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FIRST PERFORMANCES

Tanglewood Festival: Elliott Carter Celebration

Conductor James Levine's tenure at the Boston Symphony Orchestra has thus far been musically illustrious, but fraught with personal peril. He's struggled with health problems and in 2006 had to take an extended hiatus due to an onstage fall. More bad news struck in July 2008, when it was announced that Levine would have to withdraw from the rest of the Tanglewood season in order to undergo surgery to remove a kidney. To their credit, the BSO did an admirable job providing replacement conductors for Tanglewood events with minimal disruption of programming. This feat was particularly extraordinary when one considers that the Festival of Contemporary Music had scheduled over 40 works by Elliott Carter, as a (five months early) centenary celebration from Sunday 20 July through Thursday 24 July. Happily, the conductors pinch-hitting for Levine were more than up to the task.

This is the first time that the FCE has devoted itself entirely to the music of one composer. The concerts spanned Carter's entire career, but with emphasis on his prolific late career. Although many of the composer's staunchest allies performed during the week, he also garnered new champions. The New Fromm Players, including Brook Ferguson, Kathryn Bates, Stephanie Nussbaum, Martin Schultz, and Gareth Zehngut, gave sterling renditions of the Second String Quartet, *Enchanted Preludes*, *Four Lauds* and solo string *Figments.* Sandra Gu and Jacob Rhodebeck were impressive in new works for solo piano: *Intermittences* (2005) and *Caténaires* (2006). Soloist Kate Lindsey and conductor Jeffrey Milarsky gave a touching performance of *In the Distances of Sleep (*2006), a cycle of Wallace Stevens settings for mezzo-soprano and orchestra.

The TMC commissioned two pieces for the festival; both showed Carter to still be capable of surprises. *Sound Fields* was a brief work for string orchestra. Inspired by Helen Frankenthaler's Color Field pictures, the piece was an exploration of thick and thin textures. Played softly and non-vibrato throughout, it channelled sounds from pieces written early in the 20th century, ranging from Schoenberg's *Farben* to elegiac moments in Mahler; a few quipped that it was like Ives's *Unanswered Question* sans trumpet.

The other new piece, *Mad Regales* (2007), was premièred on Tuesday evening. It consisted of three short settings of John Ashbery: a constantly overlapping *8 Haiku,* the jocular *Meditations of a Parrot,* and the kaleidoscopically tempo-shifting *At North Farm*. Conducted by John Oliver, a sextet of young operatic aspirants gave a cleanly tuned and expressive rendering of Carter's first work for *a cappella* singers in nearly 70 years. Then, after thunderous applause and a curtain call by the composer, they sang it again.

Fred Sherry's brilliant performance of the Cello Concerto (2001) on Wednesday evening suggested that, even though it was written for Yo-Yo Ma, it is Sherry who now effectively *owns* the work. This same concert included what was for many a festival highlight; the TMC Orchestra's performance of the Concerto for Orchestra (1969). Under Oliver Knussen's direction, this group of emerging musicians gave a rendition that set the bar for accuracy, ensemble coordination, and musicality higher than most professional orchestras could hope to achieve.

Thursday night's concert brought the festival to the close with a BSO concert, conducted by Shi-Yeon Sung and Knussen, that was ambitious in scope; it also demonstrated the extraordinary commitment the orchestra has made to Carter's work under Levine's tenure. The program included three recent BSO commissions as its first half: *Three Illusions* (2004), Horn Concerto (2007), and *Boston Concerto* (2002); the entire second half was dedicated to the composer's magnum opus for large orchestra, the nearly hour-long *Symphonia: sum fluxae pretium spei* (1996).

Signatures of late Carter – transparency of textures and renewed commitment to long, often *cantabile,* lines – was abundantly in evidence in *Boston Concerto.* It showcases each section in turn, interspersing lyrical *soli* and imaginatively orchestrated sectional deployments with sparkling *pizzicato* interludes. The composer pointed out in a pre-concert talk that he's listened to the BSO since his teenage years, when he was taken to their concerts by Charles Ives; he viewed the *Boston Concerto* as a gift in return. Knussen's traversal of the *Symphonia* imbued the work with admirable clarity; the last movement in particular seemed more fleet-footed than the BSO's previous performances. But the three-movement piece,

originally written as three separate commissions before being combined into a single symphony, has a gargantuan presence. It proved a fitting, epic conclusion to Tanglewood's *tour-de-force* centenary celebration.

Christian Carey

London, Royal Albert Hall & elsewhere: Proms 2008 (1) – Bax, Holt, Schubert orchestrations, Eötvös, Stucky

I opened my *Tempo* survey of last year's Proms premières by wondering aloud whether Nicholas Kenyon might have passed his sell-by date as Proms planner – and poof! he was gone. So if I – or *Tempo* – have this kind of power, I had better take care to say no such thing of Roger Wright, Kenyon's successor, whose first Proms season (even though much of it would have been planned before he took up the reins) had a freshness and a generosity of spirit that bodes well for the seasons ahead where he has a freer hand.

With hindsight, the programming of Bax's *In memoriam* on 24 July, five days after illness had forced the cancellation of what (astonishingly) would have been Vernon Handley's first Proms appearance since 1995, proves to have been sadly prophetic: doubtless Wright's saddest duty in his first season came on 10 September, when he announced from the stage that Handley had died that morning. As fortune would have it, the orchestra on 24 July was the BBC Philharmonic, with whom Tod Handley recorded his Bax symphonic cycle for Chandos in 2002–3 (CHAN 10122(5)), thus making it the pre-eminent Bax orchestra, thin though the competition may be. This *In memoriam* – it is not the work called *In memoriam (1916)* for cor anglais, harp and string quartet – is a symphonic poem composed in 1916 but unheard in Bax's own lifetime: the short score (all that was known for decades) bears an inscription (in Erse) to Padraig Pearse, leader of the Easter Uprising in Dublin that year, shot by firing squad on 3 May, and Calum MacDonald's programme note wondered whether such overtly anti-British associations might have encouraged Bax to keep the piece from public inspection. And so the full score went undiscovered until 1993.

It was recorded – by Handley and the BBC Philharmonic – in 1998 (Chandos CHAN 9715). Handley's recorded account adds three minutes to the 12 that Yan Pascal Tortelier required for this Prom performance, the extra broadness adding substantially to the weight and impact of the score on CD; the diffuse Albert Hall acoustic cannot have helped Tortelier's case. *In memoriam* opens as if intent on demonstrating the subtlety of Bax's scoring, suggesting he has captured the Celtic half-light in sound. A dignified and spacious tune emerges from the reedbeds, the kind of tune that conventionally attracts the label 'Elgarian', though Elgar would never have decorated it with the melodic tendrils that Bax spins off. The heroic mood darkens as it approaches a climax, and march rhythms push their way forward, garlanded by trumpets, crispened by drums. Oscillating woodwinds paint a swirling Baxian seascape; as it fades away, the Elgarian tune resurfaces, sweet in upper strings, for a last passionate upswelling, before the mists close in and the music is lost from sight. Farewell, Tod; we'll miss you.

