Citation

Goldsmiths

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

CHORAL MUSIC

JOHN POTTER

In the week when the London Sinfonietta was packing them in at its tenth birthday concert at the QEH, choral music (an apparently little-known form of music-making) was also proving itself to be alive and well just across the river. The BBC Singers under John Poole continued their much-praised series of mainly French and German music at St John's on January 23 with a programme which included the British première of Gilbert Amy's *Récitatif, air et variation*, composed in 1970. The late 60s and early 70s were fertile times for composers investigating language, as Amy does in this piece, and looking at it across the eight-year gap between its composition and arrival here, it was interesting to speculate on who got what from whom. The work, for 16 solo voices, is an exposition of the physical origins of language. Based on texts taken from the Surrealist poet René Daumal, it begins with two principal elements, voice and breath, which mate (it was quite an evening, what with Strauss's *Die Göttin* and Messiaen's *Cinq rechants*) to produce syllables and then words. After a suitable gestation period the text itself emerges through some appropriately ravishing textures. It then starts to disintegrate and returns to its elemental state, ending with a brief burst of claves and maracas.

It was, I think, the Singers' first real excursion into music-theatre. The entries and exits were written into the score and there was some attempt at spatial effects by regrouping the performers while singing. I was surprised that Amy didn't make more of this, and surprised too by the percussion effects which seemed a rather simplistic way of representing Daumal's 'ultimate discipline'. Nevertheless it was an exciting performance of a difficult score, the singers deploying a comprehensive range of techniques involving unpitched sounds and delicate senza vibrato chords, as well as more full-bodied soloistic lines. Willingness to put the demands of the music before one's preconceived ideas about singing is crucial to works of this kind. It was good to see the BBC Singers doing just that.

A similar attitude is required for Rolf Gehlhaar's *Isotrope*, an astonishingly adventurous commission by the Saltarello Choir, who gave the work its premiere under Richard Bernas on January 26, again at St John's. Although Gehlhaar claims that Stockhausen is not a strong influence on his present work the spirit of the master was never very far away, not least in the galactic conception of the piece. *Isotrope* was inspired by two conflicting theories of the origin of the universe. Both state that it is expanding isotropically ('evenly in all directions'), but each predicts a different outcome. The musical material is related to both theories by two sets of proportions governing all parameters from individual tone colours to the form of the whole piece. The vocal writing is relatively straightforward but to compensate for this the singers have to play pitch-pipes, whistle (there are some ace whistlers in the choir), clap their hands and produce a long list of pitched and unpitched sounds. Two things struck me about this event: one was that Gehlhaar could express complex ideas in a very 'performable' way; the other was the commitment and competence with which the choir tackled the work, in many ways rendering the distinction between professional and amateur meaningless. Food for thought.

It would be interesting to hear an amateur choir having a go at Xenakis's *Nuits*, performed by that most professional of ensembles the John Alldis Choir a month later in the same building. The work, which is textless, was written to commemorate 'unknown political prisoners' but the composer suggests that it can also be seen as 'an exercise in vocal devices'. I imagine most of the audience opted for the latter though the choir seemed more on the side of the prisoners, which made me feel a bit guilty for so desperately wanting to laugh in the 'doing-doing' bits. The performance was suitably monolithic, with some convincing quarter tones, but I can't help feeling that the almost over-sophisticated sound of trained singers gets in the way of the 'uprearious' interpretation Xenakis asks for. It's less a case of losing one's inhibitions than of literally losing one's voice, something that professionals are naturally rather reluctant to do.

The programme also contained a Kyrie and Agnus Dei by Malcolm Singer and Birtwistle's *Narration*, both of which were sung with the usual meticulous attention to detail. But

the most exciting work, and it really did seem to have the audience gripped, was Brian Ferneyhough's *Missa Brevis*. I suspect that part of the fascination lay in wondering just how long the choir could keep up an apparently faultless performance of such a fiercely difficult score. Ferneyhough chose to set the mass because of the resilience of its text (a useful quality for most of his texts I would guess): the words were often deliberately inaudible, seemingly implied rather than stated. Despite the acknowledged lack of religious motive, the gradual transformation from the strictness of the Kyrie to the relative freedom of the Agnus Dei is presumably of more than musical significance. The performance was stunning, especially of the soprano parts which were often cruelly high.

The concert ended with *The Golden Wine is Drunk* by David Bedford. Few contemporary composers would choose to set Dowson and fewer still would get away with it. The sentiments expressed in the poem and the layer upon layer of simple musical motifs that make up the heavy pianissimo chords are more often to be found in rock music (where all the Romantics have gone?). Multi-tracked on melotrons, the piece wouldn't be out of place on a Genesis album. The difference is in the singing: the melting lines need a delicacy which only live voices can give. It was a lovely end to the evening.