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Mark Ingleby

## Pacific Ring Festival

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Department of Music, University of California, San Diego, 29 April - 9 May 1986

*... California has come to be not only the last arrival point of the Frontier spirit, but also a powerful springboard for a growing awareness of and interest in the cultures of the Pacific. Spanning the largest single area of ocean on Earth, the Pacific Ring itself is perhaps the last region of its size to offer the opportunity for peaceful cultural osmosis in an age of awesome technological power and yet multifariously fragile diversity.*

[from a statement in the Festival Exhibition]

The influence of Oriental cultures on the music of American, and particularly of Californian, composers is by now a *de facto* occurrence of contemporary music, but the two-way process of technological and artistic exchange between the countries of the Pacific region has rarely seen the light of a consistent concert series or festival, even in California. Presented as part of the 25th-anniversary celebrations of the newest campus of the University of California, at San Diego, and sponsored by the latter's internationally famous Music Department, the UCSD Pacific Ring Festival unveiled a boldly imaginative and perhaps unique gathering of New World and Japanese new musics, highlighted against a background of traditional performance groups from these and other Pacific Ring nations. Although financially linked to the University's marking of its quarter-century and to the opening of a new Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, this multimedia and multi-ethnic celebration was stimulated by a National Endowment on the Arts award to John Cage, Toru Takemitsu and UCSD composer/performers Ed Harkins and Philip Larson. Starting from the theme of trans-Pacific collaboration, the Music Department's annual 'Sound Shapes' Festival was transformed into an event of considerable international significance, which went engagingly beyond the already wide-open commitment of UCSD to technological, stylistic and media pluralism in music.

The meaningful presentation of what the Festival Exhibition text called 'multifariously fragile diversity' hinged crucially on the cunning division of the festival along the lines of four themes: 'Collaboration', 'Technology', 'Extensions' and 'Ensembles', as overseen by Festival Director, Roger Reynolds. These overlapping distinctions provided the materials for some stimulating public discussions among panels of the attending composers and performers, but they chiefly functioned as labels to the billing of the four major multi-stylistic concerts. The extent to which avenues of 'collaboration', 'extension' and so on were actually unveiled by the events of the festival was, however, less a product of the contents of these categories themselves than of the amount of time the visiting guests were able to stay. Almost all the purely traditional performances of Pacific music, for example, were confined to a single 'Ensembles' day; and among the participants in this, the Samahan Philippine Dance Company and Musicians and a Javanese gamelan from Jakarta were only present for the concert itself. The value and interaction of the exploratory juxtapositions of the Pacific Ring Festival depended crucially, as at any other international festival, on the amount of time during which performers and composers from different cultures and styles were able to intermingle. Instant osmosis was thus not to be had, unless one accepted the colourful speculations to be found in the festival brochure.

Nevertheless, variety and contrast produced their own moments of lucid interconnection in the main concerts. Computer music by John Chowning and Roger Reynolds dominated the main 'Technology' concert, but the electricity of these powerful pieces was matched by the extraordinary 'electricity' of the Guatemalan composer Joaquin Orellana's live array of self-built cane instruments, used with analog tape. The range of computer-aided and computer-created work at this concert gave some useful hint of the development of digital techniques in recent years. Four-track performances of two of Chowning's early digital synthesis compositions, *Phone* and *Sabelithe*, were reminders of the first characteristic timbres of the now portable Frequency Modulation technique; the technique of vocal re-synthesis, as used in *Phone*, maintained its allure, in spite of its now widely imitated FM percussion timbres. Video synthesis was shown off to very good effect at this and other concerts in the festival; the climax of this particular event was the world premiere of *Vertigo*, with video synthesis by Ed Emshwiller and computer music synthesis by Roger Reynolds. This was a work of impressive formal proportions which, like other pieces from UCSD's Computer Audio Research Laboratory (known as CARL), made telling use of spatial manipulation; it was considerably enhanced by the multiple monitor onslaught of images from the stage. Although timbrally a little disappointing, the combined effect of CARL's spatial algorithms and the adroit compositional use of the phase vocoder transformed the recorded piano source material into some areas of interesting complexity.