The first of the BBC commissions that fell into my 2008 beat for *Tempo* was Simon Holt's *Troubled Light*; Thierry Fischer conducted the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in its world première on 25 July – Holt is its Composer-in-Association. 'I read somewhere', his programme note began, 'that it was Goethe who described colour as troubled light'; that suggested 'the starting point for a [22-minute] series of five short orchestral pieces; four orchestral sketches leading up to a final piece that uses elements from them all'. Holt has always been adept at suggesting aspects of light in his music, and *Troubled Light* should maintain his reputation for the adept deployment of instrumental textures to synaesthetic effect: all five movements demonstrate the liberty with which his ear can conjure up kaleidoscopic swirls and patterns, unexpected combinations, sometimes subtle, sometimes emphatic. What makes *Troubled Light* ultimately unsatisfactory is a harmonic deficiency: all the activity was superficial, with no sense that it was happening against a background – it came without perspective, as insects skating over a pond. In my mind's ear I half-heard a part for solo organ, transforming Holt's foreground into the background for a concerto; it cried out for something more.

The Prom on 22 August – with the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne conducted by Markus Stenz – was the kind of inflated monster I remember fondly from my early Promming days in the late 1970s and early '80s; constructed like one of those mediaeval multi-bird roasts, this one opened with Mahler's Fifth Symphony, continued with the first Proms performance of Stockhausen's *Punkte* after a first interval and then, after a second, offered four new Schubert orchestrations (soprano soloist Angelika Kirchschlager) and a nightcap of Beethoven's overture *Leonore* No. 3. The idea was to reproduce the 1904 Gürzenich concert in which the Mahler was first performed, with the

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Stockhausen (he was a son of Cologne, of course, and remained faithful to the city all his life) stuffed in the middle in acknowledgement of the fact that his 80th birthday would have fallen on this day.

The Schubert orchestrations were all BBC commissions and first performances. They opened with David Matthews' version of *Ständchen*, D.920, which was a model of taste and discretion – until we came to Matthews's own coda. His programme note stated that he 'had the idea that if Schubert had lived to a decent age he might have ended up composing rather like Wagner, so I wrote this coda as if Schubert had written it in, say, 1858, 30 years after, his death. It's quite short – only 30 bars – but it does move the song into a different world'. You're telling me: in that short space it seems to morph through all of the *Great C major* before coming to rest in *Parsifal*. The stylistic dislocation disturbs the enchantment that had preceded it. And I can't quite see the logic: you wouldn't graft a coda in the style of late Beethoven onto the end of one of the Op. 18 quartets, would you? In *Bei dir allein*, D.866/2 Manfred Trojahn lent especially heavily on the clarinets in the first verse; touches of Berlioz in the second were reinforced in the third, with its antiphonal use of instrumental lines. Colin Matthews's atmospheric recasting of *Nacht und Träume*, D.827, again evoked Berlioz: underpinning rocking strings with pedals in bass trombone and tuba could bring no one else to mind. Detlev Glanert's *Das Lied im Grünen*, D.917, was the most explicitly Schubertian of the orchestrations and the most richly variegated in its use of colour. All four orchestrations were distinguished by some wonderfully subtle brass-playing, aided by the elevation of the instruments above the rest of the orchestra – and much of the sheer richness of the Gürzenich sound can be laid at the door of the timpanist and his choice of natural skins for his drums, which transforms the timbre of the entire ensemble. I hope he knows that such things are noticed and appreciated.

Peter Eötvös should have been present to conduct his own *Seven* in its UK premiere on 27 August; since he was detained by illness, his place in front of the Philharmonia was taken by Susanna Mälkki. The full title of the piece (written in 2006 and revised the following year) is *Seven – memorial for the Columbia astronauts*; symbolic groups of seven abound in the instrumentation, in the rhythm, and so on. What's still not yet clear is that this is a violin concerto, the soloist on this occasion (as also for the première in the Lucerne Festival last year) being the very capable Akiko Suwanai, making her Proms debut. *Seven*'s model as memorial piece was the Berg Concerto; it

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likewise falls into two more or less equal halves, the first of which is billed as a 'Cadenza with Accompaniment', divided into four sections which pay tribute to the astronauts as individuals or in pairs. For the first, six ancillary soloists are stationed around the hall, adding held notes and half-phrases to the main solo part, to magical effect. In the second low brass and percussion offer angry comment, with the welter of gongs, bells, drums, marimba, cymbals and other things to hit ranged round the back of the stage generating a moving forest of sound. In the *Perpetuum mobile* third, the constant activity of the soloist triggers commentary from other instruments on stage and from the players around the hall. And for the fourth the music suggests very strongly the fractured lyricism of Berg, the extended disquisition of the soloist almost settling into an elegiac sarabande. In the second movement, after a brief solo, four percussionists rub tam-tams in circular motion so that for a brief moment (and again at the end) they both sounded and looked like a train. The soloist's elegy once again draws commentary from the orchestra and the satellite soloists. Although occasional faster passages alternate with the more contemplative one, the harmonic pace is so slow that the music never really accelerates. Paul Griffiths's programme note suggested that the second movement be regarded as a set of variations; although some elements carry over from one section to the next, any deeper connexion escaped me on this first hearing – what was undeniable was the elegance and lyrical distinction of much of the writing.

Steven Stucky's *Rhapsodies for Orchestra* – a joint commission from the BBC and the New York Philharmonic – was given its world première by the NYPO under Lorin Maazel the evening after the Eötvös; the US première followed on 18 September. Stucky's note explained that Maazel had asked whether he might write 'something rhapsodic'; hence *Rhapsodies* which, the composer further explains, does exactly what it says on the tin: 'The resulting work is rhapsodic in two senses: it has a freely developing form, as if improvised, and it trades in ecstatic, fervent forms of expression'. In a single, 11-minute span, it 'unrolls as a series of rhapsodic episodes, usually triggered by a single player whose ardent phrases gradually "infect" his or her neighbour until soon a whole section of the orchestra is sounding ecstatic'. The result is a kind of mini-concerto for orchestra, with tuned percussion initiating the glittering background against which a series of woodwind and brass soloists strut their excited stuff. Not until xylophone and marimba set up a recurrent, almost minimalist pattern does the music sound specifically American. Ardent string-writing sets off tolling figures in the brass, as if they were measuring out time; the ardour then passes to the brass, which crest in burning fanfares. A bass-drum whump re-establishes the atmosphere of the beginning (Stucky has used this device before), with solo wind lines extending like birdsong over lonely landscapes. Subdued fanfares are heard, as if from a distance and the music dies into silence over held strings. I didn't perceive any particular attention to form; the satisfaction was in the telling.

