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experimental music catalogue

Eddie Prévost: SPIRALS (75p)

Richard Reason: GAMES FOR MUSICIANS (£1.25)

Both these works have been around for some time. Spirals (1967) is a graphic work, described as "a piece for playing or contemplation". The score itself is rather like bacilli beneath a microscope: four interlocking ellipses of different sizes are enclosed in a circle, and are each to be used as a stimulus for musical improvisation. The circle itself may also be treated as a section of a helix. Each spiral is a different world - relating only to itself and, intuitively, to those one step larger and smaller.

Unfortunately, any player who tries to follow the instruction that "each player will gradually progress along the spiral in any way he chooses" will find himself going round in circles, as these are not spirals but chains of ellipses. However, I imagine this is merely a pedantic point and quite irrelevant to any inspired performance of the work. For:

"The outer circle..... (is) a cross section of a spiral and as such it can only represent one time. The score can therefore only be conceived by the player at the time of the performance."

Like many graphic works, Spirals may stand or fall as visual art, but it may only ultimately be judged by the realisation of accomplished performers. The two remaining members of AMM, Lou Gare and Eddie Prévost himself, are primarily jazz musicians and the piece seems to have the sophistication, and something of the structure, of a jazz composition. The spirals themselves - relating to each other in layers, and to the circle - are like the improvised solos of jazz in their independence. The overall structure is controlled, the details left to individual initiative. This kind of music relies on experience.

I imagined that, because of this, Spirals would be best suited to a small group of musicians. However, in the performance at the Round House on March 2nd, a large ensemble was employed in what was advertised as "Ritual Music Theatre" - a somewhat different version of the piece. This

performance only confirmed my belief, in spite of the composer's involvement in the direction of it.

A picture of the score was projected onto the performance area and groups of instruments, arranged according to type - percussion, strings, saxophones - were positioned along each spiral, with gongs around the outer circle. For most of the time the texture was muddy (one of the drawbacks of using large groups of improvising musicians), but periodically each group would have its unison "solo". This certainly helped to structure the whole, but the trivial nature of the repeated themes and rhythms had rather a comic effect that may have been intentional, but which rapidly became boring. Any overall significance was soon lost and the music held no "magic" - an essential ingredient - in spite of the title given to the performance, the lighting and the cloaks worn by the performers. The structure of Spirals is reputedly based on the Tree of Life; while I can understand this by reference to the score and the original instructions, there was very little Kabbalism put across on this occasion.

I do not wish to judge the work on this one performance, yet the score can only ultimately be judged by its realisations. Spirals still awaits a convincing interpretation.

Of an entirely different kind is Richard Reason's Games for Musicians. This is populist and educational, simple and humorous - in the best tradition of Scratch Music.

It is the exact opposite of Spirals: eclectic where the latter is refined and concentrated, and playable by non-musicians or the inexperienced: a "plain man's guide to the aleatory". It has been suggested that one of the avantgarde's important functions is educational: to teach people to make art themselves, to teach people a new awareness of things - sounds and objects - around them, and to show them that they need not rely on others for their entertainment. I think this is one side of the musical coin; Spirals represents the other. It is "dramatic" in that it separates audience and performer, but there is a fundamental need for this also. In education there is a need for both lecturing and practical work.

Games for Musicians is a series of cards in a wallet. Each card contains a separate idea for a piece of music. True to the title there is a crossword - "For Lonely Musicians". "Live Music": "This game can be used educationally with children", the feet acting as notes on a large staff drawn on the ground. And much humour: after cutting up a selected piece of classical music, one is instructed to "make a cup of instant coffee (white)". There are games using dice, genuine Scratch Orchestra improvisation rites, e.g. "each player draws anything on his

L.H. player's fingernail(s)". And little stories which one either makes up or takes from books or reads from the preface (an amusing little anecdote about an incident in a railway carriage).

The "work" as a whole has no instructions, formal presentation or self-justification. It is a jumble of ideas, entertaining in itself and offering plenty of scope for realisation or further creation - an important part of the educative process. It encourages the reader to think of music as something more than sound, that theatre, sculpture, narrative, are all just a part of the "art of the future". It shows him that music need not necessarily be performed inside a concert hall or on conventional musical instruments.

However, it is not particularly original. Cardew's Schooltime Compositions, and other works produced by the Scratch Orchestra have done it all before. Thus it is really another anonymous piece of Scratch Music, which had to be written, but whose ultimate originality should not be too closely scrutinised.

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