choose a single song from David Bowie's catalogue to talk about: his style changed so much that no one song could ever be representative. But one of my favourites has always been 'Sound and Vision', from the album *Low* (1977).

Low was, oddly, the first album that hooked me on Bowie, and it was certainly the album I bought first, but it's not the Bowie that *Ziggy* fans will know. A collaboration between Bowie and Brian Eno, *Low* incorporates the influence of German 'Krautrock' bands such as Kraftwerk and Neu! to create electronic textures with a greatly expanded use of synths.

Recorded in Berlin as Bowie was recovering from his drug problems, *Low* has a melancholy mood and pained lyrics. The songs are abrasive and strange. 'Speed of Life' is built around a chromatic, tonally ambiguous guitar riff; the fragmented bass and pounding drums in 'Breaking Glass' feel like punches; Bowie's harmonica in 'A New Career in a New Town' wails horribly. Meanwhile, throughout the album Carlos Alomar uses a harsh and spiky guitar tone, while Bowie sings in a withdrawn, detached style far removed from his glam rock period.

The second half of *Low* doesn't have any songs at all. Instead, it offers largely instrumental compositions that have drawn praise and recognition from leading modern classical composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Tracks like 'Warszawa' and especially 'Subterraneans' drew on Bowie's fascination with the orient, Eno's fascination with ambient music, and their mutual interest in the modern classical minimalist movement to create unique pieces of huge expressive power and intensity. However, I'd have to get out my graphs and start using scary words like 'monotonality' to start talking about the second half of *Low*, however, and normal people seem to get scared when I do that.

So I'm going to talk about 'Sound and Vision', from the first half, which stands out in a different way.

From its opening, 'Sound and Vision' immediately contrasts with the previous songs on *Low*. You couldn't exactly describe the texture as 'lush', but gone is the crushing textural density of the previous tracks. Instead, there is a positive mood that's a far cry from the oppressiveness of tracks 1-3.

The two-guitar riff, supported by ringing piano chords, is pleasant, melodic and kind of catchy in a way. The synth part, in this track creating melody rather than warring against it, is equally pleasant. In the instrumental parts, the only thing held over from tracks 1-3 seems to be that pounding drum sound that is there throughout *Low*.

Yet even this is altered through context. Due to a less fragmented bassline and the addition of other hissing snare drum-esque drum sounds, the drum part feels less aggressive, although there is still a weird dialectic with the guitar riff. The drums in this song also create one of the most epic song openings ever with the awesome three-strike crash that announces the start of the track.

The next notable thing about 'Sound and Vision' is its pacing. In a 3:03 length track, the lyrics (discounting various 'ah's and 'doo's in the extended introduction) take their time to appear. Bowie's words ultimately enter around 1:27-1:28 – nearly halfway through the song! This song, much as with the later instrumentals, is all about atmosphere and mood, which are given musical time and space to establish themselves.

When Bowie's lyrics finally do make their entry, they are some of the most perfect lyrics in all of pop. 'Sound and Vision' has no narrative structure, instead consisting of a series of images. The temporal space between each image is wide, inviting the listener to consider the implications, the metaphors, the words unsaid within each line. And there are plenty of things unsaid. The meaning is never stated, only implied, the lyrics minimal and understated to the extreme.

Don't you wonder sometimes
'Bout sound and vision?

Blue, blue, electric blue
That's the colour of my room
Where I will live
Blue, blue

Pale blinds drawn all day
Nothing to do, nothing to say
Blue, blue

I will sit right down
Waiting for the gift of sound and vision.
And I will sing,
Waiting for the gift of sound and vision.
Drifting into my solitude
Over my head

Don't you wonder sometimes
'Bout sound and vision?

For me, the song 'Sound and Vision' – more directly than any other on *Low* – deals with depression. It deals with numbness, emptiness inside; it deals with having no idea what to do or how to make yourself better.

Bowie enters in his lowest register, introducing the central image of the song by softly asking us, *Don't you wonder sometimes 'bout sound and vision?* As Bowie sings the first half of this line, the melody slowly rises from the depths before falling back again.

