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Composers Today

*This new format seems a good way of introducing short features on more composers than we can normally manage to include in one issue. The brief is not binding, but mostly writers have been asked for their views on the work of a particular composer in the light of some recently issued scores and/or records. Well known composers thus receive up to date discussion of their music, while lesser known figures can be introduced by reference to specific works. In a magazine that appears only three times a year at present it is quite obviously not possible to keep abreast of a composer's activities as much as we should wish. The discussion of David Bedford's *Odyssey* which follows was only possible because the promotion tour for the album occurred just a fortnight before copy deadline (or rather, an already extended deadline!): it's included here to put Malcolm Barry's article into the perspective of what Bedford was doing last October, and we haven't tried to hide any differences of opinion between the authors. In those cases where we have recently featured a composer, as with George Crumb here, the format will perhaps be that of a straightforward review of specific works; in others a more general line will often be taken. In all cases attention will be drawn to a short selection of relevant articles or extended reviews in this and/or other periodicals to enable interested readers to follow up some of the previous commentary on a composer's work.*

DAVID BEDFORD

Malcolm Barry

Material received:

The Tentacles of the Dark Nebula
Universal Edition 15342, 1975 (£4.50)

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
Universal Edition 15508, 1975 (£4.50)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Virgin V2038 (£3.49)

THERE ARE COMPOSERS that write music and there are composers that write music history; some manage to do both and these are usually considered to be the greatest, but none of these achievements is necessarily more worthwhile than the others. We regard the writing of history as more important because of our own attitudes to life (particularly those stemming from the historicist views of the 19th century) and because of the growth of music education which necessitates periodisation and categorisation. The result is that the musical wood is often missed for the historical trees, or — worse — that the writing of history is confused with the writing of music.

David Bedford is not an Important Historical Figure (even if it is any longer possible to speak in these terms). He is not even 'pushing back the frontiers' very markedly. Rather (*if* an historical perspective is necessary) he is using the vocabulary of the present day in his own characteristic way. 'His own way' happens to be one of extreme simplicity, even naiveté, and in this he may be seen as reacting to historical tendencies, though this would appear to be the only historical part of Bedford's music. This ahistorical position, however, poses certain critical problems. His pieces have a rather elusive existence. There is little conceptual content other than in terms of the music itself and thus there is not very much that can be stated confidently about his style or the significance of his works. When his music is not being performed it has less existence than, for example, the music of Cardew, Stockhausen or Tippett, which often seems to exist independently of its realisation.

So Bedford's music depends upon its audition: it is 'about' its performance, and reflecting this, his works are overwhelmingly concerned with performance techniques, ranging from the space-time notation he used in 1963 to the string sounds of *The Tentacles of the Dark Nebula* (1969).¹ It is therefore quite appropriate that Bedford has sought links with another performance-based music that exists only for the occasion on which it is played. His leanings towards pop go back at least to 1966 and the early days of The Who.² The collaborations with Mike Oldfield are a logical development of this inclination. These works are also a natural extension of his interest in sound as such, something that has remained constant throughout 15 years. Every one of his pieces seems to start from an interest in tone-colour, perhaps

deriving from his studies with Nono and at the Studio di Fonologia at Milan. Despite these characteristics it is difficult to speak of development in Bedford's career or to mark out in this or that work a significant new departure — another aspect of Bedford's ahistoricism. Some pieces are inevitably more successful than others. Some, because of their simplicity, run the risk of becoming embarrassing unless it is remembered that to listen to Bedford with ears attuned for Schoenberg is to invite disaster. Bedford's output, more than that of most musicians, demands acceptance of its premises before any sympathetic listening can take place.

