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

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

Citation

Schiffer, Brigitte. 1979. 'New Music Diary'. *Contact*, 20. pp. 50-58. ISSN 0308-5066.

NEW MUSIC DIARY

BRIGITTE SCHIFFER

Friday November 3

By scoring her latest piece, *Between Ourselves*, for a chamber ensemble of seven players without a conductor, Judith Weir intended to take up the challenge presented by Susan Bradshaw, who complained in a recent radio talk¹ about the now widespread practice of small ensembles appearing with a conductor. No doubt she took great care in the layout of her piece, which is as easy on the ear as it is on the eye. It should pose few problems to reasonably experienced performers, as it is strongly derivative and could as well have been called 'Homage to Debussy'. It could serve a useful purpose with young players in training, but at its first performance it was easily eclipsed by the Partita of Sebastian Forbes which, although written twelve years ago, sounded newer, less predictable and more rewarding for as excellent a group as the Lontano Ensemble and their conductor on this occasion at the Wigmore Hall, John Carewe.

Wednesday November 8

When Erika Fox decided to set to music texts from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, she must have been unaware of the tight and complex structure of the cycle, because otherwise she would have realised that it is absolutely inconceivable to take any 'fragments' from these poems, let alone 'alter the original order of the words' as she did. Whatever she attempted to achieve — whether the 'reconciliation between the striving of man' (represented by the singers) and 'the impassive and immovable face of nature' (represented by the instruments), or the expression of the inexpressible, the 'innermost life' — her attempt was doomed to failure from the very start. To let the angels speak through the voices of Jane Manning and Stephen Varcoe and allow the instruments to take care of the rest

seems a singularly naive approach, though Erika Fox's score, in every other aspect, is anything but naive. The instrumental writing sounded skilful enough and the Contrapuncti Ensemble, conducted by Michael Lankaster, seemed to have done full justice to the work. However, it would need many more hearings before it would be possible to decode the piece and find 'la clef pour cette parade sauvage'. At the first performance in the QEH the work left the audience bewildered and perplexed.

Wednesday November 15

The Australian Sinfonia (conductor, Patrick Thomas) opened their QEH season with the first performance of *Ring Out the Changes* for two sets of bells and strings by the Australian composer Jennifer Fowler (b. 1939). She set out to explore patterns and relationships and to establish series of durations and dynamics. The bells were so sparingly used that their 'dialogue' was sometimes hardly audible, but their echoes and reflections gave rise to some shining, shimmering textures which lingered in the mind long after the piece had ended. In the second part of the concert, the very charming and very French-sounding Concerto for two pianos and string orchestra by Malcolm Williamson was played by Moura Lymany and the composer, and accompanied with great gusto by the Australian ensemble.

Sunday November 19

Hans-Jürgen von Bose (b. 1953) is a young German composer hardly known in England. However, he enjoys considerable fame in Germany, and is the recipient of a number of prizes and scholarships. *Travesties in a Sad Landscape* was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta for a concert given at the Round House as part of the Goethe Institute events of 'London-Berlin — The Seventies Meet the Twenties'. It was most revealing to hear the new work after a Hindemith *Kammermusik*. When writing their music, both composers were attracted by old German folksongs, and some of the excitement created by Hindemith's folksong arrangements from the 20s repeated itself 50 years later with these *Travesties*. They are, in fact, travesties of an old song treated as a sort of cantus firmus, around which different layers or 'landscapes' are skilfully arranged, creating sometimes an impression of modern collage, at others of medieval parody. True, the 'electronic sound gestures' were lost on the listener, but there was enough variety in the dressing-up of the song and enough imagination in the alienation of the 'landscape' to arouse keen interest, show real talent and raise substantial hopes for the young composer. However, the boldness of the young Hindemith was nowhere matched, and the excitement was due rather to the nostalgia than to the daring of the new work.

Tuesday January 9 — Thursday January 11

The Australian Sinfonia's next concert at the QEH on January 10 featured the first performance of *Mirages* by the Australian composer Barry Conyngham (b. 1944). The 18-minute piece has much atmosphere but little substance, and this is as it should be with a mirage: so ephemeral, so changing. Unfortunately, the changes which occur are neither those of light and its reflections nor those of illusion. They are a set of eight variations that may well 'appear, shift and disappear, suspended or shimmering in a timbral haze', but that are nevertheless set in the most traditional frame. The 'slow unfolding of a song' by which they are accompanied is strangely alien to the soundscapes developed by the orchestra, and although, at a first hearing, *Mirages* yields some enticing sounds, it does not stand up to closer scrutiny and would certainly benefit from some cutting.

