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INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER HOBBS

Christopher Hobbs - a composer, member of P.T.O., ex-member of AMM., editor of the Experimental Music Catalogue - was interviewed recently by Peter West and Peter Evans.

Could we start off by asking you something about your musical education?

I studied bassoon and piano at Trinity College of Music and composition and percussion at the Royal Academy. Before that I had been to grammar school in Northwood.

And you studied the usual kind of music there?

Yes.

Did you become less certain of the capabilities of conventional music while you were still at school?

It wasn't a matter of becoming less certain of it because we were lucky in having a music master enlightened enough to play us records of Cage and Boulez as well as Beethoven and Holst - and it became immediately apparent that I preferred the records of Cage and Boulez. So you could say that I took naturally to the newer type of music; though I had to study older music to pass the examinations, of course.

Do you think these examinations have any relevance?

None whatsoever. I didn't actually need to pass any to go to the College and I didn't take any while I was at the college....

That means you're totally unqualified?

Yes.

Then do you think that studies in traditional harmony and counterpoint are totally useless?

I've never found a use for them. It depends what you're trying to do - for some people it's obviously still very useful.

How do you make a living at present - is it by composing?

No, not by composing. Through performing - experimental and commercial music. I've also done some teaching at Art Colleges.

You teach art or music?

Music. - as part of a liberal studies or fine arts course.

Why did you take it upon yourself to organise the Experimental Music Catalogue?

Because I thought there was not enough outlet for this type of music through the normal channels. That is, publishers weren't interested in taking the sort of music which I or the people I knew were writing and yet there seemed to be a growing number of people who would be interested in performing the music if only they could lay their hands on it. I thought that some sort of centralised collection was needed which could disseminate this music.

And are there a lot of people in fact buying this music from the catalogue?

Yes. In the early days it was mainly individuals but now it tends to be music libraries and so on. Not very much in England; mostly in America and Europe. It continues to sell, in fact it flourishes. It would flourish much more if I decided to devote all my time to it, which I haven't.

Could you tell us something about the objects of the Scratch Orchestra, with which I believe you're involved?

I'm involved with it rather less nowadays. I don't think it has any objects.

Does it aim to give enjoyment to people in the same way as traditional music does?

I don't think that comes into it very much. Just now there's a lot of discussion within the orchestra about aims and so forth, but I haven't been for some time. I think everyone's idea of the orchestra is different, which is why it's still very interesting.

But the music produced by the Scratch Orchestra is based on some kind of notation or other, isn't it?

Oh, very rarely nowadays. Most of the concert proposals are in the form of statements or quasi-metaphysical instructions, or whatever. What is done is far less well-defined than it used to be.

When the Scratch Orchestra play "popular classics" is it satirizing them?

No, not at all. It's simply presenting our view of that music. In other words, a lot of people play the music as it is written and we are showing that there are other ways in which to do it. This way of presenting music might not be without humour but I don't think the basic intention is humorous. We have a similar activity in the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, where we make "ready-mades", as we call them. We take music from the past -

which has either been medieval or Elizabethan music - and make pieces from it. Just lately we've been using syncopation exercises for this purpose as well. But we make notated pieces out of this music and perhaps chop it around more than the Scratch Orchestra would have done. But there again the aim is not at all satirical; it's simply regarding it, being music of the past, as material to be used.

Moving on to your own compositions now, I see that you have a piece in the Catalogue called the "Arnold - Wolf-Ferrari Orchestra Book". Could you tell us something about this?

It was one of the first pieces that I wrote after my Word Pieces. It's a piece for orchestra lasting about twenty-five minutes, consisting of 250 particles from the works of some ninety composers which were chosen and then juxtaposed by random means.

This is also just to show a new way of looking at these old pieces?

Hopefully, yes.

In the catalogue there are quite a few graphic pieces, including one by yourself - Untitled Graphic.