This creates a tentative atmosphere – it is as if Bowie is afraid of emerging into the song structure, of making his crazy feelings known. Moreover, the word 'sometimes' is set to eight notes in succession, whereas an orthodox syllable-by-syllable setting would use only two. The resultant elongation of the word 'sometimes' subtly implies, for me, that Bowie has been wondering perhaps far more than he would care to admit about 'sound and vision'.

Most songs would now immediately have an answering melodic phrase: the melodic phrase, *Don't you wonder sometimes 'bout sound and vision?* only takes up three bars in the repeating eight-bar chord progression. Bowie, however, defies expectations by leaving the question hanging in the air musically as well as rhetorically. The melodic fragment is never answered, just as his question is never answered. Instead, it is left there ambiguously, and we have to wait another five bars for Bowie's next vocal entry.

When it does come, Bowie employs a shocking two-octave jump to the very top of his register at his next entry with *Blue blue, electric blue*, echoing for me the apparently random moments of uncontrollable emotional outburst during depression. Immediately, he falls back to his ultra-low range to sing, *That's the colour of my room, where I will live*. The moment has passed; the numbness returns.

Meanwhile, aside from the vocal delivery and musical structure, the images themselves also evoke depression and numbness. It seems to have become the standard cliché for literary critics to over-analyse the colour 'blue' in literature, but in this song the colour blue is clearly significant. It is first introduced half-screamed at the top of Bowie's range; and the phrase *blue, blue* occurs three times in a song where very little at all is said. (The second two times it occurs, it is double-tracked: Bowie layers on top of his vocals another copy of himself singing harmony in a higher octave, emphasising the image yet more.)

The context of this image brings the depressing, melancholic connotations of 'blue' to the fore. Bowie immediately returns to his ultra-low register in the next line, *That's the colour of my room*, and later, more explicitly melancholic images feature in the song: *Pale blinds drawn on day, Nothing to do, nothing to say,* and *Drifting into my solitude*. The context of the album as a whole is also important: every other song deals with negativity in some form, even if 'Sound and Vision' is the only one that deals with depression so directly.

Far more elusive is the central image of 'sound and vision', which is rich with connotations and could be interpreted in many ways. Every time it appears, it is unexpectedly double-tracked. This again serves to emphasise this image yet more, especially as it is contrasted with his precise, clipped style of singing in his ultra-low octave throughout most of the rest of the song.

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Misinformation in the Rhodes Campaign

Madeline Briggs

Martin Luther King once said 'Hate cannot drive out hate- only love can do that'.

On 9th April 2015, the statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town following a vote of approval by the University Council. The statue's removal was a victory for the 'Rhodes Must Fall' (RMF) movement which asserted that the statue was a symbol of colonial aggression and oppression and that it served as a prominent reminder of the horrors inflicted by colonial imperialism.

Ever since their victory in Cape Town, the RMF movement has gained traction and momentum at Oxford University. RMF is again demanding the removal of a statue of Rhodes, this time the one located on property owned by Oriel College. In a petition, RMF states that by refusing to remove the statue 'Oriel College and Oxford University continue to tacitly identify with Rhodes's values, and to maintain a toxic culture of domination and oppression.'

As evidence for their position, they cite an abhorrent statement by Rhodes. Their petition states that 'Rhodes is the same apartheid colonialist who said: 'I prefer land to niggers…the natives are like children. They are just emerging from barbarism…one should kill as many niggers as possible." The quotation reveals Rhodes not just as a colonial racist, but as a man advocating genocide. A statement this damning makes one pause.

So when exactly and in what context did Rhodes make these statements? That is where the story gets interesting.

Although the source for the quotation is not cited in the petition, with a little digging one can find it in the form above, complete with ellipses, in a book review by Adekeye Adebajo of Paul Maylam's 'The Cult of Rhodes' (*Times Literary Review*, 2006). Adebajo, himself a former Rhodes scholar, subscribes fully to Maylam's disparaging treatment of Rhodes. Reached for comment, he repeated that the quote is directly from Maylam, and confirmed the attribution to Rhodes. A careful search of Maylam's text reveals the seeds of the quotation on page 14. However, the three phrases indicated by ellipses are indicated by Maylam to have been said by Rhodes at different times, and in different contexts. The single sentence quoted by RMF does not exist in Maylam's book.

