

# contact

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

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Bradshaw, Susan. 1982. 'John Buller'. *Contact*, 24. pp. 18-20. ISSN 0308-5066.

# Reviews and Reports

JOHN BULLER

SUSAN BRADSHAW

In spite of the rare unanimity of critical acclaim and the even more unusual evidence of a genuinely enthusiastic public response to his recent large-scale works (the expectant concentration and subsequent warmth of applause of the Promenaders at the first performance of *Proença* in 1977 remains memorable), John Buller's music is still relatively unknown outside London and—apart from *Proença*<sup>1</sup>—scarcely heard of beyond these islands. For a composer now in his mid-fifties, particularly one whose music has been received so favourably, this may seem hard to credit. But the astonishing fact is, rather, that Buller's high reputation is built on a mere handful of works, for he did not begin to believe in himself as a serious composer until the 1960s—the first work he now acknowledges, *The Melian Debate*, dates from as recently as 1968—and he has been a full-time professional musician only since 1974.

Born in London in 1927, John Buller received his earliest musical training as a chorister—a chance piece of good fortune, since his passion for music seems, both then and later, to have met with what he now describes as almost complete indifference on the part of his family. At Wellington School, Somerset, he learnt the piano and wrote a considerable amount of music, including a piano sonata and a number of choral pieces for performance by the school choir. Towards the end of his time there an enlightened teacher showed some of his work to the BBC in Bristol, who were interested enough to ask him to keep in touch. In 1945 he went straight from school into the navy and spent the latter part of his two-year service at an education centre, where he was eventually put in charge of a music-appreciation class on the strength of having passed the Higher School Certificate in music (for which he was one of the first ever candidates). During this time he wrote a sonata for violin and piano and, in 1946, a setting for soprano and orchestra of selections from Shelley's *Adonais* which he was persuaded to show to the BBC in Manchester. An audition performance of this work, with Buller himself playing the piano, so impressed both Maurice Johnstone and Charles Groves that they sent him to see Gordon Jacob in London, who unhesitatingly sanctioned a broadcast with the BBC Northern Orchestra. Surprisingly Jacob's offer was never taken up, for it was just then, with the possibility of success opening before him, that Buller began to doubt himself—suddenly realising not only that his work was dangerously derivative (he cites Sibelius and Walton as major influences) but that he had no idea how to set about developing his own ideas, let alone notating them. For a young man of only 19 to have had the courage to turn down such an opportunity shows unusual strength of purpose.

He must also have had a deep-seated faith in himself in order to survive the next eight, musically barren years. Studying part time for his BSc degree while working for the firm of architectural surveyors in which he was later to become a partner, Buller continued composing, but off hand he remembers only two works dating from this period: a setting of Dante entitled *The Ship of Souls* for four solo voices, and a piece called *O rosa bella* for clarinet and piano, which, he says, shows his first attempts at serial composition—although he was still completely self-taught and without contacts in the musical world. 1955 saw the beginning of the end of this isolation. For one thing, it was the year in which he married the painter Shirley Claridge (who today, like Danuta Lutoslawski, copies all her husband's scores—in the first instance purely as an exercise in graphic design, without herself reading a note of music). For another, he decided to enrol as a student at Morley College. There he attended classes given by Iain Hamilton and Anthony Milner, and from 1959 onwards he studied privately with Milner, taking an external BMus at London University in 1964.

But it was 1965 that was to prove the first major turning-point in his composing career. The second of the Wardour Castle summer schools proved a chance too good to miss and he decided that the time had come to submit a work of his to the test of a performance by professional musicians: *The Lily, the Rose* was given at the school by Bethany Beardslee, soprano, and an instrumental ensemble conducted by Alexander Goehr. But even more than the chance to hear one of his works professionally performed, Buller valued the opportunity to meet and to talk to not only Goehr but Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies. He even had a couple of lessons with Davies, at whose suggestion he wrote a series of small piano pieces as exercises in compositional techniques, and he felt that he was at last beginning to glimpse ways of writing more freely and to discover a notation adequate to his purpose. It was at about this time that he was invited to join the committee of The Macnaghten Concerts (of which he later became chairman); this was important since it enabled him to renew and extend his contacts with the music profession.

In spite of feeling himself within sight of quite new and different musical horizons, Buller had still one more work to write in pursuit of his ideal of absolute technical control. He describes *The Melian Debate* as his most rigorous work ever; the intellectual solemnity of the verbal argument (from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*) is aptly chosen for the purpose of a musical argument based entirely on two five-note groups and revolving round the intervallic structure of its rhythmically independent (that is, scarcely ever interdependent in the contrapuntal sense) lines and their vertical aspect as chords. In its linear character, the music provides a clear pointer to more recent developments, and although the speech-type rhythms employed are set against a metrical pulse almost throughout, they seem already straining to be free of their enforced synchronisation. In *The Cave* for instruments and tape Buller created the opportunity he needed to let slip these metrical controls—not only between instruments and tape, but between the individual instruments themselves. However, it was in *Two Night Pieces from Finnegans Wake*, written for The Macnaghten Concerts, that he first discovered the means of expanding the strict motivic writing of *The Melian Debate* into longer, more flowing melodic lines. And this work was to be crucial in more ways than one, for Buller cites his discovery of Joyce as the second turning-point in his life. It was Joyce who enabled him to realise the possibility of the free permutation of a limited number of ideas, as well as to understand for the first time that the material for these ideas could be found in the common currency of everyday life. As he was later to write: 'Joyce loved the ordinary, the commonplace; to him, in fact, nothing was ordinary'<sup>2</sup>—because, of course, ordinariness becomes extraordinary when filtered through the creative mind.

