

contact

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

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

Citation

Shepherd, John. 1979. 'Review of Recordings from the 21st International Festival of Contemporary Music, Warsaw, September 1977'. *Contact*, 20. pp. 35-36. ISSN 0308-5066.

**RECORDINGS FROM THE 21st INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC
WARSAW, SEPTEMBER 1977**

JOHN SHEPHERD

Contact was unfortunately unable to send one of its intrepid correspondents to cover the Warsaw Autumn Festival in 1977, though there will be a comparative review of the 1978 and 79 festivals in the next issue. We were, however, lucky enough to be sent a copy of the five-disc set which the Polish Composers' Union produces as a record of the Polish element of the festival. This set, of course, reveals nothing of the truly international flavour of the occasion, nor can it give a feel for the particular atmosphere which each festival develops as it goes on. Further, not all the Polish works performed are put out on disc. All that can presumably be claimed for the records is that, given the usual difficulties of putting on a festival such as this, they give some general idea of the state of Polish composition at the time.

The overall impression gained is that, notwithstanding the undoubted abilities of the individual composers, Polish composition as a whole has become a little stagnant. Colourism and minimalism appear to have been worked to a point where the strengths and weaknesses of this particular 'school' of writing are almost totally known. So although, on the one hand, there is not a single weak work to be found on the discs, there are, on the other, few that leave a lasting impression. It seems as if many of the composers have completed their composition studies adequately, and reached the level of competence required to mine perpetually the Polish musical vein without necessarily having anything original to say.

Some of the composers represented on the discs cannot be brought under this rubric, however. Zygmunt Krauze is

easily identifiable among Polish composers, and his Piano Concerto (performed by the Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hans Zender, with the composer as soloist), demonstrates why. Krauze has for some years had an interest in the instruments of folk music, as well as in older instruments in general. This interest is reflected in the concerto. The texture of the piano writing is frequently reminiscent of piano rolls, for example, while the use of an harmonica creates the impression of an organ grinder at work. On another level it is not difficult to hear the clichés of classical piano writing trying to break through in full cry from their transmogrification into a 'timeless' mosaic.

Three other pieces for solo instruments are also of interest: Zbigniew Wiszniewski's *Pezzo Concertante* for alto flute and percussion, Norbert Mateusz Kuźnik's *Anophora* for trombone solo and Witold Szalonek's *Musica Concertante* for double bass and orchestra. The sonorities of the Wiszniewski are in many ways predictable: split notes, harmonics and breathy effects from the flute and opposing emphases on dry and liquid sounds from the percussion. However, together with well managed developments from one sound cluster to the next, the work displays a good sense of proportion. The handling of the rattling, clicking and rasping sonorities which open the piece is singularly impressive. The Kuźnik is similarly predictable, blatant raucousness being opposed by the insinuating smoothness that only a trombone can achieve. Yet again, the skilfully juxtaposed sound clusters and carefully delineated proportions resulted in attention being maintained. Of particular note are the vocal 'sympathisations' emanating from the larynx of the soloist Stanislaw Pierożek.

Szalonek's *Musica Concertante* differs from the two works just mentioned in that, while exploring the wide range of sounds which can be coaxed out of an instrument, in this case the double bass, it is also conversational in tone. Para-linguistic squeaks, grunts, whines and groans punctuate an orchestral background in a way that is unsettling. Only towards the end of the piece is there any sense of resolution or answer: this conveyed through a flowing, high flute solo. Nevertheless the work ends by asking a final, haunting question. Although it seems structurally safe, there is little doubt that conviction is added to the piece through the authoritative playing of the soloist Bertram Turetzky.

Of all the soloists to appear on these discs, the soprano Stefania Woytowicz is easily the most memorable. Listening to her sing 'Baa, Baa Blacksheep' would quite conceivably be a moving experience. The work she performs on this occasion plumbs the depths a little more, however. Meyer's *Polish Chants* for soprano and chamber orchestra (the Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra excellently conducted by Jerzy Maksymiuk) is a serially-informed piece of elegiacally intense proportions that at times seems to overstretch itself. Yet there are some convincingly restrained moments of aggression, as well as some elegant, more melismatic passages. Both these give full rein to Stefania Woytowicz's formidable talents.

The seriousness of Meyer's *Polish Chants* is matched by that of Tomasz Sikorski's *Sickness Unto Death*, a setting of a Kierkegaard text for reciter, two pianos, four trumpets and four horns. Monotonous, out-of-phase hammerings on the pianos alternate with internally changing, long-held brass chords to give the impression of a steely and icy confrontation with death. There is no hint of acceptance, refutation or discussion: merely a simple presentation of deathliness. Another similarly powerful work is Zbigniew Bujarski's *Domestic Music* for 18 strings (performed by the Polish Chamber Orchestra, again well directed by Jerzy Maksymiuk). Unlike the Sikorski, *Domestic Music* is much more of an essay, a lot of emphasis being placed on high string textures which attain a surprising degree of depth.

That most works of interest on these discs feature solo artists might seem to suggest that colourism and minimalism work best when there is an easily identifiable focal point to maintain the interest of the listener. Given the apparently stagnant state of these media, blandness becomes more obvious when there is nothing obvious to latch on to. That this need not be so is demonstrated by Serocki's *Ad Libitum*, which consists of five pieces for orchestra alone. Serocki has a reputation for being one of the more original colourists, and this is borne out in this long work (it occupies one complete record). There is a

sense of proportion, structure and direction (this not linear or 'purposeful', however), as well as a bold and bright handling of sonorities sadly lacking in many of his colleagues' work. With Serocki, the 'Polish School' would still appear to have a future. How far this is generally true would, on the evidence of these records, seem to be subject to question.

The first of the records reviewed here is a collection of songs by Serocki, recorded in 1955. The songs are mostly in the style of the 'Polish School', with a strong emphasis on melody and a clear sense of structure. The recordings are of high quality, and the performance is excellent. The songs are well chosen, and the collection as a whole is a very good example of the 'Polish School' at its best.

The second record is a collection of songs by Serocki, recorded in 1956. The songs are mostly in the style of the 'Polish School', with a strong emphasis on melody and a clear sense of structure. The recordings are of high quality, and the performance is excellent. The songs are well chosen, and the collection as a whole is a very good example of the 'Polish School' at its best.

The third record is a collection of songs by Serocki, recorded in 1957. The songs are mostly in the style of the 'Polish School', with a strong emphasis on melody and a clear sense of structure. The recordings are of high quality, and the performance is excellent. The songs are well chosen, and the collection as a whole is a very good example of the 'Polish School' at its best.

The fourth record is a collection of songs by Serocki, recorded in 1958. The songs are mostly in the style of the 'Polish School', with a strong emphasis on melody and a clear sense of structure. The recordings are of high quality, and the performance is excellent. The songs are well chosen, and the collection as a whole is a very good example of the 'Polish School' at its best.