Martin Anderson

Proms 2008 (2): Stockhausen Day

A prophetic, even valedictory salute to the world, Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Harmonien* for trumpet, received a reflectively elegiac yet virtuoso posthumous world première by Marco Blaauw at the BBC Proms' Stockhausen Day on 2 August 2008, and was enthusiastically applauded. Both *Harmonien*, and *Cosmic Pulses*, which received its UK première, form part of Stockhausen's last major cycle, *Klang* – which, like the operatic epic *LICHT*, extended the ideas of the iconic avant-garde works of the 1950s and 60s on a grand, visionary scale. Originally conceived as an 80th birthday celebration (he was born on 22 August 1928) the Proms' Stockhausen Day was instead a celebration of his achievement 'in memoriam'.
Harmonien, a BBC commission, was composed in September 2006 and forms the final third of the three-part Fifth Hour of *Klang*, the cycle of 24 pieces for each hour of the day, 21 of which Stockhausen completed. The first two parts are for bass clarinet (composed May 2006) and flute (composed June 2006). *Harmonien* is a very attractive piece, particularly because of the accessible formal, tonal and melodic idiom, suggesting a comparison with Berio's solo *Sequenza*s, and it works well in the acoustics and space of the RAH. Its quasi-religious symbolism, a Bachian allusion at the start with the spoken words 'Lob sei Gott', seemed to express some form of peacemaking with his Creator. The broad rhythmic arcs through which silences and sounds intermingled were unexpectedly expressive, evidence of a late style which, on this occasion, made its impact with clear intentions. The trumpeter Marco Blaauw – who has worked with Stockhausen since 1998 and has premiered parts of *Licht* – was an ideal interpreter of this highly virtuosic and demanding work.

Into the pregnant darkness and silence of the hall, centre-stage with a series of mutes on his belt,

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Blaauw blew a solemn four-note introduction, each note separated by a spoken uni-syllabic word: 'Lob – sei – Gott' ('Praise be God'). The pure bright sound of the long straight trumpet was amplified through its invisible microphone via three large speakers behind him, facing into the hall. The motif, a falling major third followed by a falling minor third, seemed highlighted as a Bachian quotation (Bach's Fugue in B flat minor, *WTK* Book II, perhaps?), as did the German phrase (a play on 'Lob es Gott', maybe). This motif returns at the very end, just before the final sustained note, acting thus as a framing gesture, yet it also sets up the embryo of the rest of the melodic material, 24 different melodies symbolic of the 24 hours of the day by which *Klang* is inspired, each melody derived from five distinct groups of pitches, tempos, rhythms and registers, hence the 'Fifth hour'. From each finely-crafted melody a widely leaping motif is extracted, and reiterated with accelerations and pauses, thus suggesting a polyphonic harmonic field. Blaauw's virtuosity was displayed in the rapid accelerations, trills, double attack or flutter-tongued patterns, sustained notes, singing while playing, and the colours of at least four different mutes. The effect of the surreal syntax was reminiscent of Samuel Beckett or Dylan Thomas's delving into sonorities and silences, infused with evocative beauty that held the audience's rapt attention up until the final seven-note melody. Here, theatrically, he turned around and played to the loudspeakers; and, as a final gesture, repeated the initial four-note motif followed by a sustained final note which miraculously glissandoed up through a whole tone.

Although absent in the flesh, Stockhausen's spirit was clearly sensed in the new works which were performed by artists who has strong personal links with the great man himself. As well as Marco Blaauw, we heard his companion and favoured sound-engineer and muse, Kathinka Pasveer, who directed the UK première of *Cosmic Pulses* (2006–7), which is the Thirteenth Hour of *Klang*. *Cosmic Pulses* is a 30-minute purely electronic essay in spatially spinning sound saturation. Interestingly radio (and online) listeners were given a specially pre-recorded version (approved by the composer), where stereo panning gave the aural illusion of circling sound. In the Royal Albert Hall this was engineered through Kathinka Pasveer's artful manipulation of a surround-sound collection of loudspeakers suspended from the balconies and gallery, through which the music – composed, apparently, in 241 trajectories – could rebound across the space with a uniquely sci-fi 'cosmic' effect, enhanced by some eerie moonlit lighting. The 'pulses' of the title refer to Stockhausen's notion of pitch as increasingly rapid pulses, explored through the simple filling-up of the pitch space from low to high frequencies.

The piece opens and closes with slow organ-like pitches, which at the start are gradually overlaid with layer upon layer of increasingly granulated and flickering strands, filling the texture to the highest pitches. When the texture reaches saturation, there is a noticeable evolution from metallic, scraping sounds to a more bell-like and bubbly surface, the high-pitch tintinnabulations distinct from the lower range strands. This section was rather too unvarying, and someone entering the hall at this point might have tried to escape what appeared to be the dark cavernous residence of a swarming cloud of bats! The ending simply thinned out the middle layers of texture, closing with the high and low strands, slowing down the pattern to a series of long sustained beeps and low pedal notes that recalled the very opening.

Any such event needs to take stock of the major influence on music and culture that Stockhausen represents, and thus it was admirable of the BBC to programme several avant-garde classics of the 1950s and 60s, alongside films and discussions. *Gruppen*, his magisterial 1957 essay for three orchestras, was performed twice, at the concert's start and close, by the BBCSO with an impressive trio of conductors, David Robertson, Martin Brabbins and Pascal Rophe, who drew out, clearly and expressively, the many cross-allusions between orchestral sections and individual instruments. There were especially lovely solos from the BBCSO leader (Orchestra 1), the piano (Orchestra 2), and various guitar, brass and percussion across the three ensembles, before the final Webernesque conclusion. Though it might have appeared dated, *Gruppen*'s accessibility was one of the qualities recognized already in 1960.

By contrast *Kontakte,* in a virtuoso account by pianist Nicholas Hodges and percussionist Colin Currie supported by Bryan Wolf's intricate live-electronic sound design, retains its aura of radicalism. Much was made here of the theatrical element, changing from other instruments to the tam-tams to cue in with the electronically swirling sounds. Similarly it was the theatrical, rather than spiritual, aspect of *Stimmung* which, in the atmospheric Late-Night slot, was most boldly projected by the Theatre of Voices. Their director Paul Hillier was one of Gregory Rose's 'Singcircle', who gave the previous Proms performance in 1979. Entering in silence one by one, as per the stage directions, they sat silently in yoga position, then picked up their microphones, bowed their heads, and began. To navigate their way through each of the 51 sections, each singer

in turn made elegantly demonstrative hand gestures, leading the dialogues, convergences and counterpoints of vowel sounds, sporadic words and 'Sprechgesang' (the composer's own erotic verses) against the amplified vibrato-less singing. All this against the backdrop – though impregnated with some dramatic silences – of an unresolved 'dominant ninth' which happily, and involvingly, fluctuated around its pure tuning with delicious microtonal spice. Though *Stimmung* has imbibed a cocktail of late 1960s influences, including La Monte Young, Tibetan, Buddhist meditation and Stockhausen's own explorations of the overtone series, the emphasis here was on the witty rather than the seriously meditative.

