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R E V I E W S

Birmingham Triennial Festival 1971

"The main impulse behind the work came from seeing Sam Peckinpah's film 'The Wild Bunch'. ... It was not the violence of the film that so impressed me ... but the extraordinarily satisfying, thoroughly musical shape of the work. The way in which the opening part impelled the film inexorably forward through the various intervening parts to the final section - which was a powerful outburst - communicates to me the continuity of life. After the final culmination of events, there is a near-epilogue in which it is suggested that because life is what it is, and because human nature is what it is, it will happen again somewhere else. Naturally, in my music I've interpreted this feeling in my own way ... so that in the long run, the only really strong influence from the film that remains is the overall shape of the work and, more particularly, the fact that it ends with the same phrase with which it began. It seems to me that this sounds both the same at the end as at the start, and yet different, which is exactly what I wanted to do."

Such was the odd mixture of naive philosophical cliché and 'Pseud's Corner' material quoted in the programme note as the thoughts of John McCabe on his Second Symphony, given its first performance by Louis Frémaux and the CBSO on Saturday, September 25 in the Birmingham Town Hall. It strengthens my scepticism as to the helpfulness of composers' opinions about their own music. In this instance the unwary listener could have been misled sufficiently to miss what seemed to me to be the basis of the work - a struggle between staticism and dynamism rather than an inexorable forward movement. McCabe here attempts to build a symphonic structure by combining and contrasting the two opposing poles of contemporary musical thought. This he achieves with a certain amount of success. The basic five sections comprise a basically static opening pair, fast - slow, the former having a foreground of increasingly violent rhythmic ostinati, succeeded by three contrasted movements, fast (scherzo-like) - slow - fast, in which we seem to be more in the symphonic world of Walton. The 'happiest' stroke structurally speaking (its emotional effect seemed aimed at catastrophe) was the series of violent chords at the end which led to the recall of the opening staticism.

McCabe's handling of the orchestra was virtuostic, and in return the playing of the CBSO under Frémaux reached its now habitually high standard. There was perhaps insufficient individuality in the musical material - too much reliance on post-

Stravinskyian rhythmic idioms and glittering Tippettian counterpoint. One also felt that the basic idea of the structure did not need five movements to express it; in particular the fourth movement seemed redundant and never took wing melodically. All the same, the work deserves further hearing - the only sure way of assessing its worth. Luckily it is being played in the CBSO's Thursday series on March 9, 1972.

The remainder of the concert consisted of a very fine performance of Strauss's 'Don Juan' (with enrapturing playing by horns and strings), and an altogether over-precise, underpowered account of Rachmaninov's second Concerto with Aldo Ciccolini as soloist.

The premiere of another large-scale work commissioned for the Festival attracted a larger audience: John Joubert's oratorio 'The Raising of Lazarus', given by the City choir and the CBSO under Maurice Handford with Janet Baker and Ronald Dowd as soloists. I must admit at the outset that the whole evening appears in retrospect in the reflected radiance of Janet Baker, whose singing of Mary's solo in Scene 3 seemed more beautiful than any I have heard.

The text by Stephen Tunncliffe tells the story of the 'Raising' as in John's Gospel with additions which attempt to convey the atmosphere more strongly through choral descriptions and through more sharply drawn images of Jesus and Mary; it is divided into three scenes, 'The Arrival', 'The Raising' and 'The Departure'. I was at first unconvinced of the textual plan as explained by Mr Joubert in 'The Musical Times', but the final couplet of the closing chorale-like verse provides the answer as Christ, entering Jerusalem,

"Faces now the hour appointed
All mankind to save."

Thus a parallel is drawn, and in the midst of triumph the suffering to come looms. There was here a happy correspondence between Joubert's often bitter-sweet harmonic and melodic style and the spirit of the events described. Thus Mary's song in Scene 3 expresses the central theme "with tears of joy and sorrow".

