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ISCM Festival 1985

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Cloistered behind a wooden perimeter fence during the current restabilisation of its rotting piles, the Concertgebouw provided a striking image with which to reinforce any prejudice the visitor may have felt when arriving for the opening concert of the 1985 Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music. For, like Amsterdam's magnificent but close-to-subsiding concert hall, the ISCM too has in recent years appeared in danger of sinking under its own weight. It has sometimes seemed as though decline were inevitable after those early years, soon after the First World War, when, under the Society's auspices, monumental works by composers such as Bartók and Berg were given their first hearings.

It was an omen sadly undisputed by the programme given by the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra under Ernest Bour which followed inside. This consisted largely of old-fashioned and mediocre serial pieces, though admittedly things were enlivened at the end by the over-wrought grotesqueries of the Danish composer Poul Ruders' *Corpus cum Figuris*: a kind of up-dated Mahlerian slow-movement-cum-scherzo which, however, came complete with an all-too-Mahlerian projection of time-scale. The prospect before those of us who were committed to take in the entire ten days of intensive concert activity was not exactly enticing.

In fact the fundamental problem of the ISCM is one common to many another international forum: it has become bogged down by the bureaucracy of its democratic procedures. Nowadays any composer can submit scores to the annual sessions of an *ad hoc* international 'jury' of his august creative colleagues, but the works are really supposed to be chosen first by the relevant, affiliated National Section. It is hardly surprising that, in the main, only the most inoffensive – that is, the most boring – scores spill through this double filtering process, quite apart from the fact that selections of individual submissions scarcely make for coherent programmes. Any 'restabilisation' of the ISCM would clearly have to take all this into account.

In 1985 the Dutch Section actually tried hard to organise an interesting ten days of music-making from the works chosen, as well as attempting to sugar the pill by using a variety of home-based ensembles and a selection of venues in the five main cities of Holland. It was bad luck that one of the most logically planned concerts – of choral works – was in the event truncated, apparently because the Netherlands Radio Chamber Choir (under Robin Gritton) did not feel able to learn a whole new programme of difficult pieces; the English composer Bayan Northcott's *Hymn to Cybele* was one of those dropped. At least what they did do – including another English composition, Michael Finnissy's *Ngano* – was sung extremely well, despite the fact that an afternoon encased in the concrete confines of Rotterdam's De Doelen Small Hall did not exactly provide the most propitious circumstances for Finnissy's evocation of traditional 'songs sung during the evening' from the Northern Transvaal. *Ngano* reveals itself as one of its composer's closest refractions of folk music, especially in the transcription-like feel of the log drum rhythms at the end. Emile Biessen's playing of the obdurate quarter-tone material of the obbligato flute part Finnissy adds to the chorus yielded a particularly exotic flavouring.

The concert in the De Doelen Large Auditorium the same evening was also blighted: this time by the reorganisation – that is, the contraction – of orchestras that is currently going on in Holland. The Netherlands Radio Symphony Orchestra, a brand-new fusion of two 40-year-old radio orchestras which has been created as 'a result of economy measures which the government imposed upon the NOS' (the Dutch broadcasting authority), appeared somewhat demoralised. Its stylistically varied programme, under Lucas Vis, offered works by Kaija Saariaho (her now fairly well-known *Verblendungen* for orchestra and tape), Louis Andriessen, Werner Heider, and Zygmunt Krauze. At the end of the concert, the rapid-fire, spatial interplay of Andriessen's *De Snelheid*, a kind of aural equivalent of alternately flashing strobe lights astride a rhythmic ostinato on temple blocks, livened things up. I for one, though, find this composer's recent jackboot 'machines' somewhat distasteful; they seem, with their high amplification, to be designed solely to manipulate an audience into excited wonderment at the skill of an extended delay of a relatively simple process.

Real musical stimulation was certainly hard to come by during the course of the main week of events. But on the Friday night, back at the Concertgebouw, there was a concert which seemed to dispel the bad spell cast there seven days before; indeed, it proved to be an auspicious start to a good final weekend. Under Denis Cohen, the ASKO Ensemble provided a performance of Brian Ferneyhough's *Carceri d'Invenzione I* which had the distinct virtue – rare in performances of works by this composer – of making all the notes sound extremely vital: no mean feat in a piece which frantically 'invents', as it goes along, a grating proliferation of seemingly independent chamber-orchestral parts. With a quite different line-up, of brass, electric keyboards and percussion under Vis, the ensemble also made a good job of the young American Michael Torke's *Vanada* – a gripping panorama of musical Stateside, with Reich-like minimalism, jazz and funk all linked by similar modal material and an incessantly lively rhythmic jaunt – even if the group inevitably

played without the loose-limbed feeling that American players would have had. No less than four other substantial pieces completed this long, but well prepared, programme, including *Ritos Ancestrales* by the young Argentinian Alejandro Iglesias Rossi: a simple but highly effective series of *Ur-gestures*, often separated by pregnant pauses, that was confidently enacted by the Korean soprano Yung-Hee Kim and The Hague Percussion Group.

