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Hilary Bracefield

Gaudeamus Music Week 1982

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It is six years since *Contact* had a representative at the Gaudeamus 20th-century music festival in Holland, so it was with pleasurable anticipation that I accepted an invitation from the Gaudeamus Foundation to attend the 1982 event. I knew, of course, that I could never hope to write such a witty report as Dick Witts did (sorry about the pun),¹ but I was as curious as he was to see just what this Week provided. It is, after all, one of the most venerable contemporary music festivals—it was begun in 1947—but though it is as close as any in Europe to British musicians, it does not seem to attract them in great numbers.

The 1982 Week saw the Foundation in the middle of some reorganisation, and future events could very well present more attractive music making for the visitor. The Gaudeamus Foundation still exists, as its publicity states, 'to promote and propagate new music in general and the music of young composers up to 35 years of age in particular', and the backbone of the September Week is still a competition for composers under 35. But the constitution of the board of directors has changed. The indomitable Walter Maas has now retired, though happily he is still around and about, and since 1979 the competition has existed without monetary prizes. The composers of selected works are offered a trip to the festival, during which they attend rehearsals and hear their works played in a public concert; the hope is that the new pieces will enter the repertory of the performers. Instead of accepting compositions of any kind, the directors every year list certain categories, which supposedly correspond to soloists or groups versed in playing 20th-century music.

The composers selected in 1982 did not appear to be upset that no cash prizes were handed over; young composers are glad enough to receive performances. They seemed to enjoy and benefit from the week of fellowship with other composers from all over the world. But there are still some problems with the system. One is that the categories remain very wide-ranging, and in fact include a 'free choice', though a work selected in this category is not guaranteed performance. Another is that some of the works selected this year were very slight and did not give performers, promoters or critics much idea of the composer's worth. This could be a fault of the judges. But since this time there were 140 entries in ten categories and they were judged, without (apparently) any preliminary reading, in only two days, it must certainly have been hard to choose wisely. Anyway, the interesting panel consisted of Isang Yun, Brian Ferneyhough, François-Bernard Mâche, and Joep Straesser. Some selections obviously mirrored judges' preferences, or even favoured their pupils, but I see this as no great problem as long as the works are worthy and the judges change each year. None of this year's lot, incidentally, took the opportunity to come and hear their choices.

Until 1982 the Music Week was always based in the Foundation's headquarters in inaccessible Bilthoven,

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Contact 10 (1976), 10-11. See also *Contact* 11 (1977), 10-11.

though concerts were held in other parts of the country. One excellent change that has been made is to move the base for the Week to Amsterdam. This has come about partly because of the rethinking of Gaudeamus policy in the last three years, partly because of the appointment in 1981 of an energetic young organiser Henk Heuvelmans, and partly because the library and information services of the Foundation have been moved to new premises in De Ijsbreker in Amsterdam.

De Ijsbreker (yes, it does mean 'the icebreaker') is an old-established café-bar by the side of the Amstel River, a short walk out of the centre of town and not far from the museum district. It was recently acquired by Jan Woolf, horn player with De Volharding and the ASKO Ensemble, and has become a favourite meeting place for people interested in contemporary music. The spacious room behind the café has been converted into a concert hall seating 220. It was to have been completed for the Music Week but, as is the way of all such things, it was still being finished around us. Simply furnished, with raked auditorium and hi-tech furnishings, it is reminiscent of, though smaller than, London's ICA theatre. There is also space in the building for the Gaudeamus library, a dance studio and offices for a number of other organisations which are thinking of moving into the centre. So while the Bimhuis is still the place to go to in Amsterdam for jazz, call in at De Ijsbreker, Weesperzijde 23, to find out what is going on in the new music world.

The removal of the Gaudeamus Music Week and the Foundation's library to Amsterdam is the best filip Gaudeamus has received in years, so while not everything went smoothly this time, the festival could take a much more important place in metropolitan Holland's musical life in the future.

Three final points about the Week's organisation before I get to the music. To replace the 'consultations' of the composers with each other and the resident judges that were a feature of the old régime in Bilthoven, so-called 'composers' presentations' were offered. In a festival with a captive international presence and, one hopes, growing local interest, this sort of thing is essential to provide a forum for the visiting composers and a springboard for public and private discussion and argument. (De Ijsbreker is ideal for this, of course, because of the adjacent café—good light food all day and evening, and a bar with marvellous opening hours.) The 'presentations' were valuable because they fleshed out the little we heard in the concerts of some of the composers' music, and I was pleased that most had brought tapes and scores as well. But we had some marathon sessions. Firm chairmanship, a time limit on the composers, and an organised translation service are needed for 1983.

Another innovation this time was an evening of electroacoustic music, selected from the Bourges Festival a couple of months earlier. It was well worth while and deserves to become an institution.