While Chowning's work reminded one of the power of vocal modelling in digital music, the electro-acoustic pieces of Orellana more succinctly presented the juxtaposition of the native human with the technological: *Híbrido a Presión*, for two flutes, cane instruments and tape, contrasted traditional European instruments with the treated

sounds on tape of native Indian phonemes and with instruments built in the composer's own locality. Orellana, according to Gordon Mumma in the festival brochure,

bypassed the distractions of technological opulence which would have been quite inappropriate to the Guatemalan context. Instead, he explored indigenous acoustical resources, developed extended performance techniques with local ensembles and built new musical instruments. He gathered the sounds of his experiments and of life from both city and countryside. Using these materials, during the 1970's, Orellana produced a stunning group of electro-acoustical compositions, some of which employed theatrical or projected images. They include *Humanofonía* (1971), *Malebolge* (1972), *Primitiva I* (1973), *Tzulhumanachi - - Rupestre en el Futuro* (1978), and *Imposible a la "X"* (1980).

Orellana's works presented on this occasion allowed us to hear, among other things, front-blown cane sounds, used in numerous groups with various forms of attack, and a delightful plethora of percussion instruments, varying from circular wind-chimes to various sizes of half-moon-shaped 'sonarimbas' - curved marimbas in micro-tunings. Different sonorities were provided by different attack agents such as marbles on rubber bands, and by membrane instruments using braided string snares. The sight of at least 15 musicians playing these toy-like creations added to the bewitching timbral 'electricity' of the music.

Indeed, the unspoken message emerging from this main 'Technology' concert and from the 'Ensembles' concert the following afternoon was that of appropriate, rather than 'high', technology as the future currency of artistic exchange in the Pacific region. The latter event was brought to a fitting close by the Harry Partch Ensemble's performance of this composer's *Daphne of the Dunes*. Following on the heels of delightful performances by the Samahan Dance Company and Musicians and by two Indonesian gamelans - one Javanese, the other Balinese - the music and spectacle of Partch could not have been better placed to show the debt and yet the individuality of a Western composer in relation to Oriental traditions and tunings, and the re-discovery of 'multi-media' presentations. *Daphne of the Dunes* was fairly modest in theatrical demands by comparison with some other Partch pieces, and utilised two dancers. While their choreography here verged on the predictable, the 'unsung' choreography of a Partch performance happened magically around them: eight musicians playing Cloud Chamber Bowl, Bamboo Marimba, Diamond Marimba, Bass Marimba, Gourd Tree, Cone Gongs, Kithara II, Harmonic Canon II (with movable bridges), Surrogate Kithara, Spoils of War (assorted non-pitched percussion), and the multi-coloured keyboard of the Chromelodeon organ. The ensemble was capably directed by its leader, Danlee Mitchell, the curator of the Harry Partch Collection. Performances by this group become rarer and rarer: there is no permanent building or facility for the composer's unique set of instruments, which lives almost cheek-by-jowl with the percussion of San Diego State University, without repair budget, staff or ensemble tour co-ordinator for one of the outstanding heritages of 20th-century music. In any other country but the United States, the Harry Partch Collection and Ensemble would be awarded the financial and artistic protection that they manifestly deserve. As a visitor to the Collection on previous occasions, I was sad to witness its slow

decline.

Technology was also viewed through the exhibits and words of Nam June Paik. Paik had numerous videos on display throughout the Pacific Ring Festival, chief of which were *Something Pacific*, digitally synthesized, and a permanent outdoor installation of the same name at the University of California's Media Studies Department, which showed rooted television screens and contemplative Buddhas squatting under the palm trees of California's quick-grow turf.