The work as a whole both benefited and suffered from its essential simplicity and directness. The text was often too explicit to allow the composer imaginative freedom, its imagery dangerously naive, its expression stolid. Joubert's music was generally effective (like McCabe he is a natural writer for the orchestra), and, as often with Britten, the presence of a text helped to offset his sometimes over-repetitious technique. I was a little disappointed in the music given to Jesus, but the orchestral portrayal of the 'Raising' itself was certainly the most imaginative piece of writing I have heard by Joubert. A simple chorale-like melody (accompanied symbolically by the organ) expressed orthodox Christian aspiration at the close of each scene; I hope I may be forgiven for finding the final quiet version rather predictable! The orchestral playing

was on the whole superb, but the choral writing did not always come over as effectively as it might - a larger choir seemed to be required. The warm reception given to the performance showed that there is certainly a market for this kind of work. What price a text with a truly contemporary impact?

ANTHONY CARVER

Fringe Events, arranged by the Birmingham and Midland Institute

1. Concert in St Chad's Cathedral arranged and conducted by John Tavener

20th September, 1971

In a concert of mixed works and mixed enjoyment given by the London Synfonietta Chorus, Margaret Lensky (mezzo-soprano), Delia Ruhm and Frederick Walsh (flutes) and Harold Lester (harpsichord), there was most interest and the best performances in two works by Tavener himself.

Responsorium in memory of Annon Lee Silver, who was to have sung in the concert, was given its first performance. A short effective work for two flutes, two sopranos and chorus, it consisted of a simple 5-note canon sung by the chorus, forming an accompaniment to the Latin Responsorium sung by the sopranos interweaving with the flutes in quite thrilling juxtapositions of notes.

Nomine Jesu (1970) part of a long work called Ultimos Ritos - Tavener seems much concerned at the moment with religion and ritual - used two flutes, organ, harpsichord, soprano and two choruses, with a group of parsons as speakers. The composer intends a meditation on the name Jesus, and as a constant background, one of the choruses intoned the name rhythmically on a single chord but in different European languages. This was punctuated by short, florid passages on the solo instruments, and by the solo singer, and also by the other chorus, who interjected at times the name of Jesus in Negroid and Asiatic languages. The other element was a reading of (I think) Matthew 1:21 in English, Latin, German, Italian and French in turn by the clergymen, usually after a soprano solo. The work had considerable unity, helped by the pedal effect of the intonation of "Jesus", and some force, with some interesting climaxes on solo instruments, and aroused interest in the rest of the work: which, one hopes, provides contrast to this section which was certainly of the exact length to extract all possible interest from the idea.

2. Concert of chamber works by John Joubert given by the Tunnell String Trio with Susan Tunnell (piano)

27th September, 1971

It was an interesting idea to have four chamber works by one composer illustrating his development and also to give a concert of instrumental works by a composer whom one is inclined to think of

as primarily a choral writer.

I had heard none of these works before, and wondered if the composer would have succumbed to the English tradition of string-writing of the post-Elgarian kind. But no, Mr Joubert is aware of the more unusual possibilities of music-making on such instruments, as investigated by Bartok, and it was with that composer that I found myself comparing these works in a concert absorbing from beginning to end. That comparison in no way belittles Mr Joubert's compositions, for I felt he has taken the ideas of Bartok only as a starting-point; he has gone on in his own way.

We had the most recent work first, the Kontakion for cello and piano, Opus 6^a, was composed for this concert. It is based on a Russian liturgical chant which provided the main theme of the work and gave it a sombre, modal flavour. The cello writing was strong and meaty, but from this one hearing I thought the piano part at times insipid and wispy and hard to reconcile with the two main ideas of the composition.

The rest of the concert consisted of a Duo for violin and cello Op 65 (1969-70), the early Sonata for viola and piano (Op 6), and the String Trio, Op 30 (1960). In all of these Mr Joubert gave the instrumentalists plenty of strenuous work to do of some technical and rhythmic difficulty, but allowed them to enjoy what they were playing, and this communicated itself to the audience, which is surely the point of intimate chamber music.

HILARY BRACEFIELD