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Musica '83

Musica '83, Strasbourg, 19 September-9 October 1983

The combined initiatives of the French Ministry of Culture, Radio France, and the town and regional councils, produced in Strasbourg Musica '83, an exciting three-week programme of orchestral and chamber concerts, music theatre, music and dance, and music and cinema. The result was undoubtedly the largest and most successful festival of its kind to have taken place in France for many years. Nine of the events were shared with a sister festival in Rome. With adequate financial backing assured, a festival director, Laurent Bayle, and an eminent programme committee¹ were appointed to the task of devising a festival that would feature works by established 20th-century composers alongside more recent works by the younger generation:² over 65 composers in all were represented and their works were played by a formidable line-up of orchestras, ensembles, and soloists.³

At its inception Musica '83 chose to pay homage to Varèse on the centenary of his birth, and 'la couleur Varèse' established the main artistic premise for much of the programming. This concept was not used, however, to highlight direct and explicit connections between Varèse and other composers: the term 'la couleur Varèse' was coined in an attempt

to explain more metaphysical, less tangible associations between the works chosen. It symbolises a seriousness of creative intent, pursuit of the same artistic goals, the same striving for expression, the same intellectual drive. This is not to suggest that any grandiose statement was being made about the state of the art. On the contrary, the idea is only sketchily explained in the documentation and I suspect that the programming was largely intuitive. In fact the lack of any written explanation of artistic policy allowed the direct engagement between music and audience to take place unhindered. Communication is the festival's essential objective and it has been achieved first by careful planning and placing of the event within the existing regional culture, and then by attempting to lead audiences, through their encounter with established 20th-century works, towards a greater understanding and enjoyment of contemporary music.

In this respect Musica '83 differs significantly from most other contemporary music festivals in Europe. It is not simply another event for professionals in the Royan-Venice-Metz-Donaueschingen tradition, and it stands a fair chance of effecting a change in the musical life of the region. There is in Strasbourg a foundation, albeit in the conservative classical tradition, on which to build. Such a base does not, for example, exist in La Rochelle where the festival comes and goes and has little or no effect upon the day-to-day cultural life. In Alsace there are established orchestras, the opera, the conservatory, the university, arts centres, local ensembles, local radio, and, above all, suitable venues. Of course, as Laurent Bayle was keen to point out, it is far too early to predict the festival's achievements: the project must be seen in the long term. One cannot hope to change the attitudes prevailing in the established institutions without any direct influence over the major musical appointments, artistic or administrative. One can only inject the right elements and hope that the waves from the initial shock will have some cumulative effect, especially in the educational institutions. Encouragingly, audiences at the first festival were large, young, and enthusiastic.

Naturally, there was a large input of new French music, representing no single trend or development but a pluralism of styles from young composers associated in the main with the central forces: groups such as the Ensemble de l'Itinéraire and 2E2M, composers such as Xenakis and Boulez. Against this backdrop, a fair scattering of German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese music was also to be heard. Predictably the only British composer featured was Brian Ferneyhough. The absence of American music was notable, but was largely the result of a lack of knowledge of much more than Cage, Feldman, Glass, and Reich. One would hope to see this intensely European perspective broken down in future festivals, but it was, as usual, practical considerations that led to mostly French and Italian composers' being commissioned.

I venture to suggest that Musica '83 represents the first explicit manifestation of the current Franco-Italian axis, which seems to have developed in direct opposition to the 'new simplicity' and neoromantic forces prevalent in Austro-German culture. Awareness of this helps one to make sense of the otherwise somewhat nebulous concept of 'la couleur Varèse'.

It is Laurent Bayle's intention to widen the field in future and offer more opportunities to foreign composers and performers, finance permitting. Most of the ensembles engaged were based in Paris and Alsace or imported from Italy. More foreign performers would undoubtedly mean less involvement

JAMES DILLON

String Quartet (1983)

Commissioned by the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival for the Arditti String Quartet. First performed on 18 November 1983
Subsequently performed in Amsterdam, London (PLG Series), Bath Festival, La Rochelle Festival, Darmstadt Summer School, Copenhagen, Geneva, Toronto (ISCM World Music Days)
Next scheduled performance: 9 December 1984, Milan
Score in preparation. Performing material on hire

Le Rivage (1984)

Wind Quintet
Commissioned by the Bath Festival for the Vega Wind Quintet. First performed on 28 May 1984 followed by a London performance on 19 June
Score in preparation. Performing material on hire