The first demand, stemming from his ahistoricism, is for unlearning. Bedford's music, though it may present a complex surface, is essentially simple. The structures are usually sectional, with sections characterised by texture or performance techniques. A piece may even be based on a juxtaposition of simple ideas united by a single procedure, a method which has both charms and dangers. These charms and dangers are demonstrated very well by his recent record *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1975). This contains eight sections and a coda, the sections being broken up by a narrative taken from Coleridge's prose gloss on his poem. The voice is untreated except at one point, the entry of the ghostly ship. The piece opens and closes with Bedford's arrangement of Susato's arrangement of *La Morisque*. From this emerges an ostinato, at first on piano, and subsequently spreading to other instruments at varying speeds. The ostinato becomes ostinati and governs the whole texture of the piece. Bedford also uses another objet trouvé: *The Rio Grande* arranged for children's voices. This dominates the second side of the record, producing an effect not unlike the song at the end of Mike Oldfield's *Ommadawn*. The textures that Bedford arranges, governed by ostinati as they are, change only slowly and — despite Bedford's disavowal — follow the poem in a programme-music manner. The danger then arises: if the piece depends so much on the poem, why have a piece of music at all?

Bedford played most of the instruments himself, arranged many interesting textures and produced the record. In these aspects he allies himself to that part of the popular music industry that defies categorisation and is characterised by Oldfield. The model for *The Ancient Mariner* is clearly the group of albums by Oldfield — *Tubular Bells*, *Hergist Ridge* and *Ommadawn*: single pieces devised, performed and produced by one musician using a lot of expensive studio time but using the potentialities of the studio to the full. It is only as a record that *The Ancient Mariner* achieved its full existence; a score would have a very ambiguous relationship to the perceived work. Like the Oldfield albums the main interest, given the long sections based on a single idea, lies in how these ideas and sections successively merge into one another. The most impressive bits are usually those more extended sections based on ostinati (e.g. those at the ends of the first sides of *Star's End*³ and *Tubular Bells*), while the weakest seem to derive from a lack of stamina: usually at about the middle of the second side there is a feeling that padding is going on. That it is possible to identify these sections so clearly shows the successive nature of the works and also how closely they are tied to the record format.

In *Star's End* (1974) Bedford presents another sectional piece (eleven sections) but uses a certain amount of cross-reference to much better effect, breaking down the successive impression in favour of a more cohesive approach. It sounds as if a composer is at work in the piece, which unfortunately is not always the case in *The Ancient Mariner*. Both works comprise extended transitions that rarely arrive anywhere, but the evidence of thought is more impressive than the triumph of packaging. Perhaps it is as well, however, that the programme for *Star's End* is not as easily accessible as that of *The Ancient Mariner*. The latter, given the basis of the poem, the example of Oldfield's records, and what can be done in a studio, sounds far too easy.

Sound, performance and simplicity can govern a musical structure successfully as may be heard in *The Tentacles of the Dark Nebula*, a setting of a text by Arthur C. Clark with an accompaniment of a string ensemble. There are three sections of text, each describing a beach at a different point in history, separated by two static interludes for strings. In each section the music opens with a repeated type of sound (bowed glissandi in the first, plucked in the second) which creates a static texture that becomes progressively more mobile until, at the end of each section, individual glissandi return. A simple idea but an effective one (and excellently performed by Peter Pears and the London Sinfonietta). There remains a problem with this piece: the perennial one of the relationship between words and music. Bedford's textures teem with sound which inevitably distracts from the foreground, a fairly conventional setting of the words. These words are so strong and so unambiguously building a narrative that the listener is forced to concentrate upon them with the result that the nebulous background, inevitably accompanimental, can become an annoying intrusion. The successful construction of the piece is, therefore, not matched by its success in communication.

One of Bedford's most notorious pieces, *With 100 Kazoos* (1972), brought him into conflict with Boulez. (The note of the first performance in the score is thus incorrect.) Boulez' ire seems to have been aroused by the instruction to interpret some pictures included in the score, which range from star maps to illustrations suitable for children's books. (This was not the first time that Bedford had departed from any semblance of conventional notation: in *Music for Albion Moonlight* (1965) the instrumentalists are directed to interpret the word 'sklitter'.) The work — again sectional — is unified by the audience participation (with 100 kazoos) and Bedford's selection of textures. There are, as always, many striking ideas, such as the

presentation of the pitch material at the opening. But this presentation does not fulfil its promise — at least not audibly so — and the music becomes concerned with texture and therefore colour. In this instance the concentration on colour is certainly justifiable, for where such variables as free improvisation and an audience with 100 noise-makers are involved it behoves the composer *not* to make his pitch basis too strong in case the imbalance damages the piece. It is the result of each performance that counts (a common feature of Bedford's music) and it seems possible that with this work Bedford found a successful milieu.