Stockhausen lived and stood for 'the new'. For Pierre Boulez, in a Radio 3 interval talk by Tom Service, he was 'one of, if not the, most fascinating personalities' he encountered. While Stockhausen's iconic reputation is premised upon his innovation and experimentalism, aesthetic expression and communication often seem problematic. Stockhausen's works, bold as they are, continually inhabit the experimental, crossing new frontiers, taking ideas to their logical extremes. Running through his works is a simplicity, if radicality, of form, designed to highlight the complexity and novelty of process and technique. His path, however thorny in the last two or three decades, has already spawned a multitude of responses and it is right, as demonstrated by such a fitting 80th anniversary memorial tribute concert (a harbinger of several large-scale Stockhausen events in the coming year) both to revere his achievements and to look at the richness of the individual new paths they continue to inspire.

Malcolm Miller

Proms 2008 (3): Carter, Hillborg, Messiaen, Chen Yi, Inspire

The centennials of Elliott Carter and Olivier Messiaen and the eightieth birthday of Karlheinz Stockhausen were among the focuses of the Proms this summer. Although the first night concert included the first performance of a Proms commission from Carter, the piano piece *Caténaires*, he was only represented by three other works, the Oboe Concerto, *Night Fantasies*, and *Soundings*, as opposed to 18 works of Messiaen – several of them, including the opera *St. Francis of Assisi*, major works of considerable length. Carter's *Soundings*, which received its first UK performance on 18 August in a concert by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, was written in 2005 to a commission by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a present for Daniel Barenboim when he relinquished the post of the orchestra's music director. Since Carter's intention was to celebrate Barenboim as a musician who regularly directs performances of Mozart piano concertos in which he is also the soloist, he cast the work for piano and orchestra, intending that the piano soloist would also be the conductor.

It goes without saying that the rhythmic and ensemble difficulty of Carter's music is greater than that of Mozart's, making the realization of this idea a challenge. Although there are certainly ways that could have been devised to deal with this problem, Carter chose to sidestep it altogether by, basically, never having the piano and orchestra play together. The piece begins with a piano solo, there is a short interjection by the orchestra, the piano plays a little bit again, then there is a long stretch of orchestra music; there is a very brief exchange of single notes on the piano (the notes, D and Bb, being, of course, Barenboim's initials – in fact, D is also the first note of the piece, and Bb the last), and then the piece ends with a piano solo. In a performance where the soloist and the conductor were the same, the skimpiness of the interaction might not be so noticeable; but in this performance, where the piano, moved off to the side of the orchestra, was played by Nicholas Hodges and the conductor was Illan Volkov, it was not only noticeable, but a little strange and unsatisfying.

Although Carter's program notes didn't explain the title, presumably it refers to the practice of using sounds and echos to measure underwater distances. In this case bursts of fast notes, usually in the winds, are answered by sustained notes, usually in the strings, outlining the boundaries of the registers used. Carter is certainly a master, and in *Soundings*, as in all his other music, both the instrumental lines, which are always wrought in a masterly fashion, and the unfolding of the music through time, are continually skillful and elegant. There's no question of it being anything other than first-rate music. However, it is clear that the piece is, to say the least, not one of Carter's most important or profound works. Virgil Thomson's comment on the Beethoven Irish folk song arrangements seemed applicable here: it's like getting a letter from somebody who can really write, about nothing in particular.

The August 13 Proms concert featured the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. The concert attracted a certain amount of general interest on account of Dudamel, who had, along with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, created a sensation in their con-

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cert in the 2007 Proms. There seemed to be some curiosity to see how he would do when working with grownups. Their program included, along with *La Valse* and the *Symphonie fantastique*, the first UK performance of the Clarinet Concerto, subtitled *Peacock Tales*, by Swedish composer Anders Hillborg, with soloist Martin Fröst. Fröst is an accomplished mime, as well as being a clarinettist, and the work, which was written for him, was tailored to his extraordinary abilities, including over its 30-minute duration not just clarinet playing, but mime, dance, and lighting. After a quite effective opening soliloquy for the soloist, the orchestra came in, and, after a while, the music got very intense (with what the program notes described as 'shreiks and wild glissandos'.) The soloist sometimes wore a mask, which was a sort of fox face. After a while he moved the mask around to the back of his head, which made him look a little like some kind of mouseketeer. His movements were very choreographed and often intricate. The music for much of this consisted of repeated ostinato figures in the orchestra. Sometimes there was red lighting, sometimes blue; sometimes there was bright white light, and sometimes the lights were dimmed. In any case, there was nothing at all intricate about it. The demands made on the soloist, both in terms of the music and the choreographic motion, were quite extreme, and the realization of them was dazzling. The program notes said that the piece was a journey through many different musical and emotional 'stations'. The single overarching line of aesthetic intention which would have rendered all of this a coherent musical and dramatic experience eluded this listener completely.

Earlier in the afternoon there had been a Composer Portrait event, which included performances of other works of Hilborg's: *Close-ups*, for solo flute, *Close-up* for bassoon and tape, Six Pieces for Wind Quintet, and *Corrente della Primavera* for solo piano, all performed with high style by musicians from the Royal Academy of Music. These pieces represented rather more clearly Hilborg's background in rock music. The bassoon piece consisted of the first minute of the flute piece (which is music which Hilborg said he had used in many of his works) played to a drum track. It had the effect of somewhat slowing it down first of all, but also of providing a metrical background which did make the same music seem rather different. *Corrente della Primavera* is an extremely difficult, breathless perpetual-motion piece, which received a drop-dead, take no prisoners performance from Alissa Firsova.

The Prom on 19 August, given by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ilan Volkov, was a collaboration between the BBC and IRCAM, and featured the music of Jonathan Harvey, a long-time associate of IRCAM. It included the first performance of Harvey's *Speakings*, a major work commissioned by the BBC, IRCAM, and Radio France which was also the final product of a three-year association between Harvey and the orchestra. The concert was in three parts, divided by two intermissions, each of which consisted of a relatively brief piece for tape or electronics, followed by a larger-scale instrumental work.The first contained Harvey's *Tombeau de Messiaen* for piano and digital audio tape, followed by Messiaen's *Concert à quatre*, the second Harvey's *Mortuos plango, vivos voco* for eight-channel tape, followed by *Speakings* for orchestra and live electronics, and the third Varèse's *Poème électronique* for magnetic tape and *Déserts* for 15 wind instruments, percussion and magnetic tape.

