David Roberts
Arts Lab Scores

Lyell Cresswell, *Drones IV*, for tuba (Birmingham: Arts Lab Music Publishing, c1977)
Simon Emmerson, *Variations*, for tuba (c1977)
T. J. Endrich, *Steps*, for clarinet and soprano (c1979)
Keith Gifford, *Momentella*, for clarinet (c1978)
Richard Orton, *Ambience*, for bass trombone and tape (c1977)
____, *Concert Musics 1 to 7* (c1978)
____, *Mug Grunt* (c1978)
____, *Pièce de résistance*, for piano (c1978)
____, *Sawlo Seed (Alchemusic for Voices)* (c1979)
Melvyn Poore, *Vox superius*, for tuba (c1977) John Schneider, *TBA*, for solo bass instrument (c1978) Tim Souster, *Heavy Reductions*, for tuba and tape (c1978)
____, *Quints Jam*, for four sliding instruments and two dual-trace oscilloscopes (c1979)
Jan Steele, *All Day*, for voice and piano (c1978)
Trevor Wishart, *Polysaccharides*, for eight clarinets (c1979)
____, *Tuba mirum*, for prepared tuba, electrically operated audio-visual mutes, tape, and lighting (n.d.)

available from Arts Lab Music, Holt Street, Birmingham B7 4BA

A review of scores from Birmingham Arts Laboratory has been rather slow to find its way into print in *Contact*, and as may be seen from the publication dates listed above, after an initial flurry of scores following the launching of their publishing project in 1977,[1] the flow dried up. I hope that Arts Lab Music has merely entered a period of dormancy and has not suffered a premature extinction, for it has brought forward a group of works slightly out of the ordinary and presented them in a variety of attractive formats. The scores are mostly loose leaf, and different shapes, sizes, and colours, with decorations or illustrations, some humorous; they are not bound in covers but come in large brown envelopes. The bundle of scores under review is rather diverse and my discussion is uneven: the amount of space I give to each does not necessarily correlate with quality.

The main shaping force on the content of the Arts Lab Music catalogue was Melvyn Poore, tuba player, composer, and former director of music at Birmingham Arts Lab. He has encouraged the production of new music for the tuba and six of the scores were written for the instrument. Poore has developed a variety of extended playing techniques and these are called on frequently in this group of compositions. His own *Vox superius* (1976) makes effective use of a large complement of techniques, including, as the title hints, singing while playing to produce chords. (And quite respectable chords too—not like nasty woodwind multiphonics.) Simon Emmerson's *Variations* (1976) employ the same effect plus breath tones, microtonal inflections, key clicks, and both key and lip trills; durations in the piece are not firmly fixed but are governed by the player's breath and articulative capacities. Lyell Cresswell's *Drones IV* (1977) contains the curiously vague direction 'Any high pitched drone may be used and it continues throughout the piece. It should begin and end as loudly as possible, but loudness may be varied ad lib. during the rest of the work.' The tuba part consists of fragments and requires singing while playing, instrumental growling on pedal notes while growling vocally, and so on.

TBA (1976) by John Schneider is dedicated to Melvyn Poore, but we are told in a rather mischievous note that the title has nothing to do with tubas at all, but stands for 'To Be Arranged', and that the piece may be played by any bass instrument. This being the case, extended techniques are (perhaps mercifully) more or less out of the question for once, and *TBA* relies on shape rather than colour (though, possibly to compensate, the score is printed on violent yellow paper). The work consists of 36 modules, each of which lasts no more than a few seconds and presents a unified musical character, such as all *staccato* notes with an emphasis on repetition of minor seconds, or wide-ranging *legato* phrases mostly of four or five notes. These modules are arranged as a 6×6 matrix through which the performer is free to move under certain restraints. The modular arrangement aside, the only notational novelty is the graphic indication of dynamics on a five-line stave, which seems both a precise and an intuitive way of representing nuances.

A simple music-theatre element is introduced in Tim Souster's *Heavy Reductions* for tuba and tape (1977). The performance begins with the concert hall in darkness. Sounds of water are heard from the tape. A murky green 'underwater' light fades up to reveal the tuba player, who reads (in English) the opening stage directions of *Das Rheingold.* The tubist then begins to play a harmonic skeleton of the prelude to the opera and is joined after a short interval by the tape, which simulates a simple time-delay system, so that it plays in continual canon with the instrument. Occasionally the player breaks off to read further stage directions. The ten-minute piece ends as it began with the sounds of water. An elegant idea that should please all fans of E flat major.

The dramatic element in Trevor Wishart's powerful and impressive *Tuba mirum* (1978) is far more elaborate. A prisoner in a 'psychiatric hospital' makes a variety of experiments with a tuba. At first these are bizarre and aimless, but gradually hints of clarity and coherence emerge, until there comes a culminating moment of beauty and self-realisation. In the end, though, the prisoner is liquidated by three silent and anonymous doctors-cum-bureaucrats, whom we have seen discussing his case throughout. I have nothing but admiration for Wishart's willingness to do for himself any job that needs doing: he invents the scenario, composes the music, prepares the taped material, builds the props and scenery, constructs the modifications to the tuba (racks to hold motor horns, duck calls, train whistles, fairy lights, and so on), builds three new types of tuba mute, designs and makes the electronic gadgetry, and draws the score, which includes exhaustive instructions for staging. The musical notation is complex, for rather than give a fully determinate series of instructions to the soloist, Wishart provides a network of signs that indicate repertories of elements, the mix between elements, and the transformations that are to be worked on them. Consequently the work must be extraordinarily demanding in its calls on the player's commitment, as well as

on his technique and acting ability.