Two other recent works attach more importance to pitch without losing any of the interest in colour. *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer* (1972) is a sort of wind counterpart to *The Tentacles of the Dark Nebula*, a setting of words lasting about a quarter of an hour for a conventionally-treated voice and a similarly scored accompaniment of woodwind and brass. *The Golden Wine is Drunk* (1974) is a setting for 16 solo voices which inevitably invites comparison with the earlier and highly successful *Two Poems* for mixed chorus (1965) but, in that comparison, reasserts many of the aspects of Bedford's music. *The Golden Wine* is not an advance on the earlier work, nor is it a regression; it is merely different. Of all the music I have mentioned, it seems to be the most successful, given the sympathy of the human voice to the sort of textural composition in which Bedford specialises. The static pitches of some of the sections seem to refer back to *Piano Piece 1* (1966) where pitch-class set 6-14 (in Forte's terminology) was put through its paces very effectively. The unified and almost timeless nature of Bedford's 'progression' is thus once more demonstrated.

Just as there are references back to earlier music so there are anticipations in the works of the 1960s. For example, *Piano Piece 2* (1968), with its preparation of the piano and sudden entry of the prepared chord, anticipated the sonority of the Oldfield works and especially the entry of the major chords at the start of *Star's End*. There are confirmations in the later music too, particularly the lyrical gifts of the Patchen settings transferring so successfully to the apparently unpromising material of a short story by Arthur C. Clark. Chronology has little to teach about Bedford either within or without his output and it will be interesting to see whether he can continue to cheat history, to remain simple and demand unlearning for his music.

Such unlearnedness, however, contains its own dangers. Schoenberg once wrote 'mature minds resist the temptation to become intoxicated by colours and prefer to be coldly convinced by the transparency of clear-cut ideas'. The danger for Bedford's music is that for 'simplicity' could be read 'immaturity'. But this in itself shows up the dilemma of music today: for if music tends, at least in part, to be 'about' its own history, where does that leave music that is avowedly ahistorical?

NOTES:

¹ This piece was written for Peter Pears who sings it accompanied by the London Sinfonietta conducted by the composer on Decca Head 3.

² See David Bedford and Cornelius Cardew, 'A Conversation', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 107, No. 1485 (March 1966), pp. 198-202. For more recent material on Bedford see Meirion Bowen, 'David Bedford', *Music and Musicians*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (February 1972), pp. 42-44 (this article is followed by the score of *An Exciting New Game for Children of All Ages*) and the chapter on the composer by Carolyn Stokoe in *British Music Now*, ed. Lewis Foreman (London: Paul Elek, 1975): this book also contains a Bedford bibliography and discography. (Ed.).

³ Played by Oldfield, Cutler and the RPO conducted by Vernon Handley on Virgin V2020. All the scores mentioned are published by Universal Edition.

Richard Witts

Material received:

The Odyssey
Virgin V2070 (£3.49)

DURING THE HOPEFUL 1950s the composer was encouraged to function as a Pioneer, the maker of a prototype syntax for future market use. The overall decline of profit through the 1960s rendered this image irrelevant. Composers collaborated with, or took ideas from, the popular music business: Berio meets McCartney, Maxwell Davies arranges The Beatles, Bedford works for Kevin Ayers. They were pushed willingly back to recognise a more accessible and stultified syntax. Inflated tonality has re-emerged as a force in progressive music, now used in an exclusive way (and not integrated as in Pousseur or Berio) by such composers as Cardew, Hobbs and Bedford. (The fact that it's used by composers from right across the political spectrum doesn't signify much more than the general economic and social climate affecting all; it's the service that the sounds are put to and the structure they engender that determines their political cast.)

