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1971 CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL - A RETROSPECTIVE REPORT

All but the most casual of music followers must have become aware of the changing face of the Cheltenham Festival in the last few years. The first recent change came in 1966 with the addition of a 'second feature' to supplement the Festival's actual 'raison d'être' - a spotlight on one country or group of countries' music and musicians. In the last three years the festival has come more to resemble Edinburgh or Aldburgh through its diversity of concerts spread, as they are, right through the day, from piano recitals in the morning, through afternoon chamber music to the main feature in the evening, usually an orchestral concert.

1971 has seen, amongst other things, SWIBY - for the uninitiated, Scandinavian Music In Britain Year. Several of the names of the composers represented were new to me; all the music certainly was, although one work, Blomdahl's Chamber Concerto, has been available here on disc for some years. Two works by Grieg - the Symphonic Dances and Piano Concerto - were the sole representatives of earlier centuries of Scandinavian music (Why no Berwald?) so one was left with the impression, however rightly so, that Scandinavian music for the concert hall began with Sibelius and Nielsen. The BBC Symphony Orchestra, under the young conductor Leif Segerstam, gave remarkably idiomatic performances of Sibelius' 7th and Nielsen's 5th symphonies; the young conductor, aerial display simulations apart, seemed in control, and in the phrasing of the Sibelius in particular, one was reminded of the quasi-definitive performances of Tauno Hanninkainen some years ago.

More recent orchestral music by Scandinavians was also featured although, since this periodical did not buy me a 'festival subscriber's' ticket, I must confess to not having gone to all the concerts. One work which some readers may have heard through two recent broadcasts was Per Norgaard's 'Luna'. The composer drew influence for the piece from Thomas Ring's 'Astrological Psychology'. Acoustically, the work resembled a similarly anonymous piece, 'Cloudscapes' by Elizabeth Maconchy, heard at the festival some years ago. The constant eerie effects were only occasionally broken by more violent outbursts, the most memorable gesture being the ending. Electronic music has obviously not been neglected by Scandinavian composers; as well as being incorporated into his orchestral 'Epitaffio', Arne Nordheim's electronic creations were heard in the annual concert of tape and live electronics, presented by Tristram Cary. Nordheim's 'Warsawa' struck one as a sort of electronic equivalent of Schoenberg's 'Survivor...', yet with more concern for the actualities of that terror-torn city than Schoenberg's epitaph piece. The sounds of explosion, falling masonry, weeping children were all fused into a collage both moving and frightening; my only criticism lay in its lengthy reiterations of the obvious terror-filled 'punch-lines', which made the work as a whole too long. Tristram Cary was represented by a live piece (assisted by family) which coupled his own dexterity on the VCS3 with his sons' selecting dice. The commissioned piece was David Jenkins' 'The Devil's Dream', made in the RCM studio, where he is a pupil of Cary.

Another pupil of his, Simon Desorgher, appeared in the Cirencester School Percussion Ensemble's concert under Elis Pehkonen, as guest flautist in Peter Lawson's new piece for flute, piano and percussion (to be published soon by Edition Peters), 'Valentia Extramateria! - extramaterial, that is, to a previous piece, 'The Cavern', similarly drawing inspiration from the west coast of Ireland, a favourite summer haunt of the composer. On one hearing, the work did not seem as personal as all his previous offerings, but, if

nothing else, the piece showed off the independent and combined talents of Simon Desorgher (complete with amplified flute), the composer at the piano, and the pupils of this widely travelled group of young school children. The conductor, Elis Pehkonen, was represented by his 'Music of Paradise', recently commissioned by Farnham; it brought together a choir and small instrumental ensemble in addition to the percussion, in settings of lines from Dante. Pieces by David Bedford (Fun for all the family), Christian Wolff ('Toss'), and John Cage ('First Construction in Metal') made up the rest of this refreshingly different concert.

One would have preferred the British works in the more major concerts to be as refreshing. The opening concert celebrated Sir Arthur Bliss' 80th birthday with a performance of his 'Morning Heroes'. However relevant this work must have been between and after the World Wars, its dated choral writing made it sound very dull, indeed, bearing in mind that it is practically contemporary with 'Belshazzar's Feast'. The most successfully invigorating passages were the purely orchestral ones, where one was given a glimpse of the composer of the ballet scores, which could never be called pedestrian or dull. The 'dullness' of the performance does not reflect on the Festival chorus, or the spirited devotion of Charles Groves, the conductor. How much more poignantly Mahler's 'Kindertotenlieder' expresses the melancholy of lost loved ones, especially given the dramatic intensity of John Shirley-Quirk in the solo part.

Amongst the new British works, Nicholas Maw's 'La Vita Nuova' failed to get written in time (nay, started at all). Martin Dalby's 'Concerto Martin Pescatori' only confirmed my present opinion of this composer (the St. Martin's Academy looked as uncommitted as the music sounded) while the première of the new Fricker piece found me in a local hostelry! With such a dearth, one was more than thankful for the visit of Reginald Smith Brindle. 'Apocalypse' his new orchestral work, breathed a little fresh air into an oppressively hot Town Hall, albeit with rather pessimistic overtones. The composer's programme note spoke pessimistically of Man's future and 'the means of mass extinction', but more importantly, of 'the extinction of Man as a poetic, creative, spiritual being'. 'Where are the Leonardos and Michelangelos of today?', Smith Brindle asks. The fresh new sounds and their assembly in this music only confirmed my first impressions of the composer on hearing his 'Amalgam' for chamber ensemble some years ago at a festival - that here we have one of our most individually exciting composers in Britain today. Hearing this work in the context of other British works in the week, one was led to speculate whether, perhaps every British composer should breathe the latin air to blow the stiffling Saxon cobwebs from his mind, and hence his musical language. (That a composer, other than Brindle, mentioned above spent some years in that air and returned to write the music he has, needs no further comment from me.)

(If the music of the present day was disappointing at Cheltenham this year, it was more than compensated for by performances of Mozart by Alfred Brendel, of exceptional quality. However relevant Mozart is to the modern world, I fear a discussion of the six piano concertos heard at the festival does not come within the primary aims of this periodical.)