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MUSICA NOVA, GLASGOW  
SEPTEMBER 12-18, 1976

BARBARA WINROW

The Scottish National Orchestra's third Musica Nova, held at Glasgow University, continued a venture which, though still to some extent suffering from teething troubles, has considerable potential if it can define clearly its own exact identity and purpose. This seemed to be the general consensus of opinion among those who attended it, and it was a promising feature of the week that lively discussion about some of its more controversial aspects led to the drawing up by participants of a number of positive proposals for the future, which were submitted to the organisers.

Not having myself attended either of the previous Festivals (in 1971 and 1973), it is essentially in such forward-looking terms that I must discuss this one and the balance between its diverse strands. Basically the situation was that four orchestral works, commissioned for the occasion, were presented in a concert forming the climax and conclusion of the Festival, the four composers concerned having been, as it were, introduced at the beginning of the week through a BBC Invitation Concert by the New Music Group of Scotland, who played a chamber work by each. The intervening days were filled by open rehearsals of the commissioned works, seminars for 'advanced composition students' conducted by the guest composers and a variety of evening events, including a choral concert in Glasgow Cathedral at which Penderecki conducted the Scottish premiere of his *Magnificat*.

While competition as such was no part of the Festival's intention, I think most people tacitly conceded pride of place to Harrison Birtwistle's *Melencolia I*, a remarkable work given its finishing touch by the superb playing of Alan Hacker. Two string orchestras, 'placed distinctly apart' create an extraordinary sound world, through which the clarinet inexorably pursues an ever-widening path of exploration, accompanied by comments from the harp (also an essentially solo part, ably performed by Rhona MacKay whose name should surely have appeared on the programme). Birtwistle's fascination with the paradoxes of time comes to the fore in the strange ending where free contrapuntal permutations of melodic and rhythmic units by separate string groups finally coalesce into stillness and are filtered out; and, out of nothing, the clarinet quietly and self-absorbedly embarks afresh on what Birtwistle calls a 'beginning' - only to be cut off decisively by the harp.

Unlike some of the critics, I found Morton Feldman's *Orchestra* also a very satisfying piece to hear. Feldman's sound world, in

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many ways the antithesis of Birtwistle's, is equally distinctive in its translucent, ethereal, but nonetheless resilient mosaic. Among the elements which stood out from this were the semitonal descent in the cellos (a recurrent topic in discussion of the piece, in which Feldman persistently, and understandably, refused to describe what is, after all, a monochrome streak in a multi-coloured fabric as a 'chromatic scale') and the lovely metamorphosis at the end into a coda by two widely-spaced pianos and six softly-played gongs.

Faced with the somewhat formidable challenge of standing beside two such highly individual works, George Newson's *To the Edge of Doom* nevertheless triumphantly preserved a convincing character of its own. Its relation to the Shakespeare sonnet 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds', explained at some length in the programme note, has actually no direct relevance for the listener, and Newson's obvious interest in literary and other non-musical terms of reference found a more direct outlet in the chamber concert when his explicitly theatrical *Valentine* was presented. However, his work is well integrated musically, and *To the Edge of Doom* made an effective opening to the evening. In saying that David Dorward's Piano Concerto (played by Ronald Stevenson and stringless orchestra except for two double basses) survived the challenge less well and tended to emerge as a series of clichés, it should be pointed out that a variety of factors probably prevented Dorward's abilities being shown to best advantage. The choice of medium (perhaps connected in some way with the almost uncanny symmetry of disposition of forces in the concert as a whole) inevitably invited direct comparison with the Birtwistle; and its position as the final (apparently a last-minute alteration) and longest (and incidentally least rehearsed) item of the concert placed on it more strain than it could well stand. A shorter orchestral work, early in the programme, might well have had more success.

Of the other evening events, Jane Manning's and Barry Guy's late-night recital provided some pleasant variety and the electronic concert showed a courageous desire to extend the Festival's territory. This latter event was accompanied by a sort of 'Mrs. Dale's Diary' by Peter Zinovieff - entertaining enough in itself, though advertised under various misleading titles connected with electronic music. The two forums were presumably intended to promote public involvement, but unfortunately the brains-trust set-up, in which an over-large panel faced a scattered audience across a large bleak hall with speech-acoustic problems, was not particularly helpful in furthering this aim, though some good points were made on both sides.

The choral concert is a problematical event to discuss. It was impossible not to welcome the chance of hearing a live performance of the Penderecki but, all things considered, it is questionable whether this was the best occasion for it. The concert did not really integrate into the overall structure of the week, and Hamilton's *Epitaph for this world and Time* did not pair very satisfactorily with the *Magnificat*. Attendance at rehearsals was restricted by various factors, such as distance and time-table clashes; and, in a Musica Nova context, the enormous expense of mounting such an event might perhaps have been better diverted to other purposes.

It is here, in fact, that we come to the central question - for whom should Musica Nova sessions be primarily intended? The organisers' hope was that Glasgow's concert-goers would eavesdrop for a week on rehearsals and discussions and thereby lose some of their inhibitions concerning 'new music'; while, as a by-product, student composers could talk to more experienced and established colleagues. Laudable as these twin aims may seem in theory, in practice the scheme tended to fall between the two. The public fairly predictably, flocked to the cathedral, came to the concert of commissions in passable numbers (one naturally does not meditate, in such a context, on the size of Glasgow's population), attended other concerts and forums thinly and rehearsals hardly at all. Student and other young composers, on the other hand, seeking maximum feedback from the week, often felt somewhat frustrated. The seminar groups (again meeting, unsuitably, in large halls) proved to be too large and, as always in such circumstances, the sessions tended either to develop into lectures or to be dominated by one or two people. Furthermore, a certain barrier to informal contact tended to exist between the students (who lived in halls of residence) and the guest composers (who lived in a hotel), so that the former found little opportunity, for example, to discuss scores with the latter and, with one notable exception, none to discuss them with the professional players. The exception arose from a spontaneous offer by Alan Hacker, who spent a whole afternoon playing pieces written for him literally overnight. In the light of this experience, one of the most important recommendations finally drawn up by participants was that a chamber ensemble (perhaps drawn largely from the orchestra) should be engaged which would play and discuss participants' pieces and provide soloists to lead some of the seminars. Seminar groups, it was unanimously agreed, should be doubled in number and halved in size; five students with one composer would give much better value for time in terms of personal exchange than ten with two.

The moral of all this seems fairly clear. Musica Nova is, in principle a Good Thing (one might say an Excellent Thing) and should exert all its will to survive - to which end it must grow and respond to the demands of its immediate environment like all successful organisms. No-one would decry or seek to check its

endeavours to narrow the notorious gap between the 'public' and 'contemporary music'; but everyone knows by now that this is a sticky problem (calling, I personally think, for skilled research as well as missionary work), and in the short term the most urgent need is to remember that charity begins at home and concentrate more on the existing, and admittedly more specialist, demand. If, in its next incarnation, Musica Nova caters liberally for its future composers - the people, after all, who have scraped together the cost and travelled from all over the country and committed themselves wholly and seriously to the week - then it will have established for itself a strong nucleus with, in fact, an intrinsic long-term interest in promoting the public relations of 'new music'. If it fails to do this, it risks decaying from within - a common enough fate of new enterprises - and all wider issues will then be irrelevant.