The concert clashed with one of the 'Young Artists and 20th Century Music' events of the Park Lane Group which take place every year and invariably come up with the discovery both of some talented young performers and some interesting works by young composers. It was just by luck that I was able to reach the Purcell Room in time to hear Frances Kelly, a most accomplished harpist, give a brilliant performance of *Harmony and Invention*, a piece written for her by Judith Weir which explores 'the harmony derived from a single pedal setting' and 'the large range of sounds to be made on the harp'. The three chordal and two

invention sections are made to interact on each other, and Judith Weir displays a remarkable knowledge of the instrument and its possibilities. Just the same, I was at times reminded of a title once used by Darius Milhaud, who called one of his early song-cycles *Catalogue de fleurs*. What Judith Weir presented sounded more like a catalogue of devices than a consistent piece of music, but the devices were ingeniously put together and played by Frances Kelly with great subtlety.

Dominic Muldowney was one of the young composers whose new works raised the greatest expectancy, and it was gratifying to see that he was represented in two different recitals, one by the oboist Andrew Knights on January 9, the other by the percussionist James Wood on January 11. Obviously the time of the Chartres pieces is over. The sharp, contrasting sounds, elaborate rhythms and one-directional outlay of the early pieces are no longer to be expected, and the fact that, only a few days earlier, I had heard Muldowney conduct his own Double Reed Ensemble in the foyer of the National Theatre and had found precisely those sounds and rhythms was entirely irrelevant. What Muldowney is trying to achieve now is quite the opposite, a very homogeneous sound. *Three Hymns for Agape* for oboe, cor anglais and oboe d'amore achieves precisely that, but little else that I could perceive. Granted the melodic fifths gave the piece a slightly archaic character, but this impression was annihilated by the constantly swelling and diminishing dynamics, the soft romantic interludes and the impressionistic colouring.

There was also a certain lack of motivation which also prevailed in the other piece. *First Show* for percussion and tape starts in a very slow tempo with vibraphone and later marimba. These are joined by tape-delayed vibraphone and marimba, and as more tape sounds are gradually added the density increases without the piece gathering any momentum. The piece is set within a narrow frame of reference and strikes one as static and minimalist without being systemic, and without generating any of the excitement and hypnotism sometimes generated by that kind of music. The work lasts 15 minutes and it provided the soloist, James Wood, with some taxing and also rewarding demands. But as it meanders without direction through the different sequences, one keeps wondering what exactly Muldowney is aiming at.

Monday January 22

At the Wigmore Hall Suoraan, a new group consisting of four instrumentalists and one vocalist and 'founded for the performance of music composed in the last few years', gave three first performances of works by young British composers. James Clarke (b. 1957) has written an eight-minute piece for four instruments, *Aäneen/Out Loud*. It is well shaped, well scored and well proportioned, with a powerful climax in the middle, some virtuoso piano playing (from Claire van Kampen) in the first part and some lyrical flute playing (from Nancy Ruffer) in the second. There is as yet more skill than originality, but that should come at a later stage.

In *Mountainfall*, a piece for solo voice by Michael Finnissy commissioned by Josephine Nendick and inspired by a Noh play, an old woman is taken by two young relatives to a mountain top and left there to die. The work faithfully retraces the different stages of her fading away into the landscape, but not before some cries of acute anguish and suffering have been heard. This is not the first time that Finnissy has been involved with Japan. By incorporating into his new piece some of the ritual aspects of *Tsuru-kame* (a music-theatre piece also based on a Noh play and performed at the Gaudeamus Competition in 1973) and by developing at the same time his very personal melismatic style and extending his repertoire of new vocal techniques, he has considerably deepened his emotional range and widened his lyrical appeal. Singing, humming, moaning and whispering in turn, Josephine Nendick gave a moving performance of this difficult piece, which lasted ten minutes and left a deep impression.

The third new work of the evening was by Richard Emsley (b. 1951). A single sentence, drawn from the Book of Revelation, provides the entire material for *In the Days of the Voice of the Seventh Angel*. Emsley is certainly more articulate in his introductory notes than in his music. This piece lasted 16 minutes and made little impact. Between the new works there was a sharply defined rendering of

Xenakis's *Dmaathen* for oboe (David Powell) and percussion (John Harrod) and a technically most creditable performance of *Discantus I* for solo flute by the Finnish composer Paavo Heininen (b. 1938).

Thursday January 25

In a country where amateurism is held in such high esteem, it was gratifying to note the air of real professionalism displayed by the vocal quartet Electric Phoenix who here gave their third London concert, at St. John's Smith Square, and who, in a remarkably short time, have built up for themselves a reputation for high standards, good programmes and outright fun. Their astonishing achievement has set the imagination of young British composers rotating at high speed, but none of them has yet come up with ideas new enough to match the potential of this ensemble.

The evening started with *Micro-Macro* by the American composer John Anthony Celona (b. 1944). This piece was originally written for the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble of the University of California, San Diego. As a matter of fact, the techniques extended just as far as Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, and although the Phoenix singers and their mixer, Terry Edwards, did their best, nothing much came out of the performance.

As for the new version of Paul Patterson's *Brainstorm*, it sounded as stimulating, the drive was as strong and the exploitation of the Phoenix's abilities as clever as in the first version, performed last year. The theatrical element has been tightened and the length reduced, but it still remains what Meirion Bowen called it then: 'A *tour de force* for composer and performers alike'² — no more, no less.

