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7th May : Elgar Concert Room

(University of Birmingham)

Some Thoughts on the Lunchtime Concert given by the
University Improvisation Group

"What is important for the lucid ordering of the work - for its crystallisation - is that all the Dionysian elements which set the imagination of the artist in motion and make the life-sap rise must be properly subjugated before they intoxicate us, and must finally be made to submit to the law: Apollo demands it." (Stravinsky)

Poor old Stravinsky! How old-fashioned! But in what precise ways, I wonder, does his view of the creative process differ from the rationale of a performance like this? I mean, is it that "order" is no longer a valid category? Or has it simply changed its appearance? Has "lucidity" been abandoned? Or is it simply that all - however complex it sounds - will be made clear eventually? Is "law" to be escaped altogether at all costs? Or are we in the presence of a new law?

I'm not sure of the answers. Consequently I'm not sure how to judge music like this. Sincerity? But most bad music, as well as most good, is sincere. Interesting sounds? But how many sounds can you imagine which are uninteresting? Meaningful relationships within the group? Is this activity, then, no more than group therapy? Certainly it seems clear that the composer's name is no guarantee of obvious excellence. The piece by Stockhausen ("Meeting Point" from "Aus den sieben Tagen") did not appear to be in a different class from those by Terry Loane, Keith Potter and Chris Villars. But should we judge at all? The distinction here is surely between intuitive ordering, which necessitates value-judgement, and emancipation from order, which renders value-judgement impossible. It's the difference between the American radicalism of Cage et al. and the tradition-bound conservatism of the European avant-garde, who, almost in spite of themselves, cannot help but reintroduce "musical" considerations into the random or improvisatory situation. There are values in both radicalism and compromise. There are disadvantages too: with compromise the disadvantage is that it's

usually uneasy. I take it the Improvisation Group tends towards compromise.

Stockhausen asks for "collective intuitive creation". It has always seemed difficult to me to be intuitive, particularly for culture-bound Europeans; and to aim to be intuitive is self-contradictory. Compromise again, especially if one regards the musical results as important. And this, I think, is why so many "spontaneous" moments sound familiar. I would be interested to know whether the Group sympathise with Stockhausen's picture of himself as a medium transmitting divine vibrations. I doubt the divinity is the Christian one, for He has usually communicated, at least as far as art is concerned, via men's (conscious) minds (Stravinsky, the pre-eminent example in our century) - except, of course, for the saints, mystics, lunatics and all others "moved by the spirit", who have bumbled direct and incomprehensibly from the unconscious. Do we see a re-emergence of this Dionysian subculture, as formless and aimless as the new theology of the young is doctrinally vacuous? How then Apollo? Can we believe that you will be silent for very long?

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