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If the Music of our Time festival in Budapest was shorter this year than on previous occasions, then at least visitors had the benefit of some spare time to explore this beautiful city, and there was no danger of the 'musical indigestion' that can result from more intensive festivals! And if the proceedings lost momentum somewhat in the middle, this was hardly surprising since the stamina of Hungarian musicians had already been tested to the full by all the celebrations surrounding the Bartók centenary. Not only that, but Budapest had lately played host to conferences of the International Music Council and the International Association of Music Librarians. (You would be mistaken if you thought that Hungarian musicians could now relax — 1982 is the centenary of Kodály's birth!) However, on paper, at least, the programmes promised to be interesting enough, beginning with Hungarian premières of recent works by György Kurtág and ending with a concert by Hungary's leading exponents of experimental music, the New Music Studio. In between was a concert of Berio's music (he was this year's 'featured' composer), a concert by the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Paris including works by Gilbert Amy and Jean-Louis Florentz, a recital by the young percussionist Gábor Kósa, orchestral works by László Vidovszky, Miklós Kocsár and Sándor Balassa, a concert of Latvian music by the Latvian Chamber Orchestra, some Swedish electronic music, and a concert of works by members of the Young Composers' Group of the Association of Hungarian Musicians.

There was a great sense of occasion for the opening concert. The occasion of two Hungarian premières of works by Kurtág (b. 1926), generally accepted as the leading composer in Hungary today, was an important one in Budapest musical life. This was especially so since one of the works, the song cycle for soprano and chamber ensemble *Poslaniya pokoynoy R. V. Trusovoy* (Messages of the late R. V. Trussova; 1979-80), a setting of poems by the Russian poetess Rimma Dalos who now lives in Hungary, is an unusually extended work by a composer who is otherwise noted for the brevity of his music. It was not surprising, therefore, that this concert was the best attended of the 'week'. The other Kurtág première was of the short choral work *Omaggio a Nono* (1979), also to poems by Rimma Dalos, which received its world première in London in February 1981, when it was given by the BBC Singers; in the same month, at a BBC College Concert, *Poslaniya* received its first British performance, by the Hungarian soprano Adrienne Csengery and the London Sinfonietta.

There were revealing differences between the British and Hungarian performances. *Omaggio* on the whole fared better in London. The augmented BBC Singers produced a more beautiful tone than their counterparts from Hungarian Radio and Television, and especially, captured the right sound for the more lyrical movements. They also paced the pauses between the movements well, whereas the Hungarian choir seemed to want to get on with the piece as quickly as possible. The six movements are short enough and to give the impression of rushing them detracts from them considerably. Kurtág's style is so concise that the attention needs time to achieve the degree of focus necessary to follow the music. It was not all on the 'plus' side for the BBC Singers, however; the Hungarian choir gave a far more spritely performance with just the right amount of humour for the first movement, whose text consists merely of various declensions of the Russian pronoun 'whose?!' Kurtág, incidentally, requires a large choir to perform *Omaggio*, 'at least 70'. The BBC Singers eventually managed to muster 47 or 48, and although the choir at the Budapest performance was supposed to be much larger, in fact they had no more than 51. The work poses many problems of pitch and it is difficult to find the requisite number of singers who can cope with them. Probably the only way Kurtág will hear the piece with the forces he intended is if some kind impresario arranges for the BBC Singers and the Hungarian Radio and Television Choir to get together!

In contrast, the Budapest performance of *Poslaniya* was more successful than the London one, if only for one reason: the balance in the instrumental ensemble was far better. On both occasions Adrienne Csengery sang magnificently, but the London performance was marred by the fact that owing to

bad placing the clarinet and horn dominated the texture, while the cimbalom, mandoline, and xylophone were hardly audible at times, so that much detail was obscured. (This imbalance has to a large extent been mixed out on the BBC tape.) In Budapest the clarinet and horn were at the back of the ensemble (the Budapest Chamber Ensemble) and played with much more restraint. The conductor was András Mihály who is himself a composer and who is an excellent interpreter of contemporary music. (He teaches in the same department as Kurtág at the Academy in Budapest, and he understands Kurtág's music particularly well.) Unfortunately the Budapest performance was spoiled by poor intonation, especially from the wind instruments, and overall the playing was too restrained so that some of the louder movements lost their impact; the ensemble could easily have played up without fear of drowning Adrienne Csengery. Both works make an immediate and forceful impression, so in spite of the shortcomings of the performances it is not surprising that they were enthusiastically encored.