Aside from the innocent wit of Cage's contributions to the public discussions, the main focus of his activities at the Pacific Ring Festival was his contribution to its opening event, *Vis-à-Vis* (under the 'Collaboration' heading), performed by [THE], the trumpet-and-voice duo of Harkins and Larson. Originally forming the male end of San Diego's Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble, this music-theatre team performed a two-hour show that bore a disturbingly close resemblance to their previous concert, six months earlier. The showmanship, precision and dry humour of their material, some of which requires considerable bodily virtuosity, is too easily taken by Californian audiences as easy humour, and [THE] has an obvious white, middle-class following around affluent San Diego. The fact that this duo has successfully toured Japan several times points to something else, however, and it was disappointing that Takemitsu's involvement in *Vis-à-Vis* turned out to be no more than a shy analog tape part, isolated near the end of the piece.

Harkins and Larson were open in discussing the problems of a collaboration that involved 'antiphonal responses through the mail'. They initially sent a videotape of some of their previous collaborative works to Cage in New York, who responded with a mesostic. According to Jonathan Saville in the festival brochure, both poem and videotape arrived in Tokyo, where Takemitsu responded with a poem by a contemporary Japanese poet, an audio-tape and 'a two-color graphic, made up of abstract symbols, together with very general instructions as to how to convert these symbols and their arrangement into sounds and movements'. [THE] then produced an audio-tape and began the circle again, with similar responses. It is unclear why these inputs did not obviously manifest themselves in the performance, but Harkins and Larson told us that Cage's contribution was primarily 'structural'. Although Cage's text did appear as a lyric at one point, the distance of the collaboration and the concern to 'respect integrity' resulted in a performance which audibly owed nothing directly to either composer.

While Harkins and Larson displayed a way of proceeding in openness with regard to non-traditional forms and sounds, a powerful example of the force of sounds and gesture in a partly traditional theatrical context was given by the Pacific Ring Festival performances of the Suzuki Company of Toga, Japan. Based on the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, their Japanese version of *Clytemnestra* projected tremendous emotional force through the well-patterned ebb and flow of spoken rhythms and dynamics, intensified by deliberate, decisive body movements. It did not matter that we were not hearing an English text.

'Extensions' in the Pacific Ring Festival, like 'Technology' and 'Collaboration', were best achieved in terms of their relation to technical advance and the dynamics of individual projects. Some of the most successful compositions,

whether by major figures or graduate students, were those which started from modest materials and means. Among the student composers, the UCSD penchant for sustained timbral interest was amply demonstrated by David Dramm's syllabically inspired *f/v* for solo flute, ably played by John Sebastian Winston; *Chuen Mian* by Gan-Wei Yin for soprano, flute, cello and piano and *Japanese Gardens* by Igor Korneitchouk for flute/piccolo, guitar and percussion showed a very Eastern and highly musical sense of timbre and space. Takemitsu's musical presence at the festival was better manifested through several piano pieces, exquisitely interpreted by Cecil Lytle, who was also the soloist for Joji Yuasa's major electro-acoustic piece, *Towards the Midnight Sun*. Yuasa's adroit use of the technology of the instrument to hand was superbly exhibited by Laura Hunter's performance of his *Not I But The Wind* for solo amplified saxophone, which successfully projected the world of the ancient shakuhachi into the complex resonances of the alto saxophone.

Yuasa's *Towards the Midnight Sun*, for piano and digital tape, was, for me, the most successful piece involving computer music in the festival. As in *Icon* – a much earlier analog work, sculpted from elemental white noise – Yuasa here used the same sound source and carved it into shapes and gestures of awesome range, aided by an exemplary use of spatial manipulation software, which is one of the outstanding creations of the CARL system. The live pianist functioned not so much to do battle with the 'orchestral' might of the sounds around him; rather, he 'stoically offers complementary patterns which weave in and out of the computer's tapestry of elastic evocations', as Roger Reynolds put it in the festival brochure. Pieces by John Stevens (*The Evolution of Madness*) and Robert Thompson (*Soul Rejoinders*) from CARL, the latter with video synthesis by Victoria Bearden, also displayed the strengths of the system's randomness programs as compositional and textural aids: the use of randomness within other, controlled, parameters.

