The Broadway Sound – The Autobiography and Selected Essays of Robert Russell Bennett

Edited by George J Ferencz

University of Rochester Press/Boydell and Brewer, 296pp, HB, £30

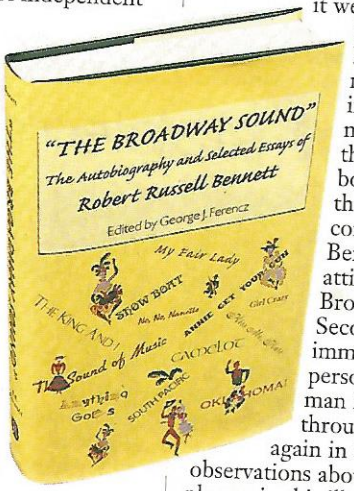
There is a constantly fascinating anomaly at the heart of Robert Russell Bennett's autobiography. Few of Broadway's most successful (and, indeed, least successful) musicals between *Showboat* (1927) and *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1965) were born without the benefit of his immense orchestration skills.

The very term that forms the title of this book, *The Broadway Sound*, owes itself to Bennett's pioneering work in raising the status of the orchestra to an essential element of the modern musical. His ear for what the audience wanted to hear (although it could hardly, in his view, be expected to know that for itself), for the voices of the performers and above all for what was going on in the composer's and lyricist's heads when they first conceived their golden songs, was responsible for the lush, plangent scores which filled auditoriums with the richness of their sound.

But Bennett himself was loath to see any magic or mystery in what he doggedly believed, throughout an extraordinarily long and productive career, was his day job. He was a classically trained musician and composer who spent time under the tutelage of the Danish-American composer Carl Busch and Nadia Boulanger, among others. His great love was the composition of 'serious' music and he was equally prolific in this field, penning nearly 200 pieces that ranged from opera to symphonies, works for wind band, and a fair smattering of chamber music. Present at the birth of the television age, he was also a notable composer of broadcast music for documentaries, and was remembered specifically for his work on the marathon NBC series about the Second World War from a naval perspective, *Victory at Sea*.

'A good orchestrator can make a very fine living at his craft,' wrote Bennett in *Backstage with the Orchestrator*, one of eight essays selected by editor George Ferencz to accompany the main body of the autobiography. 'But my most earnest counsel is that he regard it as a craft – something to be done as a pot-boiler while he prepares himself for the higher demands of independent creative artistry.'

And this pin-points the crux of the reader's sense of ambivalence. While the bulk of the memoir is about Bennett's Broadway career, crammed with fascinating anecdote about working with Porter, Berlin, Kern, Rodgers, Hammerstein, Hart *et al*, you never lose the feeling that he regarded these men – good and admirable though he believed them all to be – as mere mortals, not really worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as, say, Beethoven or Rachmaninov.



This might be high-handed if it weren't for several important factors. First, he admits to musical snobbery in gently self-mocking terms at the start of the book, and gives the reader some context for Bennett's complex attitude toward his Broadway work. Second, the immensely likeable personality of the man himself shines through time and again in his generous observations about his fellow players in this illustrious cast list. And third, there is the groundedness of his refusal to over-analyse his subject – hardly surprising in a man who was clearly as passionate about his baseball and tennis as he was about his music.

Ferencz, who wrote a 'bio-bibliography' on Bennett in 1990, has done an excellent job of editing and annotating these memoirs. But perhaps his most important achievement was to get them published for the first time. This is an important book for musical theatre scholars and students of 20th-century American classical music alike. As fewer and fewer of the participants in these vibrant fields remain to talk about their work, it is wonderful indeed to read a 'new' perspective from one who was actually there.

Fittingly, one of the last shows Bennett contributed to was *The Grass Harp* in 1971. His colleague as an orchestrator was Jonathan Tunick, whose works for Stephen Sondheim would take musical theatre resoundingly forward in the latter part of the 20th century.

Piers Ford