

The Art of Appreciation: Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain. By Kate Guthrie. University of California Press, Oakland, California, 2021. X + 293 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-35167-7,

The middlebrow is still a term very much defined by its unfashionable and denigrated status. When talking recently to a former TV critic about bringing together postmodern media theory and football coverage in an issue of *Time Out* magazine in the 1970s, I asked him whether it could be described as a 'middlebrow' initiative. 'Yes', was the answer, 'if you exclude all the *negative* connotations of that term!' Kate Guthrie's *The Art of Appreciation* is a book that, through careful scholarship and archival research, sets aside these tired connotations to examine with fresh eyes certain educational middlebrow initiatives to foster appreciation of classical music. A close focus is maintained throughout on their aims and the extent to which these were achieved in the context of the rapidly changing, class bound and highly fractious cultural climate that existed in Britain between the 1920s and the early 1960s. According to Guthrie, recent scholarship on the middlebrow has tended to focus predominantly on social questions - this book tries to instead look at how the debates around cultural hierarchies shaped the aesthetic and stylistic forms and cadences of middlebrow cultural products, as well as the contexts of their reception. Guthrie builds upon the kind of work undertaken by Christopher Chowrimootoo on Benjamin Britten (in *Middlebrow Modernism*, 2018) but adopts a longer historical view and puts musical works 'into dialogue with the institutions that played an increasingly powerful role in mediating cultural access throughout this period' (p. 11). In doing so we witness the 'elective affinity' that emerged between musical appreciation and various forms of public service media, including interwar BBC radio (Chapter 3) and the documentary film movement (Chapter 4), given their intersecting aims and concerns to educate and widen access to culture.

After an informative introduction to the evolution and development of the concept of the middlebrow, the chapters are each devoted to middlebrow initiatives of various kinds. These include, in order, Robert Mayer Concerts for Children (1924-1939); Sir Walford Davies' BBC programme *Music and the Ordinary Listener* (1926-1939); Benjamin Britten's documentary *Instruments of the Orchestra* (1949, directed by Muir Matheson); Extra-Mural Music Education at the University of Birmingham (1948-1964); and the avant-garde educational innovations of Peter Maxwell Davies' *O Magnum Mysterium* (1960). Forms of music education and performance in the concert hall, classroom and via broadcast talks were seen as providing a means to cultivate more active and attentive forms of listening at a time when the widespread availability of music through technologies like radio and the phonograph was leading to concerns about superficial engagement with art music, in addition to the usual ones about the coarsening of public taste.

Whilst these are all fascinating case studies, the thick description and layering of historical contexts, whilst lucidly written and absorbing, deprive us of synoptic linkages and contrasts between the chapters. Whilst issues of taste are explored, there is an ostensible lack of curiosity regarding their political derivations, manifestations, or implications – for example, the politics of those who vehemently opposed the middlebrow. Guthrie rightly highlights their unease about cultural 'contamination' in terms of what they regard as the commercialism (i.e. entrepreneurialism) of middlebrow initiatives, yet she does not evaluate their own class position. In some ways the stance of the highbrow critic is equivalent to that of the aristocracy, whose leisured pursuits accrued status by dint of their distance from economic necessity, thus serving the purpose of class distinction. As Thorstein Veblen emphasised, refined tastes...require[s] time, application, and expense, and can therefore not be composed by those whose time and energy are taken up by work'.¹ Critiques of commercialized leisure can therefore be seen as a defensive posture to reassert the greater aesthetic worth ascribed to loftier pursuits when the working classes began to have more free time and a greater measure of disposable income. This elite cultivation and inheritance

of 'refined tastes' should be borne in mind when encountering Guthrie's claim that 'children from poor backgrounds usually displayed less of this allegedly natural skill [of musicality] than those from well-off families' (p. 121). If 'music educators worried that attempts to meet everybody's needs might result in a lowering of standards' (ibid.) then that suggests they were often culpable in drawing distinctions related to taste and quality that served to uphold and preserve this cultivation, to protect it from the dilution that supposedly resulted from immersion in the 'mainstream'.

As David Savran has argued, most highbrows can be located more precisely within what Pierre Bourdieu called 'a dominated fraction of the dominant class', highly educated (often operating within the academy) and professionalized, but exiled, because of their relatively lowly income level, from the upper classes.ⁱⁱ This does help to explain preoccupations with 'demarcating the battle lines' (p. 16) of culture and the highbrow hostility towards middlebrow initiatives and extra-mural forms of music education that seemed to allow for greater social mobility and wider access to the pool of cultural capital. The upper limits of the middlebrow are perhaps represented by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies' approach in *O Magnum Mysterium* as a work for schools, with Guthrie's account suggesting that its educational potential was limited by its complexity and its tendency towards form over function.

Guthrie states at the outset that it is not her concern to 'arbitrate' between competing claims about the cultural terrain (p. 5), but she seems averse to adopting any kind of theoretical, analytical, or polemical stance on the middlebrow phenomenon and debate. It would have been helpful to, for example, at least acknowledge the ways in which the intellectual climate portrayed here – with its preoccupation with the relationships between commerce, authenticity, and taste – shaped the emergence of cultural studies. Although represented here as sharing Virginia Woolf's condemnatory attitude to the middlebrow (p. 16), it is important to note that Leavis also frequently attacked Bloomsbury and metropolitan literary culture, and the journal *Scrutiny* (discussed here in Chapter 5), which he edited between 1932 and 1952, was highly influential on the intellectual formation of writers like Raymond

Williams and Richard Hoggart. Finally, it was a shame that the book's otherwise astute 'epilogue', which focused on Gabriel Prokofiev's Concerto for Turntable and Orchestra and its critical reception, did not seek to synthesise some of the key findings from the various case studies. Given Benjamin Britten's use of Purcell's theme in *Instruments for the Orchestra* (as discussed in Chapter 4), and the discussion of cultural pluralism, it might even be posited that there are more connections between classical music and hip-hop than it might otherwise be assumed – in both forms of music 'reproduction, pastiche and quotation, instead of being forms of textual parasitism, become constitutive of textuality'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Footnotes

ⁱ Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption* (Penguin UK, 2005), 2.

ⁱⁱ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Wollen, 'Ways of Thinking about Music Video (and Post-Modernism)', *Critical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1986): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1986.tb00253.x>.