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FIVE CONCERTS

GEORGE BROWN

Wednesday January 25

At St John's, Smith Square 'a choral and orchestral concert of twentieth century music' given by 'the music department of the University of Surrey' (with a small amount of 'stiffening'), I have been wondering about the motives behind repeating this departmental concert in London. Was it to give the student performers the experience of working under professional conditions or were we witnessing the more mercenary sight of a department using the occasion as a shop-window to play the tertiary education version of the numbers game?

The programme order seemed a little eccentric, living composers being separated from the dead by the interval. The first item was a very down-tempo version of

Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*. The solo piano part was played by the University's 'chief piano teacher' but, because of Sebastian Forbes' control of the ensemble's dynamics, Martin Hughes never seemed to achieve the type of interplay with the ensemble that can make this piece so exciting. The slow tempo was probably intended to help the student wind players but resulted in their playing Messiaen's flamboyant lines in a rather laboured, every-note-must-count way.

Next came the pleasant surprise of the evening: *Psalmos* for choir, brass, organ and timpani by Odaline de la Martinez, a Surrey PhD student. As the title suggests, it consists of a setting of four psalms. At the beginning there is a declamation of the motif G-D-E flat-A by solo timpani; this is then slowly transformed to produce the material for all four movements. I found the third movement, which sets Psalm 23, the most interesting of all with its slow periodicity set up by the interchange of instruments and voices. *Psalmos* is a simple yet effective choral piece that should be brought to the attention of conductors of amateur choral societies looking for a new work within their capability.

Another composition written by someone from Surrey was Sebastian Forbes' eleven-year-old Chaconne for Orchestra. The composer/conductor writes, 'the effect of the music is symphonic, even dramatic, rather than academic'. After pondering upon these apparently mutually exclusive states, I think if this is to be the result then give me academe — it does not have to be a pejorative term.

There followed a well-prepared but accident-prone reading of Webern's *Das Augenlicht* and the performance concluded with Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto played by Ross Pople with the orchestra sounding more homogeneous under Nicholas Conran's baton.

I could not help feeling that this concert was a more successful venture than could have been mounted by all but a few music departments. But when one thinks of the high standards that have been set in the past by such people as Edwin Roxburgh with RCM students (*Gruppen, Pli selon pli*, etc.) one realises that Surrey still has a long way to go.

Monday February 6

Members of the BBC SO presenting a Joycean evening at the Roundhouse. Why do people put on concerts at this awful place? Before the performance one is aware of the inadequacy of the refreshments and during it every quiet passage is accompanied by the noise of the gas heating and high speed trains. The plastic chairs are beyond comment.

The first music inspired by Joyce was the Berio *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* for stereo tape. In the halcyon days when BBC Roundhouse audiences were treated to a short talk beforehand and a discussion afterwards, I could see the point in including a tape piece. However, this just felt like a bit of programme extending. It was good to hear this 20-year-old work now, as I found it still sounding relevant in a way that instrumental works by Berio from about this time do not.

After this highly imaginative music, which takes the Ormond Bar scene of *Ulysses* as its point of departure, we were given John Buller's version of the 'Children's Night Games' section of Part II of *Finnegans Wake*, entitled *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies*. Much has been written about this piece already, both before and after its performance. Buller, who has a highly-informed interest in the musical possibilities inherent in Joyce's writings, states in his programme note:

I felt it was essential to keep in mind the total forms of the singing games/play/music-hall of this section of the book, for (in Joyce's words) it is 'filled with the rhythms of English singing games'; and for these reasons again my piece had to be music 'theatre', in the sense that freedom must be allowed for the musicians to 'act it out' — or at least, interact; adults are playing children, singers are playing adults, children are playing angels and devils, and the edges remain blurred.

I have been wondering why I dislike the piece so much: I think the answer lies in Buller's attempt to translate ideas from one art form to another. We know that Joyce was much influenced by music; however, when he uses a musical idea (e.g. the fuga per canonem of the Ormond Bar scene) he transforms it into something new. This, combined with borrowings from his own art, in an attempt to heighten human consciousness, produces a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and transcends all of them. Buller's attempt to create the same type of effect in music is

too simplistic. Pastiche, whether it is Kurt Weill or Ligeti, sounds as it is. One of the few cases of this idea working in music must surely be Maxwell Davies's *Taverner*.

The Mime . . . did get a very good performance (the questionable balance in the hall having been rectified on the delayed transmission). Special mention must be made of Christine Messiter's flute playing and the superb performance (complete with Irish accent) of Jane Manning. My programme informs me that it was staged by Murray Melvin — perhaps he decided on the colour of the lighting and arranged the music stands. I do hope the BBC will manage a repeat sometime.

Thursday February 9

OdB at Peter Gill's Riverside Studios, Crisp Road, W6 (Hammersmith Underground). Before mentioning the concert, I should like to take the opportunity to recommend the Riverside Studios to audience and promoters alike. If promoters are looking for venues other than the usual established places, forget those cold churches and trendy local authority complexes and go to Riverside. The reasonably-priced pre-concert food and drink is marvellous, tickets for some events are reduced on the night with the production of a NUS card, it's warm and friendly and seems to get good audiences.

