

contact

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VERBAL ANTHOLOGY £2.00

In assessing experimental music, especially 'text' pieces, it is necessary to suspend traditional modes of judgment. I therefore offer only personal reactions. I have considered the thirty-three pieces contained in this EMC Verbal Anthology (the bulk are by Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs and Hugh Shrapnel) in relation to two questions: "How good is the idea?", and "How well might it shape out in performance?" - for it is the hallmark of many such pieces that they are best left to the imagination.

Let me say immediately that anyone with a taste for the absurd will find plenty to please him here. It is impossible not to be attracted by the extravagant titles and the 'deadpan', yet highly precise, language with which the frequently lunatic events are notated. This is especially true of the contributions by Gavin Bryars and Chris Hobbs. Bryars' The Harp that once through Tara's Halls instructs the performer to take a pre-recorded accompaniment to a "record-your-voice-and-send-a-message-to-a-loved-one" booth, and, by adding first the solo, then superimposing alternately accompaniment and solo, make a cumulative series of records - "until the desired fidelity is achieved". The same composer's Far away and dimly pealing begins: "Cause sounds to occur at least one mile from the performer. Do not use explosives and do not allow someone else to make the sound for you". It ends with the laconic postscript "the only attempt I ever made at this was thwarted by an express train severing the means whereby the sound was to be made". Best of all, perhaps, is a piece called 1,2,1-2-3-4, in which performers attempt to imitate music they are hearing over a headset, the audible results being further complicated by the fact that the pieces they hear are arranged in a pattern that changes systematically from player to player, while the organ chord which they are all hearing by the end is tuned at variance to the instruments. These bizarre proceedings are set in motion by the leader tapping his feet to the rhythm of the title: "then everyone switches on his tape/cassette and begins".

The contributions of Chris Hobbs fall into a similar category. For me the most interesting is Too soft to touch, but too lovely not to try, which involves the activation of vibrating surfaces (such as piano sound-board with pedal down or tam-tam) by sounds emanating from outside the performance area (they may be environmental) which are amplified and broadcast over small loudspeakers placed close by. Chris Hobbs is also responsible for the most sensitively written piece, a miniature that appears as the second of Two Compositions, 21 May 1969 (it will also be found in Nature Study Notes, favourably reviewed in Contact 6).

Hugh Shrapnel, by contrast, displays an almost traditional seriousness of purpose, reflected in his avoidance of obscure titles and concern, in at least three of the ten pieces by which he is represented, for purely musical processes of a highly specific nature. This is especially the case in his two Waves pieces. In Waves I players, working either singly or in groups, produce wave formations, a wave being defined as "a sequence of sounds related to an initial sound or group of sounds (the source), but continually moving away through change in one or more characteristics of the source (medium of change), directly or indirectly, at any speed, for any length of time, with increasing impetus of motion, to a definitive point relative to the source, such that further motion is impossible". The overall form of any realisation may be either left to chance, or else planned, in which case it may itself describe a large-scale waveform. In Waves II each member of a first group maintains a sound while his counterpart in an identically constituted second group, beginning from the same sound, must diversify to a point relative to it, then return, motion to and from the extreme point being of the same length. The piece consists of a series of such processes, players working sometimes in conjunction, sometimes independently. These are simple ideas perhaps, but ones that could scarcely fail to produce exciting results in performance.

In general, then, few could take exception to this good-humoured anthology. Not a single piece shows the slightest tendency towards destructiveness; even Bryars' The Heat of the Beat, where brass and percussion instruments are subjected to "a wide range of temperature treatments (ice, fire, heating and cooling appliances, fans etc.)" in an attempt to sway them from a maintained D flat triadic monority, warns against damage to the instruments. As the toys which make up the performing requirements of the same composer's Made in Hong Kong "should only be borrowed or taken from children with their consent, and only after the performer has fully explained to the owner why he wants that particular toy".

CHRIS ROOKE.