Much of Harvey's music is influenced by a concern with spirituality, reflecting an interest in Buddhism. Each of the three pieces of his on this concert were also deeply concerned with the opposition of the mechanical and technological to the simple and human. *Speakings* refers to Buddhist concepts of purification of speech, and considers speech as a means of human communication closely linked to, although distinct from, music. Its most immediate and noticeable preoccupation, though, is with the acoustical phenomena associated with the act of speaking and the expressive qualities and colors that those phenomena might suggest in and of themselves, without direct reference to any linguistic sense with which those sounds might be connected. The orchestral discourse, as Harvey wrote in his program notes, is 'electroacoustically shaped by patterns of speech' through a process of shape vocoding realized with the aid of IRCAM music designers Gilbert Nouno and Arshia Cont. The heart of the work is the longer elaborate and active central section which Harvey intended to suggest 'the frenetic chatter of human life in all its expressions of domination, assertion, fear, love, etc.', with a prelude which is a 'descent into human life', and followed by more serene hymn-like section, featuring single lines close to Gregorian chant projected through the acoustical space of the hall. *Speakings* is a serious and handsome-sounding work, lasting about half an hour, which, despite its involved technical paraphernalia, remains human and humanly expressive.

Mortuous plango, vivos voco, which lasts nine minutes, is based on the sound of the largest bell at Winchester Cathedral (inscribed with the text HORAS AVOLANTES NUMERO, MORTUOUS PLANGO, VIVOS AD PRECES VOCO: I count

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the fleeting hours, I lament the dead, I call the living to prayer) and of the voice of Harvey's son Dominic, who was from 1976 to 1980 a chorister at the Cathedral. The dominating sound of the bell, which, according to Harvey, is, 'for all its richness of sonority', a dead sound, counts time, marking the beginning of each section and maintaining an unmoving position in the acoustical space of the work, surrounding the audience, while the boy's voice, a living element, flies freely around that space. The pitch and harmonic structures of the work are based on the complex overtones of the bell. The sounds of those elements, with their different spectra, were manipulated by computer and 'crossbred' with synthetic simulations of those same sounds, as well as transformed back and forth into one another in various ways; among other things the bell and the boy's voice suggest an opposition between the mechanized and technological and the human. *Tombeau de Messiaen* also plays on the opposition of the piano sounds of the tape, manipulated to be tuned to the harmonic series of 12 different pitches, to the tempered tuning of a live piano. The dialog of those two elements lead to a climactic cascading over the range of the live instrument. All three of Harvey's pieces out sounded imposingly in the space of the Albert Hall, and were, certainly from an acoustical standpoint, impressive and highly effective.

The first section of the concert included Messiaen's *Concert à quatre*, a 26-minute work for piano, flute, oboe, cello, and orchestra (soloists Emily Beynon, Alexei Ogrintchouk, Danjulo Ishizaka, and Cédric Tiberghien, respectively), left unfinished at his death and completed by his widow Yvonne Loriod, in consultation with Heinz Holliger and George Benjamin. I'm continually at a loss to understand my reaction to Messiaen's music; those pieces which seem to me to be absolutely first class, and those which I can't tolerate, all seem to do just about the same thing in just about the same way. This one, by me, anyway, was a real dog, solemnly self-important, completely commonplace, and unbearably tedious. I was reminded of Stravinsky's writing to a friend after hearing a Mahler Symphony, saying something along the lines of that it was like being told with great solemnity for over an hour that two plus two equals four.

The concert ended with works of Varèse which were the beginnings of the tradition of music incorporating noise and technology that includes Harvey. By comparison to Harvey's state of the art technological qualities, the *Poème électronique* seemed by turns quaintly low-tech and beguilingly expressive and entertaining. *Déserts*, however, despite the less sophisticated level of its electronic technology, and even in a performance that was rather too soft-edged, was completely overwhelming and enthralling in its utterly serious, granite-hard monumental quality.

The BBC marked the first day of the Beijing Olympics by offering the first performance of *Olympic Fire*, commissioned for the occasion from Chen Yi. All of Chen's music uses Western modernist practices to evoke her native culture, but *Olympic Fire* deals even more directly in Chinese materials, using folk songs both from the predominant Han Chinese and from minority Chinese ethnic groups as well (Chen keeps to the Chinese government party line by considering Tibetans among those Chinese ethnic minorities), and imitating the sounds of Chinese instruments, particularly the *lusheng* (described by Chen as a 'mouth pipe-organ'). *Olympic Fire* begins with enormous energy, unrelenting febrile motion and considerable instrumental brilliance featuring the brass and the xylophone. The initial ebullient activity continues for quite a while, to be interrupted by a slightly slower high ostinato music with a less thick texture (evoking bird calls, and still featuring the xylophone), which turns out to be an accompaniment to longer lyrical tunes in the lower registers. The opening celebratory activity is eventually regained, with the layering of different musics over a repeated rhythmic figures. The music goes driving headlong into a furiously explosive timpani cadenza which leads to a roaring ending. The performance, by The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Leonard Slatkin, matched the exuberance of the music.

For the last ten years, the BBC Proms has sponsored Inspire, a competition for young composers between the ages of 12 and 18, which culminates in a concert of works by the winners, presented as a pendant to the Proms and broadcast on Radio 3. The format of this final presentation has been different over the last three years, which might indicate that the BBC has not yet found one that they find satisfactory. Three years ago there was a quite informal event with a fair amount of talking, including discussion with the composers (every one of whom said that the most important influences on their music were Copland and Adams). The next year the concert was rather tightly scripted and much more formal, with the composers seen but, in any aspect other than their music, not heard. This summer Errolyn Wallen was the audience-friendly, rather informal, and loquacious presenter for a concert by the Aurora Orchestra conducted by Nick Colon which did not particularly feature the composers themselves; several of them were not there, and those who were sat in random places in the audience and were not

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much seen at all. Clearly the music – all of which this year was interesting and accomplished as well as brilliantly performed – should be the focus of the event. But though too much conversation can certainly be (and, in years past, was) tedious, it is interesting to get a sense of the personality of the composers in such a situation, and a better balance between those extremes might be more satisfying for everybody.

The composers whose music was included in the concert were Alex Nikiporenko (*Awaiting* for flute and piano), En Liang Khong (*Black Rain* for narrator, strings and percussion), Andrew C. Hadfield (*The Flight of the Phoenix* for clarinet and piano), Toby Young (*Les Jongleurs* for french horn and piano), Tom Rose (*Moth Lamp* for winds, strings and percussion), Men Gei Li (*Triquad Variations* for piano), Lloyd Robert Coleman (Quintet for soprano saxophone and string quartet), Sasha Valeri Millwood (String Quartet, last movement), Philippa Ovenden (*Etone* for harp and recorders), and Tom Curren (*Searching* for two pianos and percussion).