But each of three phrases is incriminating in its own right, so it is worth digging deeper into Maylam's sources. The first phrase is cited from a 1957 biography by Felix Gross, titled 'Rhodes of Africa.' Gross did not present his biography as a work of serious scholarship. He notes in the introduction that 'The thoughts and soliloquies of Cecil Rhodes are derived from his speeches, letters and reported conversations. So as not to interrupt the continuity of the story I have refrained from giving references in footnotes.' On page 242, cited by Maylam, he attributes the quote directly to Rhodes, but, on page 395, he expands that Rhodes made the statement to Olive Schreiner during a dinner.

Yet in 1897, after writing and days before publishing her novel, Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland, Schreiner wrote to William Hay asking him to provide evidence for a quote used in the book. 'It is most necessary', she wrote, 'that we have some exact quotations from… a speech which I heard [Mr Rhodes] make [to Cape Parliament] about four or five years, some valuable remarks as showing his attitude on the native-question, 'I prefer land to niggers.'' Schreiner appears to have misremembered Rhodes's 1892 speech to the Cape House, regarding taxation and governance, in which he said 'You want to annex land rather than natives. Hitherto we have been annexing natives instead of land.' No evidence of a reply from Hay exists, and Schreiner proceeded with using her memory of the quote on page 37 of her novel.

The second quotation is from Rhodes' 1894 speech to Cape Town Parliament on the Second Rereading of the Glen Grey Act. The full paragraph reads: 'Now, I say the natives are children. They are just emerging from barbarism. They have human minds, and I would like them to devote themselves wholly to the local matters that surround them and appeal to them. I would let them tax themselves, and give them the funds to spend on these matters — the building of roads and bridges, the making of plantations, and other such works. I propose that the House shall allow these people to tax themselves, and that the proceeds of their taxation shall be spent by them on the development of themselves and of their districts.'

The final quotation – 'one should kill as many niggers as possible' – is the most abhorrent. But this wording actually does not come from the Maylam biography; it was introduced in Adebajo's review, and no other source has been located or provided by the author. Maylam presents the quote as 'You should kill as many as you can', and cites Gordon Le Sueur's book *Cecil Rhodes: The Man and his Work*, published in 1913. On page 159, Le Sueur references a conversation recounted to him by 'an unnamed officer'. This unidentified man reported hearing Rhodes say, following a deadly and bloody battle against rebels, 'Well you should not spare them. You should kill all you can, as it serves as a lesson to them when they talk things over at their fires at night. They count up the killed, and say So-and-so is dead and So-and-so is no longer here, and they begin to fear you.'

In summary: in making its case against the character and legacy of Cecil Rhodes, RMF presents and seems persuaded by a single damning quotation. But a modestly careful analysis of the quotation and source should cause us to pause and then recognise its insubstantiality. The quotation fractures into three parts. The first is, in all evidence, an avowedly fictional attribution. The second, in full, speaks more for the African people than against them. The third, finally, appears to have been fabricated.

The disintegration of this quotation is not an argument for the character and legacy of Rhodes. Rhodes, and the British nation as a whole, were engaged in colonialism in ways that are impossible to disconnect from racism. Mistakes made by preceding generations cannot simply be set aside or dismissed.

Still, these injustices are not rectified by taking a symbolic action against the legacy of any one man, whether it be Cecil Rhodes at Oxford or Woodrow Wilson at Princeton. It is fair to dig deep into history and vindicate those who have been oppressed and marginalised. It often takes time and perspective to see things clearly. But it does not help or make things better to misrepresent the evidence to score a victory today. It merely perpetuates the conflict. One cannot defeat lies with more lies or hate with more hate.■

THE COLUMN

College Interviews

Giorgio Scherrer
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Dawid Adam Piekarz, 30, barman and scout at Oriel thinks this year's students are an especially amazing bunch.

