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

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

Citation

Anderson, Virginia. 1985. 'Almeida 1984'. *Contact*, 29. pp. 42-44. ISSN 0308-5066.

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Almeida 1984

Almeida Festival, London, 14 June–8 July 1984

The Almeida is a strange festival, more a festival of festivals. This one, the fourth, included series of French and Russian music and film, a weekend event presented by the Electro-Acoustic Music Association of Great Britain (EMAS), experimental and avant-garde English music and film, and even a musical and a concert of 19th-century spirituals (given, appropriately enough, on 4 July). I can speak only of those events that I attended, which were by no means all as I arrived in London only on the 23rd, in time for some of the Satie Weekend, and was later involved in rehearsals for the final concert, Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning*.

Vexations (1892-3) dominated the Satie Weekend of 23-24 June, if only through its length. The 840 repetitions of the work were performed at crotchet = 60, which resulted in a 24-hour version.¹ 21 pianists, with few exceptions all major figures in English experimental and avant-garde music, each took at least an hour's shift; they included John Tilbury, Elliott Schwartz, Richard Bernas, Tim Souster, Phillip Mead, Michael Nyman, Susan Bradshaw, Stephen Montague, Christopher Hobbs, Andrew Charity, John White, Howard Skempton, Dave Smith, and Keith Potter. The performers seemed to be divided between those who made the repetitions as alike as possible and those who chose to vary their interpretation for the sake of interest. All the experimentalists were of the former persuasion and even took the purist approach so far as to avoid the use of the pedals. Among those looking for a personal style, some opted for a variety of pedallings, some for alternating dynamics. It would have been interesting to hear a performance uncluttered (as far as possible) by personality, but perhaps this is irrelevant. John White interprets Satie's instruction, 'Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses', not as an injunction to play the work 840 times but as an instruction to be followed if one were to attempt such a thing.² However, while it is possible to give a performance of *Vexations* that consists of a single rendering of the 'motif', there is no escaping the fact that the work has come to be regarded as consisting of 840 evenly and expressionlessly played repetitions. Measured against this standard, the Almeida performance failed.

The topics dealt with in the Satie symposium that followed, given by Wilfrid Mellers, Patrick Gowers, Antony Melville, and Gavin Bryars, were changing attitudes to Satie's music, an appraisal of *Socrate* (1918) in the light of contemporary reactions, translations of Satie's writings, and the Rose+Croix music. To have scheduled the symposium after such a long and draining work as *Vexations* was the only thoughtless decision taken by the organisers of the festival; even Dr Mellers's dancing during a musical example did little to rouse the audience. Possibly in consideration of flagging stamina, the promised open discussion did not take place, despite the fact that methodological differences seemed to indicate a possible divergence of thought between the participants.

On the evening of the 24th *Socrate* (1918) was performed by Music Projects/London, conducted by

Richard Bernas. Sopranos Linda Strachan, Jenny Albon, and Rosamund Sykes among them took the roles of the four characters. Satie called *Socrate* a 'drame symphonique avec voix'; it is an attempt to capture the qualities of an ancient music and the soloists are instructed to sing as if reading. This understated style (reinforced at the festival by the stark performance space of the Almeida Theatre, with its three brick arches framing the soloists) results in an almost completely flat landscape of feeling—so restrained, in fact, that the power of the last scene (Socrates' death) is almost surprising. The work lacks the immediately endearing characteristics of much of Satie's music, the noises of *Parade*, the wit and charm of many of the piano pieces, but is nonetheless impressive.

The second half of the concert consisted of some of Satie's shorter works. John White, who considers Satie a major influence upon his own music, accompanied Michael Chambon in several cabaret songs and the violinist Alexander Balanescu in *Choses vues à droite et à gauche (sans lunettes)* (1914), then performed the solo piano works *Prélude de la porte héroïque du ciel* (1894; used by White in his own Sonata no.53, 1972), *Le piège de Méduse* (1913), and the early *Ogives* (1886). It was refreshing to see the piano pieces performed in a deadpan manner, without the emphasis on the humorous elements that other pianists seem to feel the need to introduce; White certainly understands his spiritual mentor and should record these works.

The retrospective concert of Tim Souster's music on the 26th highlighted Souster's concern about political and social events.³ His subjects are worthy of treatment, but a serious subject does not guarantee musical quality. *Spectral* (1972) was written at a time when almost everyone in popular and art music seemed to be using whale-song as source material. Souster adopted a different approach by transcribing the whale-song into coloured graphic notation to be realised by viola, leaving the tape part to provide watery echoes. However, as the American composer Barney Childs said in a concert review, no one would have written these pieces 'if, in common belief, malevolent whales were wantonly slaughtering millions of innocent plankton'.⁴ *The Music Room* (1976) is a theatre piece about the British army's use of white noise in the interrogation of prisoners suspected of being members of the IRA. In this performance the doctor/interrogator Stephen Montague forced a hooded James Fulkerson to stand to attention and play the trombone while a tape provided white noise; this seemed to me a silly evocation of a serious problem.