Just when a new vitality in our music culture, Punk Rock and Reggae, is being hastily promoted by the rock press and the record companies, David Bedford is keeping his youth in virgin shape by recycling the remnants of Canterbury-rock. *The Odyssey* is a concept album based on passages from you-know-what. It belongs in the lineage of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, the 'one man in a studio, did it all myself with a little help from my friends' species. The multi-track studio is attractive to composers who are fed up with the routine of score to publisher, to promoter, to inadequately-rehearsed concerts, to an audience of 50. In the studio you are responsible for every stage of manufacture (excepting prooction and distribution) and, if you have a quick brain, your output (and what's more, your control over the quality of output) is greatly increased. The money's rather better too, as is the audience.

In the commercial music weeklies Bedford is presented as one of many creators of progressive concept albums together with Oldfield, Vangelis and Alan Parsons, e.g. *Sounds* linked their review of *The Odyssey* with Gordon Giltrap's naive Blake-inspired album. But given his training and past career, Bedford should have much more to offer; he may be able to open out an area of remarkably successful and influential music-making. Successful? *Tubular Bells* is still in the U.K. Top 50 L.P. chart. Influential? The progressive and intellectual pretensions of these and similar musicians makes a greater impact on the public than any other composers mentioned in this magazine.

What I find most interesting in *The Odyssey* is the attempt to produce structural unity through extended tonality. I'm unsure that this has any aural value nowadays as the general interest in timbral variety has made any subtlety of modulation and harmonic contrast irrelevant. But I've played this album to 'non-musical' friends and young students, and some have talked positively of its harmonic variety ('in the bass' someone said). This may be a sign of new trends — Punk Rock so far avoids timbral hardware — and worth noting. Certainly the contrast of timbre is no greater than in *Tubular Bells*, and metric or temporal variety is actually less, but the span of tonality is much wider and richer. *Tubular Bells* is limited to ramblings around E minor (e.g. the Tune), E major (e.g. the end), A minor (e.g. the opening), F sharp major and D minor. Bedford's *Odyssey* is tied around both vertical and horizontal triadic relations, i.e. in both harmonic and melodic dimensions. Track by track, the overall tonal scheme is this:

- 1 F (modal) minor — D (modal) minor
- 2 C major — E flat minor
- 3 D (modal) minor
- 4 E major
- 5 D (modal) minor
- 6 A major
- 7 C minor — E flat major — E minor — G major
- 8 F minor/major
- 9 D (modal) minor
- 10 A minor — F sharp minor — D major — F major/(modal) minor

The odd-numbered tracks represent 'Penelope's shroud' by a perpetually-winding and never-ending Dorian scale (Stravinsky's 'Orpheus' motif inverted). Actually the effect doesn't work well, as the 'joins' (jumps down an octave) are clearly audible. The emergence of the D minor scale out of a nebulous Dorian (transposed on to F) cluster, and the emphasis on A at the 'shroud's completion' model the structural use of triadic pivots throughout. Similarly, the main tune of track 4 returns emphatically in the finale, first in D major, then in F. (This tune is itself constructed from triadic and scalic formulae, see Ex.1.)

Example 1. 'Phaeacian Games', bars 3-14

Two sections show well the wider tonal range employed by Bedford. 'King Aeolus' (track 2) is a finely-paced movement of great fluidity, with some good keyboard playing. It runs through C major, E flat major, G minor, C major, E flat major, E major, G major to E flat minor. (See Ex.2 for an extract: I've notated the melody and bass lines and implied the inner harmony but omitted the inner semiquaver figuration.) 'The Sirens' (track 6) employs the earthy-angelic girl's choir that features so much in Bedford's work; they're getting to be as much of an institution as Britten's boys. The harmonic scheme — long-held

