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**DIARY: HOW TO WRITE ABOUT MUSIC IN LONDON  
(YOU WILL ONLY END UP WRITING ABOUT SOCIETY)  
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MALCOLM BARRY

I. Not that this is a complete review. Not having the energy, enterprise or leisure of youngish Potter I found myself going to fewer events than he normally manages and these were probably of more conservative aspect, given our respective predilections. Many of the interesting gaps have been filled by other contributors to this section (described by Adrian Jack in his characteristic 'two cheers for' manner as 'jarring with the academic tone of the rest of the magazine').<sup>1</sup>

One of the most interesting features of the contemporary music scene is that as much interest is generated by extra-musical phenomena concerned with music as by music itself. The popular music industry has its associated rag trade while straight music has a 'rag' trade all to itself. Look at the journals, both 'learned' (i.e. those in which you can appear with academic respectability) and those less so. Book reviews etc., the rest of this and, just published, the *Triumph of Style*.<sup>2</sup>

II. Quiz.

1. Which new British opera 'should not be treated naturalistically nor thought of as specifically American Indian'?
2. Which new British opera had a very naturalistically American Indian — costume, war paint and all?
3. Which popular ex-avantgarde composer was heard to say, on leaving the theatre at the end of a new British opera, 'It was better after the African cooled down.'?
4. Which was the opera?
5. To whom might he have been referring?<sup>3</sup>

Nicola LeFanu's *Dawnpath* was one half of a double bill presented by the New Opera Company at the Collegiate Theatre, September 29, 30 and October 1; the other work was Elizabeth Lutyens' *Infidelio*. The latter was a stark and simple piece about the course of a relationship and its link with the seasons of the year. Written in 1954, it was given its stage première by this company in 1973; it was good to see a company doing *second* performances, at least as important as the first. The aridity of the characters' situation was well matched by the bleakness of the staging and the intensity of the music.

*Dawnpath* was no light relief. LeFanu's libretto was based on two Amerindian myths of the primeval that proved stronger than the music, a flaw which removed the music to third in importance behind the libretto and the staging. This may have been LeFanu's intention but there was insufficient musical personality evident to counter the impression that the composer was peripheral to the whole enterprise. The choreography, devised and executed by William Louthier, seemed mannered and rather fussy (though one person seemed to have enjoyed it, or part of it)<sup>4</sup> and the staging did not help to make the myth universal.

III. 'Are you writing that gossip column?' My interlocutor was a contributor to *Musics*, a periodical licensed to fracture the English language and described as 'less sedate' by Mr Jack. I had to confess, thinking how curious was the gap between intention and appearance.

The occasion was the first in a series of concerts of experimental music at the Air Gallery. It was an enterprising set of events presenting systemic and political composers and two gifted soloists, Lily Greenham and Evan Parker. The trouble is that the Air Gallery, with or without powercuts, is an inhospitable place for the passive contemplation of music. I hope the pictures find the environment more congenial than some of the human beings (including at least one of the performers). Cardew was good in the first of the series; at least his recent music has some communicable commitment and conviction even if it represents a dubiously worked-out viewpoint. In the second concert the Personality Cult was shown to be alive and well: the influence of Cardew is still clearly strong and Howard Skempton smiled a lot (justifiably) as his pretty pieces sounded through the gloom (a blown fuse) while Michael Parsons did not. First pick your personality for Cardew is now involved in the production of a magazine<sup>5</sup> which, in developing and disseminating 'new art and literature that serves the working people' and 'publishing examples of the new vigorous revolutionary culture springing up from the youth in this country', ignores fundamental conventions (is communication a bourgeois vice?) of the English language. With its split infinitives and shrill assertions it reads like an embarrassing school magazine. A pity, since there's a good idea there trying to get out.

The most interesting comment on the conjuncture between contemporary music and politics is to be found miles away from the journals, learned or otherwise, or the cabals of the avantgarde. 'Punk', writes Lucy Toothpaste (sic) in the book of the same name,<sup>6</sup> 'isn't gonna change the world. But punks might, one of these days.' A valuable corrective to the quasi-sociological academicism that seems to affect both New Wave and the politicisation of the avantgarde, and a reasonable statement applicable to other sectors of music. The book itself, a collection of interviews, comments and photographs, contains some of the sanest writing on New Wave there's been, perhaps because it's 'by the fans for the fans. And anyone else who's interested'. (And the publisher's bank balance, presumably.) At least the thing is put together with enthusiasm.

Reading this made me realise that the average London drummer (in a New Wave band, at least) would be unlikely to be agreeing that associations are culture-bound too (and that *that* is an ambiguity in itself) and discussing the finer points of minimalism. These bands consist actually (rather than as an academic conceit) of working-class people though without the political sophistication that wishful thinking sometimes imposes upon them.