The Berio concert should also have been quite an event but Berio himself was unable to be present because he was heavily involved in work on his opera *La vera storia* (1976-81). His absence was partly made up for by the appearance, on the night, of a book of extended interviews with the composer by Bálint András Varga. Such booklets have become a regular feature at the Music of our Time festival and are one of its outstanding achievements. Their speed of production is a *tour de force* for Editio Musica Budapest: the interviews are often conducted in the same year in which they are to be published; they then have to be translated into Hungarian and printed, always in time for the appropriate concert. Even by Hungarian standards they are cheap, about 30 pence, but they are nevertheless attractively presented. British readers may be familiar with *Lutosławski Profile* by Bálint András Varga (London: Chester, 1976), which is an English translation of one of this series. The Berio booklet is no less informative, containing a brief biographical sketch, his thoughts on several aspects of contemporary music and on his own music, plus a list of all his works to date (except those he has suppressed), a list of all the articles in the journal *Incontri musicali* (1956-60), which he edited, and programmes of the concerts that *Incontri musicali* put on with Italian Radio and Television.

To return to the concert itself, there were two works: *Il ritorno degli Snovidenia* (1976-7) for cello and orchestra, and *Coro* (1975-6) for chorus and orchestra; both were receiving their Hungarian premières. The solo cello part in *Il ritorno* was well played by Miklós Perényi but, surprisingly, the rest of the performance was disappointing. The work is directed to be played *piano* almost throughout, but the Hungarian State Orchestra, conducted by Péter Eötvös, played much of it *mezzo forte*, which is not the most interesting of dynamic levels. Because of this, many of the work's subtleties were lost, and the texture appeared too monochromatic; this was relieved only towards the end with an increase in dynamic. *Coro* was a much more enjoyable experience (perhaps it was better rehearsed). Here the orchestra was joined by the Südfunk-Chor from Germany and Lóránt Szűcs playing the solo piano part. It was good to have the opportunity to see a performance of this work, to appreciate its more visual aspects, such as the disposition of the choir amongst the instrumental ensemble, and the way in which the individual singers sometimes sang to, or at, each other. Singers and instrumentalists performed excellently, obviously enjoying the work's more humorous aspects.

Of the other intervening concerts perhaps the evening of percussion music played by Gábor Kósa (b. 1950) made the greatest impression. I liked much of his own piece *Híd* (Bridge; 1979-80) for vibraphone and tape. The work is a bridge in a number of ways: it is bridge-shaped in construction; it is a bridge between electronic and 'live' sound; and it is hoped that it will be a bridge between the artist's experimental workshop and the general public. All the tape material was derived from the vibraphone, and Kósa achieved some interesting sounds with this. If anything, the piece was too long in the middle, where it seemed to lose momentum. The most successful piece in the programme was Xenakis's *Psappha* (1976), whose compelling rhythms really engaged the attention.

*Induló* (March; 1979-80) by László Vidovszky (b. 1944), which was given its première at a concert of Hungarian orchestral music, sounded promising but was played with apparent incomprehension by the orchestra, on this occasion the Orchestra of the Budapest Philharmonic Society, whose

usual job is to accompany the Opera. The title 'March' is ironic: the piece is a procession of subtle and slowly shifting harmonies, which would repay closer study at a more understanding performance.