The *Lamento* by the Cuban-American Odaline de la Martinez (another first performance) was a long, drawn out, slightly melodramatic and over-repetitive essay in a kind of theatrical Sprechgesang on words by St. John of the Cross. The only composer who came up with some new ideas and succeeded in making use of the special brand of vocal techniques of this ensemble was William Brooks (b. 1943), another American composer. His *Four Madrigals* were both witty and clever: studies in new techniques, notation and persiflage, sometimes outright funny and the whole time extremely demanding on the performers. They sang and acted with authority, charm and great stage presence.

Wednesday January 31

In their QEH concert The Fires of London played two works specially written for them: *The Runes of a Holy Island* by Peter Maxwell Davies and *The Cloud of Unknowing* by John Hopkins.

The Runes were originally written for a Lunchtime Magazine programme of the BBC on Radio 4, and this was the first live performance of the work. It consists of five short pieces for an instrumental ensemble of six that evoke the composer's medieval past, his beloved island and his mystic leanings. Lasting just ten minutes, they may well be called trifles, but trifles of a very special kind: what the composer calls their 'picture-postcard qualities'. In their austerity the pieces belong very clearly to the Orkney period. Inspired by a seascape of cliffs and isolation, they vary from each other in tempo, percussion scoring and character, and the time-signature often changes from one bar to the next. There must be plenty of scholarly devices, but they remain hidden behind the drive and high spirits of these appealing little pieces.

The Cloud of Unknowing by John Hopkins (b. 1949) is a more robust piece, but it misses both the fibre and the fervour of *The Runes*. It is over twice as long, but much less substantial, and the rather sparse sound (so suitable to Davies's aphoristic little pieces) is ill fitted for a sonata movement concerned with dialectical processes and development. No doubt the work, based on early religious writings, contains some good ideas, but real motivation seems to be lacking, and with a duration of 25 minutes it considerably overstayed its welcome.

Between these two pieces Stephen Pruslin gave a neat and lucid performance of Elliott Carter's Piano Sonata. The second part of the concert was devoted to Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, sung by Mary Thomas. She sang it at the first concert of the group (then called The Pierrot Players) back in 1967 and has since become a specialist in this most famous classic of the Second Viennese School.

Monday February 5 and Wednesday February 14

The Redcliffe Concert of British Music at the QEH on February 5 featured two works by British composers. The first was *What Does the Song Hope for?* by Robert Saxton. This piece, written by Saxton when he was 21 and first performed at the Gaudeamus Competition in 1974 (when Saxton was acclaimed a kind of British 'Wunderkind') is an Orpheus cantata for soprano, ensemble and tape on words by Auden. The second work was *A Dream of the Seven Lost Stars* for six voices and ensemble by David Bedford. It was written in 1964, when Bedford was 27 and being hailed as a prodigy on which to pin great hopes. The piece is now over 14 years old. It sounded so pretty, was so well planned and so sensitively scored that one listened to the six voices on the stage (the Redcliffe Singers) and the instrumentalists hidden behind the curtain (the Redcliffe Ensemble, conductor Edwin Roxburgh) with a melancholy pleasure, thinking of what was going to come.

It came only a few days later, on February 14, at a London Music Digest concert entirely devoted to works by Bedford given by the London Sinfonietta. On the programme there were early pieces like *That White and Radiant Legend* for soprano, speaker and chamber ensemble (written in 1966, when his leanings towards 'pop' music were just starting), *Pentamino* for wind quintet (which the London Sinfonietta had commissioned and first performed in 1968) and Piano Piece 2 of the same year which (according to Malcolm Barry)³ anticipated the sonority of the Oldfield works.

1968 was also the year in which Bedford started teaching at Queen's College, Harley Street. The two works written for and performed by the pupils of that school at the end of the evening (*Some Bright Stars for Queen's College* of 1970 for chorus and plastic twirly pipes or 'howlers' and a suite from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, an opera for young people written between 1975 and 78) had little to do with his former experimental work in schools with George Self in the early 60s or, for that matter, with straight 'pop'. They did, however, have everything to do with commercialism and sentimental popular taste. At a time when he was closely associated with Cornelius Cardew and John Tilbury his deliberate simplicity had a well-defined reason, but on this occasion, as he stood in front of his pupils, arms raised as if he were Bernstein preparing to conduct Beethoven's Ninth, the so-called simplicity left a nasty after-taste. There was, of course, prolonged cheering from all the numerous relatives of the young performers and from the still more numerous Oldfield fans who had come to applaud their idol. He, incidentally, played only a short obbligato in the last work, and so it turned out to be a happy event for some, a sad experience for others.