I first came to Oxford on a Friday. I had flown over from Poland for a job interview, because a friend of mine was working in Hall and had told me that a position was free. So I did the interview, got the job and started working two days later. This was eight years ago. My English was really bad at the beginning, so I had some lessons with a tutor here in college, but I couldn't stay in Poland. The situation was just desperate there, not many jobs, and I had little work experience.

I'm from Gliwice, an old Polish town near Krakow; sometimes, when I'm a bit down, I think of going back, but actually I'm already like a local person here – everybody knows me, not just in college. And my family is a bit all over the world anyway, I've got my parents in Poland and two sisters in Holland that I haven't seen for quite a while.

Luckily there are some amazing people here too, this woman for instance, she's been a scout for forty-five years – you can have conversations with her like the good ones with your mother.

When I arrived I first worked half-time as a waiter in Hall and half-time as a scout, until I changed from Hall to the bar three years ago. The bar, I'd say, is also my favourite place around here, although staircase 15 is nice too, and Hall, of course. But not the Island site – it's so dark there!

Myself, I live in West Oxford, five miles from here, in a shared flat with some friends. Accommodation is very expensive in Oxford – so if I could change one thing about my life here, it would be to make it cheaper. Or college rooms for staff members – that would be something too.

I think people like me – and I like to be popular. This year is actually the first time I had no problems with any student. In the years before there used to be ones that didn't respect me, didn't say Hi or were a bit posh. But I think that's not because it's Oxford; in every place you have people that feel like they're better than you. But, as I said, this year is different – there are some really amazing students now. Although it's hard to remember all the names – what was yours again?'■

Online Exclusives

Stay alert as The Poor Print continues to publish throughout the coming week. Here's what's in store:

Narnia Revisited: The Wheaton Question
Zixin Jiang
Monday 25th January

The Happiness Extortion
Jacob Warn
Tuesday 26h January

Corrections

The Poor Print humbly apologies for an error of attribution made in Issue #4 (4/12/15). The article 'Please don't all write about Star Wars' was mistakenly published anonymously. We apologise to Fran Donnellan, the esteemed author, for missing her name.

Upcoming Issues

Issue #6 - RITUAL
31st January

Issue #7 - GREEN
14th February

Issue #8 - DECLINE & FALL
28th February

‘You Cannot Pass’

Peter Gent

‘You cannot pass,’ said he, despite his foe.
Then all the Orcs stood still among the stone;
Retreated eight, dead silence fell, and woe.
No fellowship-for Gandalf’s will alone
Did face the Balrog’s dreams when he did leave
His morbid home and search a higher life.
‘No pass,’ said Gandalf, ‘shall you e’er achieve!
Distinction? Ha! A fantasy too rife.’
‘Unless,’ smirked he, ‘a paper under stress,
A thesis written, and those essays too.
And so, comply! Examiners shall bless
not ever, if refuse were you to spew.’
‘And to what end?’ as Gandalf walked away.
Mt Doom, the end; ‘extortion’ one could say.

REMEMBERING BOWIE
Continued from Page 1

The image of ‘sound and vision’ occurs four times in three forms, the first instance bookending the song. The passages where Bowie employs double-tracking are italicised:

- ‘Don’t you wonder sometimes,
  ’bout sound and vision?’
- ‘I will sit right down,
  waiting for the gift of sound and vision.’
- ‘I will sing,
  waiting for the gift of sound and vision.’
- ‘Don’t you wonder sometimes,
  ’bout sound and vision?’

Bowie’s image of ‘sound and vision’ suggests searching for inspiration: searching for a way out of the numbness that binds him, searching for a means of escape from his depression. Until he finds a way out, he’ll just carry on sitting in his room; until he finds inspiration, he’ll just carry on singing. What else can he do? ‘Sitting’, as well, is an extraordinarily passive word: for me it implies utter helplessness. His emotional stasis is echoed in the guitar riff looping round, and round, and round.

