

KATE GUTHRIE. *The Art of Appreciation: Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain*. California Studies in 20th-Century Music. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. Pp. 306. \$70.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.60

The concept of the middlebrow has encountered a resurgence in recent years. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term originated in Britain in the 1920s and was “frequently derogatory,” often denoting work of “limited intellectual or cultural value” (“Middlebrow, n. and adj.” *OED Online* [2021]). As such, the middlebrow is still recovering from a history of largely negative connotations and scholarly devaluations.

Certain publications and conferences over the last decade have, however, sought to reclaim the term as a site of productive dialogue, where long-standing societal debates over art versus entertainment, and aesthetic cultivation versus mass culture, can be negotiated and mediated. *The Art of Appreciation* is no exception. Drawing on case studies ranging from the 1920s to the 1960s, and using spectacular archival work, Kate Guthrie persuasively articulates how the middlebrow was a pivotal force in shaping long-lasting ideologies of music appreciation in Britain. Meticulously tracing the networks of educators, musicians, critics, and policy makers who sought to increase audiences for music through educational reforms and new media technologies, Guthrie explores how ideas of moral citizenship, leisure, and listening were played out in public discourses. Rather than tracing a teleological story of social progress and national enlightenment, Guthrie explores the “tension between sympathetic and censorious reading” that created and reinforced entrenched sets of “cultural hierarchies” (4), which in turn showcases the “myriad cultural negotiations” and “slippery terms in which musical hierarchies were framed” in the “fraught discussions that surrounded music appreciation” (5).


What is British about the musical middlebrow—and how did the middlebrow relate to broader musical expressions of national identity? This query was at the back of my mind from the outset, particularly when many of the repertoires promoted in Guthrie’s case studies were not (always) by British musicians, begging the question as to why, exactly, the concept of the musical middlebrow emerged in the way that it did. While in chapter 2 Guthrie provides a superb point of comparison with the rise of mass culture in America, the comparative absence of global contextualizing throughout the rest of the book raises a relatively unaddressed question about the intersection between the middlebrow, musical canonization, and British nationalism: the enduring centrality of German musical repertoires (Beethoven appears in almost every chapter) raises difficulties in this regard, particularly in relation to the post–Second World War contexts discussed. By extension, the intertwined concepts of modernity and modernism might benefit from more explicit links to the anxieties about social regression and racial degeneration that fueled many late Victorian liberal reforms. While there are ample references to Victorian liberalism and cultivation, it is worth remembering that Victorian liberal humanitarianism was also used to justify many authoritarian forms of discipline and policing, which runs counter to the idea of twentieth-century middlebrow modernism as working against oppressive hierarchies.

Chapters 3 and 4, in which Guthrie examines case studies through radio and film respectively, are the most compelling in terms of the intersectional multimodality of the middlebrow, showcasing richly documented archival work on mid-twentieth-century public initiatives for music education. Particularly interesting is the chapter “Victorians on Radio,” in which Guthrie describes how “music educators adapted late-Victorian ideals of cultivation to meet the cultural and political challenges of twentieth-century modernity” (98). The case study of extramural education at the University of Birmingham dovetails nicely into the debates about school education and modern music in chapter 6. In chapter 5, Guthrie contextualizes the persistent presence of canonical composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven within a discourse of conservatism (141), providing evidence for the fact that the canonization of

these composers has been contested historically, despite their ongoing prevalence. Guthrie's reading of Peter Maxwell Davies's *O Magnum Mysterium* in chapter 6 is cogent and captivating as an analysis of middlebrow modernity while raising the question of why such close musical readings are absent in the other chapters and what the analysis of musical texts within the project as a whole really achieves—that is, is the very act of providing a close reading of *O Magnum Mysterium* itself a contemporary (re)enactment of middlebrow pedagogical principles?

Finally, the short epilogue incorporates the first sustained examination of an arguably more popular musical example (in this case, the influence of hip hop in Gabriel Prokofiev's *Concerto for Turntable and Orchestra* at the BBC Proms in 2011), underscoring timely debates about how the middlebrow intersects with contemporary issues of cultural appropriation, race, and gender (female YouTube commentators are quoted as source material, for example). The sudden incorporation of a more diverse range of voices at this final stage retrospectively exposes the comparative absence of such perspectives in the main chapters. I do not intend this to be a criticism, as much as a comment on the lack of an intersectional diversity within the existing archive of the musical middlebrow in twentieth-century Britain: Guthrie's subjects and sources are overwhelmingly white men, promoting the music of white men as a way to mediate between conflicting cultural hierarchies and technologies that were, undeniably, gendered and racialized, both then and now. This archival fact is revealing, highlighting the possibility that the roots of twentieth-century middlebrow culture did not create sufficient space, by definition, for female or ethnic minority agents to lead the cause of inclusive music appreciation efforts in Britain. As such, the leap to cultural pluralism in the epilogue poses crucial and relevant questions about *why* and *for whom* certain genres have been traditionally classified as highbrow, lowbrow, or in between, and how the middlebrow might serve to confront and repair such hierarchical imbalances.

I look forward to seeing the conversations that will be inspired by Guthrie's excellent research. Her closing challenge, that value-laden aesthetic hierarchies "remain constitutive of Britain's musical culture" today (218), will be relevant for years to come.

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KARL HACK. *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire*. Cambridge Military Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 530. \$34.99 (paper).
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Karl Hack's much-anticipated book, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire*, provides the fullest treatment of the Malayan Emergency published to date. Issued as part of the nascent Cambridge Military Histories series from Cambridge University Press, Hack's monograph is a well-balanced narrative that blends the perspectives of the many agents who had an impact on or were affected by the emergency period, ranging from British military strategists and Malayan Communist Party insurgents to members of Malaya's local and urban village communities. Hack ultimately offers a fresh approach to the study of the Malayan Emergency and the book will be a welcome addition to the historiography on a broad range of subjects, including military history, British imperial history, Southeast Asian studies, and the history of decolonization.

The Malayan Emergency is organized into ten chapters that proceed in a roughly chronological order. While the introduction and conclusion place the monograph in conversation with