In the first part of the Redcliffe concert on February 5 (before the performances of the Saxton and Bedford) Alan Hacker played two works by Stockhausen: *Amour* and *Tierkreis*. *Amour* for clarinet consists of five short pieces, 'musical presents that I wrote with the wish that they should bring much happiness'. And that is exactly what they sound like: lovely little melodies, each one characterised by its own set of gestures. *Tierkreis*, on the other hand, is a series of twelve melodies connected with the twelve signs of the Zodiac and originally written for musical boxes. Each melody is 'composed with all the bars and proportions in keeping with the characteristics of its respective star sign'. They can be performed in any combination by a melodic and/or a chordal instrument. The version prepared by Alan Hacker and occasionally accompanied on the organ by Peter Seymour proved haunting and memorable.

Wednesday February 21

A chamber orchestra version of *Tierkreis*, prepared by the composer himself, was played by the London Sinfonietta at their QEH concert the following week. In this version the different characters were more sharply described and the details more closely focused. However, it missed the haunting qualities of the solo version.

The programme of this Sinfonietta evening had been designed with its twelve principal players in mind, and they were presented in different combinations of one, two and eight. The evening culminated in a work by Nigel Osborne (b. 1948), commissioned for the occasion and scored for the twelve players and a guest, the guitarist John Williams. The purpose of the concert was to dispense with a conductor,

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Full details from Kirklees Information Office, Albion Street, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

Fourth Yorkshire Arts Association Composers Competition

Selected works will be rehearsed by **Gemini** (director **Peter Wiegold**) and **James Wood** during the Huddersfield Festival. Works should be offered for instrumental quartet (flute/piccolo/alto flute, clarinets/soprano saxophone, violin/viola, cello/ with or without soprano voice or solo percussion. Prize money may be offered but the emphasis is on rehearsing in workshops with the possibility of public performances for the best pieces.

Full details from Yorkshire Arts Association Music Officer, Richard Phillips, Glyde House, Glydegate, Bradford BD5 0BQ (Tel: Bradford 23051)

Northern Contemporary Music Circuit 1979/80

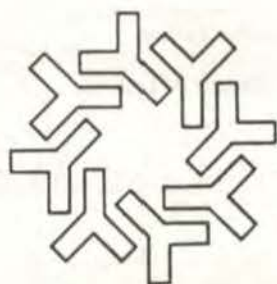
Tours by **Whispering Wind Band**, **Fitzwilliam String Quartet** and **Alan Hacker**, **Yorkshire Imperial Metals Band**, **Sheffield University Piano Trio**, **Bruno Canino** and **Antonio Balista**, **Lindsay String Quartet** and the **Leeds Wind Quintet**.

Full details from Music Officer, Yorkshire Arts Association, Glyde House, Glydegate, Bradford BD5 0BQ (Tel. Bradford 23051)

Contemporary Music Network in Yorkshire 1979/80

Concerts on tour by **Ian Carr** with **Nucleus**, **John Tilbury** and **Denis Smalley**, **Bobby Wellins' Sextet**, **Arditti String Quartet**, **Nash Ensemble**, **London Sinfonietta**, **John Alldis Choir**, **Elton Dean's Ninesense**, **Five Centuries Ensemble** and **London Jazz Composers' Orchestra**.

Full details from Music Officer, Yorkshire Arts Association, Glyde House, Glydegate, Bradford BD5 0BQ (Tel. Bradford 23051)



Yorkshire Arts Association

and this piece involved a special scheme of time and coordination.

Osborne describes the first movement of *In Camera* as a kind of give-and-take between the different instrumentalists. The second movement is very fast and elaborate and presents a high risk in performance which the composer does nothing to avoid. In the final movement — an accompanied solo-recitative for the guitar ('written with a sideways glance at Schoenberg': particularly at the last scene of *A Survivor from Warsaw*) — Osborne tries to penetrate to the very core or heart of the instrument. This exploration started in 1978 with a piece called *After Night*, commissioned by the guitarist Rose Andresier.

Osborne calls the three movements of *In Camera* nocturnes: dark pieces inhabited by cool passion and painted in sombre colours, with long silences and low dynamics. *In Camera* is a piece of real chamber music involving constant interaction and decision making. The twelve members of the Sinfonietta played with great determination and commitment, and John Williams gave a remarkable performance of his difficult and unspectacular part.

Saturday February 24

The performance of works by Stockhausen, Bedford and Saxton may have been a safe bet, but by presenting in their next programme, at the Purcell Room, a young composer never before heard in public, Redcliffe Concerts took a considerable risk. This is precisely what creative programme planning is all about. In 1978 — as he was embarking on his undergraduate life at King's College, Cambridge, after having spent a year in Paris at the Conservatoire — George Benjamin (b. 1960) wrote his Octet 'on the request of Francis Routh' and with a publisher (Faber) ready to print the finished product. The amazing skill displayed in the Octet can, no doubt, be traced back to Messiaen, his former teacher. However, this is not the case with the sound, which strikes one as being highly personal, or with the scoring, so transparent and so clear, purposeful and uncluttered. There is also a great freshness and a certain sense of humour which can be detected throughout, but nowhere as conspicuously as in the coda, a short 'leggiero' only five bars long, which comes after all has been said and done and the preceding allegro has died down. Piccolo combined with pizzicato in the high strings and a bourdon in the low strings and a flourish of the celesta all add the final touch of charm and high spirits to this attractive little piece and faintly evoke the last movement of Ligeti's Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet ('Is that all?' Alice timidly asked. 'That's all,' said Humpty Dumpty. 'Good-bye.')