Rodney Lister

Proms 2008 (4): MacRae, Lindberg and Berkeley

Stuart MacRae, still only 32 years old, first came to the attention of the music world following a performance of his Violin Concerto at the 2001 Proms. A 20-minute concerto for cello and strings (*Harmatia*) featured in the 2005 season. Other than an hour-long chamber opera, *The Assassin Tree* (2006), MacRae's brand new work *Gaudete,* given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Edward Gardner, is one of his most substantial, scored for soprano and large orchestra and coming in at just under half an hour.

The Assassin Tree set a libretto by Simon Armitage. In *Gaudete,* the Scottish-born MacRae chooses texts from another Yorkshire poet, Ted Hughes. If the key aspects of the Violin Concerto's success were the violent expressionism of the orchestral writing, the naturalness and seriousness of the elegiac passages and the substantial challenge for the soloist, then *Gaudete* is largely built on those same foundations.

Hughes's *Gaudete* poems are his most extreme: violent, querulous and transcendent by turn. In writing for a soprano of Susanna Andersson's expressive range (the piece was written with her in mind and asks her to cover bottom B to top E), MacRae has discovered appropriate ways to match all three of these moods. All are found in microcosm in the opening of the work. After the thickly-scored burst and charge of energy, brass straining at their rhythms to break through the texture, the soprano's entry is high but wordless, an ethereal voice descending to pose her odd unanswerable questions. For the gnomic aspects of the text, MacRae not unexpectedly deploys a spiky vocal line against close woodwind doublings reminiscent of the Second Viennese School. It suits such utterances as 'How will you correct / The veteran of negatives …?'

The second section 'Your tree – your oak' is less abstract and more concerned with natural images of water, sunlight and 'the oak .. flying / Astride the earth'. Its power points up the unusual choice MacRae made in scoring the vocal part for soprano, rather than the more obvious craggy male voice. The stark 'masculine' aspects of the score, though, are more than adequately represented by the harsh, dense, steely-edged quality of MacRae's orchestration, which descends like a swarm of insects only to swerve out in a trice, leaving only strings to accompany Andersson as she rhapsodizes in coloratura style – as in 'the oak' (all in grace notes) 'is flying'.

The power of MacRae's orchestral writing is *Gaudete*'s real strength, not only in its raw, menacing threats, but also in its delicacy. Listen to the earth stirring in piano cluster-chords, solo violin, muted horns and trumpets, a suddenly-erupting frenetic jig breaking out until a *molto adagio* section where the soprano, as in the opening, floats in again so lightly and 'Distance blues beyond distance'.

MacRae has given himself a considerable challenge in setting some of Hughes's densest and least lyrical verse. At times the texts' thorny abstractions make for awkward vocal settings, but at others the success is complete. 'A sea / Full of moon-ghost, with mangling waters' is treated – with running semiquavers in the harp against a rippling piano figure in the highest register – in magically sensuous fashion, with the soprano singing a vocalise at the very topmost part of her register.

The third and final section is the most successful, partly because of MacRae's restraint in not rising to Hughes's violent bait in his setting of such lines as 'the snowflake crucified / Upon the nails of nothing' but mostly because he recognizes that Hughes's lines are indicative of a state of mind and are not a depiction, however surreal. The restless, repeated figures for brass and wind, which explode in one *fff* chord after the line has been sung, bear out MacRae's statement that he was interested in the 'overall feeling of the poem' rather than dwelling upon its overwrought word-

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play. This last section, beginning 'I said goodbye to earth' is the longest text-setting in the piece. Although MacRae has written that *Gaudete* is not finalized – other Hughes texts may one day be added – he seems content with this section at least and writes of its 'otherness'. Subtle, the incipient violence held in check more than in the other settings, this is the best of MacRae to date.

The sun which appears in *Gaudete* puts in another appearance in Magnus Lindberg's recent orchestral piece *Seht die Sonne* (Behold the sun). Commissioned and premièred by the Berliner Philharmoniker in 2007 under Rattle, it was given its UK première by the Oslo PO under Jukka-Pekka Saraste. The other piece played at the Berlin premiere was Mahler's Ninth, and Lindberg, by his own account leapt at the chance to write for an orchestra of that size. The connexion of Lindberg's piece to Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* (whence the chorus *Seht die Sonne*) is not prominent, and the overall atmosphere is certainly not valedictory *à la* Mahler, but more of that later.

Refreshingly for a modern Finnish composer, the influence of Sibelius is not obviously present. Where the opening four-note rising figure on the brass might otherwise have portended a vast and slow landscape, it is immediately allied to a more casual falling phrase. Trumpets and horns continue their interplay with this material and set the scene for a highlighting of instrumental groups that characterizes the opening section. The other feature of the section is its energy and lightness, familiar Lindberg trademarks. Rapid up and down figures in the high woodwind, the presence of glockenspiel and crotales, gives the music a surface glitter and speed that insists throughout on colour and excitement. There are moments when heavy string down-bowings initiate passages that seem inevitably about to climb into something broad and sustained, but they do not – once again that falling brass figure and quickening tempo lighten the scene. This is traditional Lindberg territory: the orchestral works with which he achieved prominence in the Nineties – *Feria, Corrente II* and *Arena* – have a 'hot', bright dynamism.

After this opening, the second section (beginning at minim = 54) is a welcome contrast. Starting slowly with divided strings, the entrance of the harps with their thick chording, then the emphatic (almost Mahlerian) timpani solo bring a genuine, sustained, climactic moment that transforms that familiar falling pattern in the brass. After that moment, Lindberg's brass-writing (and brass does dominate) strikes me as problematic. Favouring

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the trumpet's high register, short snappy phrases repeated many times lose their power of alarm and take on a Hollywood character. Some of the swooping string phrases and quickly-accelerating brass rhythms are surprisingly reminiscent of Gershwin.

What saves this piece is a wholly unexpected and extended solo for cello – often in harmonics, with other cellos gradually joining the soloist – which is as slow, passionate and thoughtful as so much of what preceded it was not. The solo introduces the third movement. Here at least Lindberg's penchant for accelerating, indeed galloping strings, whooping (or at least sliding) solos for the first trombone and motoric repeated rhythms in the timpani find a natural outlet. Yet again, however, Lindberg surprises us, as, 30 bars or so from the end, a huge *rallentando* sees the return of the tolling drum. The slow, widely-spaced upper strings play in intense *legato*, with the cellos now bringing back that same falling-rhythm with which the piece opened. Thus the work fades away in a gradually settling field of *divisi* strings and timpani rolls, not unlike the last pages of Mahler 9 itself. By the end of Mahler's symphony, though, through its frenzied irony and fierce nostalgia, we have earned such resignation. In Lindberg's hands, however skilful, we do not traverse anything like the same path.