By 1972 it was already becoming obvious that Buller had reached a crossroads in his parallel lives and when, two years later, he was forced to choose between his partnership in the surveying firm and the offer of the Forman Fellowship at Edinburgh University, he opted for the latter. *Familiar* for string quartet was the result of a commission from the Edinburgh Quartet; this is a work that stands apart from others of the period both for its brevity and for the taut, quasi-Classical development of its freely placed melodic fragments, drawn from and held in check by a single chord.

Long before this, of course, Buller had embarked on the first of his large-scale works, *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies*, which, with its associated enterprises, *Scribenerly* and *Poor Jenny* and an offshoot, *Finnegan's Floras*, was to occupy him for four years. Buller set out to compose a work, on a selection of texts from Part 2 of *Finnegans Wake*, in which musical allusion was to reflect the verbal allusions of Joyce's prose: in *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies* the notion of childhood memories prolonged into (and distorted by) adult life is mirrored in musical memories common to us all, which are woven into a sound fabric that echoes dreams

(sometimes nightmares) in reality and makes reality seem like the stuff of dreams. This long and many-layered music-theatre work (lasting over an hour) has had only one complete performance to date and urgently awaits another, one that will come nearer to matching in performance the expressive involvement that went into the writing of it. The difficulties, it has to be said, are enormous — because the work presupposes that the musical memories of each and every performer are as long and as wide-ranging as the composer's own, and because just as Joyce's hidden meanings have to be searched for so do Buller's. Without such understanding, Buller's unbarred rhythmical patterns lose much of their character; they can seem like a rhythmical straightjacket to the performer and can, in spite of invitations to proceed according to the spirit rather than the letter, be made to sound angular rather than free-flowing. For Buller's starting-point is not harmony but the rhythmic shapes associated with particular melodies, so that the resulting harmony can and does include octave doublings and other incidental side-effects without damage to the whole.

After finishing *The Mime*, Buller received a commission from the BBC for the 1977 Promenade Concerts which provided the impetus for his first orchestral work. That he had never written for orchestra (apart from the unperformed Shelley setting) before *Proença* could scarcely be guessed by an innocent listener — its sheer professionalism is astonishing, particularly when it is remembered that it dates from less than a decade after the rigorously self-educational essay of *The Melian Debate*. *Proença* is a breathtakingly lavish piece, rich in decorative effects, yet giving the impression overall of being centred on a slowly evolving melody, shaped and propelled by and of itself without recourse to any obvious developmental devices. Or perhaps it is rather that the *cantabile* flow of the predominating song element — instrumental as well as vocal — casts continual reflections of itself, so acquiring a three-dimensional depth that includes rhythmic impulse as well as a harmonic background strong enough to float rhythmic freedom within a wider perspective.

It would seem that Buller really needs a largish body of instruments to support and absorb his unbarred patterns and

so allow them to sink their independence in a chorus of sound. ('Chorus' would seem an apt word here, because Buller's thematically suggestive rhythms, with their minute variations and unsynchronised overlay, could well be said to find a rhythmic parallel in the random repetitions of the dawn chorus). Moreover, the clear distinction between the various rates of movement set up by these melodically defined rhythms creates a flexible landscape which shapes the form of the work. In this respect *The Theatre of Memory*, a second BBC commission, is still more striking, since its structure is entirely abstract: without a background of verbal imagery to evoke response in the listener, the voices of seven solo instruments (trumpet, cor anglais, celesta, harp, flute, contrabass clarinet, and cello) are used to focus attention on the many contrasting elements of the *tutti* orchestral fabric. To quote Buller again:

If style, as Proust said, is not a question of technique but of vision, the composer must go down to the elements of musical consciousness and re-order them, those same elements — as in all new music — of pitches, intervals and the distances between them, of sound sources, time measurement and rhythm, of lines, colour, noise, densities and patterns, of structures, of drama and with all these, memory, which must circumscribe the whole as it circumscribes us.<sup>3</sup>

Buller's visionary ability to complete his large-scale designs without blurring their initial inspiration is exceptional, and it is no surprise to learn of his long-term plans for an even more ambitious music-theatre piece. Before that, and after completing three shorter works already commissioned, he means to write a work for two singers and orchestra, which is to be a setting of both prose (mezzo) and poetry (tenor) by Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam. Remarkably, less than ten years after deciding to become a full-time composer — and with only the Edinburgh Fellowship, two Arts Council bursaries, and two short spells of teaching at the Royal College of Music and Lancaster University to help bridge the financial gap — Buller is now in the happy position of being able to expect to make a living from the imaginative use of our collective musical memory.

## John Buller

The music of John Buller is published exclusively by G. Schirmer Ltd.

Works currently available for sale are:—

**Finnegan's Floras** (chorus, percussion and piano) £5.95

**The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies** (soprano, tenor and baritone solo, chorus and chamber orchestra) £21.95

**Poor Jenny** (flutes and percussion) £3.95

**Proença** (mezzo-soprano, electric guitar and orchestra) £15.75

**Scribenerly** (cello solo) £1.95

A recording of **Proença** was released last year by Unicorn Records and was enthusiastically received by the critics. It is available on disc (UNS 266) in a performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, with Mark Elder conducting and soloists Sarah Walker and Timothy Walker, and is available from record shops throughout the country.

Scores for sale may be obtained from all good music shops. For inspection copies and a special leaflet giving full details of the works of this remarkable British composer, please contact:—

**G. Schirmer**

• 140 Strand • London WC2R 1HG • 01-836 4011