The question that bookends the song, *Don’t you wonder sometimes, ’bout sound and vision*, feels quite fundamental. He’s questioning everything about the way we experience the world; it is almost as if Bowie is trying to find a spiritual solution to his quest for meaning, for release. It’s open-ended, it’s confused: he is inviting us into his personal troubles. The song’s lyrics end as they begin, with the unanswered musical statement once again echoing his unanswered question perfectly. Even the backing track does not have a musical resolution; instead, the track fades out, ending in uncertainty and stasis as the guitar riff continues to loop.

Bowie’s genius comes through in the way he combines these complex and depressing images into a track that, for the listener, is both kind-of catchy and not depressing. It’s a sad song, and Bowie’s jolting octave jumps clearly convey his pain and anguish – the way his vocal delivery is completely different between his two registers feels almost schizophrenic to me. But in this track, Bowie holds back from forcing this anguish onto us, instead using the song as a cathartic form of release that we share in.

Catharsis is in fact the unifying idea behind ‘Sound and Vision’; the song is arguably only fully comprehensible by considering it through this concept. Seeing the song as cathartic release makes sense of the inherent tension between the unexpectedly melodic, positive guitar part and the pounding, aggressive drums. Catharsis links the disparate images in the second half of the song with the exultant, emotive ‘ah’s and ‘doo’s in the extended introduction: while they stand in utter contrast, they both represent a form of emotive release. Catharsis is even present in the images themselves: while they may be images of depression, they are in fact far more positive than those in some of *Low*’s other songs. Despite the inherent passivity of Bowie *waiting for the gift of sound and vision*, this image contains hope, and is one of the few images on Low where Bowie can conceive of a way out at all.

This cathartic aspect once again links this track, in a central position on the anguish-filled first side, far more to the second side of the album than the other tracks in the first. Whereas the first side (excepting ‘Sound and Vision’) details pain and anguish, the second side and ‘Sound and Vision’ offer catharsis and release. *Low* as an album has become my go-to album for depression – nothing else comes close.■

This is an excerpt from the full article published online at The Poor Print.

SLOW TRAVEL: Into Saudi Arabia

Tobias Thornes

Down the dusty road from Jordan into Saudi Arabia I make my slow but steady way. The bus takes me southwards through this dry desert peninsula, on another route frequented by pilgrims from far and wide down the ages. They travel in their millions to Mecca and Medina – those great, ancient outposts of vibrant civilisation in the midst of an arid land – which complete the trio of holy sites, so curiously but perhaps meaningfully clustered on this narrow bridge between Africa, Asia and Europe, that have historically been thronged in religious festivals of global importance. Unlike their northern cousin, Jerusalem the besieged and divided, to this day these cities continue to witness an annual swelling of their populations by several times at the appointed time of year.

I am glad not to be travelling during the Hajj, when these roads will be packed with pilgrims beyond counting: a wonderful and inspiring sight, to be sure – especially in an age of apathetic secularisation when such meaningful and committed sacrifice of time, effort and home comforts for the sake of one’s core purpose and beliefs is rare – but nevertheless not the safest place for a slow traveller to be caught amidst the rushing crowds.

One wonders whether the commandment to do pilgrimage – given at a time when the Muslim world was smaller and travel was more spiritually reverential and less harmful to the environment – should really still apply across the world today, or whether the meaning of this once so humble, arduous pilgrimage is lost amidst the bustle of modernity. I am glad, too, not to be here in high summer, when today’s sweltering maximum temperature of nearly forty degrees could easily be topped by another ten. Even here in the relatively cool coastal mountains of the west, the sun beats a parched and weary heat from hot horizon to hot horizon and the very air feels heavy to my unaccustomed lungs.

Regular temperatures much higher than this would simply not be survivable, and it is ironic that things will only get worse as the climate changes, further scorching a country that, more than most, has hinged its economic survival on the very fuel that fires global warming. Saudi Arabia is almost utterly dependent on oil. Extorting this black gold from the Earth accounts for ninety per cent of its exports and almost its entire domestic production and service industries. It far exceeds the country’s extortion of water, which is mostly derived from non-renewable aquifers now four-fifths exhausted by a small but significant unsustainable domestic agriculture.