Sgothan (1984)

Solo Flute
Commissioned by the La Rochelle Festival for Pierre-Yves Artaud. First performed on 6 July 1984
Subsequently performed in Darmstadt, Turin and Paris
Score in preparation

BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

Adagissimo (1983)

String Quartet
Written for the Arditti String Quartet. First performed at the La Rochelle Festival on 28 June 1984
Subsequently performed in Darmstadt, Copenhagen, Malmö and Montréal (ISCM World Music Days)
Score in preparation. Performing material available

Etudes Transcendantales (1984)

Cycle of 9 songs for soprano, flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord
Commissioned by the La Rochelle Festival. Songs I, II, III, VI and VII performed on 26 June 1984
Subsequently performed at the Darmstadt Summer School
Score in preparation

Carceri d'Invenzione II

Solo Flute and Chamber Orchestra
Commissioned by Roberto Fabbriciani
First performance to be given in the series "Musica nel nostro tempo" in Milan on 17 January 1985
Score in preparation



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by local groups and individuals. The festival committee gives the highest priority to the choice of programmes and makes heavy demands upon performers to learn new repertory.

I arrived in Strasbourg on 23 September for a concert by the *Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France*, conducted by Gianluigi Gelmetti: the programme consisted of Brian Ferneyhough's *La terre est un homme* (1976-9), Franco Donatoni's *Duo pour Bruno* (1975), and *Arcana* (1927) by Varèse. *La terre est un homme* represents in Ferneyhough's output the culmination of his explorations of extreme density and performance difficulty. The work pushes the modern orchestra to the limits of its technical and interpretative capabilities. In this performance those limits were brutally exposed. Gelmetti's global, dramatic sense of the piece was not enough to compensate for the lack of attention to details of dynamics and balance. No one can deny that *La terre est un homme* is a problematic work, a challenge to any orchestra and conductor; we may well have to wait several years to hear anything like a true and comprehensible representation of this score. By comparison, the orchestral textures in Donatoni's *Duo pour Bruno* seemed almost translucent. This is an inventive though perhaps overlong score, in which the composer's preoccupations with both serialism and chance are skilfully juxtaposed and integrated. The material is distributed between contrasting blocks of orchestral sound in the fashion of a 'concerto for orchestra', and between various duos (the most prominent being two pianos and two violins), which tends to heighten the concertante-like feel. *Arcana* is perhaps Varèse's greatest achievement, the work in which, via an assembly of 119 musicians, he managed to expose the full potential and power of his highly original approach to rhythm, dynamics, and texture. Perhaps because of its unrelenting abrasiveness, not characteristic of the preceding works, *Arcana* remains shockingly new.

The following day was the first to feature solo works: three programmes entitled 'Les Nouveaux Virtuoses' were given. Carmen Fournier (violin) began with *Xnoybis* (1964) by Giacinto Scelsi, *i* (1983) by Nicos Cornilios, and *Diaprée* (1983) by Frédéric Pierre. All three works were similar in mood and technique. There is a limit to the range of expression attainable through the subtle variation of string timbre: vibrato, microtonal inflections, glissandos, scordatura, and the rest. The results are lifeless and monotonous in the extreme. The concert by Martine Viard (voice) and Jay Gottlieb (piano) was far more flamboyant. Two works by John Cage, *A Flower* (1950) and *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942), were performed with a microphone, despite there being no such indication in the scores, and interpreted in an overtly sexual manner. Mme Viard's style of presentation is more suited to the performance of works by the Greek composer Georges Aperghis for which she is well known. His *Recitations* (1982) offered ample opportunity for the display of virtuoso vocal and theatrical talents. The text evolves from a series of domestic and emotional situations around which minimal musical material is subjected to constant expansion and repetition. During the first performance of *Contes* (1983) by Claire Schapira I realised that probably all the works in Mme Viard's repertory suffer the fate of being filtered through, and distorted by, her own very strong personality. The final piece, also by Aperghis, *Il gigante Golia* (1982), was full of cheap theatrical jokes such as the pianist turning his music upside down, firing a pistol at the singer, etc., etc.

