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Trans-Atlantic Interactions

British-American Musical Interactions, Third American Music Conference, Keele University, 1-4 July 1983

An impressive conference on the subject of American music, co-sponsored by the Sonneck Society and attended by, among others, scholars, performers, and composers from more than 15 American states, took place during the weekend of 4 July. That's not necessarily news, since the Sonneck Society—as the principal institution concerned with the entire area of music in American life, past and present—organises events of this nature each year. What is newsworthy is the fact that the conference took place in Britain, at the University of Keele's Centre for American Music.

As many visiting Americans have discovered during the past decade or so, the University of Keele's music department is unusually receptive to American developments. Professor Peter Dickinson has travelled extensively in the USA (beginning with his own student years at the Juilliard), and frequently gives talks on such subjects as Ives for the BBC. The Keele Centre, which houses one of the most comprehensive libraries of American music outside the USA, hosted two international conferences on American music during the 1970s, one on the cultivated tradition and the other on blues, country, and rock styles. Dickinson has also brought a number of Americans to the Centre as guest professors. The most recent of these, Karl Kroeger of the University of Colorado (who spent a year at Keele as Leverhulme Fellow), has also been an active officer of the Sonneck Society. It seemed only natural that the third Keele conference should be jointly sponsored with Sonneck, and that this unique trans-Atlantic venture be devoted to the subject of British-American musical interactions.

American attendance at the conference was impressive, even though early July is a vacation period for most American academics; people travelled to Keele from points as widely separated as Vermont, California, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Alabama, Colorado, Kansas, and Michigan. British representatives came from Glasgow, Southampton, Liverpool, London, Oxford, Sheffield, and a great many other places—testimony to the deep interest in American music and its British connections that is felt on both sides of the Atlantic.

Papers were ordered according to historical period, beginning with presentations on 18th-century topics by the critic Percy Young and the University of Michigan's Richard Crawford, among others. 19th-century subjects of particular interest included an account of Horatio Parker's travels to London at the turn of the century (William Kearns, University of Colorado), and the influence of Gilbert and Sullivan on the American music theatre (Steven Ledbetter of the Boston Symphony Orchestra). Contemporary topics that especially interested me included Ruth Wilson's study of recent songs in which American texts have been set by British composers (and vice versa), and three papers presented by Britons: on the BBC and broadcasts of American pop music in the 1920s and 1930s (Simon Frith), home-grown British spin-offs of country music (Tony Russell), and the fascinating relationship between Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and Frank Bridge when he visited America in the twenties (Stephen Banfield).

A number of concerts were held at Keele during

the conference period, including a nicely varied recital by baritone Henry Herford, winner of the 1982 International American Music Competition. Herford's programme, which was recorded for future broadcast by the BBC, offered strong readings of Ives, Barber, and Virgil Thomson, among others. We also heard a lecture-recital by Stephen Spackman (St Andrews, Scotland) on Thomas Jefferson and the violin, and performances by Keele pianists Penelope Roskell and Peter Seivewright of music ranging from Tippett and Elizabeth Lutyens to the young American Larry Bell (resident at the American Academy in Rome).

I personally took part in a lengthy morning-and-afternoon session devoted to the unique 'interaction' of British and American composers who have developed special attachments for each other's countries, and came to Keele to discuss those attachments. First there were performances of music by some of the composers present; of these, the taut, intense *Dialogue and Song* for cello and piano by Jonathan Harvey, and the American Stephen Montague's *Paramell III*, for piano solo and a quiet repeated-noted drone chanted by the audience, were the most effective by far. The discussion period that followed offered uniquely individual glimpses of the 'British-American interaction' on a personal level: Harvey's years at Princeton, on a Harkness Fellowship, working with Milton Babbitt; the Harkness residency of Roger Marsh at the opposite end of America (aesthetically as well as geographically) in San Diego; Montague's decision to remain in London as a free-lance musician after his visit a decade ago as a Fulbright Scholar; the influence of the British avant garde upon my own work (also a decade ago); Simon Bainbridge's summers at Tanglewood; Keith Potter's visit to New York as a critic, covering performance art at The Kitchen.

From our different standpoints we also tried to isolate certain factors that might distinguish recent British and American music, or that might relate the two: the concern for multiple 'levels' and simultaneities, a fascination with collage and parody (perhaps more British than American), the search for new intonation systems and instrument building (certainly more American), and the like. Much of the exchange was led by the elder statesman and best-known member of our panel, who has done more to further trans-Atlantic 'interaction' than the rest of us put together—Wilfrid Mellers, author of *Music in a New-Found Land* and a frequent visitor to the USA. Mellers (who had, in fact, just returned from a visiting residency at Dartmouth College) was awarded honorary membership of the Sonneck Society for his contributions to the study of American music.

The conference ended with a panel on that most complex of Anglo-American musical collaborations, the latest edition of *Grove's Dictionary*. Stanley Sadie, editor of *The New Grove*, joined H. Wiley Hitchcock of the Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College (and associate editor, with Sadie, of the forthcoming *American Grove*) in answering questions from the floor—not only concerning the *Grove* project, but on issues related to future musicological co-operation as well. And if a model for such co-operation is needed, the Keele Conference itself in all its aspects—from the presentation of papers to concerts, in its actively engaging the BBC and the *Musical Times* (which brought out a special American issue), and in its broad-based appeal to many quarters of the musical community—will undoubtedly serve for many years.

A different version of this review will appear in *Musical America*.