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The Council, however, reflected that of any democratic body, and was not in a position to make a final decision. It was the Council's duty to make a recommendation to the members of the Council, and it was the members' duty to make a final decision. The Council's recommendation was that the Council should be dissolved and a new Council should be elected.

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THE SPNM COMPOSERS' WEEKEND, SEPTEMBER 10-13, 1981

ALAN BARNES

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SPNM COMPOSERS' WEEKEND LONDON, 10-13 SEPTEMBER 1981

CHRISTOPHER FOX

The 1981 SPNM Composers' Weekend was significantly different from earlier Weekends: it took place in September instead of the customary July; for the first time in nine years the venue was in London; and for the first time in its history there was no concluding concert of participant composers' music.

As a result of the move to London, audiences for the four evening concerts (by Vinko Globokar at Morley College, and the Michael Nyman Band, the Myrha Saxophone Quartet, and

the West Square Ensemble at St John's, Smith Square) were considerably larger than had been the case at previous Weekends. However, while this will undoubtedly have done the SPNM finances no harm, it was perhaps unfortunate that the technical upsets that wiped out the second half of the West Square Ensemble's programme (of which more later) had to occur in full view of the London concert-going public and critics.

In general it seemed that people were satisfied with the changes that had been made. The participant composers' concert, in particular, has been a bone of contention for some years, with a number of composers opposed to the at times unwarranted prestige conferred on those pieces included in the programme. In 1981 more composers got more time to work on their pieces than has often been so, and the musicians available were consistently helpful. Rarely did one get any sense of the antagonism that can creep into encounters between professional musicians and fledgling composers.

Inevitably there were problems. Most of the workshops and lectures were held in Morley College and on the final day it was discovered that only one Revox had been left there to record the pieces submitted for the Myrha and Nyman groups (all the other machines had been taken to St John's); amazingly the dozen or so pieces were all eventually taped. Composers who had written for the West Square Ensemble of piano, cello, bass clarinet, and electronics were less fortunate, however. Like some mythical beast, the Ferneyhough *Time and Motion Study II* gobbled up rehearsal time, consuming sessions scheduled both for the other pieces in the group's official concert and for the submitted works. I was relatively lucky, I suppose, in that I was able to rehearse my *Solo* for instrument, player, and tape with Harry Spaarnay, but the by then hopelessly confused scheduling meant that St John's was totally deserted throughout the 40 minutes during which we worked together.

Throughout the Weekend participants were faced with fairly agonising choices as to whether to sit in on the rehearsals of other composers' works or to hear the guest lecturers' sessions. On the whole I chose the latter and so I only caught half a Nyman Band workshop (on Jan Steele's dreamily laid-back *Ivory*) and the Myrha's final session, in which pieces by Malcolm Singer, John Gray, Peter Stacey, and Edward McGuire were recorded. If it was the stamina of the four saxophonists that struck me, rather than outstanding merit in any one of the pieces, this was less the fault of the composers than of an administration that had arranged the session in a cramped, airless seminar room.

Besides the Nyman, Myrha and West Square workshops there were also opportunities to hear tape pieces, most notably in a 'semi-official' tape music concert in St John's later on Sunday afternoon. Here Tim Souster introduced Malcolm Singer's *Sines of our Times*, Simon Waters's *Passages*, and Peg Ahrens's *Erne*—all of which had been submitted for the Weekend—as well as Mike McNab's *Dreamsong*. Of these I found the Singer and Waters pieces the most satisfactory: *Sines of our Times* is a perky little rhythmic study, made on the computer at Stanford, whose material is restricted to sounds characterised by the waveform of the title; *Passages* was made in the studio at the University of East Anglia and skilfully manipulates predominantly concrete material.

All too frequently, though, the characteristic malaise of new music conferences—that the ideas around the pieces are more exciting than the pieces themselves—was in evidence. This was especially the case when the talk turned to computers—one of the main focuses of the Weekend's lecture programme. Tim Souster, Rolf Gehlhaar, Tod Machover, and Peter Manning all spoke of the vastly enlarged musical resources that digital synthesis makes available to the composer. Yet, for all this, the music played—the tape part from Souster's *Mareas*, a recording made in Gehlhaar's IRCAM installation, *Pas à Pas*, Machover's *Soft Morning City*, and McNab's *Dreamsong*—revealed that computer music *per se* is still in its infancy, with composers using digital synthesis as little more than an elegant and efficient substitute for old-fashioned analogue techniques.