The Piano Sonata that followed was written at an earlier date and showed less originality. It is the piece of an exuberant young virtuoso who has learned from Messiaen how to write for the piano and from Yvonne Loriod how to play it. He did so in a most spectacular fashion, with special attention to careful pedalling and resonances. In the second part of the programme some of the Redcliffe players gave a most creditable performance of Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

Sunday February 25

A particularly interesting programme, which included the British première of Rolf Gehlhaar's *Camera Obscura* for brass quintet and the London première of Richard Orton's *Brass Phase* for twelve brass players, was presented at the Riverside Studios by Richard Bernas and his excellent Music Projects players. The music of Gehlhaar is not normally very endearing to the ear. In this piece, too, the sound is stark and sombre, except for those rare moments when a shaft of light falls on a corner of the 'camera obscura' which is then momentarily lit. Otherwise the music is dark and aggressive, and yet there is something irresistibly compelling about it. Just as in the music of Xenakis, there is something that makes one feel that every sound and non-sound, every sequence and every silence, is significant and essential. I must say that Gehlhaar's reference to relativity bypassed me completely, but then it would certainly have helped me if I could have heard the piece at least twice.

The work, Gehlhaar tells us, represents an attempt to create a musical structure in which all the parameters may

be experienced as equally significant. In order to guarantee the uniqueness of every event, independent scales were set up for each parameter. The listener's attention is mainly focused on the gradual changing of timbres and durations, densities and articulations, and dynamics and registers. Great demands are made on his discerning ear and his analytical mind, but the result is intensely rewarding.

In *Brass Phase* by Richard Orton the players are given much scope to improvise. It is a piece in which the brass players have fun making fun of brass music, and the audience has a marvellous time watching the players perform their antics and listening to the 'variations' of a circus fanfare and a Salvation Army chorale. Audience participation may even have increased the effect, though it is difficult to see how this could have been achieved. But without it some of the events, such as an interlude played on different kinds of mouthpiece, still drove home the piece's point effectively enough and it was much enjoyed by all.

Elliott Carter's *A Fantasy about Purcell's Fantasy on One Note* for brass players was just the right introduction to the concert, and Robert Saxton's *Reflections on Narciss and Goldmund*, with its elaborate textures, provided a welcome contrast and relaxation after Gehlhaar's *Camera Obscura* and before Orton's *Brass Phase*.

March: Four Friday Concerts

March was the month of the 'Four Fridays'. Sir William Glock, chairman of the London Orchestral Concerts Board, succeeded in getting the 'Big Four' London orchestras to give a series of four concerts in the RFH on March 9, 16, 23 and 30, each of which included at least one contemporary work. This in itself must be a formidable achievement, and no matter what reservations or criticisms come to one's mind, Glock deserves wholehearted congratulations on having won his battle against extremely heavy odds: during one of the pre-concert talks he himself hinted at the considerations which had to be taken into account when arranging the four evenings. And although one may dispute the actual choice of works, one should not forget that every programme had to be negotiated with the governors of the respective orchestra. Whether one is in favour of mixing new music with works from the standard repertoire is another matter, but the attempt to avoid creating a contemporary music ghetto may well have coincided with an attempt not to antagonise the orchestral musicians beyond endurance. Glock must have displayed considerable diplomacy in his negotiations, and as long as this first enterprise is going to have a sequel (another similar series is planned for May 1980) one should welcome it unreservedly.

The series was opened by the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus who performed Cristobal Halffter's *Cantata Yes speak out yes* under the composer's direction. This was written in response to a commission from the United Nations to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1968 and it was first performed by the Minnesota Orchestra and Chorus in the UN General Assembly Headquarters in New York. The text, by the American poet Norman Corwin, is based very firmly on the articles of the Declaration itself. Halffter, who for the first time in his life had at his disposal unlimited resources and was therefore completely free in his choice of scoring, uses colossal forces to drive home his point and attempts to create an atmosphere of anguish which would add a new dimension to the text, even though this might bring about 'a slight loss of intelligibility'. In fact, and without any blame being attached to the eight excellent soloists led by Jane Manning and Michael Rippon, there was no intelligibility at all, only great waves of sound occasionally pierced by shrill screams of pain and despair. One could perhaps argue about a lack of balance, but the fact remains that the experience was full of frustration and disappointment.