It isn't in the catalogue at present, though I hope it will be eventually. The only difficulty at the moment is getting it printed. It really has to be done by computer print-out because it's 1296 pages long; 1296 separate drawings which could be very easily done by computer programme, though I haven't got the programme written out yet.

Could you tell the difference between, say, your Untitled Graphic and a page out of Cardew's Treatise?

I don't think that whether I could tell the difference or not has got anything to do with it. As I see it, the relevance of graphic notation is to act as a stimulus to the performer. If a performer reading Treatise receives the same impressions from the drawing as he does from reading a page of my Untitled Graphic then that's not my fault or Cornelius's. It's simply the view of the performer. I didn't have any sonic ideas when I made the piece.

Presumably the purpose of the graphic piece is to divert the conscious mind away and let the subconscious....

Well, that's your view of it; and that being your view of graphic notation you could work on Treatise or Untitled Graphic in one way. But I take a very rational view of it. When I play Treatise I just read the numbers in the score or something like that.

Are you still open to the idea of composing a piece by the systematic use of rigorous methods, such as following random numbers?

Oh certainly, yes. Just as I'm also open to the idea of writing a piece by purely empirical methods.

So you can either compose with a pure method or not use one at all?

Well, no method is pure because when you apply it you invariably make mistakes. Or when you've written a piece or whatever you're making from that method then somebody makes a mistake afterwards in printing it or performing it or whatever. No method can be "pure". For example, when I did the Orchestra Book I decided to limit myself to the number of orchestral scores to be found in the Central Music Library in Victoria. That might be considered an impurity but I didn't feel that it was. It obviously meant that other people's choices affected my work. That is, if somebody had decided to take out all the scores of Schoenberg from the library, then none of Schoenberg's music would have got into my piece - although I wrote it over a period of some five months and the possibility is that I would have got some Schoenberg.

Which of your "musically-notated" pieces for large ensembles have been performed?

Czerny's Waltzes, a piece using Victorian piano music, has been performed. I can't remember what else there is, actually.....There's a piece for strings which hasn't been performed; two books for organ which as far as I know have never been done in public - but I keep meaning to play them. Music for the Crumbling Cookie has been played. And then all the more recent work has been done by the Promenade Theatre Orchestra - but most of it isn't in the catalogue.

Could you tell us something about the Promenade Theatre Orchestra?

It's a group of four people: John White, Alec Hill, Hugh Shrapnel and myself. It was formed in the New Arts Laboratory in London in 1969 and the group gradually coalesced around the summer of the following year. We play reed organs and toy pianos mainly, but also some other instruments like jews harps and swanee whistles, and we write our own music for these combinations. We've done some concerts at Cambridge and at various colleges in London and we were involved in a broadcast of Cage's Music for Amplified Toy Pianos.

Are you optimistic about the amount of penetration that your type of music is making into everyday hearing?

Oh, I'm very optimistic! I have to be, don't I? Certainly the financial situation as far as the organisation and sponsoring of concerts is concerned is getting far worse, but the position of actually writing music and playing it is, I think, far better than it has ever been before - because we have groups like the Scratch Orchestra, which wasn't in existence three or four years ago, and the Promenade Theatre Orchestra. There are a lot of people making music in various ways, I think more ways than there have been in the past - which is all to the good.

The avant-garde has always been described as having taken art to the extreme where it can't go any further. Can you as a composer see any way ahead?

I think the way ahead as far as the P.T.O. is concerned is to go backwards. That is, we're now playing and writing music solely for enjoyment - ours and other people's. In other words, we hope that people will enjoy the music, because we think that the sounds are very enjoyable.

Why is this "going backwards"?

It's going backwards because a lot of the music of the past was written solely to be enjoyed by people and by composers, whereas the view now is very often that of the composer writing music which the audience is often bludgeoned into accepting.

What is your opinion of the Dadaist composers?