Lastly, there is a useful part of the festival, occupying the earlier days, during the prize-winners' rehearsal time. Music from different European countries has been featured in this spot each year since 1976. Poland was the choice this time, but unfortunately arrangements faltered, so instead we had four concerts of new music from Holland. Despite what we think, Dutch contemporary music doesn't get as frequent an airing as it seems to, and young composers, particularly, benefited from an opportunity to submit works for an orchestral and a choral concert.

Well, what we had over the ten days were 43 works,

with 18 world premières and seven first performances in Holland. Nearly all the works were written in the last three or four years. This may look like the typical contemporary music festival overkill, but with no more than two concerts a day and a welcome gap mid-week it wasn't fatal. The Gaudeamus tradition of programming concerts in several venues and centres continues, and good audiences assembled in The Hague, Hilversum (a live broadcast), Utrecht, and Haarlem, as well as Amsterdam. De Ijsbreker doesn't hold a huge number, but it was good to be in an auditorium packed to the doors. Chamber music was also heard in a concert room in the Stedelijk Museum (surroundings good if sight-lines weren't), and an orchestral concert was given in a grubby but atmospheric converted church, renamed the 'Paradiso' and used more often as a pop concert venue.

To get to the music. *Contact* reviews being written, usually, at some remove from the event, it is interesting to see what remains in the mind after a few weeks. The 18 selected works were a pretty mixed bag, and I can't honestly say that any of them had me wishing to proclaim a genius. All the problems of competitive selection of previously unperformed works by young composers came to the fore in the first concert of music by the winners—the broadcast orchestral concert by the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Ed Spanjaard; the four chosen suffered from an indifferent orchestra, insufficient rehearsal time, and the problems of their own writing for the medium.

A conventional orchestra responds best to the familiar, which is why *Cantares*, a monodrama by Todd Brief (b. USA, 1953) on a fashionable text by Pablo Neruda, superbly sung by Young Hee-Kim, got the most understanding performance; I found it absolutely competent, but its ripe, overblown, Richard Straussian vein repelled me. Dariush Dolatshahi (b. Iran, 1947) tries in *Enekus*, as in all his work, to mesh his Western musical upbringing with his knowledge of Persian music. A thoughtful and talented musician—in some ways the most interesting at the festival—he balances a Persian modal system against conventional Western orchestral patterning in this work. It should have made a greater impact, but the forces were arranged more suitably for broadcasting than for listening in the hall. Neither *Ceng die* by Man Yee Lam (b. Hong Kong, 1950) nor *Poème: couleurs de spectre* by Stephen Reeve (b. Great Britain, 1948) received sympathetic performance, and it is hard to tell how far the problems were inherent in the scores. Man Yee Lam, a Ferneyhough pupil, here applies serial techniques in a work first conceived for Chinese orchestra, and Reeve has invented his own system of creating compositional material based on relationships between the colours of the spectrum. Neither work, as we heard it, achieved satisfactory musical results.

In an afternoon concert in the Stedelijk Museum, four string quartets were played with steely efficiency, and with scarcely a breathing-space between them, by the Gaudeamus Quartet, who seemed to want to get a necessary but distasteful task over within an hour. It was daunting to have to sit and listen, for all the works were similar enough to merge into one another, ending up like one mad amalgam of mid-20th-century cerebral music making. The trouble was that *Ictus* by Jean-Baptiste Devillers (b. France, 1953) out-intellectualised all the others; it was the only work to challenge the players with some original and rebarbative, but always musical, writing. I had to admire it. The other three works were all by more lyrical Italians: *Tetrarco* (Franco Balliana, b. 1952),

Per accordar (Ivan Fedele, b. 1953), and *Nuances* (Piero Papini). Note the titles: guess the contents! It was pleasant, incidentally, to emerge from the concert and rest in front of Brian Eno's video film *Mistaken Memories of Medieval New York*, with its cool music, on display in another room.

The Gaudeamus Quartet returned in the final concert of the festival to perform, again with grim meticulousness, a set of string quartets by Daniel Brožák (b. Czechoslovakia, 1947). I wavered between thinking of the system behind these works first as a joke, then as a serious return to the Romantic quartets of Dvořák or Smetana, then as a delusion. Brožák seems absolutely certain that his 'interval keys' are the way forward, and will sell you a copy of the computer print-out of the chord series. But while one of *The Seasons* might suggest that the system works, the sameness of all four when played together (which is not, apparently, intended by the composer), made one realise that a system does not necessarily produce music, only simulate it.

