

# contact

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## R E V I E W S

November 18th and December 2nd: Town Hall, Birmingham.

Humphrey Searle's 'Labyrinth' and Peter  
Dickinson's Organ Concerto played by the CBSO.

On November 18th, under its principal conductor Louis Fremaux, the CBSO gave the first performance of Humphrey Searle's "Labyrinth". Subtitled "Symphony No. 6" (it was first conceived as a symphony) the work gave no clue as to the precise meaning of its title beyond the composer's association of the recurring opening theme with the idea of a maze - connected in some way with the painter Michael Ayrton's obsession with the myth of Daedalus the Maze Maker. (Maze obsessions are becoming quite common these days.....Tippett's opera "The Knot Garden" is a good example). Ayrton's well-known Berlioz obsession may be compared with Searle's Liszt obsession - another example of the link between these two artists, both of an essentially romantic turn of mind - of the somewhat 50's-ish cinematic variety. The piece is dedicated to Ayrton, jointly with the CBSO.

Considered simply as a piece of "pure" music, the work rather hung fire. It was extremely fragmentary, and few of the many short sections had time to build up any inner momentum before being cast aside. The overall structure and development of the work suffered accordingly, since the "maze music" did not prove strong enough to bind the contrasting sections together. A big climax near the middle of the work, however, did seem to provide the focus that composer (and audience) needed, and formal cohesion was more evident from then on. The orchestration was conventional enough - Searle is not afraid to use lush string textures for appropriately romantic themes. There was considerable ingenuity in the percussion writing - Searle used quite a battery and treated it somewhat in the manner of Roberto Gerhard, who was a master in this field.

The other recently-composed work in the CBSO's programmes this autumn was a second performance of Peter Dickinson's Organ Concerto, first performed at the Three Choirs Festival in August with Simon Preston. The soloist on this occasion was Christopher Robinson. To me this work, like Searle's "Labyrinth", suffered from an over-sectionalised approach - particularly at the beginning, where three very long sections of highly differentiated material succeeded each other without any immediately apparent sense of inner logic. Study of the score reveals closer motivic and structural connections that do not reveal themselves at a single hearing - a good indication that several hearings would prove the work finer than I first thought.

There was, however, plenty that could be apprehended at once, such as the very high writing for organ (2 ft. stops) against pitched percussion in the third section, and the glissandi for the two timpanists which followed. The blues elements derived from the use of a chord progression from Ravel's "Valse Nobles et Sentimentales" (which Dickinson had also used in his bluesish setting of Byron's "So we'll go no more a-roving") seemed less successful, but the work continually casts meaningful glances in the direction of tonality, which culminate in the emergence (three times during the course of the piece) of an unembellished triad played softly on the organ.

KEITH POTTER.