The second orchestral concert was given by the *Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg*, conducted by Theodor Guschlbauer, and began with a pedestrian performance of the Fifth Symphony of Sibelius; but the impassioned performances that followed, of *Jonchaies* (1977) by Xenakis and *Amériques* (?1918-21) by Varèse, more than made up for this. *Jonchaies* is a very solid architectural construction, violent and austere, but unmistakably a product of the mature Xenakis. The writing is more intuitive, the progression more directional, the structure more inevitable; constantly, dense blocks of motor-rhythmic sonorities are set in opposition to produce an unfathomable complexity, which then dissipates and resolves in a manner not dissimilar to the more sophisticated forms of process music. The juxtaposition of *Jonchaies* and *Amériques* highlights a striking similarity between Xenakis and Varèse. Both set out to reconstruct music, to begin again with the raw materials, to carve out a new musical language. It is this primitivism, verging on banality, which lends to their music a pungency far beyond the spurious barbarism of *The Rite of Spring*!

A local group, the Ensemble Instrumental Studio 111 de Strasbourg, under the direction of Détélef Kieffer, gave us the première of a new work by René Bastian entitled *Partition 111*, a collage of incessant, meandering, bird-like sounds for tape and an ensemble of eight players. I cannot believe there to be any justifiable reason for this amorphous collection of minutiae. *Insole inquiète* (1982) by Gilberto Cappelli helped to save the concert. I first encountered this composer's music at the 1981 Venice Biennale, where his first work to be given a public performance, a String Quartet, was highly acclaimed. *Insole inquiète* contains many of the same stylistic elements—fast, energetic, florid writing, owing a great deal to Sciarrino and Berio—but the instrumentation of three strings, three woodwind, piano, and celesta seemed to be working against the synthesis of timbre to which the material aspired. In particular, the piano remained alien to the rest of the ensemble.

A concert by the Romarai Ensemble, directed by Luciano Berio, proved to be one of the highlights of Musica '83. Franco Ferranti opened the programme with a Berio première, *Lied* (1983) for solo clarinet. In its nostalgia and melancholy, this short piece is characteristic of the style now recognisable as a departure from the emotional intensity of Berio's earlier work. Recent pieces, such as *Sequenza IX* for solo clarinet (also performed in this concert), *Il ritorno degli snovidenia* for solo cello and orchestra, and the opera *La vera storia*, do not display any weakening of intellectual rigour or craftsmanship, but they demonstrate a near obsession with delicate, lyrical gestures, invariably based on small intervals, which lack any urgency or dramatic potential. The result is 'low-key' music in which all passion is subdued. In marked contrast to the two works for solo clarinet, Massimiliano Damerini gave a strong and articulate performance of *Sequenza IV* (1966) for solo piano, and the concert ended with *Points on the Curve to Find* (1974), which in its energy, power, and durability served to remind me of Berio's genius.

In a concert by the Ensemble 2E2M, under their director Paul Méfano, we heard works by Claudio Ambrosini, Denis Cohen, Francisco Guerrero, and Franco Donatoni. Ambrosini's *Vietato ai minori* (1983) is scored for an upright piano, flute, clarinet, xylophone, and harpsichord. The pianist wore gloves in order to ease the playing of numerous glissandos and clusters; except for some fast chromatic passage work, these were all the piano part consisted of. Against this manic, but *una corda* activity from the

piano one could occasionally discern a muted harpsichord, but the rest of the ensemble was either inaudible or contributed very little to the proceedings. It was, therefore, a great relief then to hear a positively musical work by Denis Cohen, his *Cantate* (1982) for two female voices and eleven instruments, a beautifully declamatory, expressionistic setting of a poem by Georg Webern, against an elaborate polyphonic web of instrumental sound. Though stylistically derived from post-war serialism (there were shades of Barraqué and Berio in particular), this work is undoubtedly the product of a strong musical personality. Guerrero's *Concerto de chambre* (1978) for flute and strings, plus a bass clarinet, suffered badly in the hands of these performers. Intermittently, amid his florid virtuoso line, the flautist is required to sing. Unfortunately some flautists can't. This one's obvious embarrassment and the other players' inability to keep straight faces combined to produce a little farce. I was surprised to see experienced players, even if not totally convinced by such a piece, reacting in so unprofessional a manner.