The Autumn was distinguished by the rolling forward of the New Wave. There were several publicised gigs at the Battersea Arts Centre (e.g. The Plague) and the Albany Empire in Deptford but, more important, the grass roots aspect — the pubs and clubs — held together. If they *want* to avoid being corrupted by the business (some of the musicians would be quite happy to be corrupted by money —

none of this nonsense of selling out) they need to avoid at least as much the emotional capitalising, me-too-ism and vicarious involvement by cryptos.

'Drum a bit — anyone can drum.'<sup>7</sup> An appropriate slogan.

IV. One prominent figure connected with Punk (significantly, a manager) has been described to me as 'one of the few people irredeemably evil'. But then Wagner was no saint and we don't know whether Brian Ferneyhough is good to his mother, kind to animals, etc. What is sure, and there was a rare moment of critical agreement (or bandwagoning) on this, is that Ferneyhough is a major musical thinker. This of course distinguishes him from the minor, non-musical thinkers and affirms him as one not frightened by music and the power of the intellect to organise it. No hiding behind relentless systems, naive politics or feeble empiricism for him. *Transit*, given a performance preceded by an 'explanation' by the composer at the QEH on November 16, is clearly a major work.

There were some unconvincing moments in an apparently excellent performance by the London Sinfonietta under Ferneyhough: a badly-calculated balance between bass flute and ensemble in 'Verse 1' and a feeling that Boulez does the tumultuous a bit better in 'Tutti 2'. Overall, and in parts, however, the work hangs together with a rare conviction and, moreover, with a use of sound, both vocal and instrumental, that is absolutely compelling. Five months that included *Transit*, *Jacob's Ladder* and Tony Coe's *Zeitgeist* can't be all bad.

V. It is always ironical when others acting (apparently) in line with one's beliefs prevent one's beliefs being communicated. Having hawked his somewhat expensive conscience around the jet set circuit it is possible that not too many people were overtroubled when Henze's opera *The Bassarids* was shut down by industrial trouble last season. Problems of a similar order for another avowed Marxist, David Blake, whose *Toussaint* was caught by the power-workers' unofficial dispute. It was reported as being quite long; certainly the libretto is quite thick. I hope it is revived for it treats a difficult problem and treats it more thoughtfully, I think, than the somewhat glibly pessimistic *We Come to the River*. It has been suggested that Blake might profitably take up the pruning shears before any further performances.

VI. Two concerts by the BBC SO almost convinced the Festival Hall that we were back in the confident halcyon days of the late 60s, cond. P. Boulez. In the first, on November 23, *Jeux*, Schoenberg's Orchestral Variations and the *Firebird* framed *Le soleil des eaux* (revised version). This last is a worthy successor to the French tradition. Surrounded by its mighty companions it seemed dwarfed; it was a pity that it could not have been repeated. Jane Manning was rather overwhelmed by the tumult but this did not seem to matter too much as the entire sound rippled around the hall. It was odd to think that this piece might, at one time, have been considered 'difficult'. No trace of 'difficulty' in this performance and, just as encouraging, the piece did not sound at all dated.

The other pieces received strong performances, Schoenberg's gritty Variations demonstrating (if justification was needed) that it's all very well theorists (Boulez among them) pontificating on the contradictions in Schoenberg's later works but it's the end-product, the music, that counts. The *Firebird* was a little hard to take after that, even with a cup of cold GLC coffee in the interim. *Jeux* had got the concert off to a reasonable start after a somewhat hesitant opening.

No hesitation a fortnight later (December 7) as the BBC Singers and Chorus launched into *The Meeting of the Apostles*, a rarely performed piece of early Wagner in the key of triumph. The main item was a splendid performance of Schoenberg's *Jacob's Ladder*. A particular word of praise for two of the soloists, Siegmund Nimsgern as Gabriel and John Shirley-Quirk as the Chosen One and another for the playing of the orchestra.

However temporary it was, there was real achievement during Boulez' tenure with the BBC SO: modern music sounded like repertoire. This, and his works, make his current preoccupations all the more regrettable.<sup>8</sup> Regrettable too was Hugh Wood's seizing upon the programme note as a polemical vehicle for anti-contemporary prejudices in an otherwise excellent introduction to *Jacob's Ladder*.

VII. If Boulez and the BBC SO have provided some of the most memorable music in London concert life in the last few years, then the London Sinfonietta has provided most of the rest. January 24 was the tenth anniversary of their first performance. Their concert to mark the occasion proved that they have not lost their commitment to a certain brand of modern music<sup>9</sup> albeit with resources strained in such a way as only a society that cares little for music can contrive.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps banning television plays that have cost £120,000 is a more suitable activity in the climate engendered by the Great Debate.<sup>11</sup>

The anniversary concert opened with the premiere of Birtwistle's *Carmen arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum*. The composer's preoccupation with relatively static blocks of sound and the juggling of time within these is becoming rather an *idée fixe*. Nothing wrong with that when the instruments are used so well and the piece is so convincing as here. *Idées fixes*, however, can become clichés. That would be a pity.