On the second Friday the LSO under David Atherton gave the first British performance of Maxwell Davies's *Dances from Salome* in the only concert which drew anything like a capacity audience. Drawn from the two-hour ballet score which was commissioned for performance last year by the Danish choreographer Flemming Flindt and written within five months, the piece constitutes a symphonic work in its own right. It is quite possible to 'follow the purely musical argument rather than attempt to grasp the action' in the

way which the composer wants us to, although it is hardly possible to overlook the programmatic implications of the music. While the use of plainsong and magic square lend it an intellectual air, the music sounds anything but scholarly and in fact appeals to our imagination rather than our intellect: a fact which must have contributed considerably to its overwhelming success.

The contemporary music in the third Friday concert was shared between the John Alldis Choir and the LPO. Alldis conducted his choir in a very beautiful performance of Giuseppe Sinopoli's *Requiem Hashshirim*, underlining a perfection of form and sound which almost defeats its own purpose, having a shattering rather than a moving effect. The LPO was joined by eight members of the Alldis Choir for a performance of Berio's *Sinfonia*, dating, like the Halffter, from 1968 but by now a recognised classic of modern music, which Walter Susskind conducted with great panache. The two works scored a considerable success.

At the fourth concert Wolfgang Rennert conducted the RPO in the premiere of Tavener's *The Immurement of Antigone*. In the past this composer has drawn on Latin and Byzantine chant, and myth and mysticism have been his main sources of inspiration. Greek tragedy is, however, another matter, and even when retold by Gerard McLarnon, Tavener's librettist, *Antigone* still remains the work of Sophocles and can be reduced neither to a tale of crime and punishment nor to the level of sacrifice, especially of Christian sacrifice. But this, strangely enough, is the context in which it is placed, the division of the entombment into three parts — from feet to loins, from loins to heart and from heart to head — allowing for a whole range of extraneous matter such as lost opportunities connected with the womb, sentimental losses connected with the heart and the identification of her father with God, the highest hierarchy being associated with the head.

The emotions range from fear and anxiety to panic and despair, but nowhere is there tragedy in the sense of Greek antiquity, nor does one feel a genuine dramatic impulse. This must also have been due to the soloist, Vivien Townley (soprano) who, while delivering her part in an impressive way, remained not only incomprehensible but also unmoved and unmoving throughout and whose costume and gestures did little to intensify the atmosphere. Rennert conducted with great authority and musicianship, but it was only Bruckner's Fourth Symphony in the second half which created a lasting impression.

Friday March 2

By strange coincidence the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra paid a visit to the RFH exactly a week before the first LOCB concert to play Tavener's *Palintropos* for solo piano, brass, percussion and strings, having given the premiere the previous night in their home city. *Palintropos* was written on the island of Patmos in 1977-78; it thus belongs to Tavener's 'Greek period' and is meant to reflect 'the extraordinary change of colours in the course of the day'. Elaborate textures are the most striking feature of the work. Abundant use is made of very rapid repeated notes on the piano, which have a tinkling effect and which, when supported by celesta, harp and handbells, are very reminiscent of the sound picture of a Greek island, especially on a Sunday morning when the wild sound of all the churchbells ringing at the same time fills the air and calls the inhabitants to the service.

Although the piano never actually takes over or even dominates, the work makes quite considerable demands on the soloist which were met by Stephen Bishop-Kovacevich with great virtuosity. There is plenty of imagery and colour and even occasionally a slight hint of bouzouki, but the music is so swamped by decorations that it is difficult to penetrate to its centre, let alone to find a hard core. The piece is in four sections, turning back on itself in the middle as the title indicates so that it finishes, as it began, with a single long held C on the double basses, a pivotal note of the whole work. A piano concerto in C major? Not quite, but almost.

Wednesday March 7

While orchestral concerts monopolised the attention in March, a number of very rewarding chamber music events also took place, regrettably often two on the same day. In the Lontano Ensemble's Westmoreland concert in the

Purcell Room the two vocal items had to be dropped owing to the indisposition of the singer, Karen Jensen. As a result Ingrid Culliford (flute) and James Wood (percussion) were the undisputed stars of an evening which opened with a brilliant performance of Laszlo Sari's colourful and atmospheric *Sonanti No. 2*. Ingrid Culliford was also the soloist in Pawlu Grec's *Duo II* for flute and piano, a piece full of contrasts and conflicts which were thrown into relief by the pianist Odaline de la Martinez, the ensemble's director. Lontano also gave a very clear and transparent account of the intricate *Poems, Aria and Interlude* for flute, clarinet, violin and cello by Malcolm Stewart, and the evening ended with Stockhausen's *Zyklus* for solo percussion played by James Wood with an unflinching sense of time and texture.

Earlier the same evening the Contemporary Music Repertory class of the Royal Academy of Music presented three particularly demanding and interesting works. The concert started with *Ricercari in memoriam Luigi Dallapiccola* by the Scottish composer Edward Harper. The lyrical flow of the two outer ricercari is set off against the sharp, even slightly aggressive character of the middle part with its fanfare-like bursts and explosions. The writing is less polyphonic than the title would suggest, but a strong Italian flavour can be felt throughout, and if there are no direct quotations from Dallapiccola there are certainly strong reminiscences of the Italian master to whom the 15-minute work is dedicated.

