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INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN CONNOLLY

On 5th February Justin Connolly came to Birmingham for the first performance of his new work "Triad V". The following interview between him and the editors of this magazine took place on that occasion.

Could you tell us something about your musical background?

I studied law first before I studied music and I went to the Royal College of Music, where I was a student of Peter Fricker. I also studied piano with Lamar Crowson and conducting with Sir Adrian Boult. Then I was lucky enough to get the Harkness Fellowship and I went to study in the United States with Mell Powell, who was formerly a distinguished jazz pianist and also a pupil of Paul Hindemith. He was a very fine musician who did a great deal for me and helped me tremendously with composition. Then I was asked to teach at Yale and taught there for about 18 months. I returned to England in 1967 and started teaching at the Royal College of Music, where I've been ever since.

What would you say were the major influences on your music?

I've always been interested in a very wide range of music of all periods. I couldn't really say I was more influenced by one kind of music than another except, of course, that naturally one gravitates towards classical models. For me, that means Mozart and Schubert more than Beethoven. I don't quite know why. That doesn't mean I don't approve of Beethoven or think him a great composer, but he hasn't done as much for me as the other two have. Perhaps these influences do show, in fact, one of my pupils once told me that my music sounds curiously classical.

What about the various traditions in the twentieth century?

Of course, Stravinsky and Schoenberg are tremendously important to me. Among less well known figures Elliot Carter has been particularly influential. I've always been absolutely fascinated by his idea of the connection between performance by the players and the kind of thing that is invented to play. For example, consider Webern's music. Nobody could claim that it is really the music of performance. It doesn't react upon the player in that kind of way. Carter's music, although it's very complex, has a great sense of the drama of actually playing instruments. This is a very important thing to me.

Is this something you try to do in your own music?

Yes, very much so. I think this is a prime thing, this involvement with the notion of performance. I'm fairly active as a conductor and am very fascinated by the particular difficulty players have in coming to terms with what I've written. Also, I'm sure what I've written is itself suggested by what I imagine takes place when somebody does something on an instrument. Ever since I first started writing music,

I've been very keenly concerned with what it was like to play. Of course, there's a whole class of different but nevertheless very fine composers, like Tippett or Webern, whose music is always hard to play and doesn't give any evidence of having been specifically composed for the instruments.

Has your technique of composition changed very much over the years ?

I think it's changed a lot. When I was a student I was very interested in twelve note music and the classical twelve note procedures of the Schoenberg tradition. But I moved away from that slightly when I went to America and was exposed to things with a different kind of emphasis on them. My music is looser in organisation than that of the great German tradition but if I was asked whether I followed the German or the French traditions I'd certainly say, the German, because their juxtaposition of very intense feeling and a certain intellectual rigour at the same time is something that appeals to me.

What connection do you feel you have with other contemporary British composers ?

Of course, being about the same age as Maxwell-Davies and Harrison Birtwistle I belong to their generation. But, since I was already twenty-five when I started composing and was therefore 10 years behind my contemporaries, I also have a link with the younger generation of composers, like Roger Smalley, who were my immediate contemporaries at college.

Do you actually use serial technique in your compositions ?

My pieces are certainly very much affected by serial procedures, especially in the sense of the equation of harmonic with melodic elements; the unity of musical space which Schoenberg spoke about. But there are also lots of tonal things in my pieces of which I'm not a bit ashamed ! Indeed I think they constitute a virtue. It's rather difficult to import tonal references into a non-tonal situation without it being incongruous, so that if I can make somebody hear the chord of E flat major, but not quite recognise it as such, this is a triumph for me. I've made them hear that chord in a new guise, which, considering how old the chord of E flat major is, is no small achievement. In general, I don't think twelve note music is better than tonal music or that tonal music is better than twelve note music. I think there's a place for most kinds of mixture. It seems to me that the artist has to discover for himself what the mixture is for him. So far as my rather short past history of completed pieces is concerned I think I'd say I was an eclectic. I'm more interested in communication than in the purity of whatever kind of system I've used. For me, it's what the music says that's important and, to this end, I find that I need to grasp a whole number of traditions, classical as well as our own.

How important for you is electronic music ?

I'm very interested in electronic music. I've worked in the studio with Peter Zinoviev who's been very helpful to me on the technical side and we've done one or two things that have worked reasonably well. I think it's another instrument and I'm very enthusiastic about it. But I think the future is obviously not going to be electronic music. It's going to be live music because people like to play and it's probably going to be live music with electronics.

You don't see any future in purely electronic music ?

Not really. Not unless we can get a lot more variety than is possible at present.

What about indeterminacy ? The music of Cage, for example ?