But environmental sustainability isn’t top of the agenda here, and I’m surprised that even talking about climate change hasn’t been declared illegal by the oligarchic regime that’s getting rich from global warming. After all, reporting on poverty – another important subject – has been banned, and the government refuses to acknowledge that it even exists, or to gather any statistics on how many of the exploited lower classes are failing to benefit from its oil-fired boom.

Medina greets me like a microcosm of all this: a dream-like mountain ‘paradise’ sprouting from the parched earth, flourishing civilisation where there ought to be desert. At the end of a shimmering ribbon of road, the city seems at first a magical and welcoming sight but, in common with much of modern Saudi Arabia, its charms are superficial – artificial, even, manufactured in the image of the rich world that it apes.

There are mosques, domes and minarets aplenty amidst the modern skyscrapers and apartments, but one would be mistaken to imagine that these reflect the ancient heritage of the city. Most of the centuries-old monuments hereabouts are no longer standing. Considered idolatrous under the strict religion of the Saudi government, many shrines, Mosques and places associated with the Prophet Muhammad have been destroyed in the past few decades lest they become the foci of idolatrous worship of places and people rather than God.

It’s a point of contention that’s surfaced many times in religious history: do devotional images and buildings draw us closer to God or distract us from Him? Often, though, this sort of violent iconoclasm speaks more of the ruling regime’s desire to demonstrate its own power and impose its own man-made religion on its subjects than of selfless sacrifice to God. Amidst the foreign fabrications of Medina – or at least, those parts that a non-Muslim is permitted to visit – I feel little connection with the past and little sense of peace.

I find greater peace in the mountains away from the city, and the next few days see me journey slowly, by foot and by bus, from their majestic, spiritual splendour down towards the hot, flat plains of the east. It is too hot to travel in the middle part of each day, and I take advantage of my long sojourns in villages and towns to sample at least a taste of a past, nomadic culture that is being slowly suffocated beneath the wasteful and exploitative Saudi Arabia of today. There is still some wildlife to be seen here, though the desert’s biggest creatures – onyx, leopard and gazelle – were wiped out by the over-extortionate hunting of the mid-twentieth century.

When I eventually reach the capital Riyadh it strikes me as profoundly uninspiring. Adorned now with ostentatious trappings designed to flaunt the greedy, excessive wealth of the rich oil barons, there is very little left of the town’s humbler beginnings. If Mecca and Medina are the region’s spiritual heart, Riyadh is a temple to the gods of money and material wealth, and perhaps gives a truer illustration of where the hearts of the ruling classes lie. At least, though, I saw there one small nod towards sustainability in the recycling of sewer water to quench the city’s thirst.

It’s difficult to see any such signs at my next major stop, just across the border: the city that shouldn’t be. I reach Dubai on the coast road by air-conditioned coach, which gives a strong foretaste of the city itself: artificially ice-cool where it should be burning hot. Here, capitalist competition for show-offish success and disregard for the long-term prosperity of the planet meet their crux amidst the world’s tallest buildings, which rise from the dust like Towers of Babel.

The huge airport – which forms a brief stopping-point for countless fast travellers on their thoughtless long-distance journeys – provides the best indication I know of for the extortionately fast pace of the modern world. The air-conditioned buildings, the ice rink in the desert, the fake sand on fake islands on a man-made coastline: all strive to keep up the pretence that so many people living here is normal.

But the resource costs of keeping all these wealthy residents and tourists not only alive but drowning in material excess are huge. The city lives off non-renewable extortion of natural resources and human labour like nowhere else. Dubai is mankind saying to itself, ‘Look at my greatness, thriving even in the harshest of environments’. Yet it can’t last. If the planet takes this trajectory, it can’t be long before our own Ozymandian ruins give testament to the foolishness of our pride. And looking on at all these mighty modern works, I myself almost, indeed, despair.■

Cinderella No More: A Brief History of the Viola

Andrew Boothroyd

Strident, assured, passionate, virtuoso.
These are not words normally associated with the viola, one of the more modest and inconspicuous members of the orchestral family. But anyone who hasn’t heard the distinctive sound of this unheralded stringed instrument should have been at the Oriel Champagne Concert in Michaelmas Term 2015, where we heard not one but two, played superbly by Peter Mallinson and Matthias Wiesner, young violists from the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

The viola in its modern form appeared in the early 16th century, at about the same time as the violin, although there was continuous development up until the middle of the twentieth century as players strived for a good balance of sound quality and playability. One of the oldest ‘modern’ violas, made in 1574 for Charles IX of France, can be seen in the Ashmolean museum. It is huge, and must have been a great physical challenge to play.