The concert of works by members of the Young Composers' Group was disappointing. While all the pieces were technically competent, it was difficult to discern any spark of originality in any of them. I did like *Capriccio szólófuvalára* (Capriccio for solo flute; 1981) by Balázs Szunyogh (b. 1954), which was expertly played by István Matuz. Szunyogh overcomes the difficulty of writing for a solo wind instrument by using some Baroque-like textures (without resorting to Baroque tonality!), perhaps not an original solution, but it worked well here. To be fair, not all the young composers in the group were represented at this concert, and those that were did not necessarily have their best works performed.

However, if this concert and the concerts of French orchestral and Swedish electronic music all failed to stir the imagination, the composers can take comfort from a comparison with the contributions of the Latvian Chamber Orchestra, who presented one of the most tedious concerts it has ever been my pleasure to hear. Not that they played badly — far from it: they achieved a pleasant sound despite the curiously deadening acoustic of the much-discussed Vigadó concert hall. It is a pity that this recently restored hall, on which so much effort and expense has been lavished, should not be a more successful venue: one Hungarian critic, shortly after its reopening, referred to the 'genteel poverty of the acoustically unsatisfactory Vigadó auditorium'. To say that the most interesting piece in the Latvians' programme was an orchestration of the Prelude and Fugue in E minor from Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues (1950-51) is a sad reflection on the rest of the music. Apart from a work by the Soviet composer Georgy Sviridov, neither dates of composition nor programme notes were given for the remaining items, but they sounded as if they came from the early fifties and were written heavily under the influence of Stalin's socialist realism; yet in the case of the last composer on the programme, Kangro, this cannot have been so, because when he appeared to take his bow he looked no more than 40 (dates of birth were lacking too)! We were treated to a diet of watered-down Shostakovich (or worse, Prokofiev!), which was pleasant and harmless enough, but none of it was sufficiently strong to engage the attention in the first place, let alone retain it.

Apart from the Kurtág evening, the final concert was for me the highlight of the 'week', since it featured works by the New Music Studio. (I have written in greater detail about the New Music Studio in an article elsewhere in this issue, to which readers should turn for more information). One never knows what to expect at a Studio concert. It is possible to be utterly bored and thoroughly interested in turn, but it is usually a worthwhile experience. Each of the three composer founder-members of the Studio was represented in the programme. László Sáy's contribution was a delightful piece entitled *Socrates utolsó tanácsa* (Socrates' last teaching; 1980) for voice and piano. The title and musical material alludes to the third movement ('Mort de Socrate') from Satie's dramatic symphony *Socrate*. The piano part is in three single strands, the middle one of which is rhythmically independent of the outer two. The voice follows the middle strand with a text of broken-up and intermixed French words. The result is a hesitant texture of great delicacy. The piece was, if anything, rather long for its unchanging texture and dynamic, but it made an attractive sound.

Zoltán Jeney was represented by his recent work *Arupa* (1981), which was played in London earlier in 1981. This is written for specially made instruments: metal bars which are struck by the performers. A steady pulse is given by a drummer, and an instrument such as an organ holds down a constant fundamental C. Having started together the individual players then proceed separately through a series of given rhythmic patterns. This is a fairly well-worn formula, but to appreciate the resulting 'canon' as it develops in such a piece it is essential that the sound of the instruments should be tolerable; unfortunately the bell-like tones of the metal bars were over bright and set up a ringing in the ears which made the piece very difficult to listen to and obscured any detail. It would be better played on softer-toned instruments to give the musical idea a chance to be judged on its own merits.

The final item was a complete surprise: a little musical burlesque by László Vidovszky on the tale of Narcissus and

Echo (*Nárcisz és Echó*, ?1980). It is not entirely fortuitous that, despite the title, the text is in German, for the work sends up a number of German operatic traditions, notably Wagner and the late Romantics. There was some excellent piano and solo cello playing from the ensemble (which was unnamed but was presumably drawn from the members of the Studio itself), as well as fine singing from the soloists. The chorus (the Girls' Choir of the Central Chorus of the Young-Friends-of-Music Club — in fact the group was smaller than its title!) sang well despite having no conductor, especially in the heavily syncopated final number, a suitably cheerful chorus of mourners summarising the work's 'most important teachings'; this was enthusiastically encored, and made a splendidly festive ending to the festival.