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EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC: Cage and beyond, by Michael Nyman

STUDIO VISTA, 1974 (£3.75)

Does writing about experimental music between hard covers constitute some kind of contradiction in terms - as the only review of Michael Nyman's new book that I have seen so far seems to be saying? I would emphatically dispute this view and my reasons will, I hope, be apparent in what follows.

Firstly, what is experimental music? Nyman, following Tilbury, Cardew and Cage (to trace the expressed notion back in order to its sources), distinguishes it from avantgarde music by its refusal to espouse the latter's aesthetic; its refusal to be a music

"which is conceived and executed along the well-trodden but sanctified path of the post-Renaissance tradition." (p. 2)

Indeed, his first chapter is, slightly subtly, entitled 'Towards (a definition of) experimental music'. To Nyman, then, experimental music is that written in the last 25 years or so which has its essential beginnings in the music and ideas of Cage: Feldman, Brown (only up to the middle 50s) and Wolff as well as Cage himself; George Brecht, LaMonte Young, and the Fluxus movement; the electronic and environmental music of the members of Sonic Arts Union, David Tudor and Lowell Cross and others; Ichiyangi, Ashley, Wolff's work in England, Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra and the English experimental music stemming from these experiences; the minimalist music of Young, Riley, Reich, Glass and Rzewski and the English experimentalists Hugh Shrapnel, Chris Hobbs, John White, Howard Skempton, Gavin Bryars and others.

It will be noticed - and it is an important distinction - that all the music under discussion is from America and England, none of it from continental Europe. Thus not only is the familiar and continuing (Stockhausian) Teutonic attempt at domination entirely irrelevant to this music, but so is

the whole cult of the composer as a unique personality, different from the rest of us - and not only different but superior. Boulez and Stockhausen, Berio and Bussotti, Davies and Birtwistle are all equally a part of this aspect of the tradition which may broadly be called the 'avantgarde': a term which is becoming increasingly historical and stylistic in its application - like 'classical' or 'romantic' - and which even seems destined to attach itself permanently to these composers, thereby changing its original meaning entirely. Nyman's book is important because it sets down this distinction clearly and concisely and attempts to define it in some detail, so that there shall, in future, be no excuse for ignorance of its implications.

In doing this, Nyman has succeeded in demonstrating that experimental music is important. He has defined it by constant reference to the music and ideas of Cage and in particular to the famous 'silent' piece, 4' 33", which he uses

"not because it is notorious (and misunderstood) but simply because it is the most empty of its kind and therefore for my purposes the most full of possibilities." (p. 2)

The first chapter is also structured around Cage's

"questioning of the traditional unities of composing, performing and listening: 'Composing's one thing, performing's another, listening's a third. What can they have to do with one another?'" (p.2)

By this means he has at least been able to hint at the importance of changing attitudes to notation, the concern for music more as process and less as time-object, the uniqueness of the moment rather than the uniqueness of permanence, the release from a dominating concern with the identity of a composer or a particular piece, the attitude to time, the concept of performance as task, as a game, the freedom (and restrictions) of the performer, the idea of the instrument as 'total configuration', music as theatre and theatre as music, the concept of listening 'focus'. And the consequences of all these and much more which add up to a fusion of music with life, rather than the avantgarde composer's far less realistic treatment of life as music.

"Art's obscured the difference between art and life. Now let life obscure the difference between life and art." (Cage, as quoted on p. 32)

This leads us into the bulk of the book where the different currents running through experimental music are picked out and examined in the succeeding chapters. Nyman has not only provided a coherent view of many aspects of experimental music as it is today, but a history of his subject, beginning with a chapter called 'Backgrounds' in which he describes Cage's early work and his links with Satie, Ives, Cowell and the Futurists, and continuing with 'Inauguration 1950 - 60: Feldman, Brown, Wolff, Cage' until we reach the seventh and final chapter, 'Minimal music, determinacy and the new tonality'.

At each stage Nyman picks out the essential points, asks and answers a lot of the right questions and gives liberal examples of pieces whenever this is possible. His sources, of unpublished as well as published material, are so extensive that he almost makes up for the complete lack of actual examples from the works of Cage, Wolff and Feldman, necessitated by their

publisher's unfortunate attempt to sabotage the whole affair by demanding huge fees for the smallest quotation.

As a history of experimental music the book might have been made more complete by a more than cursory glance at, in particular, American experimentalism before Cage: a fascinating subject to which Cage himself once devoted an article (reprinted in Silence). Names such as George Antheil, Henry Brant, Merton (not Earle) Brown, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Ray Green, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness and William Russell, many of whom Cowell published in his magazine NEW MUSIC and who not only influenced Cage and his followers in varying degrees but are important in their own right, are entirely absent.

As are a good many names from the more recent years of experimental music, of course: not only most of the American contributors to SOURCE and SOUNDINGS magazines, many of whom Nyman presumably considers avantgarde rather than experimental, but composers working in England who are unconnected with the Experimental Music Catalogue, such as Hugh Davies, Graham Hearn, Anna Lockwood, Richard Orton and Trevor Wishart, whose present work could fairly be described in Nyman's terms as experimental in nature. Though it would be unfair to expect Nyman to mention composers who have only become known as experimentalists in the last two or three years (1972 seems to have been the closing date for applications), all these composers have been active for some years. There is, oddly, no mention either of David Bedford, even as an experimental performer, or of the many pop, free jazz and other improvising musicians (with the exception of AMM, Musica Elettronica Viva and Young's The Theatre of Eternal Music) who have had close associations with experimental music.

Finally, in the list of omissions, comes all mention of the recent political activities of Cardew, Wolff and others, the state of which is still partly undefined and, in the case of Wolff - if not also, as has been argued in these pages, of Cardew - still bears a strong relationship to his experimental past. All, that is, except for a footnote on page 2 (which, unlike the reviewer I referred to earlier, I do not think was added hastily afterwards) and some very open-ended statements in the final two paragraphs of the book. Nyman is in close touch with all the English musicians whom he discusses and a regular performer of their and others' music - which is both why he is so well qualified to write this book and why he concentrates, in the sections on recent English music, on London musicians of his acquaintance. Politics has been a concern of experimental and former experimental musicians for some three years now so, though I am sure he could easily have devoted a whole chapter to it, I suspect that Nyman considered it out of his brief and in too early a stage for useful comment in book form.

A few errors I have noted: Ionisation was written in 1931, not 1936 (p. 39); Schaeffer and Henry's Symphonie was pour un homme seul, not pour l'homme seul (p. 41) and there is also an umlaut missing off Jünglinge in the title of Stockhausen's composition on this page; there is some slight misquotation from Feldman on p.44; two different spellings of 'honoured' on p. 55; Wolff left Harvard some years ago and is now teaching at Dartmouth, New Hampshire (p. 56); the title of his piece mentioned on p. 58 is For 1, 2 or 3 People; Lucier's I am sitting in a room was written in 1970, not 1971. (p. 91); Ichiyangi wrote his piece for more than one electric metronome (p. 94); Tom Phillips' opera Irma has now received two productions, the first at Durham University, the second at York (p. 102).

Nyman has provided a decent bibliography, though there are some big omissions and I wish he had quoted his sources more accurately in the text. I soon got used to his quirky way with punctuation but I should have liked more acknowledgement of his indebtedness to previous articles (not always his own) in a few passages which can only with charity be described as paraphrase.

But Nyman has written a book on an important subject which needed to be written. I hope very much that people will read it rather than the reviews. And even more, I hope that they will go and listen to - and even play - the music.

KEITH POTTER

SCHMUCK

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