24th April : City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

Concert given by the Halcyon Consort
including four 20th century works.

Alan Davis's enterprising group decided that this concert was to be "experimental". This was a rather vague attempt to justify a hotch-potch concert in which several unrelated pieces must have sprung to mind or appeared attractive. We had a flute sonata by Handel, a sacred aria by Purcell, Jacobean consort music, pieces by Henry VIII and modern contributions by Alban Berg, Luciano Berio and two world premieres by Philip Wilby and Paul Venn. I would have preferred the attention to be more focused, as the eventual effect was that the consort was not altogether settled in any of the styles or periods. All the same, the standard of performance throughout was high, especially in the more familiar works. The only true weak-spot was Mr. Davis's performance of Berg's Four Pieces for clarinet and piano. It is quite obvious that his recorder technique is causing his clarinet technique to suffer. Whether it was a slack embouchure or lack of acquaintance with this piece (which rather sounded from our point of view like the gestures of Expressionism without sincerity - it could be the lack of Berg's orchestral vivacity) it certainly seemed an ill-chosen concert item for him. The two premieres appeared quite favourably in the context of the very small group. Wilby's Four Songs from Anna Akhmatova were settings for soprano solo, recorder and cello - poems dealing with intense and deeply-felt love situations, relying on a "mood-setting". Unfortunately Mr. Wilby did not match the colours of the words in his part-writing, in particular the vocal line which was crotchet-infested and uninteresting. Virginia Miskin, the soprano, also seemed incapable of dramatic ability, whilst masking the words in the upper register by an exaggerated throat-voice, so to speak. Paul Venn's Three Piano Pieces, played excellently by the composer, were rather surprisingly traditional English piano writing of a post-Ireland variety - ie. "thoughtful", "gay" etc., rather more similar to John McCabe in language.

The concert's undoubted centre-piece (by accident, I daresay) was Alan Davis's solo recorder performance of Berio's "Gesti". Mr. Davis took the trouble of explaining the piece beforehand as being in three sections; the first specifies fingering and mouthing to be quite independent and these two effects gradually move together through the work. The instrument was not only blown in the obvious manner, but much use was made of flutter-tonguing, overblowing, Varesian "speaking" into the instrument, speaking noises outside the instrument and a particularly endearing idea - the performer applying his right knee to the end of the instrument so as to obtain a top F# not otherwise available. It was a splendid piece, more a feat of courage than virtuosity, it would seem, but we would have benefitted on this occasion from a repeat performance,

despite some rather bewildered laughter from the audience; and also from a more unified concert - perhaps exclusively instrumental (even Berio) but not another glorified (and rather expensive)"school concert" employing whatever seemed reasonable.

HOWARD C. FRIEND