The ASKO and Delta Ensembles and various soloists dealt sympathetically with the rest of the winning works, though the use of Conservatorium students for some, while admirable, was not completely successful. I gather that Holland faces the same old problem of having to drag most music students anywhere near contemporary music. Two works stood out: *Oh Paraman sepolta sotto il pino* by Fabio Nieder (b. Italy, 1957) and *Jeux de société* by Denys Bouliane (b. Canada, 1955). On the evidence of his 'presentation' and this work, Nieder, together with Devillers and Dolatshahi, stands out as a composer to be watched. *Oh Paraman* for soprano, violin, and percussion, is a setting of four tiny songs from the Trobriand Islands, which uses densely organised serial music to produce a spare and beautiful sound. Despite a frisson of horror at those Trobriand Islanders popping up outside the sociological field where they belong, the piece held me. *Jeux de société*, with more than a tinge of sociological import, didn't work completely, but thank goodness for a piece with humour. Bouliane will talk volubly to anyone who will listen about the philosophical and sociological bases of his music, but take away this verbiage and one is still left with a witty social comment in musical terms through his pieces about hide and seek, telephoning, poker, and gossip. The players obviously enjoyed themselves, too.

The other chamber works were a brass sextet by Giuseppe Colardo (b. Italy, 1953), *Passaggio* for solo oboe by Ivan Fedele, *Piece in Glissando* for solo harp by the Romanian Vincentiu-Christian Coban, *Sambúðarsundurthykkja* for horn, harpsichord, and tape by Lárus Jalldor Grímsson (b. Iceland, 1954), and two works for the ASKO Ensemble—*Gasso* by Tetsuya Omura (b. Japan, 1951) and *Bagamoyo* by Ada Gentile (b. Italy, 1947). All these composers are potentially more interesting than the works that were played suggested. But I positively disliked Grímsson's pretentiousness.

The trouble with a festival is, I suppose, that it is inclined to be rather middle-of-the-roadish. The more unusual composers probably don't even bother to enter, so the competition works produce nothing startling. The preoccupations on show at the Music Week were manipulations of total serialism, private systems of the composers' own, or attempts at East-West synthesis.

Here and there, however, there were a few different moments. Minimalism in any form surfaced only in a quiet and pleasant chamber choir work by Andy Pape (b. USA, 1955), whose compositional techniques were deeply enough submerged,

perhaps, to escape the judges' notice. Music theatre appeared only briefly, in *Jeux de société*, and apart from that piece of Bouliane's, humour was used intentionally only in black form, in the prize-winning tape piece from Bourges, *Mr Frankenstein's Babies* by Klaus Röder (b. Germany, 1948). The other Bourges selections were deadly serious. It was good to meet a young Uruguayan composer Fernando Condon (b. 1955) on his first visit to Europe with an interesting tape piece, *Suiana wanka*, based on the very successful score he wrote for Peter Shaffer's play *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*.

Another different moment was the experience of returning to De Ijsbreker one night after a very traditional concert of Dutch music and hearing De Volharding playing Nina Rota's music for 8½ inside. And a breath of fresh air came with some improvised music by the Netherlands Clarinet Quartet in a late-night concert. They reminded us of all the other kinds of music going on.

In truth, though, the festival's offerings of Dutch music were rather depressingly mainstream. Most of them either trundled along a programmatic path of semi-Romanticism or tiptoed through patches of carefully worked total serialism: 20th-century music for audiences who don't like 20th-century music, and who end up patting themselves on the back for bearing up better than they expected.

Of the new Dutch works I would have taken the Concerto for two pianos and orchestra by Robert Nasveld (b. 1955) as a joke on the Romantic concerto, had it not been that the composer appeared perfectly serious about it. Chiel Meijering (b. 1954), however, based his *The End of a Specimen* (i.e. Man) on so outrageous a programme (spelled out for us in the composer's notes), and used the full orchestra so self-indulgently, that one was prepared to cheer such a Berlioz-like figure. Paul de Roo (b. 1957) deserved a clap for pursuing a homage to Webern, called appropriately *Für Anton*, in suitably spare terms, and Jan van Rosendael's *Facets* was well engineered. At 22, he was one of the youngest composers on show.

These young composers were lucky enough to receive two performances of their works by the Netherlands Ballet Orchestra (Ed Spanjaard again conducting), one of the few ensembles that did appear to be enjoying the experience. The Netherlands Chamber Choir under Marinus Voorberg, on the other hand, were ill at ease and possibly even under-rehearsed in a programme of new choral works. Ton de Leeuw's *Car nos vignes sont en fleur*, receiving its Dutch première, was, I think, a better work than this performance suggested.

Of all the Dutch music, I was impressed most, as I have been before, by the work of Peter-Jan Wagemans (b. 1952), whose Cantata was given its first performance, and whose earlier *Muziek II* was also heard. He is not afraid to delve into the past for ideas—medieval and Renaissance in both these works—but what comes out is fresh and original, compelling and persuasive. An important talent, I think.

Altogether, though, this wasn't a vintage year for music, but I enjoyed the experience, and would certainly recommend the Gaudeamus Music Week for a visit.² Composers should also think seriously of sending in a work for competition: for those chosen, the discussions and events are an invaluable way of widening what is normally such a solitary existence.

¹ *Contact 16* (Spring 1977), pp.25-8.

² The address of the Foundation for further information is Stichting Gaudeamus, PO Box 30, 3720 AA Bithoven, The Netherlands.