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The 1988 Huddersfield Festival

As Harold Wilson didn't quite say, ten years is a long time in contemporary music. The Huddersfield Festival celebrated its tenth birthday in November 1988 with a marvellous array of events spreading across two weekends and the intervening week, a long way from the first five day-long Festival in 1978 and a remarkable achievement for Richard Steinitz, who has given artistic direction to the Festival throughout its lifetime. However, this is not the place for an extended historical survey of the enterprise¹: suffice it to say that, of England's two contemporary music festivals, Huddersfield is less clubbish, more didactic, less hyperbolic, more respectable and quite a lot colder. Whether any of this matters is a question for individual taste: Steinitz's success in steadily building up the reputation of the Festival, gradually acquiring more funding, more venues and – most important of all – ever more spectacular star composers, is beyond criticism.

Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that Huddersfield does not take very many risks: the star composers are *very* stellar by the time they get invited to Huddersfield (since 1983 Henze, Berio, Maxwell Davies, Kagel, Birtwistle, Ferneyhough, Xenakis, Carter and, in 1988, the starriest of them all, Stockhausen² and they are set amongst galaxies in which less familiar foreigners mix with promising native talent, all equally safe bets (in 1988 Judith Weir, Robert Saxton, George Benjamin, Louis Andriessen, Isang Yun, Kaija Saariaho and Toru Takemitsu). So Huddersfield is not a festival at which a relatively unknown composer is going to be 'discovered' and catapulted into the international spotlight. On the other hand, the sort of retrospective attention that Huddersfield can focus on a composer's work is always instructive and Steinitz regularly devises fascinating juxtapositions, either of different composers or of different periods of work within the output of one composer.

In 1988 it was the juxtaposition of pre-1960 Stockhausen with works from his *LICHT* period which I found particularly interesting. Stockhausen was in attendance and had brought 'his' musicians and his own sound diffusion system to present a series of three 'Stockhausen Celebrations' in Huddersfield Town Hall. The first of these celebrations was also the most lavish and consisted of *Telemusik* (1966) as an appetiser for the chamber ensemble version of *Michaels Reise um der Erde*³ (1984), the middle act of *Donnerstag aus LICHT*. Readers of *Contact* 32 may remember the problems I had in Berlin with *Luzifers Tanz*⁴, another *LICHT* extract; they may even remember that on that occasion I vowed to avoid *LICHT* altogether in future. On this occasion, Stockhausen's pre-concert intro-

duction to the work and the prospect of hearing a multi-channel presentation of *Telemusik*, one of my favourite Stockhausen pieces, were enough to keep me in Huddersfield. Stockhausen introduced the various melodic 'formulae' that are the source of all the material of *Michaels Reise*; in answer to a question from the audience as to how he perceived his own development from the post-Webern serial works of the early 1950s to the formula-based works he has been writing since *Mantra*, he claimed his current method as the most advanced link in a musical chain that ran from the cyclic rhythms of Indian music to European isorhythmic composition to Bach to Webern.

For Stockhausen, the sophistication of the 'formula' method would seem to lie in its retention of the classic serial principle of an equality amongst pitches – all twelve chromatic pitches are present in each formula – while at the same time allowing some pitches to be more equal than others, both because passing notes are permissible within the system and because particular pitches, together with the characteristic articulation they have been assigned, can be dwelt on at length. Furthermore, each formula is, in theory at least, sufficiently distinct from every other formula to be recognised readily – essential in *LICHT*, since each formula is the calling card of a particular protagonist in the epic. Stockhausen evidently believes that the formulae in *Michaels Reise* are distinct, although he thoughtfully provides new listeners with extended introductions to both the 'Michael' and 'Luzifer' formulae, the two which dominate the work, before plunging us into a protracted contrapuntal debate between them. But while I was able to hear that a number of melodic figures were being manipulated into a sort of counterpoint in passages of *Michaels Reise*, my ears resolutely failed to grasp these figures as component parts of identifiable melodies.