The only one of these works in which the musical interest matched the gravity of the issues that inspired it was *Zorna* (1974), Souster's response to the problem of heroin traffic. It uses a subtle pageantry of three drummers in white, who march from the rear of the hall to the front, where a soprano saxophonist plays in conjunction with a tape-delay system, imitating the sound of the Turkish oboe or *zurna*. All elements are uncoordinated until a given point, which results in an unrelenting, high-energy music. Also enjoyable was a work with resonances in Souster's own past, *Heavy Reductions* (1977) for tuba and taped tubas, based on the opening of *Das Rheingold*. Its title and use of source material are reminiscent of 1970s 'readymades' and the systems used by the PTO (Promenade Theatre Orchestra).

The Contemporary Chamber Orchestra's concert, given on 27 June, consisted mostly of works by the English mainstream avant garde. In Harrison Birtwistle's *Carmen Arcadiae mechanicae*

perpetuum (1978) the compositional mechanisms circumvented any possibility of exploiting the characteristic sounds of the low instruments scored for.⁵ Nigel Osborne's Concerto for flute and chamber orchestra (1980) offered a little more, but Sebastian Forbes's *Sonata for 21* (1975-6) was full of academic clichés such as long notes ending in a flurry of strings. Newcomer Steve Martland's *Lotta continua* is influenced by Glass, but unlike most minimal or systems works it runs into some rather surprising and delightful corners, including a lovely jazz-like section. Interestingly, Martland describes this work as one for student orchestra; from this I must conclude that student orchestras in England (at least in Liverpool University, where Martland was a student) are incredibly competent, as this work is not easy to coordinate and the high brass parts are not easy in any respect.

On Saturday evening 30 June at the Bloomsbury Theatre works by Marius Constant and Iannis Xenakis were performed by Constant's ensemble *Ars Nova*, with the soloists Silvio Gualda, Elisabeth Chojnacka, and Patrice Fontanarosa. Constant's *103 regards dans l'eau* (1982-4, being given its British première on this occasion) groups small sections into four 'movements'; its echoes of the traditional violin concerto—ordering of contrasts, tempos, cadenzas, etc.—were brought out by Fontanarosa and the chamber orchestra. In *14 stations* (1969-70) the soloist is instructed to move through 14 installations of percussion instruments, some conventional, others built specially for the piece; he is accompanied by a 'chorus' of six instruments 'commenting on the action'.⁶ With Gualda performing, there was plenty of action too: he ran among the installations as if they were an obstacle course. Unfortunately there was little else—Constant seems enamoured of the sounds to the detriment of the piece.

By contrast, Xenakis's use of percussion is never gratuitous, particularly in *Komboi* (1981) for percussion and harpsichord, the end of which Gualda played on a set of giant flower pots. All of the Xenakis works performed here were much more accessible than those of Constant, notably *Naama (Flux)* (1984, also a British première) for harpsichord, in which short sections are transformed in repetition.

The following day I caught the second half of the EMAS festival. As the title suggests, Ricardo Mandolini's *Canción de madera y agua* (Song of wood and water) imitates electronically the sounds associated with those materials, but the resulting clichés are better suited to a commercial for bottled water or a coffee percolator than to a concert work. Charles Dodge's *Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental* (1980) presented a computer-processed recording of Caruso singing the aria from *Pagliacci* with a very live Stephen Montague, resplendent in tails, as the accompanist. This sort of dismembering of familiar music also occurs in Jon Appleton's *Boom Sha Boom*, a work reminiscent of James Tenney's pioneering *Blue Suede* (1961), a tape collage of fragments of Elvis Presley's *Blue Suede Shoes*.

Marc Battier's *Ritratto a memoria* (1983, subtitled 'Various manners of looking at the same picture') was a too-precious evocation of childhood. *Recaus* by Gabriel Fitzsimmons sounded like a video game, perhaps because the composer is only 21 and perhaps because the pre-sets of a Fairlight computer guarantee its user something approaching 'Space Invaders' noises. Christopher Fox's *Winds of Heaven* was notable for its almost non-existent tape part and for Peter Hannan's new techniques for recorder. Barry Schrader's *Moon Whales and other Moon Poems* (1982-3), performed by Mary Wiegold,

represented southern Californian music; it was written in a tonal, quasi-popular style and formed a pleasant contrast to other events of the day, which included the presentation of a delightful play-it-yourself installation by Hugh Davies. Much hoopla surrounded the closing performance, the London première of Xenakis's *Bohor* (1962). As it turned out, all the drama concerned the multitrack tape machine and whether it would be fixed in time for the concert. The music, as promised, was very loud, with over 20 speakers in the room, but it was not worth risking one's hearing for.

