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MUSICA NOVA, GLASGOW
SEPTEMBER 16-22, 1979

NICHOLAS BANNEN

The conception and organisation of this year's Musica Nova seem to have been greatly improved in comparison with previous occasions.¹ Having not attended before, I make the comparison very much on hearsay; however, I felt that on this occasion the timetabling of seminars and rehearsals catered well for students and public alike, avoiding major clashes while sustaining momentum. The seminars were given to groups of a size conducive to discussion and participation, while some composers even made themselves available for private lessons, a privilege few of us expected. Socially too the event was well-oiled, with plenty of opportunities to meet informally players (soloists and members of the Scottish National Orchestra and the Scottish New Music Ensemble), administrators (an important channel for feedback) and fellow students, as well as the many publishers and critics who had journeyed north for some important premieres.

Given this successful background, it was a pity that the focus of all this activity — the performances of resident composers' works — left so much to be desired. In the first concert Tona Scherchen-Hsaio's *Tzoue*, for harpsichord trio, had to be cancelled because the parts did not arrive in time. Since the other work of hers presented in Glasgow, *L'invitation au voyage*, for chamber orchestra, received a shaky and unsympathetic performance under Elgar Howarth, this was a major disappointment. Scherchen-Hsaio deserves better representation than this, as the tape she played of a French performance of *Vague-Tao*, a large, colourful and coherent orchestral work, proved to those who heard it. A London performance of this score should be arranged as soon as possible.

Thomas Wilson's music received the most consistently adequate performances, to the extent that one feared it represented a Scottish house-style, though his *Ritornelli*, in his own arrangement for full string orchestra, taxed the members of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. The doubtless cleaner lines of the original, for solo instruments, might have persuaded one that his classically twelve-note sound-world has something to offer. Robin Holloway's Second Concerto for Orchestra was given a performance by the SNO under Sir Alexander Gibson haunted by the constant impression that something was about to go irretrievably wrong. Why does Gibson exert so little rhythmic control in music of this metrical complexity? At times one felt that the whole thing was in the hands of his admirable sub-conductor, Edwin Roxburgh.

But it was Brian Ferneyhough, a composer used to the dismissive attitude of British orchestral players, whose *La terre est un homme* emerged with least satisfaction from the parochial hostility of the SNO's music-making. To begin with, Elgar Howarth displayed shortcomings of preparation and technique which must only have encouraged the players. A crucial contra-bass clarinet part was not catered for, little accurate representation of the dynamic and timbral instructions in the score was attempted, and every opportunity was taken to waste rehearsal time slinging



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"Beck capitalized handsomely on the rare opportunity, offered in the Lambro work, to display his considerable virtuosity, but the composition also is musically fascinating. Lambro, a living American, has titled his Two Pictures "Number One" and "Autumn Rhythm" after paintings by Jackson Pollock. "Number One," in a sort of clockwork rhythm, is full of dialogues, not only between percussionist and orchestra, but between various of the soloist's instruments (snare drums and timpani, e.g.) and between sections of the orchestra, contrasting their characteristic resonances. "Autumn Rhythm" has a penetrating jungle beat and features a cadenza with which Beck dazzled his listeners."
TIMES-UNION (Rochester, N.Y.)

"Phillip Lambro demonstrated the diversity and quality of twentieth-century American composition... Lambro's exploration of percussive sounds in the orchestral instruments, his fusion of Western and Asian musical idioms and his use of quartal and quintal harmonies, as well as metric modulation, was extensive."
CAMPUS TIMES (University of Rochester)

(BIOGRAPHICAL CATALOG AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST)



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mud at the unfortunate composer. The issue is not whether the music of Ferneyhough (or Scherchen-Hsaio, or even Holloway) is good or bad, but whether an orchestra should reap the kudos of premieres, recordings, etc., without seriously meaning to do justice to the composers' intentions. (The following week the situation was reversed, as a small but significant section of the LSO applauded Ferneyhough and the conductor Abbado after the final run-through of the London premiere.) In case anyone feels the position in Glasgow is being exaggerated, the following evidence exists: exhibit A, photographs of Holloway and Scherchen-Hsaio retrieved from the SNO centre dart-board where they had hung impaled like voodoo dolls; exhibit B: expensive orchestral material defaced and in some cases irreparably damaged by players. (Who pays for such vandalism? The public? The Arts Council?).