In a final coincidence, the MacRae Prom also saw another sun-dominated piece, Michael Berkeley's 10-minute *Slow Dawn*. Originally written in 2005 for wind band, it was revised very recently and 'significantly re-worked' in a version for full orchestra. Although woodwind parts are still prominent and effective in capturing the shafts of light filtering through trees and warming the earth, Berkeley is able to give an emphasis on the sun's ritual progression (bass drum), sustained course (strings) and sheer power (brass, especially solo tuba) that makes it seem unlikely that a wind-only piece could do the composition justice.

With the introduction of snare drums towards the end and the relentless pounding of timpani, the piece has not only a 'triumphant melancholy', in Berkeley's apt phrase, but also something of a military procession. That's not the only passion contained within this compact piece; Berkeley's yearning string writing and chattering bird-like winds sometimes recall Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloë*. It is testimony to the work's strength that the comparison doesn't distract. It's a good piece and a reminder of Berkeley's qualities in his 60th year. More's the pity that the BBC Proms didn't provide him with a large canvas to paint on.

Robert Stein

Proms 2008 (5): Hesketh, Simcock, Turnage, Meredith

The optimistic sentiments of Sir Roger Norrington's traditional 'Last Night' speech, praising the BBC forces and the universality of 'Classical Music' were borne out by the statistics of 2008's Proms, with 78% of concerts sold out and a 90% attendance for main evening concerts, as well as an increase in events overall. In this light, the first Proms season under the new Director, Roger Wright, seems to have been an outstanding success. Much of the thrill was due to the generous offering of new commissions and premières, including those I was fortunate enough to attend: the Stockhausen celebration, and impressive premières by young British composers that ranged over a broad stylistic spectrum from the orchestral richness of Kenneth Hesketh and Mark-Anthony Turnage to the more popular crossover of Gwilym Simcock and Anna Meredith.

There was an electricity and panache to the first performance of Kenneth Hesketh's *Graven Image*, a co-commission by the BBC and the RLPO, who performed it with flying colours at the Prom on 1 August under their exciting young conductor Vasily Petrenko. Hesketh's stunningly-orchestrated and eloquently-shaped orchestral work formed a colourful overture to a riveting Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto (soloist Paul Lewis) and a fiery account of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*. Hesketh, the RLPO's composer in residence (2007-9), has a string of works lined up for the orchestra, and clearly revels in its sonorities, for the most striking aspect of *Graven Image* is its brilliant, indeed resplendent orchestration, combining echoes from the transparent opulence of Mahler and Henze, as well as the perfumed richness of French music, Berlioz, through Roussel and even Messaien. The programmatic title alludes to the medieval 'momento mori', with the ideas of time and mortality, and quotes from the Third-Century Roman 'Epitaph of a cynic' in its poetic preface. Yet it also works as a pure essay in sound.

Throughout we hear bell-like sounds, produced by high string harmonies, repeated high notes in woodwind or percussion – a large section comprising tubular bells, as well as vibraphone and xylophone. Such tintinnabulations, far from suggesting frozen time, seem rather to generate a high ostinato which has its own life, and persuades the listener to follow the energetic material in the middle layer of the texture, where melodic fragments wisp around with striking melodic doublings, such as the woodwind blends at the start. The tonally-oriented harmony, though totally

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unpredictable, lacks an element of clashing dissonance, and perhaps one drawback is that it feels occasionally too sugary. Yet the strength of the work is its energy and clarity, articulated through an unambiguous slow-fast-slow ternary form which drives through a series of large climaxes. The first, in the slowly-evolving opening section, accumulates a full saturation of texture, while the biggest forms the culmination of the busier, quicksilver middle section, where Petrenko really intensified the build-up through to its thrilling peak. Especially original, though, was Hesketh's control of the relaxation process, which leads to the final reprise-like section. Rather than dissolving completely, as one expects, the thinned-out woodwind motifs, especially on mellow bass clarinet and bassoon, revive and challenge expectation in their renewal of energy and restoration of the fuller density of the start. The very ending is magical: from the tingling percussion a sustained flute note emerges, dovetailed into violin, and is cut off by a single triangle *ping*. As a whole the piece communicated, moved and thrilled; and one sensed a composer who both has something to say and the means to say it.

The classical-jazz synthesis which has preoccupied composers for almost a century, essayed in various ways by such figures as Stravinsky, Gershwin or Ravel, is seldom explored by jazz performers. Thus it was especially exciting to hear *Progressions*, a piano concerto in all but name, by the young Jazz pianist Gwilym Simcock, who gave the world première with his trio (Phil Donkin, double-bass, and Martin France, drums), supported by the BBC Concert Orchestra under the charismatic command of Charles Hazlewood at the Prom on 9 August. Simcock's gracefully progressive jazz pianism was displayed earlier in the première of a rather dreamy version of Gershwin's My Man's Gone' by alto saxophonist Jason Yarde. Then, after Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* with Michael Collins as suave clarinet soloist, and Bernstein's swinging *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*, came *Progressions:* aptly titled, since its ternary form develops a single motif with contrasting solo and orchestral textures and progresses from a serene opening to an ebullient Latin-American ending. The work's harp-shaded opening mood returns near the end, and after expressive piano and horn dialogues, the first two meditative solos gave way to a third for Trio, featuring fabulous scales, yet ingeniously interrupted by slow Scriabinesque chords, and leading to something new and involving.

Throughout, Charles Hazlewood's buoyant dancing podium style allowed Simcock maximum freedom, yet kept taut coordination. The layout of lidless grand piano facing into the orchestra, surrounded by bass and drumkit, highlighted the contrast of the work with a conventional classical concerto, yet also underlined its 'concerto grosso' resonances. The sound-world was clearly that of symphonic jazz, with eloquent duetting for piano with strings, clarinets, horns, and pitched percussion including marimba. Simcock's solo pianism was beguiling: richly harmonized, allowing plenty of room for improvised meditation or, with the trio, frenetically fast passagework reminiscent of Oscar Peterson. The solos modulated the moods, arriving via serene slow passages at faster swing sections, an intricate fugato leading into an exuberant Latin combo finale. Formally the concerto design functioned as a medium for Simcock's improvised solos, which impressively communicated his supple and relaxed, yet often intricate and complex, inspiration.

Jazz is also one of the prime influences on Mark-Anthony Turnage, who was embraced by Bernard Haitink on the stage of the RAH to enthusiastic applause following the European première of his *Chicago Remains*, given by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the first of their two Proms concerts, in a programme which also featured a stunning performance of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. Composed and premièred by the same forces in 2007, *Chicago Remains* is a product of Turnage's two-year period (2006-8) as the CSO's Mead Composer-in-Residence, an appointment which has been extended for a further two years. Though commissioned by the Koussevistky Foundation and the Schmidt Family Fund, there is a poignant Proms connexion in the dedication of the piece to the memory of Sir John Drummond, former Proms Director (1986-1995), and a champion of new music.