In contrast to all this drama, the final Sunday provided a relaxing afternoon recital in the Waterlooplein's Catholic, Baroque Moses and Aaron Church given by Het Nieuw Ensemble, one of Holland's most expert contemporary music groups, and the singer Dorothy Dorow under Otto Ketting. Zoltan Jeney's *Twelve Songs* for female voice, violin and piano, all based on variable repetitions of limited note collections, is a more entrancing piece of etiolated minimalism than anything I have otherwise heard from this representative of Budapest's New Music Studio. The Belgian Jacqueline Fontyn's *Alba: Tre Poesie di Vincenzo Cardarelli* for soprano and four instruments is, on the other hand, an essay in a more traditional kind of expressive radiance, complete with many eloquent points of instrumentation.

The most interesting discovery of the 1985 ISCM Festival was that nationalism in composition is far from dead. We are often told that music has become more international, and contemporary music in our part of the world sometimes seems couched in a kind of musical Euro-speak. The Dutch, however, succeeded in challenging these notions by inviting each of the 32 individual ISCM National Sections to submit an hour-long 'national programme'. This simple but effective idea – which followed up an initial attempt of this kind by the Greek Section at the 1979 Festival in Athens – proved to be the most consistently fascinating, if as often creatively uninteresting, strand in the 1985 events.

National character is, it seems, irrepressible. Even the fairly undiluted, Americanised jazz-funk of the Austrian 'electric big band' Nouvelle Cuisine – appearing at the BIM House, a popular 'centre for jazz and improvised music' in a converted garage near Amsterdam's Nieuwmarkt – provided a very European form of music: the soloists merely filled in some improvised space until the next dose of compositional arrangement was cued in, by the conductor Wolfgang Kubizek. A Viennese sense of propriety always prevailed.

Jazz received an even more stand-offish examination in the Dutch 'national programme'. The rhythmic jauntiness of Theo Loevendie's *Strides* for piano works towards but does not quite unveil the American stride-piano style that lies behind it. With the more recent *Walk* – like *Strides*, played by Fred Oldenburg – Loevendie is not as successful precisely because the walking-bass jazz influence is so much more pronounced. Both works, however, have that anecdotal quality so particular to Dutch composition: the nonchalance of traditional Dutch tolerance.

Towards the edges of Western Europe, the American influence is more subdued. Indeed, the particular propensity of the Swedes to disengage from the world and darkly contemplate one's navel was well on display the next day in their national programme, which consisted entirely of works involving tape. Like most of the electro-acoustic concerts, this was heard at De Ijsbreker, Amster-

dam's small auditorium-cum-riverside-café. Both Rolf Enström's *Fractal* and Pär Lindgren's *Den förstenade* (The petrified one) are obsessive studies in incestuous, ear-splitting grey. Lindgren's piece included a mezzo-soprano (Kerstin Stahl) who stood completely still in a dim light, several times opening her mouth as if to speak, but managing only to gargle: a scenario which had the kind of portentously erotic quality familiar from the more neurotic scenes of Ingmar Bergman films. After an hour of this sort of thing, even the strongest among us had to get some air. No wonder the suicide rate in Sweden is so high.

The Icelanders provided a more direct transcription of their wintry predicament. With its manic arrangement and rearrangement of a limited repertory of notes, Hjalmar H Ragnarsson's *Trio*, given by the Icelandic Piano Trio, presented a prospect of limitless ice floes dancing in front of the eyes, before surrendering to a sense of overwhelming intensity.

Significantly, the unmistakable engagement of the Central European tradition now appears at its strongest outside Europe. It was not surprising to discover that the Israeli composers should, like all cultural emigrés, lovingly recultivate in their hot-spot in the Middle East the earnest romanticism of a now dead musical culture – particularly since their forebears played such a historically important role in it. Piano quartets by Tzvi Avni and Josef Tal, played by an *ad hoc* group, offered a surging amalgam of the pre-war *espressivo* idioms of Bartók, Janáček *et al.*

The Japanese, on the other hand, seem to have taken over the typically European 1960s obsession with instrumental technique and avant-garde gesture – but redefined via a particularly Zen-like quality of letting each sound speak of and for itself. The natural logic of the *recherché* sonorities of Joji Yuasa's *Inter-posi-play-tion No.2* was a good example of seeming intellectual disengagement. A trio of players began on bass flute, harp and vibraphone but gradually all transferred to percussion instruments. Yuasa's precise gestures were beautifully and unfussily realised by members of the HATO Ensemble.