There were some good performances to be heard: a rabble-rousing account by Howarth and the SNO of Schoenberg's opus 9b (the not-so-Kammersymphonie) which showed just what this band is capable of; Harry Sparnaay's persuasively brilliant reading of Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study I* for bass clarinet; sterling work from the Scottish New Music Ensemble in Wilson, early Holloway and student pieces; a sensitive recital of Crumb, Eisler and Shostakovich by John Tilbury, who together with Jane Manning and Gregory Knowles tackled some difficult pieces in the workshops; and a concert, less weighty than the SNO's, in which the BBC SSO under Christopher Adey played, in addition to Wilson's *Ritornelli*, a piece entitled *Source* by the young Scot, Edward McGuire, which combined pleasantly a colourist sonority with folk elements growing from Janáček-like fragments to a gentle modal continuum. The piece featured offstage percussion (cowbells and bamboo) played by remote control by tugging on a clothes-line.

The BBC SSO concert also contained Holloway's sequined *Scenes from Schumann* and a work whose presence in these circumstances I found hard to accept, a new Piano Concerto by Brian Chapple, played by Howard Shelley. Hardly a note was not immediately redolent of Prokofiev, Shostakovich or a rhythmically anaemic Messiaen. Unlike Holloway's borrowings and anachronisms, which have at least a donnish brilliance that itself approaches originality, the second-handedness of this work was difficult to take seriously. The thought that it was taken seriously enough by the Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust, who commissioned it, and by Musica Nova to be performed was, for some of us, most disturbing.

Fortunately the student works rehearsed came closer to contemporary styles. Though no outstanding compositions appeared and the competitive aspect introduced a note of embarrassment to the final concert, the opportunity of hearing a variety of procedures and notational experiments in rehearsal was of great value. The Scottish New Music Ensemble of flute, trumpet, double bass and piano (soon labelled the 'Gang of Four') proved an awkward challenge to write for, though it produced a first prize-winner of the award donated by Chandos Records. The winning work, *Ainulindale*, a set of tone-pictures based on Tolkien by James Macmillan, impressed me less than several of the other works played. Malcolm Singer's clever piece of music-theatre, *A Singer's Complaint*, for Jane Manning's group, and John Lunn's instrumental *Journeys of Nothing in the Land of Everything* also received awards, and a special extra sum was presented to John Marlow Rhys, despite the fact that his *Precipitevolissimevolmente* was unperformable in the circumstances. I found the works for the piano/percussion group of greater interest than those for the SNME and was impressed by Christopher Bodman's *Soundscape Tranquillity*, memorable for the balletic grace with which Gregory Knowles played the percussion part.

Tilbury, Knowles and Manning gave useful seminars in which the emphasis was on technical potential and notation. The experience of hearing *all* of Maxwell Davies's marimba parts played in succession by Knowles certainly provided a new perspective on his music. Manning demonstrated characterisation by vocal colouration in an unaccompanied solo cantata-opera written for her by Judith Weir (now Crambe Fellow at Glasgow University). Tilbury included a workshop on the piano music of Cage.

A further new feature of this Musica Nova was the electronic music course, run by Stephen Arnold, who also mounted a concert of new British and American tape pieces. The studio was open for almost the entire week,

with David McKenzie tirelessly and enthusiastically explaining all to anyone who wandered in. The equipment Glasgow possesses is most impressive, and the studio would make a good base for a featured composer in the next event in 1982.

The overall impression was that this was a most successful Musica Nova. Criticism of the areas I found disappointing poses problems; the event would not exist but for the advocacy of Sir Alexander Gibson and the organisation of the SNO, but at the same time the low standard of performance hardly justified the importance attached to the premières. We must not bite the hand that feeds us, but improvements *will* be required if the event is to retain credibility and attract a more than merely local interest. As it was, very few foreign musicians attended, a sad state of affairs if British contemporary music is to break through the insularity that continues to stifle progress. It would be interesting, too, were a composer from outside the conventions of strict notation and acoustic instruments to be featured next time: Cage, Globokar or Kagel, perhaps. For in a curious way the gulf that seems at first to exist between, for instance, Holloway and Ferneyhough is soon recognised as a difference of degree. Both are stimulated by the permutative properties of advanced notation to build complex structures in which much of the detail is lost to the ear. Both have a liking for romantic gesture, even if they wear the heart on different sleeves: compare the last bars of, respectively, *La terre est un homme* and the Second Concerto for Orchestra. The presence next time of a composer working outside the late late-Romantic tradition would be a great leavener.

NOTE:

¹For a review of the 1976 Musica Nova see *Contact* 15 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 40-41. (Ed.)