Indeed the most striking features of *Michaels Reise* had little to do with either the 'drama' of which the work is part or with the compositional techniques Stockhausen has developed to articulate that drama. Instead, as with *Luzifers Tanz*, I was impressed by the extraordinary musicianship of the ten members of Stockhausen's ensemble: Markus Stockhausen ('Michael', trumpet), Kathinka Pasveer (flute), Michael Svoboda ('Luzifer', trombone) and Suzanne Stephens ('Eve', clarinet) were as committed as ever as the central characters and Lesley Schatzberger and Ian Stuart (clarinets and basset-horns) gave quite delightful performances as a pair of clowns. The fluent grace of their movements as, in the closing stages of the piece, they mimic a love duet between Michael and Eve, made a charming contrast to the rather more studied gestures of Stockhausen and Stephens.

Ian Stuart returned two days later to dance and play his way through father Stockhausen's *Harlekin* (1975). Although I fail to see any reason for the existence of this piece this was another excellent performance and it is a tribute to Stuart's dedication to his task that *Harlekin's* 45 minutes passed as quickly as they did. But, excellent as Stuart was, his performance was overshadowed by quite superb playing from Bernhard Wambach and Andreas Boettger earlier the same evening. Wambach played *Klavierstücke V, VII, VIII and XI* (1954–6), Boettger played *Zyklus* (1959) and, together, they played *Kontakte* (1959/60). In the wake of *Michaels Reise* and Stockhausen's use of pitch centres in that work it was instructive to hear these techniques anticipated in *Klavierstück VII*, particularly in a performance of such tonal sensitivity as Wambach's. Boettger played *Zyklus*

from memory – a feat in itself – and after the interval proceeded to do the same with *Kontakte*. The resulting performances took the interpretation of post-war music to new heights: not only were both players totally in command of the music's demands on their own techniques, they were also entirely familiar with each other's parts and, most importantly, they obviously knew every detail of the tape part. Stockhausen's intention for this work was that the live musicians should 'react freely during the performance'⁵ to the tape; in this performance that illusion was created and, through their absorption in the electronic soundworld Wambach and Boettger also sustained the fundamental illusion of the work, that 'contacts' really can be made between synthetic and acoustic sounds. *Kontakte* is a marvellous piece – full of incident and yet so subtly developed – and, in a performance as magical as this one, quite capable of lifting the listener gently out of his seat.

There were also excellent student performances of early Stockhausen (*Kreuzspiel* (1951) and *Kontrapunkte* (1952/3)) by the Royal College of Music Twentieth-Century Ensemble and of *Sternklang* (1971), by student ensembles from Cambridgeshire College of Technology, City University, the Guildhall School and Huddersfield Polytechnic. Stockhausen connections abounded elsewhere in the Festival programme: for example, *Michaels Reise* was preceded by a concert of works by Gavin Bryars, whose uncanonical realisation of Stockhausen's *Plus-Minus* (1963) is commemorated in the third volume of Stockhausen's collected writings.⁶ Bryars led his own ensemble in performances of his *My First Homage* (1978), *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo* (1977/8), *Les Fiancailles* (1983) and *Dr Ox's Experiment* and the Balanescu Quartet played *String Quartet No. 1 (Between the National and the Bristol)* (1985). *My First Homage* is a particularly lovely piece and although the two versions of the piece in which a tuba takes the bass line retain a special place in my heart,⁷ this version, with plucked double bass providing the attacks to sustained bass clarinet notes, nearly displaced them. Perhaps the rest of the concert was a little too even-paced harmonically for some members of the audience to resist the effects of the more soporific pieces; in *Dr Ox's Experiment* (an excerpt from a forthcoming opera of the same name based on Jules Verne's novel of the same name) the music's generally sedate progress made it especially hard to retain any sense of what sort of sentence the string of words intoned by soprano Sarah Leonard might be forming themselves into.