The Australian 'national programme' – deftly and professionally put together by the mixed sextet of the Ensemble Flederman and heard to advantage in the excellent auditorium of the new North Amsterdam Music School – was one of the festival's bright spots. All the pieces in it – the composers were Graham Hair, Keith Humble, Carl Vine, and Martin Wesley-Smith – had something to say. Again, there was something inexorably 'nationalistic' about Wesley-Smith's *Snark-Hunting* for ensemble and tape which – with its wildly veering sections of different types of music, including boogie-woogie and, inevitably, jazz and funk, all most imaginatively integrated with a tape of simple transformations of instrumental sounds – netted a bumper catch of all the disparate influences that clearly face composers Down Under.

Some of the ISCM Sections outside Europe also sent over traditional music to be played alongside the contemporary compositions. Most notably, there was Chinese music from Hong Kong, heard to advantage in the small hall of the Vredenburg Centre in Utrecht. Unfortunately, though, a good deal of the traditional programmes planned – including a Greek Byzantine choir and a whole panoply of players from Venezuela – was cancelled at the last moment by the Sections concerned.

There was also yet another strand to the festival, brought about by the deferment of the annual Gaudeamus Music Week in order that this event for young composers should run during the same period. There was, however, no danger of overload, since only two programmes' worth of music – just seven scores, out of some 400 submissions – were selected by the 1985 Gaudeamus jury. This was ironic, given that more than twice the normal number of submissions had been received. The rules had been changed so that works already played were not automatically excluded. (There had been complaints that, because of the relative ease of getting performances in Holland, Dutch composers were effectively being excluded from their 'own' competition. Double irony: not one of the consequent flood of Dutch entries was selected.)

The Gaudeamus prize, of 4,000 guilders (just under £1,000), was won by a 24-year-old Korean, Unsuk Chin, for her composition *Spektra*, a rather playful essay for three cellos which was reminiscent, in its mercurial contrasts, of the range of expression to be found in shorter pieces by Ligeti, her current teacher. The British composer James Clarke, four years older, was unlucky not to have won or at least to have shared in the prize. His *Försvinna* for bass clarinet and ensemble, played in Hilversum by Harry Sparnaay and the Radio Chamber Orchestra under Ernest Bour, was a stronger score: its thoroughly worked run-down of tension is matched by its clear reflection of the composer's experience of a gradually calming electrical storm over the coast of Finland, where he lived for two years.

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The above, broadly negative, account of the 1985 ISCM Festival as a whole could apply in general terms to almost any of the World Music Days of recent years, during which time there have, it is widely agreed, been too many consistently mediocre events cobbled together from selections of indifferent music. Indeed, the last time the ISCM scored a shattering success was in the ancient history, in contemporary-music terms, of 30 years before the Dutch festival, when Boulez' *Le marteau sans maître* first saw the light of day at Baden-Baden in 1955. That, of course, was when the ISCM practically stood alone as the standard-bearer of new music internationally. Since then, innumerable festivals of contemporary music have sprung up, many of them indisputably eclipsing the World Music Days in terms of international impact. Each year, during the festival, the ISCM General Assembly nevertheless meets, pontificates and attempts to pass resolutions as if – even when the delegates all agree on something – it was really going to achieve anything to alleviate the depressing prospect that inevitably lies ahead each year.

So is the ISCM a mere relic of outdated international goodwill? Has it, in the cynical 1980s, simply outlived its usefulness? I would argue not, if only because it remains just about the only democratically run international forum to which unknown composers, of any age, can send their work. That is something of inestimable value to hang on to, particularly in the face of the increasing tendency of the other, more autocratic, festivals to trade off each others' discoveries and successes, or simply to organise yet another event around the always imminent round-figure birthday of a world-

famous composer.

It is, of course, precisely this 'democracy' to which many object, with the familiar and indeed self-evident argument that no committee ever makes good programmes. And ironically, though we may look back at the early ISCM festivals – when works such as Berg's String Quartet, Op.3 were heard for the first time – as particular moments of glory, the fact is that bad programmes have undoubtedly always been a feature of the organisation. The reason for this is simple: there was just as much fudge and horse-trading in the jury room then as there indubitably is now, as the following remarks, from a letter written by Berg while he was himself on the 1928 jury, suggest (the festival was in Siena that year):

As this year there will be only three chamber-music concerts it was not easy to distribute fairly the works to be chosen among the many nations which fancy themselves to be creatively productive. All the same, I have succeeded in causing Austria to be represented with dignity by Webern's Trio [Op.20] and the latest quartet by Zemlinsky. The members of the Jury were perhaps not all aware that Zemlinsky can write a quartet movement not much worse than that by [Frank] Bridge, that his inventive power is perhaps not less than that of Bloch, and that he is scarcely less up-to-date than Alfano, who mostly belong to those composers of whom two can be had for a penny.¹

This revelation may be taken as typical of the dismissive and/or chauvinistic spirit in which many, if not most, composers approach jury work – especially prominent composers who, caught up in their own ideas, usually have little or no understanding or even (as private conversation reveals) tolerance of other music. Perhaps the ISCM should recruit *failed* composers as jurists.