By contrast, a local ensemble of clarinetists, L'Accroche-Note, demonstrated brilliantly how to cope with some extremely bizarre instructions in Vinko Globokar's *Discours IV* (1974). This highly entertaining theatrical presentation was performed with total conviction and great humour, and without apology. Their concert began with Brian Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study I* (1977) for bass clarinet. Performances of this work have, to date, been given exclusively by its dedicatee Harry Sparnaay. Armand Angster is the new exponent and his approach differs significantly from Sparnaay's and provides a welcome new perspective; his performance is less aggressive and theatrical, more delicate and introverted, more concerned with the details of each instant than with the global effect.

An opportunity directly to compare performances of the same work arose in a cleverly devised programme given by the pianists Marie-Françoise Bucquet and Claude Hélffer, both of whom played Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* (1956) and *Evryali* (1974) by Xenakis. Intriguing though it was to hear two versions of *Klavierstück XI* (the 19 fragments may be played in any order), studying the different techniques of the two pianists became more absorbing. Bucquet's performance was an object lesson in clarity and precision, but it lacked the dramatic spark and sumptuous tone characteristic of Hélffer. This was all the more apparent in *Evryali*, a work built almost entirely upon fast, repeated, chord figurations, in which Hélffer, having chosen a faster tempo, sacrificed detail to the grand gesture. The result was exciting but perhaps a little naive. Bucquet, though more accurate, became bogged down in detail and seemed to lose sight of the overall form. The ideal performance may exist somewhere between these two extremes.

This concert was for me one of the high points of Musica '83, but nothing was comparable, in terms of prestige and quality of performance, with the all-Varèse evening under the direction of Pierre Boulez. Conducting the combined forces of the Ensemble InterContemporain, Les Percussions de Strasbourg, and Les Choeurs de Radio France, Boulez drew the crowds, almost filling the 2000-seat Palais des Congrès. One suspects that to many members of the audience Varèse was a secondary consideration; cameras flashed every time Boulez walked on and off stage! He delivered, as expected, dynamic and incisive performances of *Intégrales* (1924-5), *Octandre* (1923), *Ecuatorial* (1932-4), *Déserts* (?1950-54), *Hyperprism* (1922-3), *Offrandes* (1921),

and *Ionisation* (1929-31). Laurent Beauregard, EIC flautist, gave a beautifully rounded performance of *Density 21.5* (1936), which provided welcome relief from the ensemble pieces. To hear almost the entire output of Varèse in one concert is an exciting prospect, but the reality was somewhat indigestible. This music is confined to very clearly delineated parameters of dynamic, articulation, harmonic language, and instrumental timbre (mainly wind, brass, and percussion) and cannot, therefore, withstand such overexposure without seeming to become a caricature of itself. This was my reaction as I left the hall to the pounding of a repeat performance of *Ionisation*, but this is not to belittle the overwhelming achievement of this concert, a tribute not only to Varèse, but to all those responsible for the undoubted success of the entire venture, the programme committee and the administration. Let us hope that Musica Strasbourg can survive and flourish, and establish itself alongside Warsaw, Venice, and Donaueschingen, as one of Europe's major festivals of contemporary music.

¹ Alain Durel, Détef Kieffer, André Lobstein, Pierre Strauch, and Monique Veaute.

² The former category was represented by Barraqué, Berio, Boulez, Busoni, Dittrich, Donatoni, Feldman, Globokar, Halffter, Ives, Janáček, Kagel, Ligeti, Maderna, Pousseur, Satie, Scelsi, Schafer, Stockhausen, Takemitsu, Varèse, Weill, Xenakis, Zemlinsky. The younger generation was represented by Claudio Ambrosini, Georges Aperghis, Gilberto Cappelli, Nicos Cornilios, Pascal Dusapin, Brian Ferneyhough, Rolf Gehlhaar, Gérard Grisey, Francisco Guerrero, Philippe Manoury, Tristan Murail, Emanuel Nunes, and many more.

³ Arditti String Quartet, Ensemble de l'Itinéraire, Ensemble Instrumental Studio 111 de Strasbourg, Ensemble InterContemporain, Ensemble 2E2M, Groupe Vocal de France, Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Nuova Consonanza di Milano, Orchestra Sinfonia di Roma della RAI, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Orchestre Symphonique du Rhin, Les Percussions de Strasbourg, Romarai Ensemble, Steve Lacy Sextet, Gérard Bucquet (tuba), Marie-Françoise Bucquet (piano), Carmen Fournier (violin), Claude Hélffer (piano), Andrzej Krzanowski (accordion), Aurèle Nicolet (flute), and Martine Viard (voice).