The only part of the Russian festival I attended was the concert of Soviet music given by Capricorn on Tuesday 3 July. The interest of the programme lay not in the works of Edison Denisov, who writes in a kind of cosmopolitan avant-garde style and who, in any event, is fairly well known in the West, but in Sofiya Gubaydulina's *Garden of Joy and Sorrow* (19), which had a haunting flute ritornello and used mildly extended harp techniques, and Gabriel Popov's *Septet* (1926-7), a delightfully mismanaged mixture of Hindemith and Milhaud.

Gavin Bryars's concert on 6 July consisted of three older works, *My First Homage* (1978), *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo* (1977), and *Hi Tremolo* (1980) with *The Vespertine Park* (1980), played by Bryars and others, including former members of *Garden Furniture*—John White and Dave Smith.⁷ The second half was the British première of *Three Studies on 'Medea'*, reworkings of excerpts from Bryars's new opera. Bryars has had little luck with *Medea*, his first collaboration with Robert Wilson: productions were promised in Venice, Rome, Milan, and New York, before the première was finally given in Lyons in October. It was hard to gain an impression of the entire opera from this sample, but the work is certainly more 'operatic' than Bryars's opera for record, *Irma*. One wonders why it was felt that four singers with a small orchestra needed amplification when three had got along fine without any in *Socrate* only two weeks earlier. The amplification provided was tinny, made one dread every entrance by the singers, and ruined what was otherwise a splendid performance.

The festival closed with the first performance of Cardew's *The Great Learning* (1968-70) in its entirety.⁸ The work is a monument of experimental music, involving over 100 people, and the performance was a labour of love by those who worked with Cardew, notably director John Tilbury, and Michael Parsons, Howard Skempton, Dave Smith, Eddie Prevost, and Keith Rowe.

Of the seven paragraphs of the work, 2 and 7 sound remarkably up-to-date; while Cardew dedicated the entire work to the Scratch Orchestra, each paragraph was a tribute to an individual composer—no. 2 to Terry Riley and no. 7 to La Monte Young, the fathers of repetitive and minimal music. The monster Paragraph 5 proved as confusing to play as its score and contemporary accounts promised; there were often as many things happening as there were performers—ten singers for the 'Ode Machines' (simultaneous vocal solos), ex-Scratchers Ilona Phombeah and Stefan Szczelkun performing the game-like 'Action and Number Scores', and several people involved in various improvisations. I was a little disconcerted by the lack of sensitivity (to directions in the score and to other players) exhibited in many of the improvisations, until Hugh Shrapnel (a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), who refused to play this work from Cardew's 'pre-political' period) told me that we were hearing a 'disciplined' version (which I took to mean

that he disapproved). After all, the Scratch Orchestra, with its anarchic foundation and numerous diverging opinions, cannot have conformed strictly to instructions; this performance may therefore have been more historically correct for its waywardness than I had originally thought. *The Great Learning* is certainly a work that needs exposure; perhaps the Almeida performance—a brave step on the part of the organisers—will mark the beginning of the end of the almost total indifference to Cardew's work that has prevailed in the past decade.

¹ See Gavin Bryars, 'Satie and the British', *Contact* 25 (Autumn 1982), pp.4-14, and "'Vexations" and its Performers', *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp.12-20.

² Observation made by White during a conversation with the author on 9 July 1984.

³ See David Jeffries, 'Tim Souster', *Contact* 27 (Autumn 1983), pp.20-27, for more on these works; see also Tim Souster, 'Intermodulation: a Short History', *Contact* 17 (Summer 1977), pp.3-6.

⁴ Manuscript review of the American Society of University Composers 19th National Conference, April 1984.

⁵ See Michael Hall, 'Birtwistle in Good Measure', *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp.34-6, for a review of the score.

⁶ Marius Constant, programme note.

⁷ See Keith Potter, 'Just the Tip of the Iceberg: Some Aspects of Gavin Bryars' Music', *Contact* 22 (Summer 1981), pp.4-15.

⁸ The best introduction to *The Great Learning* is still Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974); see also John Tilbury, 'Cornelius Cardew', *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp.4-12.