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concerts

February 2: Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester
MUSIC DIGEST: THE MUSIC OF EDGARD VARÈSE
Saar Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hans Zender
Stephen Roberts (bass)

It was odd, to say the least, that Manchester got the Varèse concert on February 2 (a day before the Roundhouse got it, which prompts one to wonder if it was a cunning way of getting in an extra rehearsal with the help of the Goethe Institute, the German Cultural Institute, North West Arts and the Royal Northern College). After all, Manchester does not have much of a reputation for doing rash contemporary things (except for Nor-media, of course). The London Sinfonietta virtually played to themselves when they came on their Schoenberg-Gerhard pilgrimage since everyone was off getting their "personal experience" (as the posters tell us) at the Hallé. Then the "Master Musician" series with the Carter Double (no, I am not putting it on the same level as the Bach Double or Brahms Double), Cage's Cheap Imitation and Earle Brown's Centering, hardly precipitated a stampede for the Free Trade Hall. And where are the young hiding, one might ask? That Royal Northern College, haven of the seventies' musical young, does not yet seem to have made much headway in this century's music - it has a huge convocation of pianos but the tape recorder is as much on the outer as female clergy. But remember that it's a conservatory. Conservatories conserve. Composers from Berlioz to Debussy have consistently moaned about it. Hush, hush, whisper who dares, St. Cecilia is saying her prayers.

The opportunity of hearing any of Varèse's music beyond Octandre is rare in the UK - it is significant enough that the Saar Radio Symphony Orchestra did the honours. Someone like Bertram Turetzky is in a position to talk about how Varèse should be done, but we in the UK cannot yet be as choosy or as knowledgeable about performing behaviour - it is enough that we hear Varèse's music at all. However, there were a few fundamental blunders in Manchester. First, Varèse is not a polite orchestral aristocrat - those triple and quadruple sforzandi are not just a triple or quadruple insurance against having it too soft. We need it raw and sanguine (though not crude). So Octandre, besides being hesitant, was lacking in go, like a party where the booze runs out, and in those spots in the other works (Intégrales, Déserts) where one imagines a herd of elephants grinding to a halt with their trunks in the air, there should be nothing in reserve. We know from Varèse's tape work that

he wanted our ears stretched just short of screaming point, which brings me to blunder number two: that my ears were stretched to screaming point and the loudspeakers were brought to their knees in the Poème Electronique and Déserts. St. Cecilia was not alone at her prayers. It is just plain ridiculous to put the person in charge of sound diffusion somewhere back by the percussion, where he cannot balance or regulate anything to satisfaction. It was rather like the TV commercial for gas heating - "All you do is just turn it on". One could add "and turn it up full". In all it was a beautiful demonstration of tape hiss and distortion, not quite what Edgard Varèse ordered. The final complaint is about instruments. We have to put up with an electronic organ in Ecuatorial but do we have to put up with the kind of instrument which sounds as if it has been asphyxiated in several hundred-weight of cotton wool? Again, not a Varèse sound. The good point about Ecuatorial was that it was done with solo voice (Stephen Roberts) and not a male chorus. I have heard the male chorus version (hopelessly out of "sync" too) and it is obvious that the amplified solo voice is much better, on grounds of expressivity.

As a whole it was a unique experience to hear such a Varèsian spread: from the early intimate impressionism of Offrandes, much more subjective than the usual Varèse image, to the familiar Octandre composed in the same year as Stravinsky's Octet (quite a comparison). Intégrales straight afterwards, then to Ecuatorial ten years later in 1934, with the two ondes martenot so marvellously used. And on to the post-war music: Déserts with its tape interpolations, and the Poème (1958). It is ironic that the premature electronic man, so precocious in the twenties and thirties, the "explosive precursor of the disintegration of timbres, rhythm and sound argument" (as Xenakis put it), approached tape composition with a certain nostalgia when he was finally permitted to get there in the fifties. The Poème I can listen to (believe it or not) with affection - Varèse at last able to approach his ideal. But it is powerful instrumental music as he would have liked to put together 25 years previously rather than true idiomatic tape composition. That is the irony - that he could not think instinctively in the medium he anticipated and predicted. He could only approach it.

The live concert, whatever its shortcomings, gave new force to many listeners' impressions of Varèse - so different from the LPs. One only hopes that after this we are not settling into an extended drought.

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