

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Emsley, Richard. 1973. 'Review of February 8th: Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol'. *Contact*, 6. pp. 37-39. ISSN 0308-5066.

February 8th: Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol

GENTLE FIRE

The atmosphere in which Gentle Fire gave their performance of contemporary music at the Arnolfini Gallery was relaxed and informal. The players and their electronic equipment occupied the centre of a comparatively small room encircled by the audience, most of whom sat on the floor. The sale of glasses of wine and the tolerance of smoking was a further assurance against the all-too-familiar stifling effect of the typical concert hall.

Perhaps a little too carefree was the sotto voce introduction of items and verbal presentation of programme-notes, although this further divergence from the norm of musical performances was doubtless calculated in its effect. Much contemporary and avant-garde music brings into question such critical issues as the correct mode of listening to be adopted for a particular piece - in what way should one take this work, what should one listen for in another? Gentle Fire would seem to have adopted an approach directly opposite to that of Boulez, who makes a deliberate attempt to let the audience "in on the secret" by incorporating short talks or "open rehearsals" into each concert. Whether or not the absence of information presupposes familiarity with avant-garde concepts is not clear. Neither is the audience certain as to whether it must decide upon the "right" interpretation or whether it is expected to react personally to what it hears. One would hope that Gentle Fire's non-committal attitude signified the latter.

Such questions were invited less by the first two of the three pieces performed than by the last. The evening began with a composition by Stuart Jones, a member of the group, in which three

stringed instruments and a melodica each took as a starting point one of four notes, all of which were slightly "out of tune" according to the tempered scale. Each instrument then proceeded very slowly to notes belonging to the harmonic series of the initial note. All tones were electronically filtered so as to boost the audibility of the beats occurring between overtones. The result was of a similar type to Stockhausen's Stimmung. The idea was pleasing in the way it created a musical context in which the "natural" sounds of a stringed instrument - the overtones produced by inept bowing which the player of traditional music attempts to eradicate - were given a place in the overall concept.

The realisation of Stockhausen's Verbindung which followed also made good use of sound. The choice of instruments allowed for ample contrast of timbre within the very strictly controlled range of sonority. Particularly resourceful was the use of recorder, piano (keyboard and "inside") and a range of different-sized metal springs. The electronic sound equipment was used in an effective way, restricting itself mainly to a loud clattering sound: rather frightening in effect.

Since they instruct the players as to extra-musical rather than musical qualities, these "text pieces" by Stockhausen, of which this is one, are much less deliberate in their relation to time than are the more systematically controlled early works. Although the idea of periodisation is foreign to the concept of the "text piece" one could not help feeling that the introduction of some kind of time-formation, even a simple idea of movement or stasis, would have added to the interest and shape of this performance. Despite the occasional appearance of clear rises and falls of tension, the interest centred mainly on the short-range reaction of individual instruments to the background of long-held notes. The orientating effect of this "background" was, if anything, too apparent, each part having an individual, single-pitch polarity of quite extended permanence.

The final piece of the evening - a group composition by Gentle Fire - was the most problematic for the listener. The members of the group sat around a table, some speaking simultaneously through the PA system, others operating the sound equipment. After a lengthy "first section" which contained minimal variation on contrast; the pattern of sound was changed by adding taped distortions of a speaking voice, to be followed by further electronically manipulated developments of the sound material. One would have been glad of some indication as to the relative importance of the various elements making up the total experience - was the content of the read scripts of any significance, were the sounds symbolic or was the piece to be heard as pure sonority? None of the possible

interpretations recommended itself in any way, either by its projection from the overall pattern or by the attraction of one's attention to interesting detail or development. But if one abandoned all attempt at intellectual comprehension and relaxed in the hope of receiving some form of sympathetic resonance, the piece failed even to produce a response of antipathy - for it aroused no expectations which it could disappoint.

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