The personnel of OdB is Tim Souster (electric piano, synthesizer, viola), Peter Britton (tuned percussion, piano, synthesizer) and Tony Greenwood (percussion and synthesizer). The group was formed after the disbandment of Intermodulation.¹ My reactions to this concert are probably as mixed as those of others to whom I have spoken. I very much enjoyed the first part: Riley, *Dorian Marimba* (very well played by Peter Britton), and Souster, *Afghan Amplitudes* and *Arboreal Antecedents* (premiere). Both Souster pieces were played with the panache and tight ensemble of a good rock group and achieved a similar effect. Very entertaining and appreciated by most people there. After the (as it turned out) first interval, the group played their arrangement of Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*. I did not really come to terms with this as Souster's arrangement seems to have added very little to my perception of the piece but removed a lot. Perhaps I was thinking of Intermodulation programme-planning for, by now, I really wanted something that was more than entertainment. A piece such as Smalley's *Zeitebenen* would have been just right but it was not to be; instead two more Souster pieces, *Song for Instruments* and *Arcane Artefact*, followed (this time with real Beach Boys quotes).

This was to have been the end of the concert. However, after a referendum, the audience decided that it would like to hear, after a second interval, Stockhausen's *Japan*. (This was programmed to follow the first interval but we had been told it would be omitted). Audience reaction during this second interval was a good deal less enthusiastic. Comments ranged from 'I didn't know it was going to be a rock concert!' to 'I'll go back in if you're sure I'm not going to hear *Awful Aberrations* by the guy on the ego-trip!'

Whereas I have some sympathy for some of these criticisms as well as the incestuous ensemble fear, it was wonderful to go to an electronic music concert where all the equipment not only worked well, but continued to do so without a single hitch.

Monday February 20

Members of the BBC SO and back to the stark realities of the engine shed (it was not even very successful as such). The British premiere of Robert Saxton's *Reflections of Narziss and Goldmund* started the evening. As seems currently fashionable in certain English circles, this piece is based structurally upon one idea from Hermann Hesse's novel. If the programme note is to be believed, Saxton was emulating the idea of producing a series of non-progressing sections circumnavigating the hint of any climaxes until an 'artificial' climax, close to the end. This monumental gesture (which I almost missed) is achieved by having a crescendo which is 'unsupported by any other climactic organisation of material' and followed by 'a dispersive final section avoiding the rhetoric of closure'. We are assured that Saxton is not trying to recreate the 'atmosphere or the psychological content' of Hesse's novel, so why use it to justify such a simple idea? Listened to in terms of these intentions, his work is superbly successful. As music that 'develops on its own, abstract terms' I did not so much

dislike this diminutive offering as really hate it, almost everything about it from its inchoate opening, through its pretentious central solo oboe sections, to its cessation. What I am really so annoyed about is the sight (or rather sound) of a 25-year-old composer being so seemingly content with such vacuous formulae — even if they do produce such nice pieces.

Bruno Maderna's *Giardino religioso* was given a most unsympathetic performance. The embarrassed way Lionel Friend approached his role as an improvising participant (in addition to being conductor) typified for me his relationship with the work as a whole. Did he never observe Maderna's own dedication to the compositions of others when *he* conducted? Perhaps we were only observing a younger conductor's penance before moving on to the museum masterpieces.

After the interval, the orchestra was joined by Cathy Berberian and Swingle II for a performance of Berio's *Laborintus II*, conducted by the composer. It was a shame that the BBC gremlins caused the sound system to fail, thus leaving the audience to wait 20 minutes for the piece to restart. The second half sounded like a different concert with a different orchestra. It had all the vitality and conviction that one has now come to expect from everyone involved.

Thursday February 23

The RPO conducted by Elgar Howarth at the Festival Hall. They began with a controlled performance of Stravinsky's 'Dumbarton Oaks' Concerto. Although I should have preferred a harder edge to the outer movements, Elgar Howarth's reading rewarded us with some wonderfully lyrical moments, particularly from the horns.

Cathy Berberian joined the orchestra as soloist for the next two items. The first of these was Berio's beautiful *Calmo (In memoriam Bruno Maderna)*. Because of the error of placing the 'offstage' second trumpet (who echoes the soprano throughout) on stage (actually closer to Cathy Berberian than the leader was), the balance of the small ensemble was nearly upset in this delicately woven piece. I am constantly amazed by Berio's ability to control the dramatic gesture, in this case the image of calm in Homer's 'Like a singer who knows how to play the lyre, and calmly touches the strings'. Berio produces a touching *nenia* for his close friend. In the orchestrated version of Ravel's *Three Hebrew Songs* Cathy Berberian had more opportunity to project her considerable talents. She characterised each one in a totally different and equally convincing way, producing, with the orchestra, a most satisfying account of this not very well-known work.

Lutosławski's *Livre pour orchestre* followed. This is not a work to which I am partial but Howarth made this playing of it convincing enough to make me almost change my mind.

The final work was Birtwistle's *The Triumph of Time*. Originally a RPO commission, this has not really featured very often over the last six years so I was looking forward to hearing it again. Although originally inspired by an allegorical painting by Pieter Bruegel, it is no simple tone poem. I find Birtwistle's preoccupation with the various aspects of time — whether he is playing upon the difference between clock time and perceived time or portraying in music the type of time one associates with memory over a lifetime (often heightened by a personally forceful event such as the death of someone close to one) — fascinating and at its most successful in this piece. During certain sections some of the playing seemed unnecessarily fussy — perhaps this was a result of Howarth's constant subdivisions of slow beats — but, overall, it was a magnificent performance with the difficult dynamic levels being realised as they are indicated. Each orchestral section seemed to give all it had to give; special honours go to the oboe, cor anglais and soprano saxophone.

This concert was both the most satisfying and enjoyable of all those I attended recently. Paradoxically, it was given by an orchestra that I do not really associate with 20th-century music. I hope they give us many more of this calibre.

NOTE

¹See Tim Souster, 'Intermodulation: A Short History', *Contact* 17 (Summer 1977), pp. 3-6.