

contact

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

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

Citation

Wilson-Dickson, Andrew. 1973-1974. 'Experimental Music Catalogue: Keyboard Anthology'. *Contact*, 7. pp. 29-30. ISSN 0308-5066.

KEYBOARD ANTHOLOGY (£6.00)

The Experimental Music Catalogue's Keyboard Anthology is an excellently produced and copied book - 30 pieces and 91 pages at a cost of £6.00. This may seem a high price, but when one considers the total possible duration of the music represented, it is good value.

Many of the composers have been associated with the Scratch Orchestra (though Cardew himself does not feature here), but the contents are very different from the doodles found in "Scratch Music". For one thing, much of the writing is of a specific kind. There are no pieces which do not use the standard staff for pitch notation, and there is little gimmickry - indeed, one or two ideas are a valuable simplification of an over-complicated system. In Bryn Harris' Learn to 'Play the Piano' any ligature represents one beat. Pedantic repetitions of accidentals are avoided (in Christopher Hobbs' Out of Exercise 3 and elsewhere). The only serious technical accident is the reversal of the content of pages 2 and 3, but the obviousness of the error prevents any disastrous musical consequence.

I do not doubt the sincerity of these composers. On the contrary, I am struck by the seriousness even of the pieces with picturesque titles - Czerny's 100 Royal Bouquet Valses for the Piano by Lanner & Strauss, Arranged for Such as Cannot Reach an Octave or Pretty Tough

Cookie, both by Christopher Hobbs. In the first of these, the title only refers to the origin of the then manipulated material (insidiously including plenty of octaves) which, in common with much of this anthology, evolves at a pace so leisurely that I would become very impatient.

I would react thus particularly to three of the four pieces by Hugh Shrapnel. A complete performance of his Cantation II would last four hours, with a conventional musical interest that is minimal. Here we are still in the era of contemplation of sound for its own sake, events repeated over and over again until any connection with previous and different events is lost. But, correspondingly, as in Steve Reich's Drumming or Stockhausen's Stimmung, the sound itself must be all the richer in internal interest. Such could not be said of Cantation II or of the same composer's Tidal Wave, where "the sound overwhelms the whole area of performance" for about 140 minutes. I feel that a piece of music presented as a composition must demonstrate considerable 'sweat-per-unit-duration' by the person who puts his name to it. These long time-spans are filled with sound which is the result of little personal sacrifice on the part of the composer - compared to that of the audience.

The much shorter pieces of Richard Reason and Terry Jennings seem to have the same low 'sweat factor'. They have the air of written-out improvisations - first, rather than second, thoughts. My contention is that music of this sort is far better left unwritten - not uncreated I hasten to add - and that it should exist in the existential conditions of an improvisation, in moments that are convincing at first hearing and which one should not attempt to recapture. To plagiarise Cage: "the recording of such a work has no more value than a postcard".

The most attractive piece is one of two by Gavin Bryars. It is called The Ride Cymbal and the Band that caused the fire in the Sycamore Trees. The material, consisting entirely of jazz clichés, is divided into eleven 'areas' or tonal centres, delineated by pedal notes from two cellos. As with any piece where the performer is in complete control of both form and duration, the composer runs the serious risk of a tedious performance; but here there is the possibility of a well-balanced slice of bitter sentimentality.

There is a Satie-like quality to the shorter pieces by Howard Skempton, Edward Fulton and Michael Chant. Under the right conditions, the simplicity of these pieces could be refreshing. In a concert environment they could be deadly. Cage and others have successfully exposed the artificiality of the concert situation - the careful split into doers and recipients. This music is not suited to that atmosphere. Its maximum benefit is to those who choose to perform it alone, in a deserted piano warehouse at dead of morning.

ANDREW WILSON-DICKSON.