In contrast were talks by Peter Stacey and Roger Marsh which, although promising less, perhaps delivered rather more. Stacey's session, entitled 'A Language to Describe Sounds', focused attention on the ways in which our descriptive and prescriptive vocabularies (the languages of analysis and categorisation) determine our perception and

composition of music: an area of discussion of particular interest to those working with computers, where the language—music interface is especially important. Roger Marsh spoke about the 'Method and Madness' of his own compositional practice, drawing particularly on examples from his *Dum*. The lecture ended with Alan Belk giving a performance of *Dum* which I found the most gripping experience of the Weekend.

In parallel with the lecture programme ran a debate—sometimes formal, generally informal—on musical language. On the one hand there was the Boulezian view, eloquently expressed by Tod Machover, that out of the present plurality of compositional styles, manners, and attitudes some new universal language, with the same general currency as that enjoyed by tonality in Mozart's day, must emerge. On the other hand there were those composers, of whom Vinko Globokar was one of the most vocal, who find the diversity of available new music not only exciting but an essentially healthy phenomenon.

Each day of the 1981 Weekend closed with a concert, just as most days at most other SPNM Weekends have done. But this year the concerts took place at the hub of Britain's highly centralised musical scene and so the SPNM capitalised on this and billed the concerts as 'an intensive four-day festival of new music'. It was rather disappointing that little of the music played was very new—there were only five premières among the twenty-two pieces on offer; perhaps in an attempt to forestall such criticism, the SPNM called the series of concerts 'Music of the Decade', but since not a single work from outside Western Europe was included this title was just a little inflated.

Particularly disappointing was Vinko Globokar's recital: his programme, including his own *Échanges*, *Res/as/ex/inspirer* and *Vorstellung*, with Kagel's *Atem* and Berio's *Sequenza V*, differed from that heard at the 1979 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival only in the addition of Pousseur's colourless little *Mnemosyne I*. It would be a pity if this marked a halt in Globokar's development of the trombone as a solo instrument: *Échanges*, in particular, I find an enormously invigorating piece every time I hear it.

The minor technical hitch in Globokar's recital—*Vorstellung* came to an early end when the film snapped—should perhaps have prepared one to expect trouble whenever technology was involved in the subsequent concerts. The following evening the Nyman Band's concert was virtually impossible to listen to at times because of one of the roughest sound mixes I have heard since I stopped going to see punk rock groups. It would be a mistake to apportion blame, but St John's would seem to be the wrong acoustic in which to try to set up a good live mix in the short time available. However, Nyman's music, all of it unfamiliar to me, seemed at worst breezily entertaining and at best (in *Birdwork* and *Songs without Voice*) genuinely exciting.

The Myrha Saxophone Quartet finished their Saturday night concert with another Nyman piece, the première of *Real Slow Drag*. This was impressive in its exhaustive use of a limited range of saxophone sonorities and its exploitation of the capacity of the quartet to sound like one enormous instrument, stretching from the bottom of the baritone sax range through to the top of the soprano. The concert started with the other première in the programme, *Discours V*, the most recent addition to Globokar's series of instrumental debates. The piece began in the crypt bar of St John's with the players moving among the audience, and gradually changed in status from background music to concert music. The players then shepherded the audience up into the concert hall, where we were greeted by a series of loudspeaker pronouncements on the state of music. Once the players had arrived on stage and assumed 'concert' positions, saxophones and tape fell silent and a couple of minutes of mute instrumental theatre closed the piece. All good, clean, well-managed, and provocative fun.

The last concert, by the West Square Ensemble, was less satisfactory. The first half culminated in Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II*, with the cello part heroically executed by Alan Brett but with the various live-electronic support systems on which the piece depends (tape delay, throat mike, and ring modulation) generally poorly balanced. After the interval Harry Spaarnay began Gehlhaar's *Polymorph*, only to have the tape-delay system malfunction. Simon Waters's *Passages* was played again while attempts were made to sort out the problems and, when these attempts failed, Spaarnay played another of the drone-based pieces in his repertoire (Enrique

