Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk

## Citation

Shepherd, John. 1978. 'Review of *Edward Cowie's Piano Concerto*'. ***Contact***, 19. pp. 43. ISSN 0308-5066.

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## EDWARD COWIE'S PIANO CONCERTO

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For those who like to speculate on how structure and significance in music might interrelate, Edward Cowie is an interesting figure. There is in his life a symbiotic relationship between time spent composing and time spent studying different forms in the natural world. Cowie is, for example, an elected member of the British Ornithologists' Union, and has previously written a series of works which takes the volcano as its point of inspiration. However, the composer's preoccupation with natural phenomena also finds expression beyond music. He undertakes research for its own sake, writes, and paints watercolours.

Cowie comes across as a sort of latter-day Renaissance man, and this is important in understanding the relationship between his music and other activities. For the interest in natural phenomena is not simply a prop for musical thought. It forms an integral aspect of perceiving the world in its experiential totality. Cowie's world is therefore one in which 'almost all. . . . visual experiences are coupled with a complementary hearing experience.'[1] It is through studying the formal relationships inherent in a group of experiences that up until recently Cowie provided himself with a set of compositional possibilities. Cowie has described this pre-compositional process in the following way: 'My notebooks are as full of scraps of text, drawings and paintings as they are of musical sketches. This enables me to study all these aspects of a group of experiences, and to weigh up their formal possibilities in relation to a compositional process. The composing of notes is not subordinate to these extra-musical factors, but is passed through them as if through a set of filters.'[2] The evolution of these filters or systems has been aided through an affair with serialism which resulted from a period of study with Alexander Goehr in the mid-1960s.

This process has reversed itself of late, probably as a result of Sir Michael Tippett's influence. Cowie referred to this change in a recent conversation with Michael Oliver: 'when you write systematically in serial music you, as far as I'm concerned, have to hang the hearing process on a very strong, almost draughtsmanship-like way of ordering those materials. Admittedly when you've composed these numerically or mathematically oriented formulae, you then superimpose a hearing process over it. But I think I can very clearly say the difference with my work now is that I hear first and analyse afterwards.'[3]

Cowie clearly feels that the attempt to express himself in a freer, more personal manner will not result in the abandonment of order. The order will arise instinctively from his long and intense work on systems. However, on a first hearing of his Piano Concerto (premiered in a BBC Master Concert at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, on December 6 by Howard Shelley and the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra, conductor Sir Charles Groves), the question of instinctive order remains an open one. The overall impression left by the three-movement work was that of a fertile and resourceful mind searching for a settled musical identity. The Concerto (which is for orchestra as well as piano) is nothing if not rich in ideas and stylistic references. In line with a rejection of total organisation, it revolves round different tonal centres which are used in a static, non-argumentative fashion. Yet behind the translucent and impressionistic textures that often resulted, it was still possible to detect a complex cerebral element at work. And there were times when stiffer serial sonorities were insinuated into the harmonic web.

The Concerto has many good moments. The dissipation of a considerable harmonic tension at the end of the first movement is masterfully achieved, for example. However, the attempt in the final movement to draw together threads derived from the opening movement seemed to stretch the music's fabric unduly and gave rise to a certain fussiness. It was moments such as this which threatened the success of the work as an organic entity. Yet if the experience was not a totally satisfying one, it was one that was interesting and refreshing, and it will be instructive to see how Cowie's style develops in the immediate future.

NOTES

[1] 'Edward Cowie writes about volcanoes and his own work', *The Listener,* Vol. 89, No. 2303 (May 17, 1973), p. 659.
[2] Ibid.
[3] In 'Music Weekly', BBC Radio 3, Sunday December 4, 1977.