The conductor John Carewe must be congratulated on including Maxwell Davies's extremely difficult *A Mirror of Whiteness* in the programme. The haunting, obsessive quality of this fascinating piece was astonishingly well caught by the chamber ensemble of 14 young players who gave a committed and convincing performance.

The concert ended with the premiere of Heinz-Karl Gruber's *Photo-fit Pictures* 'on the track of a suspect theme.' This is a kind of musical hide-and-seek, very skilful and amusing, in which both performers and audience have to reconstruct the original theme from hints, short quotations and gestures which may as easily be hidden in a fleeting xylophone passage as in a short trumpet fanfare. The theme's 'contours' are mostly distorted, as they usually are in 'identikit' or 'photo-fit' police pictures, and from these and from 'characteristics' difficult to detect when removed from their context the piece is built up, until a final 'confrontation' confirms the initial 'surmises' and releases the suspense in a surprising way.³

Wednesday March 14

The East German mezzo-soprano Roswitha Trexler, a major exponent of political songs from the 20s and 30s, took part in two concerts of music by Hanns Eisler in London during March. The first was organised by the Anglo-Austrian Music Society and the Austrian Institute and given at St. John's Smith Square. In the programme notes Eisler was described as 'perhaps the last great representative of the Second Viennese School': a gross misrepresentation which raised wrong expectations and was all the more frustrating since no attempt was made to substantiate this preposterous claim. Neither the music of the suites, taken from long forgotten film scores of the Berlin years and competently performed by students of Trinity College of Music, nor the Brecht songs (*Die Rundkopfe und die Spitzkopfe*, for instance) or the *Zeitungsausschnitte*, marking Eisler's break away from Schoenberg, had the slightest connection with the Second Viennese School, and it was only through the Brecht sonnets on poems by Goethe and Schiller, written in the USA 'when Eisler retrograded and used serial techniques again' (!), that a link with Vienna could be established. Eisler the 'composer of the people', as he was also described in the programme, was represented by the *Solidaritätslied* of 1930 and the *Einheitsfrontslied* of 1934, two pieces of purely functional music which should never have been exposed on a concert platform. The programme at the ICA on March 18 — devised, as was the one at St. John's, by the Eisler pupil David Blake — was in every respect more informative.

Wednesday March 21

A sixth RFH concert to include a contemporary work was given by the BBC SO who gave the British premiere of Carter's *A Symphony of Three Orchestras*. The work is dedicated to Boulez, who conducted the first performance in New York and the European premiere in Paris, both in 1977. David Atherton conducted the London performance and displayed great insight and intelligence in disentangling the numerous strands of the work and in coordinating its many different levels.

The piece was inspired by Hart Crane's poem *The Bridge* which describes New York harbour. Before the start of the first 'movement' the high instruments of the orchestra are carried away in a vast sweep symbolising the flight of seagulls high in the sky. Their descent leads to an extremely virtuosic trumpet cadenza, one of the score's highlights, of which, alas! only bits and pieces could be heard at this performance. This introduction leads directly to the first of the twelve 'movements' in the sense in which Carter uses the term: individually characterised blocks of musical material distributed evenly between the three orchestras, each of which has its own tempi, rhythms, articulations and character. There is extraordinary fluidity in the functioning of these movements and in the interlocking, overlapping and superimposition of the orchestras, and although one is unable to follow the whole process in detail, there is something overpowering in the sheer richness and vigour of the thought, and on the intellectual as well as on the emotional level one is entirely involved and absorbed.

For conductor, performers and audience alike it is a difficult and demanding work which reveals new aspects at every hearing and doubtlessly still holds many discoveries in store. Such a work should be performed at regular intervals in order to give the public a chance to unravel its many mysteries, to penetrate deeper into its organisation and the better to enjoy its terrific impulse, power and complexity.

Thursday March 22

At the Royal College of Music the 20th Century Ensemble celebrated its tenth anniversary with an exceptionally ambitious programme devised by its director Edwin Roxburgh, who conducted the British premiere of Stockhausen's *Trans*. This contains a significant theatrical element, but the aural and visual aspects are wholly indivisible: 'all that you hear and see is integrated with the entire piece'. Rather than do without the curtain, pink gauze, proper steeped seating of the violins and precisely gauged balance between the string orchestra in the forefront and the invisible backstage brass and percussion, it may have been preferable to have limited the very long programme to the accompanying Varèse, Janáček and Bernard Stevens and to have let people listen to the DG recording, equally depriving them of the visual element, of course, but otherwise more satisfactory. The performance no doubt represented a noble effort, but the magic of *Trans* never materialised and Stockhausen's dream has yet to be revealed to British audiences. In the first part of the programme, conducted by Stephen Savage, the ensemble gave a vivid and pungent account of Varèse's *Octandre* and the first performance of Stevens's Second Symphony; the evening ended with Janáček's lively and enjoyable Sinfonietta.

