

Editorial

This special issue of *twentieth-century music* is not ‘in memoriam’ David Osmond-Smith, nor is it, in the mandatory positivity of our times, a ‘celebration’. Now that five years have passed since Osmond-Smith’s death, it is time rather for a *reassessment* of his work and its significance for twentieth-century music studies. At the core of this volume is a cluster of late writings that remained unfinished or unpublished at the time of his death. They are complemented by one of his earliest and least accessible publications, reprinted as an appendix to the article by Ben Curry. It goes without saying that these texts, bookending as they do his academic career, are not wholly representative of Osmond-Smith’s work; readers are referred in particular to his two important (though concise) monographs on the work of Luciano Berio: *Playing on Words* and *Berio*.

Born in Worthing (West Sussex) in 1946, Osmond-Smith read music at Cambridge and undertook doctoral studies at York, followed by stints in Milan to work with Umberto Eco and Paris to study with Roland Barthes. In 1973 he joined the fledgling Music Department at the University of Sussex, which he did much to shape intellectually, acceding to a Chair in 1994. Having suffered from AIDS-related illnesses for many years, he took early retirement in 2004. Since his condition had stabilized, his death in 2007 came unexpectedly.

Of the many tasks that had to be performed immediately following his passing, one was finding any unfinished or unpublished work, and another was identifying suitable opportunities for publication. Fortunately, he kept the files on his computer well organized, so the former task was relatively easy to solve. It would appear, however, that he was not in the habit of drafting or recording plans: the great majority of the extant material consists either of complete texts or of work-in-progress clearly destined for publication (or at least written for the benefit of readers other than himself). While a notebook and a small bundle of sheets with hand-written jottings were also found, these proved to be of very limited use.

Two book chapters were in press at the time of his death, ‘The Ethics of Formalisation: Some Recent Italian Examples’ and ‘Temps perdu: Aldo Clementi and the Eclipse of Music as Praxis’ (details in the bibliography of his writings below). I oversaw the editorial process for both, although the quality of his writing meant that in neither case was there much to do. The greatest importance was attached to salvaging whatever there was of the substantial book on Berio that was known to be in progress. It is probably fair to say that everyone involved felt a degree of disappointment on finding that only the first chapter had been completed in draft form and that, except for the outline proposal (presumably prepared for future submission to a publisher and included here), there was precious little material for the remainder of the book. It was well known among friends and colleagues that Osmond-Smith had been working on the book for quite some time, so there was a widespread assumption that it had progressed further than it had – except that, in keeping with his working methods mentioned above, he may have had quite detailed plans in his mind. (It should not be forgotten either that the disability brought on by his condition made writing, whether by hand or using a computer, a slow and laborious process, such that he may well have tried to restrict it to what was strictly necessary.)

‘Masculine Semiotics’, published here for the first time, was destined for publication in Italian, but this has yet to materialize. I am indebted to Ben Earle for reminding me of that fact and for insisting on the essay’s importance. It is coupled here with another late piece, ‘Voicing the Labyrinth’, which appeared in Osmond-Smith’s lifetime only in French translation: this is its first publication in the original English. These texts illustrate both continuity and change in Osmond-Smith’s work throughout his career. The continuities are expressed in the title of this volume, which introduces semiotics and politics alongside music. As many readers will be aware, and as is clear from this double issue, despite wide and varied interests, both in music and beyond, Osmond-Smith’s primary research area throughout his life was twentieth-century Italian music, notably that of Luciano Berio. While his theoretical interest in semiotics is well documented and expertly discussed here by Ben Curry, this was complemented by a somewhat less overt but nonetheless similarly crucial indebtedness to Adorno and the work of the Frankfurt School. It is no coincidence that both the earliest and the latest essay represented here cite Adorno; the relative inconspicuousness of these citations should not be read as an indication of their lack of importance. Not uncommonly for a scholar who came of age during the 1970s, semiotics and Frankfurt School critical theory provided the twin pillars of his intellectual edifice. While he perhaps contributed more directly to the former in his publications, at least in later years he learnt more in the opposite direction in his teaching and in conversation.

In Osmond-Smith’s thinking semiotics and critical theory must have been interrelated. If I may speculate on the nature of this connection, semiotics allowed him to analyse the mechanics of what Curry calls ‘external signification’ with some rigour, while critical theory provided him with a clearer idea of the content of that signification. To put it the other way around, it is its social function, analysed by means of critical theory, that gives music meaning, but how that meaning is concretely embodied or expressed by the music is a matter for semiotics to investigate.

Despite his pioneering role in introducing semiotics and the Frankfurt School to British if not English-speaking musicology, Osmond-Smith seems not to have taken much notice of, let alone responded to, later developments in cultural theory. Although there are changes of emphasis and approach in his later work, these seem not to have been occasioned by new theoretical influences. Furthermore, what influence he did have on methodological debate was somewhat undermined by his hesitancy to produce substantial publications that adequately represented his thinking. While his publication list is hardly insubstantial, it is dominated by short, often occasional writings. Yet his impact should not be measured by his publication record alone. Despite the elegance of his style, he was, in his own estimation and in that of most of his students, friends, and colleagues, a teacher, conversationalist, and raconteur first, and a writer second.