I've been very much loosened up by Cage. My piece, "Triad V", has certain limitedly aleatoric things in it. All my patterns are prescribed but are to be played in different orders which will make each performance slightly different. I think my only objection to indeterminacy is that I enjoy composing too much ! I'm very much interested in the traditional craft of composition and I don't like making it easy for myself. If I were to write a piece that depended entirely upon giving a bare instruction to the performers I'd feel I was not really carrying out what I see as my duty as a composer. But one can't be doctrinaire about what a composer is or isn't. John Cage is a very remarkable man whose ideas have been influential even with those people who are not very sympathetic to his music. He has changed the face of music. One may not like its new face all that much but one must admit that it does have a certain strength and a certain importance.

Do you think we have a flourishing musical scene here in Britain today ?

Yes, I think so. I get performed a lot at the moment so obviously I think it's flourishing ! Actually, it seems to me that we have a large number of very good composers. It's certainly a very astonishing kind of thing for a country to have composers as completely different as Maxwell Davies, Birtwistle, Goehr, Roger Smalley and John Tavener. I think this is a very good thing.

What do you think of the suggestion that British composers today are merely following trends picked up from abroad ?

I think it is, and historically always has been, difficult for Britain to appear in any other than a following on kind of role. Whether you look at the development of historical institutions or any other aspect of society, Britain has rarely originated. It's not, basically, our character. As a result, we've tended to learn from other people and produce a very original synthesis. For instance, Elgar, a composer whom I greatly admire, could not exist without Dvorak or even Strauss and yet what he's produced is a "tertium quid", something quite different but which couldn't exist without the other two. In my own case I could mention the direct influence of somebody like Lutoslawski.

In his second symphony and string quartet he uses devices of writing out passages for people to play which have no fixed relation to one another but which always sound well whichever version is produced. As I've pointed out before, I've adopted this sort of limited aleatoric thing in my own music. (In fact, I pinched that idea from Lutoslawski! He knows about it. He doesn't seem to mind.) For myself, I think I'm not particularly an originator. I like to synthesize what I find around me in the world of music.

You don't think that music in Britain today is any less adventurous or experimental than it is abroad ?

No. I think we have a very vital musical scene. I don't think the corresponding composers of my generation in other countries do any better than ours in terms of interest in their music. I think we're on the up and up rather than the down and down. It may be that Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle are just outdated versions of Parry and Stanford, but I don't think so. I think they're doing something quite individual which has its own strength and value. Of course, English music is always in danger of being parochial. The difficulty is that the local scene always dominates, to the extent that friends of mine in America who've heard pieces by Birtwistle have found them incomprehensible. But the people over here have heard pieces by American composers and found them equally incomprehensible. I find this rather saddening because I really think we're basically very similar.

What do you think of the way music is run in this country ? Do you approve of the Arts Council, for example ?

Knowing English institutions, I'm sure we make a complete muddle and that things could be much better. But I think that a radical reconstruction of the system wouldn't really be much good.

Do you think that a Ministry of Culture would create a worse situation than at present ?

Yes, I think it would. The thing about the present situation is that if you want to do something, and it's got something, sooner or later somebody will take it up. Now in other countries this is definitely not true. If I wanted to write the kind of music I do in Russia or Spain, for example, I wouldn't be allowed to do it, though in Spain it may be a little easier. Here, we could easily slip back into that situation, and be having cultural policemen and all that kind of thing.

How difficult did you find it to get your own works performed ?

3 years ago was really the first time that I started to get played at all and now I get played quite a lot. It may all fade out tomorrow, so I'm not optimistic about the future. It's a very chancy business. There's no doubt that it depends a lot on who you know. I aim to be played because I like to communicate with people. I've no interest

whatever in composition as an abstract thing. So if it's necessary to engage in political manoeuvring in order to get played I'll do that too. I don't think this is anything to be ashamed of. This is the way life is organised.

Have many of your performances been outside London ?

No, they've been mostly in London. In fact it's a very rare thing for me to be played anywhere else than in London. I think this is one of the worst things about the organisation of music in our country, the fact that everything gets centralised. Of course, the BBC is the best outlet in terms of the size of audience. It's very nice to think that, even if a lot of people may turn off half way through, at any rate there's a potential audience much larger than you could get in any concert hall.

What are your plans for the future ?

I'd like to write more large works. Most of my music has been chamber music, though I have written several large orchestral works, two of which have been played. I have, also, several ideas for an opera. But this is a very big undertaking. I hope in a few years time I shall be able to do that. My works are gradually increasing in scope, size of resources etc. At the moment I'm writing a piece for the London Sinfonietta which is being performed on April 14th. It's a kind of concertante piece with 3 solo winds and a wind orchestra, violas and double basses.

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THE SINFONIETTA PERIOD

It has become an accepted part of the music establishment of London that the Sinfonietta should be the only orchestra to play contemporary music. This is a pity because the Sinfonietta is a small orchestra and cannot play the large-scale works of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is therefore a pity that the Sinfonietta is not allowed to play the music of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The only way to overcome this is to have a larger orchestra. This is what the Sinfonietta should do. It should be allowed to play the music of the 19th and 20th centuries. It should be allowed to play the music of the 19th and 20th centuries. It should be allowed to play the music of the 19th and 20th centuries.