The other item by Trevor Wishart, *Polysaccharides* for eight clarinets (1969), looks pretty much as you'd expect a piece for eight clarinets to look—after all, you wouldn't use that combination unless you wanted a fairly homogeneous effect. It's a relatively early piece, lacking the music-theatre elements that one normally associates with the composer, but it would be intriguing to hear. A group of good amateurs should be able to manage it. *Momentella* for solo clarinet (1977) by Keith Gifford is another piece that should present no very great difficulties to a clarinettist with a modestly extended technique: it's a well-constructed though rather slight piece in eight short sections. (The score is a rather depressing blue.)

I've always thought of myself as a pretty averagely sympathetic sort of fellow, but pieces like Tom Endrich's *Steps* for clarinet and soprano (1976) bring out the Goth and the Vandal in me: its *sensitivity* is just a bit more than I can take. When I read that the piece is 'dramatically concerned with the subtle appearance of such qualities as beauty, longing, and response, and their placement within the context of existence—varyingly fluid, stable, rich, and empty', I begin to see the virtues of such musical phenomena as Deep Purple or Motorhead. All this is, of course, terribly unfair on Dr Endrich, who has talent, and a good feel for musical contour, but in the old days one would have prescribed a stiff course in fugue.

Jan Steele is another composer who has worked at Birmingham Arts Lab. His *All Day*, for voice and piano (1972), a setting of a James Joyce poem, appeared in an orchestrated version on a record on the Obscure label. The note to the score makes suggestions as to how this haunting, much transmogrified twelve-bar blues could be realised for ensemble.

Tim Souster has a marked fondness for giving polyvalent names to his works, but even by his own standards the title *Quints Jam* (1971, rev. 1973, 1976) contains a screamingly awful pun. The piece is for four 'sliding' instruments (sine-wave generators are recommended) and two dual-trace oscilloscopes. It consists of about a quarter of an hour of very slow *glissandi* from fifths (i.e. quints) to unisons and vice versa. The score *looks* as if a performance would be interesting, but it's extraordinarily difficult to tell for sure.

Over the years I have heard many complimentary reports of the music of Richard Orton, who teaches at York University, but have never encountered it in the flesh. So it's good to see Arts Lab Music bring out a group of five works by this composer. *Mug Grunt* (1972) is a music-theatre piece for three male performers with large mugs. They sit facing the audience and make various stylised movements of their heads and mug arms to the accompaniment of grunts and other indistinct vocal sounds. All this is to be done according to a rigorously notated score, which must be memorised by the performers, and requires nothing less than a *tour de force* of co-ordination between the three parts. Both the idea and its execution seem very appealing. It is less easy to weigh up *Ambience* for bass trombone and tape (1975) without actually having heard the tape. The composition is dedicated to Jim Fulkerson, who gave it its first performance in the Wigmore Hall on 17 May 1975.

Pièce de résistance for piano solo (1969), dedicated to Richard Bernas, maintains until the very end a constant rocking motif in 3+3+2/8, which is transformed very slowly by passing through different tonal and near-tonal chord progressions. As with any repetitive music, such a description scarcely does the composition justice, for all kinds of unexpected psychoacoustic by-products are liable to emerge in performance. *Sawlo Seed* for voice or a group of voices (1972) arose out of Orton's experiments in forming symbols from the superposition of typewriter characters. The new symbols created are interestingly intricate and ambiguous; they may be seen as things in themselves or decomposed into their constituents. Using his overlay technique, Orton took two texts—one from James Joyce, the other from Edgar Allan Poe—and superposed them letter-for-letter and then grouped the resulting characters into 'words' according to a news item in the *Daily Telegraph.* The six pages of the score present the text in successive stages of magnification, so that whereas on the first page there are 83 'words', on the last the same space is occupied by a single character. At the foot of each page there appears a sequence of chords to which the accompanying text is to be sung. Any portion of the text from a single 'word' to the whole thing may be chanted one or more times. 'Above all, allow the phonetic implications and possibilities of the portion of the text being used to suggest a strange new phonic language; enter into this language fully and allow the language to express yourself.' This seems to me a good piece of experimental music, for it holds the rational and irrational in an interesting balance and presents what I find an intriguing challenge as to how to turn it into sonic reality.

By contrast, *Concert Musics 1-7*, a group of text pieces, seem to me to lack the vital spark that provokes or charms the performers to make an imaginative leap into musical activities of which they were previously unaware that they were capable. Asking performers to produce a 'continuous or rapidly repeating sound' (*Concert Music 1*) for several minutes scarcely offers such a stimulus. A text piece ought to be an invitation that the performers will wish to accept, rather than an instruction that they must obey: George Brecht, La Monte Young, Cardew, Stockhausen, and Christian Wolff have managed to offer such an irresistible invitation. To see what can be done with a one-line score, compare the rather tame *Concert Music 2*—'Play no note intentionally'—with a masterpiece among verbal scores, La Monte Young's 'Some of them were very old grasshoppers'.

[1] See Melvyn Poore, 'Report on Birmingham Arts Lab Music (September 1977)', *Contact 18* (Winter 1977-8), pp.45-6.