It was strange how dated Berio's accomplished essay in live/electronic textures, *Différences*, sounded (particularly in comparison with *Le soleil des eaux*). It was written in 1959. The apparent rate of change has certainly accelerated since 1945; this was confirmed in his newer piece, *Points on the curve to find* (1974). The piano part was composed in its entirety before the orchestral accompaniment was begun; though history will doubtless categorise and extrapolate 'style' and 'conformant elements' existing between the two works, it was difficult to relate the later work to the earlier in terms of recognisable identity. Both were convincing in their own terms (perhaps a necessary corrective to the totem of historicism still being propped up in the Paris sewers, by Berio among others). The later piece was simpler, more tonal, more accessible and more likely to 'last'. There might be those who would say it was more ephemeral. Katia Labeque was the excellent soloist.

A performance of Tippett's prolix *Songs for Dov* (with Gerald English as soloist) proved him to be possibly the most open-minded composer working in Europe today. The concert concluded with Lutosławski's Preludes and Fugue for 13 solo strings (1972). It was good to see the greatest Polish composer getting the attention he deserves and in such a context: there have been moments during the first ten years of the Sinfonietta's history when devisers of sound effects threatened to overshadow his reputation. For once content triumphed over packaging. It is to be hoped that this will continue and that the Sinfonietta will be at the forefront of the movement. All the elements of Lutosławski's piece — pitch and texture, strict and free writing, homophony and polyphony — were held in a constructive balance that contributed to a powerful experience which, though extended (a six-subject fugue, etc.), contained enough material to warrant its length.

VIII. There were other concerts and events too, notably the continuation of the Fires of London series (three at the QEH), mixing new pieces by British composers and an established stage work by Maxwell Davies, and a concert featuring music by Henze, Zender and Webern at the new Guildhall School. There were two benefit performances for the London Musicians Collective on November 5 and 12 to raise money for conversion of premises with many of the stars of the improvised music scene taking part. A nice irony: they took place just around the corner from where Cardew is now living. So near and yet so far. The Air Gallery was proud to announce A Whole Day of Music (including two 'machines') by John White on November 21.

The latest in a long series of variations on that theme by Paganini<sup>12</sup> was previewed by the composer in conversation with Melvyn Bragg in the new arts programme from London Weekend Television, 'The South Bank Show'. This programme is bad news for anybody concerned with either the arts or even good television. I suppose that it's coincidence that the franchises for the commercial channels are coming up for renewal and that the new culture bit is on now. In any case nobody will watch it as it coincides with 'Match of the Day' so no harm is done, except to the subject matter it's supposed to be exposing. Perhaps the rather inept production will improve as time goes on. At all events tunesmith Andrew Lloyd Webber, fresh from his admirable and lucrative encounters with Jesus Christ and Eva Peron, was not equal to the task of writing an extended instrumental composition even within the simple jazz-rock-classical-nonsense style that he

adopted and given some accomplished musicians. Mr Bragg seemed suitably impressed. Five months that includes this can't be all good.

The five months *did* see piece rescued from a classic-before-its-time atrophy. On November 21, Gregory Rose's enterprising vocal group gave a performance of Stockhausen's *Stimmung* at the Round House. It was quite a change from the Collegium Vocale's by now 'classical' and fixed version, presumably just as faithful to the letter if somewhat less awesome to the spirit of the piece. Given the construction of the score, Singcircle's fresh approach can only do the work good. Their performance has also been broadcast more recently. As a vocal group they are well worth listening to in themselves; though overshadowed by other groups, they have a distinctive style and, more to the point, Rose has a courage vis-a-vis the repertoire that should earn him more attention, both from critics and audiences.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>'Metronome', *Time Out*, No. 394 (October 14-20, 1977), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Keller, *1975 (1984 minus 9)* (London: Dobson, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>Answers: 1. Nicola LeFanu, *Dawnpath* (instruction from the libretto). 2. Nicola LeFanu, *Dawnpath*. 3. Richard Rodney Bennett. 4. Nicola LeFanu, *Dawnpath*. 5. The instrumentalists were static on the stage; the mobile performers were Jane Manning soprano, Tom McDonnell, baritone, William Louthier, dancer.

<sup>4</sup>R. R. Bennett.

<sup>5</sup>*Cogs and Wheels*, Journal of the Progressive Cultural Association. Available from 7 Agar Grove, London NW1. My copy of Vol. 1, No. 1 cost 25p.

<sup>6</sup>Ed. J. Davis, *Punk* (London: Millington, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>See Dick Witts, 'IRCAM: Le Marteau sans Matiere?', *Contact 18* (Winter 1977-78), pp. 16-19.

<sup>9</sup>Keith Potter argues in *Classical Music Weekly* (sic), January 21, 1978 that this brand is rather narrowly specialised.

<sup>10</sup>See Peter Heyworth, 'The Birthday Party', *The Observer*, January 29, 1978.

<sup>11</sup>See W. Stephen Gilbert, 'The Case for Scum', *The Observer*, January 29, 1978.

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Variations*, MCA records.

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