But there is another reason why his importance is perhaps in danger of being underestimated, and this has to do with the changes in his interests. Although Osmond-Smith started out as a theorist, he gradually became more interested in what one may call practical criticism. Whereas, as Ben Curry details, his early articles in music semiotics seemed designed to put that new subject on a firmer footing, he soon became absorbed by the desire to arrive at

a better understanding of specific pieces of music or the music of a particular composer, a change of emphasis which is accompanied by a commensurately more essayistic writing style. In conversation he highlighted a similar development in the work of his erstwhile teacher Roland Barthes. His pioneering work on Berio's *Sinfonia, Playing on Words*, which for many (including my undergraduate-student self) set the standard for contemporary music studies, still relied on a formidable theoretical apparatus. Not least due to the requirements of its format, his monograph *Berio* already wore its methodological ambitions much more lightly. The dazzling combination of historical scholarship, cultural critique, theoretical insight, and analytical close-reading exhibited in 'Masculine Semiotics' probably best encapsulates his mature work. It can hardly be claimed that the essay lacks theoretical ambition, but this is now decidedly a means to an end, not an end in itself. As Ben Earle's introductory footnote indicates, though, due to the article's ostensible focus on Goffredo Petrassi, a composer not currently near the top of the musicological agenda in the English-speaking world, it is unlikely to receive the attention that it arguably deserves.

If, whether justly or unjustly, his influence as a theorist therefore remains limited, it is as a critic that Osmond-Smith's work remains exemplary. Balancing the demands of analytical close reading, cultural theory, and historical scholarship is an ideal that is rarely reached at the best of times; combining all this with lucid and engaging writing is well-nigh unique. And yet, Osmond-Smith achieved this arguably before music analysis had developed a canon of 'approved' methods and before the 'new musicology' made the reference to cultural theory mainstream. It is his ability to remain attentive to the specificity of the work at hand, while at the same time bringing to it the full awareness of its historical and cultural contexts and relevant theoretical insights, that still has a lot to teach us. It is therefore extremely gratifying to witness Osmond-Smith's writings finally seeing the light of day in an appropriate form, even more so in the company of work by younger scholars, who respond to some of the issues brought up in Osmond-Smith's work and, in doing so, exhibit some of the same qualities just mentioned.

It is Ben Curry, in his appraisal of the early essays on music semiotics, who engages most directly with Osmond-Smith's work. Curry's article is complemented by Giles Hooper's more general account of anglophone music semiotics, which puts Osmond-Smith's contribution to that field in perspective. Two contributions discuss the work of Berio's foremost Italian contemporary, Luigi Nono, and both engage – arguably cannot but engage – with the fraught cultural and ideological climate of post-war Italy. Wesley Phillips relates Nono to one of Osmond-Smith's enduring theoretical interests mentioned previously: the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno. It is hardly a mere coincidence that Phillips's highlighting of Adorno's comparison of music and painting registers with Osmond-Smith's observation in 'Masculine Semiotics' of how, in the twentieth century, it was often through musical and visual media, rather than verbal propositions, that 'ideology crystallized' (12). Angela Ida De Benedictis, meanwhile, provides a meticulously researched account of the genesis of Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*, illustrating how, after the composer's collaboration with the original librettist (Angelo Maria Ripellino) had foundered, his plans, in particular regarding pitch structure, were ultimately compromised by the overwhelming need to rush out viable

material in time. Apart from the subject matter it is, once again, the combination of historical scholarship and analytical precision that is reminiscent of the best of Osmond-Smith's work.

Ulrich J. Blomann's 'A Semblance of Freedom' seems superficially less directly related to Osmond-Smith's concerns. Yet Blomann too delves into the fraught terrain of the cultural politics of the Cold War and their impact on music, undermining received wisdoms and cherished beliefs in the process. As Blomann demonstrates, like Nono, Karl Amadeus Hartmann became the victim of a resurgent anti-communism during the Cold War, which seemed in many ways inherited directly from the Third Reich and which makes the claims of the West to represent 'the free world' sound hollow.

Blomann's direct reference to politics points to a strange absence, an empty centre, in Osmond-Smith's own work. For all his familiarity with and frequent reference to Marxist theory, not only that of the Frankfurt School, his actual political allegiances were less than clear (at least to me). His dismissal of popular culture – in the writings presented here and elsewhere – may have been indebted to Adorno, but it also hints at a tendency towards elitism which was rarely far from the surface. Likewise, although the first chapter of his planned Berio book published here seems informed by a relatively uncontroversial, tacitly liberal view of Fascism, 'Masculine Semiotics' strikes a different tone. Its implicit critique of representative democracy, about which Osmond-Smith rarely concealed his scepticism, could potentially be the result of Marxist convictions. Yet, at the same time, many sections in the article seem to go in the opposite direction, hinting at a certain admiration for the grander aspects of the Fascist project. While this may be unsettling for many readers, it was very much part of Osmond-Smith's flamboyant personality, an aspect that may be difficult to appreciate in print but that readers need to be aware of and potentially engage with.

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1 Osmond-Smith is not credited formally as translator, but Eco writes in the foreword: ‘I decided (in 1973) to [...] re-write the book directly in English – with the help of David Osmond-Smith, who has put more work into adapting my semiotic pidgin than he would have done if translating a new book, though he should not be held responsible for the results of this symbiotic adventure’ (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, vii).