Tuesday March 27

The 20s also found their way into this year's Camden Festival which featured another concert given by Richard Bernas and his Music Projects group which I heard in rehearsal. In addition to Weill's Violin Concerto of 1924 played by Beverley Davison, the programme included the *Ballet mécanique* by Weill's exact contemporary, the young Franco-American composer and pianist George Antheil (1900-59), originally scored for eight pianos, a player piano and assorted percussion including several doorbells and two aeroplane propellers. Bernas's ensemble did a reduced version for four pianos and percussion with electronically-synthesised propellers.

It may well be true that the ballet was 'conceived in a new form, that form specifically being the filling out of a certain time-canvas with musical abstractions and sound material composed and contrasted against one another with the

thought of time-values rather than tonal values . . .', as the composer later claimed in a letter to Nicolas Slonimsky dating from 1936.⁴ But at the work's first performance in Paris on June 26, 1926, it was taken for 'music of the new machine-age' and frantically applauded for the wrong reasons. At the Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, Music Projects gave an electrifying performance of this youthful work in rehearsal which in the evening was again, whether for the right or the wrong reasons, apparently applauded with great enthusiasm and which, nearly 53 years after its premiere, sounded as provoking and exhilarating as it must have done then.

I took the opportunity of going to the rehearsal for this concert in order to be able to attend the final programme in the BBC's series of contemporary concerts in London music colleges which took place at the Guildhall School of Music the same evening. Elgar Howarth and Harrison Birtwistle conducted the London Sinfonietta who played works by Nicholas Sackman, Birtwistle and Stravinsky. Sackman (b. 1950) is a new and promising voice among British composers. His 23-minute *Doubles* for twelve winds and three percussionists, a BBC commission, was given its premiere. The title refers partly to the old variation form and partly to the presence of two separate instrumental groups which are engaged in a game of echo and pre-echo, image and mirror-image and other suchlike devices. The aural effect, however, is predominantly one of elaborate decoration alternating with extended and rather heavy-handed percussion episodes ill-suited to the dry acoustics of the hall, and in spite of the very personal scoring and some imaginative ideas, interest died long before the piece had ended.

Birtwistle himself conducted the performance of his *Prologue* and *Epilogue* which opened each half of the programme. Although several years separate the composition of these two monodramas, they have much in common. Both are scored for one male voice and seven instruments, mainly brass, and their durations are five and seven minutes respectively. In *Prologue* a setting of the 'Watchman's speech' from the Agamemnon of Aeschylus — a dialogue between an intensely expressive tenor (Neil Jenkins) and a bassoon, punctuated by furious and violent interjections from two trumpets — is heard against a many-hued background of horn, trombone, violin and double bass. In the *Epilogue* a setting of Ariel's 'Full fathom five' from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* — a hushed dialogue between baritone (Stephen Roberts) and horn, punctuated by the mysterious sound of six tam-tams (two players) — is heard against a background of four pianissimo trombones. Mysterious and powerful, with images of great distress and anguish as well as of hope and renewal, these two short pieces, in turn harsh and subdued, stark and tender, are very typical of Birtwistle's language, his pace and his unrelenting drive. For the performance of Stravinsky's *Canticum Sacrum* the London Sinfonietta was joined by the BBC Singers and the evening ended on a note of plenitude and religious fervour.

Wednesday March 28

Another Camden Festival offering this year was the British premiere of Henze's realisation of Paisiello's *Don Quixote* at the Round House. Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816) left some hundred opera buffa scores; Henze chanced on this one in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Naples and thought it suitable for a kind of popular entertainment at Montepulciano, the Tuscan village where he holds his annual summer festival.

Nothing could be more quixotic than Henze's attempt to bridge the gap between avantgarde and popular musics. In order to involve the local population in the performance, the opera was rescored for wind instruments, to be played by the village's brass band (in London pupils of the William Ellis School), and a highly sophisticated ensemble of eleven players including four different keyboard instruments played by one performer (here Valda Plunkett). Conducted by the gifted young Jan Latham Koenig, this provided a piquant accompaniment for Paisiello's recitatives and arias, giving a 20th century touch to an 18th century piece. The Phoenix Opera team presented an enchanting production which would no doubt have scored an even greater success if the proportions had been more in line with those of an 'entertainment'. As it was, the

performance lasted two and a half hours and boredom set in long before the end.

NOTES:

¹Later published as 'Whatever Happened to Chamber Music?', *Tempo*, No. 123 (December 1977), pp.7-9.

²In his review in *The Guardian* (May 18, 1978), p.10.

³In his brief discussion of the piece in the course of an article on Bedford in 'Composers Today', *Contact 15* (Winter 1976-77), p.5.

⁴Quoted in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music since 1900* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937; fourth edition, 1971), p. 351.