The Bryars Ensemble was passing through Huddersfield on an Arts Council Contemporary Music Network tour and the Network has regularly provided Huddersfield with a couple of subsidised concerts which would otherwise have been beyond the Festival's budget. In 1988 the other Network concerts were the inevitable London Sinfonietta with the inevitable George Benjamin, Robert Saxton and Colin Matthews and a rather more adventurous offering of music from Mali and India by the Dunya Ensemble. Another Huddersfield tradition is a concert by one of the BBC orchestras, with the BBC usually (but not I gather on this occasion) subsidising the cost of the concert. On this occasion it was Edward Downes and the BBC Philharmonic on duty, opening the Festival with a most attractive programme in which Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and *La Mer* (1905) framed Yun's *Muak* (subtitled 'Dance Fantasy for large orchestra') (1987), Messiaen's *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936) and Takemitsu's *I Hear the Water Dreaming* (1987) for flute and orchestra. *Muak* (the title is apparently Korean for dance music) is

in three sections, in each of which there is a gradual development from solo instrumental writing (violin at the start of the piece, oboe at the beginning of the two subsequent sections) to ensemble writing. At the same time there is a gradual accumulation of rhythmic energy, generated in particular by some thrilling passages for unison strings. What I found especially striking was Yun's reconception of orchestral sound in this piece: in ensemble passages the winds are often deployed as a densely textured, multi-timbral choir, while the strings tend to coalesce into a single musical strand. The other British première of the evening, Takemitsu's *I Hear the Water Dreaming*, contained rather less to surprise the listener, partly because Takemitsu's name appears much more frequently in our concert and broadcast schedules than Yun's, partly because his use of the forces at his disposal is much closer to standard practice. Here he was writing for solo flute (the admirable Robert Aitken, who returned the following weekend in a real dog's breakfast of a flute concerto by R. Murray Schafer) and orchestra. As always in recent Takemitsu the music was ravishingly scored and curiously boneless in structure, a sort of filleted memory of Impressionism which sounded even more unfathomable than usual when placed in such close proximity to the real thing.

The programme book made much of the fusion, interpenetration, mutual influence, or whatever, of the musics of East and West. Quite what this means I am not sure – what is the music of the West? Plainchant? Michael Jackson? – although it has been a recurrent theme at Huddersfield ever since George Crumb was the focus of the 1978 Festival. It does seem a little ingenuous to continue to feign surprise at the interaction of different cultures, particularly when the people feigning surprise are usually the descendants of the colonialists who first brought these cultures into contact with one another. Surely by 1988 it should be possible to acknowledge that the so-called blending of East and West is not a unique phenomenon but is, rather, another manifestation of the demise of post-Renaissance sensibilities in Europe and America, something which has probably as much to do with Einstein's proposal of a space-time continuum as with the presence of a Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exhibition. If anything, those composers who consciously aim to 'integrate' the music of non-European cultures into their own work are the real heirs of our imperialist ancestors.

With so much oriental mystery in the air the inclusion of a number of Judith Weir's works, so soon after her triumphs with *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, made admirable sense. As a refreshing antidote to the ill-digested exoticism on display in a number of other composers' music at Huddersfield, Weir's music is actually *about* the ways in which we perceive musics from beyond the Western European concert music tradition. In recent years she has especially focussed her music on that of the Balkans, China and Scotland and in Lontano's Huddersfield concert we were presented with *A Serbian Cabaret* (1984) in one half and a (quasi-) Yuan drama, *Consolations of Scholarship* (1985), in the other. The juxtaposition was telling: rather than being struck by the distinctions between works whose apparent influences are so geographically removed from one another, it was the similarities that hit home, the conciseness of expression, the clarity of form, the good humour. Unlike Bartok or Finnis, who wholeheartedly adopt and inhabit other musics as if they were their own, Weir maintains a critical, almost classical, distance between her sources and herself so that we are always conscious of how alien cultures other than our own must remain.

In *A Serbian Cabaret*, for example, with its alternation of declaimed texts and fantasias on the tunes to which those (translated) texts were originally sung, we laugh at the texts and their 'illustrative music background in the manner of film music'⁸, not out of a feeling of superiority (as previous generations did when presented with black-face 'Minstrels'), but out of a sense of the absurdity of this attempted cultural transposition. Weir's is a project not without danger – she regularly flirts with whimsy and she can be a little *too* neat and tasteful – but its realisation is so delightfully wry that I find it irresistible, particularly when performed with the vitality and precision that Lontano and Linda Hirst brought to *Cabaret* and *Consolations*.