Cinderella No More is the autobiography of one of the greatest violists of all time, Lionel Tertis. Born in 1876 in West Hartlepool, Tertis was persuaded to take up the viola in 1896 in order to complete a string chamber group. At the time there was very little music of interest for the viola as a solo instrument, and it was largely given dull accompanying parts to play. As a result, the standard of playing was not good. In an interview towards the end of his career, Tertis summed up viola players in the 1890s thus:

‘They were absolutely despised by the other string players. Anybody could get into the viola section simply because they were down-and-out violinists. They could get nobody else to do it. They produced a perfectly appalling sound.’

The woeful quality of the average player, a consequence of the lack of any decent music to play, gave the viola a poor reputation and has spawned an entire genre of viola jokes: ‘How is lightning like a viola player’s fingers? Neither one strikes the same place twice’; ‘How can you tell when a viola player is playing out of tune? The bow is moving’. Etc.

An exception to the dearth of pre-twentieth century showcase music for the viola is Berlioz’s second symphony *Harold in Italy*, written as an orchestral work with extensive viola solo. The piece was commissioned in 1834 by the great violinist Paganini, who had acquired a wonderful viola made by Stradivarius and wanted something appropriate to its (and his) quality to play on it. When he saw what Berlioz had written, however, Paganini declined to give the first performance, declaring the music to be ‘too full of rests’.

Generally speaking, the viola is more difficult to play than the violin because the notes are further apart on the fingerboard. The size also makes it heavier and slower to respond acoustically than the violin. From the outset, however, Tertis loved the particular sound quality of the viola, and he spent the whole of his life championing his chosen instrument through concerts and teaching. He is the person most credited with developing the characteristic sound of the viola we know today. An intense, mellow, even melancholic timbre, but at the same time rich and expressive, with a wide variety of tone colour.

The twentieth century witnessed a change in the viola’s fortunes. Through the efforts of Tertis and others in promoting the instrument, a vast quantity of great music was written for viola by composers including Bartok, Britten, Shostakovich, Walton, and many others.

Although still primarily an instrument for orchestral and classical chamber music, the viola is also occasionally heard in jazz and rock music. It even made a brief appearance in popular culture during the 2013 final of *Britain’s Got Talent* when violist Natalie Holt, who was playing in a backing group, walked forward and pelted Simon Cowell with eggs in protest at being asked to mime rather than play live.

Notwithstanding such eggcentricities, the viola has a much higher profile today than it had a century ago. The instrument’s unique qualities are more widely appreciated and it can be heard in performances by many highly accomplished violists, such as the duo that visited Oriel in November. Lionel Tertis would have been thrilled. His Cinderella has turned into a princess.■

‘The Poetry Editor’s Response’

Rory Turnbull

Following Matthew Hull valiantly hoping to extort a change in his poetic style, Mr Turnbull formally makes his response:

To those who, with the lance of liberty
And shield of confidence, are hoping I
May overcome ‘Rhyme’s ancient tyranny,’
I must make my response and ask them, why?
Why I must be denuded of the Law,
And not from uneven meters abstain?
And darkly dwell in Chaos evermore
Once this Leviathan is rashly slain?
Excuse me! Lacking courage, lacking skill
To live with anarchy and such a world,
I ask, my friends, let me continue still.
Let Order, that great comforter, be furled
Around my loins, and Rhyme remain my light.
For then, I’ll try to walk within the night.

The Poor Print welcomes your response to this issue. If you have something to say, email thepoorprint@oriel.ox.ac.uk and we can publish your comments online. Alternatively, connect with us on Twitter: @PoorPrint