Who writes Dada music nowadays? Very few people that I can think of. Kagel is still quite interested in that sort of thing, to judge from some photographs I saw recently. And I suppose you could say that Peter Maxwell Davies is, in his use of popular dances and handwound gramophones and so on. I don't think Cage's music was ever Dada because Dada was acting from an entirely different premise.

But you publish some of these pieces. I've seen some by Tomas Schmit.....

Yes, but that type of music doesn't interest me, I must admit. It seems to me very dated and late 1950's-ish. On the continent they're very much more backward in their musical tastes than we are. For them, new music means a concert of Cage's Sonatas and Interludes or the piano music of Morton Feldman, which nowadays people don't bother about in America or in England, let alone the theatre pieces which sprung up at the end of the 1950's.

So you think that music is a reflection of the age it was written in?

Well, I don't know why theatre music should reflect the late 1950's any more than the late 1960's; it simply happened that that type of music sprung up then.

Do any of the "conventional" composers past or present interest you?

I get interested in different composers as my own work progresses. So at the moment I'm very interested in hack Victorian composers such as Ezra Read and Albert Ketelbey, because I admire the job they were doing and I enjoy their music. But I also enjoy the music of Satie and Ives and occasionally Mahler.

Are you ever "inspired" to compose by hearing a certain piece of music?

Occasionally through hearing about another piece of music rather than actually hearing it. The word piece in my collection which uses vibrating surfaces - "Too soft to touch, but too lovely not to try" - is probably influenced to some degree by Alvin Lucier's Music for Solo Performer, though I hadn't heard that piece then. It's the one that uses brainwaves to resonate objects like gongs and so on. I think it generally is the case that the sound of another piece doesn't inspire me.

Can you see yourself ever writing a dramatic piece?

No. I thought of doing that once, but I immediately gave up the idea. I decided that the time for theatrical music was past. At one period in history composers might think in terms of writing theatre pieces and at other times of writing for toy pianos and reed organs. At the moment I'm mostly concerned with the latter.

Will the general public ever accept those pieces in which it seems to them that "anything goes", as, for example, in some of Cage's pieces?

I really think we're moving away from that now, you know. Before Cage, sounds were sounds and **silences were silences** and while the heyday of Cage's indeterminate music was around things were very mixed up. Now we go back to writing normal music again. We notate pieces - so does Cage. Something like the Harpsichord Piece is written down and so is Cheap Imitation. He's come back to writing "conventional music", if you like; and some of us have, also. A hostile critic might say that that's because we've gone so far along the path which we now realise to be a dead end, and so we've gone back to the big wide world of real music or whatever. And who can say - maybe it is that. At the moment the field of notated music, to be played by an elite, interests me more than the type of music that is played by a great many people.

Do you think that one can write in more than one style at once -- for films and so on?

I'm sure if one's paid enough that one can. Several people I know have written quasi-Hindemith type of music for T.V. commercials or whatever, or for films, where they knew that they were going to be anonymous. There's nothing at all dishonourable about that. It's only from a very high-flown view of what art is about that one can say it's a betrayal or mere dabbling. It's not a question of dabbling, it's a question of being useful. It's also a question of making money!

What are your views on pop music?

Well, Terry Riley has always wanted to get onto the pop music scene and he's now succeeded in breaking through into it. There's certainly more money to be had in it, you know, so good for him! David Bedford also -- he's in Kevin Ayers' group. No, there's nothing to prevent one from starting up a beat group at all, and why not do it?

Do you have an interest in any other forms of contemporary music?

Jazz interests me rather more than pop, though the whole definition of "jazz" is so blurred nowadays, it's really impossible to tell whether something is jazz or not. I do very little listening to music, other than perhaps having Radio One on. I still hold on in an old-fashioned way to the Beatles and the Beach Boys and, going much further back, to Dixieland jazz and so on, or to people like Django Reinhardt, whom I admire very much. But beyond that, hardly anything. I don't particularly enjoy listening to music.