Huddersfield is my local festival and being a local, I tend not to give it the undivided attention I give to other, more distant festivals: as a result my experience of Huddersfield is perhaps closer to that of the Yorkshire music-lover than that of the *parachutiste*⁹ new music buff. After all, if I don't particularly like the look of the next concert, or it's raining, or I've run the gamut of the town's very meagre supply of decent eateries, the temptation to take the M62 east to home, warmth and my own work can be overwhelming. Whatever the excuse, the truth is I didn't go to much more of the 1988 Festival than I've already mentioned, missing a lot of Andriessen (including Huddersfield students in the UK première of *de Stijl*) and quite a lot of Kaija Saariaho. However, I was there for the Tenth Birthday Gala Concert with which the Festival closed, so I did hear Saariaho's *Verblendungen* (1982/4) receive its UK première, in a performance by the English Northern Philharmonia (Opera North's orchestra) under Diego Masson. *Verblendungen* is a beautifully judged synthesis of computer-manipulated concrete sounds and orchestral textures: or so I thought – my (non-composing but musically sophisticated) companions both pronounced it uninteresting and very unsatisfactory for the orchestra, who they heard as entirely subjugated by the tape.

Like a lot of Galas, this one was rather long and not as coherently planned as less celebratory occasions, so after *Verblendungen* we heard the Schafer concerto mentioned earlier, a group of Messiaen organ works, his *Reveil des Oiseaux* (1953) and Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite* (1918). The organ works were something of a curiosity; presumably they were included here because no celebration of Messiaen's music would be complete without some organ music, but they sat rather awkwardly in the middle of an orchestral concert that was quite long enough. And although Jennifer Bate played with characteristic authority, extracting appropriately Messiaenic timbres from the Huddersfield Town Hall organ, why did she play a series of five unrelated pieces from 1928 to 1969, four of which were single movements from much larger works, when a single work (say the whole of the *Méditations sur la Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969) from which we heard just the sixth movement) would have made a much more satisfactory, separate recital? Pondering this mystery, but with fine performances of *Reveil* and the Bartok also ringing in my head, it was time for Samuel Smith's, the M62 and bed.

- ¹ Keith Potter's review of the 1983 Festival in *Contact* 28 (Autumn 1984) includes an account of the Festival's development over its first five years. The first two Festivals were covered in *Contact* 20 (Autumn 1979) and *Contact* 21 (Autumn 1980) by John Shepherd and Hilary Bracefield, respectively.
- ² Messiaen's music was also a feature of the 1988 programmes but its composer was not present.
- ³ The programme book anglicised this title as *Michael's Journey*, although Stockhausen himself referred to the work as *Michael's Trip* in his pre-concert talk. Elsewhere, and equally unnecessarily, Messiaen's *Reveil des Oiseaux* became *Awakening of the Birds*.
- ⁴ Christopher Fox, 'A Berlin Diary', *Contact* 32 (Spring 1988), p. 71.
- ⁵ Quoted in Robin Maconie, *The Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 144.
- ⁶ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Texte zur Musik 1963-70*, Vol. 3 (Köln: Verlag M. DuMont Schonberg, 1971), p. 47-50. See also John Tilbury's account of the same realisation in Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), p. 135.
- ⁷ I first heard *My First Homage* in 1979 at an SPNM Weekend at York University; Bryars and Dave Smith (pianos) with John White (tuba) gave what Bryars now calls his 'ghetto' concert. The work is also to be heard on *Hommages* (Disques de Crepuscule), a disc devoted to Bryars' music, where vibraphones and sizzle cymbal are added.
- ⁸ From the composer's programme note.
- ⁹ See Keith Potter's review, *op. cit.*, for an extended debate on the merits and drawbacks of *parachutisme*.