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18th October: Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.

Concert of new music by young British composers given by the Music Now Ensemble directed by John White.

"The impetus that led me to my present musical activities was, in common with many other people, a profound dissatisfaction with the existing musical establishment; not just with "modern music" but with the whole musical climate which begets it." (Hugh Shrapnel) Not new sentiments, of course, but the sort of thing that many musical revolutionaries (and a few quacks) have said before and will doubtless continue to say. The dissatisfaction is I think, in this case, genuine and does not express itself in a negative way. Still more, the method is startlingly new (although it must be seen to take its place among the overlapping styles and aesthetics of recent music and has obvious predecessors).

Let me explain. The New Music - the latest to come from the centre of the British avant-garde in London - is diatonic, or at least based on diatonic roots. The concept is fairly free, of course, but the

fact remains true. And not only this, but it is also Beautiful Music. "Restful reed-organs, tinkling toy pianos, soothing psalteries, suave swanee whistles, jolly jaws harps - NO noisy electronics! (Just the job for that lazy Sunday afternoon!)" (from advert for PTC) In fact, the reed-organs and toy pianos (two of the principal purveyors of the New Music) were not much in evidence in this concert; but this, after all, was not a lazy Sunday afternoon with the Promenade Theatre Orchestra. (See the interview with Christopher Hobbs on page 17 of this issue.)

First performances of nine works by eight composers were featured in this programme. For special mention I would single out the two pieces by Christopher Hobbs - "Piobaireachd Exercise" based on bagpipe sounds (oboes coming very near to the real thing), and "55 Endings from 66 chorale-improvisations in 8 major keys" based on Karg-Elert's Chorale Improvisations for organ, OP. 65. In this latter piece Hobbs sets a single chorale ending for wind and string group followed by four endings played simultaneously on four reed-organs at the back of the stage. This process is repeated until 55 endings have been used. The description may sound simplistic; the effect of the piece is bewitching and very beautiful.

John White (the father figure behind the New Music) conducted some of the pieces in his own inimitable fashion - (enormous gestures using a baton of positively Boult-like proportions) - and provided a fascinating piece of his own called "Autumn Countdown Machine" which divided the players into four groups centred around metronomes and involving a very informal performance practice, including stopping to change speed, to reassess the situation as the composer says, and the occasional calling out of instructions to one another.

I considered only one piece - Hugh Shrapnel's Elegy - to be a total failure: an excessively boring 11 minutes of music based on a single downward scale. And I was not altogether happy with Gavin Bryar's "1,2,3,4" either. It started off very differently from any of the other pieces in the programme - pop-influenced, with everyone wearing bright-red earphones to pick up music, which we couldn't hear but which was supposed to be used by the performers, and I think it was Howard Skempton singing - very funny. It later lapsed into a singularly amorphous, negative sound which was closer in style to that of many of the other pieces in the concert but had none of their inventive melodic or harmonic qualities. It showed well the dangers inherent in writing this kind of music.

But for the most part it was a beautiful concert and a very happy evening; very restful and untortured - one of the best evenings I have spent in a concert hall for some time. As the first major showing of the New Music it augurs well for the future and I advise everyone, and especially those who don't like "modern music", to try it.

KEITH POTTER