The easiest time for the ISCM to make coherent programmes was undoubtedly during the mid-1950s, when total serialism intellectually swept all before it, and any other music could be, and often was, conveniently dismissed on the grounds of historical irrelevance. Juries could at this period in effect be 'packed'. Then the 1960s saw the rise of a whole succession of fashionable tendencies (mobile and graphic scores, space-time notation and so on) which could be seized upon in the selection process. Nowadays, any such intellectual consensus has long since vanished, and we have returned to the privatism of mutually antagonistic groups typical of pre-War days – especially in view of the intolerable pressure under which all such 'international juries' are expected to operate.

Faced, typically, with a room full of scores from which selection has to be made by the day after next, even the strongest go weak at the knees. After a first morning's dithering, an experienced jurist will suggest an early lunch, at which a liberal supply of liquor will flow. Thus suitably fortified, the whole jury can return and get through the job of rapidly selecting or despatching scores with the detached bemusement necessary to such an ostensibly ridiculous task.

Well, that's how some of the stories go. But obviously, in such a situation, a composer can anyway only succeed in getting a piece selected by a jury if a) he flatters its members (by writing in the same style as at least one of them), b) he writes in the sort of nondescript, post-serialist idiom to which no-one will object, or c) he is himself simply well enough recognised as a creative figure. And all this is quite apart from the fact that 'priority' is supposed to be given to works submitted by the

National Sections, which themselves may not necessarily be representative of composers in their particular countries. Only in Eastern Europe do the National Sections appear to be under the direct control of composers' organisations. Elsewhere, radio producers seem too often to have gained the controlling hand, while the British Section is all too cosily couched within the bureaucracy of the Arts Council. But then to have one's National Section in the hands of a composers' clique is scarcely more palatable for the neglected ones than any other sort of alienation. And the Eastern-bloc countries were only represented at the 1985 ISCM Festival by a desultory string quartet programme from Poland, played by the Silesian Quartet at The Hague Conservatory.

Actually, to their credit, recent ISCM juries have regularly selected a high proportion of so-called directly submitted work. So who needs the National Sections? The answer is, needless to say, that the National Sections do. But to be fair, all these problems are apparent to the ISCM delegates themselves, who are all too aware of the circumstances under which each annual festival is actually organised. These representatives will eagerly buttonhole you with their own individual proposals for improvements: ranging from the appointment of an artistic director, so that someone would shoulder the praise or blame for a particular festival, to the commissioning of works from prominent composers, so that at least a degree of musical quality would be guaranteed each year.

All these are admirable ideas, but there is really no point in turning the World Music Days into yet another autocratic and success-trading festival; nor is there any point in using the ISCM's limited funds to pamper famous composers with further lavish commissions. We have to accept that as a democratic festival of new music, the World Music Days will always fall short of any profound aesthetic experience. Democracy is never the most efficient way of organising things.

It would surely be far better to turn the festival really properly into what many of its participants suggest it is already, in effect: a trade fair for contemporary music. Only works written within the previous year would then be performed, whether in 'national programmes' or in concerts organised directly by the host Section. And since the ISCM was founded on the ever-valid principle of giving a hearing to important but neglected work, it really is time to start limiting the actual submissions to pieces which will be receiving their first performance. Appallingly, only one world premiere – that of Klaus Huber's . . . *Nudo que ansi juntais* . . . , an up-dated lyrical madrigal for double choir (sung in the Radio Chamber Choir concert mentioned near the start of this review) – was given in the 1985 festival.

In the final analysis, the composers themselves, and/or their publishers, have to take much of the blame for the current state of the ISCM. In Holland there were simply too many pieces which had already gone the rounds of other contemporary music events and which had clearly been sent in willy-nilly because to list ISCM performances still looks impressive in a composer's biographical note, even if the particular festival involved proved thoroughly mediocre. Most dismaying last year was the acceptance of the direct submission from Stockhausen Verlag of The Master's *Klavierstück XII*, which naturally had to be performed by

Majella Stockhausen (in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum). What jury is going to turn down Stockhausen? (Maybe one day . . .) But then if the ISCM was essentially created by and for composers, it is perhaps only just that it should effectively be composers who are now killing it off.

† From a letter to Schoenberg written on 30 March 1928, as quoted in Mosco Carner, *Alban Berg: The Man and The Work* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p.67.

The 1987 ISCM World Music Days are scheduled for 23 October to 1 November; the host country is West Germany, and the festival will take place in Cologne, Bonn and Frankfurt.