Perhaps the works of Conlon Nancarrow should have been billed under 'Technology' rather than 'Extensions', for although the player-piano was a development in the line of Cage and Henry Cowell, it is perhaps the first computer music in terms of machine execution. It was disappointing that no player-piano suitable for a live rendition of Nancarrow's rolls had been permitted, but the re-hearings of *Study No. 25* and the acoustic *Sonatina para piano* were supplemented by the world premiere of Nancarrow's first ensemble piece to be written since his exile in Mexico. *Piece No. 2 for small orchestra* (consisting of oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, two pianos, two violins, viola, two cellos, and double bass), replete with hocketting, posed enormous challenges for its non-automated performers, and it reflected the composer's lack of contact with performers over such a long period of time. The audience was also treated to the as yet unavailable sequence of *Study No. 48 a, b and c* for player-piano in which, as in *Study No. 47*, the final section repeats the previous two sections simultaneously, leading to textures of stunning viscerality.

If Nancarrow's ensemble piece represented the tendencies of the isolated technological composer, then the Harry Partch Ensemble and, even more so, the Ensemble Sekar Jaya, offered visions of instruments for future multi-stylistic

composition. Sekar Jaya, from San Francisco, which played at the already-mentioned 'Ensembles' concert, was the first all-American Balinese gamelan to be invited by the Indonesian Government to tour in Bali, and the presence of their excellent performance begged the question as to why there was no Lou Harrison, in music or in person, at the festival. Although they performed no new music for gamelan, of which a considerable amount exists in the United States, Sekar Jaya symbolise the kind of cross-cultural exchange of performing practice outside commercial music that the world has already seen with jazz and certain African-related idioms.

Clearly, much more in the way of Pacific synthesis could have been pursued at the Pacific Ring Festival, but in the time and budget available Roger and Karen Reynolds, Bonnie and Ed Harkins and F. Richard Moore are to be congratulated for a remarkable innovation. Although modest by comparison with some more regular new music or ethnomusical festivals, the Pacific Ring Festival, organised in the middle of a busy university schedule, was highly successful in promoting awareness of the myriad richness of the innovatory osmoses which are possible across the Pacific region: a richness that is just as valid as well as challenging to composers elsewhere in the world.

## Contributors to this Issue

**Richard Barrett** Composer, improviser and co-director of the ensemble *Exposé*. A member of the Composers' Forum at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in 1986, where the premiere of *Anatomy* for eleven instruments was given by Ensemble Modern, conducted by Bernhard Kontarsky.

**Hilary Bracefield** Lecturer in Music at the University of Ulster and director of the Mushroom Group, which performs experimental and improvised music.

**Christopher Fox** Composer, performer and lecturer in art and design. A member of the Composers' Forum at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in 1984 and 1986. He is at present working on an evening-long cycle of pieces for Ensemble Köln, two interlocking trios for the Swedish group *Aquarius* and a piece for Philip Mead for electrically stimulated piano.

**Roger Heaton** Clarinettist and writer specialising in contemporary music, and clarinet professor at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik. He is currently writing a book for Oxford University Press on new clarinet techniques.

**Mark Ingleby** Composer. He studied composition with performance at the University of California, San Diego with Robert Erickson and Joji Yuasa in 1984-6, graduating with an M.A. in Music; he is currently a student at Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

**Michael Parsons** Composer, performer, and since 1970 a visiting lecturer in music at the Department of Fine Art, Portsmouth Polytechnic. Co-founder, with Cornelius Cardew and Howard Skempton, of the Scratch Orchestra in 1969. Since 1974 he has worked closely with Skempton, giving many concerts with him and performing duo works by both composers for percussion, voices, accordion, violin, piano, and other instruments. His opera *Expedition to the North Pole* has been selected for performance at this year's ISCM Festival in West Germany.

**Stephen Reeve** Composer and freelance journalist. He studied with Henri Pousseur and has particular experience of the continental music scene. His *L'oracle de Delphes*, a music-theatre piece for brass quintet, has been selected for performance at this year's ISCM Festival in West Germany.



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