The inspiration for the work was history of Chicago itself, a major industrial centre, whose skyscraper architecture was rebuilt after the 1871 fire. As evoked in the imagery of Carl Sandburg's 'Chicago Poems', the themes of a dark mobster past and the pride of creativity are suggested in Turnage's imaginative use of the full orchestra, an individual symphonic idiom which hints at jazz influences. Compelling from start to finish of its 16-minute span, the work's bold use of sonority begins with its initial, arresting anvil strokes, and ensuing angular brass melodies infused with strong syncopations; while the strings' accented chords provided unexpected accompaniments to *Hauptstimme* from the percussion section, including watery vibraphone or metallic percussion sonorities. Intermingling wisps of melody in bleak stark harmonies give way in a jazzier section to a more Americanized, Copland-esque use of fourths and fifths, adorned with a piccolo solo.

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The shift of gear is emphasized in a celebratory dance section, again richly orchestrated, which develops into a more confused, uncertain texture until a powerfully dramatic moment occurs, pointed by short sharp tuttis and silences, sustained by Haitink with compelling tension. This climax recedes into a beautifully evocative final tableau of receding tranquillity, interrupted by the anvil strokes which launched the work, just before the close. Expressively yearning duets for trumpet and clarinet against a resonant peel of gongs, seemed a sequel to other 'metropolitan' works, like Vaughan Williams's *London* Symphony or Copland's *Quiet City*, signalling, like bells at dawn, a vision of renewal.

And so to the final world première, a short new work punningly titled *froms,* by the 30-year-old Anna Meredith. This probably received more exposure than any of the more substantial premières of the season, due to being placed in the second half of the Last Night on 13 September, on prime-time network TV, as well as all related specialized channels. If the Last Night is an 'invented tradition', the interest lies in the way it is constantly re-invented: particularly so, following a decade of innovation with Nicholas Kenyon at the helm, in the first Proms season under the new Director, Roger Wright. If Sir John Drummond's famous 1995 Birtwistle Last Night commission caused a certain *Panic*, Meredith's work was clearly a crowd-pleaser, but no less interesting for that. Moreover it represented one of the two commissions this year from women composers, the other being Chen Yi's *Olympic Fire*, premièred on 8 August.

Meredith was inspired by the link-up dialogues of the by-now compulsory Henry Wood *Fanfares* which bounce between the Royal Albert Hall and five 'Proms in the Park' events across the British Isles, as question and answer. She harnessed the full hi-tech resources of audiovisual links across the British Isles for her own witty and relentless rock-minimalist orchestral-choral *froms*. A specialist in such crossover styles, she combined the interactive relaying of 'Proms in the Park' ensembles with a text drawn from Prommers' time-hallowed shouts, such as the opening choral exclamation, 'chorus to audience', and the final 'Heave Ho' (or so it seemed to me, as much of the text was in fact hard to make out in the rather boomy sound mixture). The work starts simply, with a single repeated note for first violins passed across the stage to second violins (situated on stage right) then to violas. Then there is a witty round of chorus applause, shushed from another part of the hall, before the double basses join in. Meanwhile, the steady repeated note builds up a tonic pedal that grounds the harmony, allowing the various geographically-separated groups to merge.

Visually one could follow this in the hall through two suspended screens, showing firstly the BBC National Chorus of Wales (from Swansea), then the brass ensemble from Ulster. Each in turn played in a superimposition over the rich textures within the hall. The fine co-ordination was evident as the conductor, Sir Roger Norrington, wrenched the harmony up a tone unanimously into a new key, at which point the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra entered the fray from Glasgow, in a type of large-scale canon, followed soon by the drumming percussion section of the BBC Concert Orchestra in Hyde Park, adding a layer to the already brassy mixture and driving the momentum forward until a final change of metre signalled the concluding section. If the musical ideas were somewhat thin, and the harmonic idiom conservative (perhaps Orff and Sibelius meet Michael Nyman), one had to admire the ingenuity of the geographically separated dialogues and the vitality of the propulsive thrusting style.

froms was performed amidst a sea of English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish flag-waving across every inch of the Royal Albert Hall. Along with the pops, hoots and toots ricocheting from side to side, balloons and beach-balls volleying around the packed arena and exuberant audience humming and singing, it characterized this year's Last Night of the Proms as every bit the party it has become – according to Norrington, the 'greatest music festival in the world'. The line-up of BBC Chorus, Singers and Symphony Orchestra, with Bryn Terfel and pianist Hélène Grimaud, fortunately transformed what could have been a hotchpotch of lollipops into a memorable musical experience, to which Meredith's multi-locational miniature made a key contribution. It was reason enough for the *a cappella* hand-clasping, all-swaying *Auld Lang Syne* at the close of another Last Night to provide an optimistic glimpse – bolstered by the riches this 114th season has brought – into a bright future for classical and contemporary music in Britain and beyond.

Malcolm Miller

Santa Cruz, California: Christopher Rouse's Concerto for Orchestra

As Music Director since 1992, Marin Alsop has grown the Cabrillo Festival to a lovefest for composers, musicians, and attendees. As remarked by

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UK newcomer Stephen McNeff, one of Alsop's seven guest composers for the festival, 'One of the things that stunned me over the last couple of days is that you have bigger audiences for your open rehearsals than I've sometimes seen at concerts!'

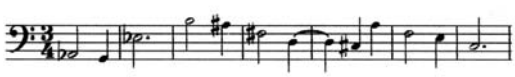
Part of the reason for Alsop's success has been her skill in cultivating composers that care about listener response and who write works that lend themselves to her razzmatazz style of conducting. This may rule out those artists characterized by McNeff as the 'Everybody-hates-us-and-we-don't-care' school that 'characterizes too much new music', but Alsop's standards are high enough – and her orchestra is responsive enough –to attract first-rate compositional talent within her chosen parameters.

The *pièce de résistance* (of five first performances scheduled during the two-week festival) was Christopher Rouse's Concerto for Orchestra. Commissioned by Alsop and a team of patrons, the work is likely to get considerable exposure as Alsop tours it, starting in Baltimore in November. In terms of razzmatazz and listener friendliness, the Concerto is strong in both – but Rouse himself, well versed in America's Homeland Security designations, played it safe when discussing the music publicly before the concert with Alsop:

> I thought I'd actually try a little reverse psychology and see what happens. I would say the threat level on this piece is Orange. It's rooted in the 12-tone system and the dissonance level is quite high … If we get [members of the audience] looking forward to it too much, they might be disappointed. So this way, they're almost ready to leave. So, if they like it, it will be an added bonus.

The Concerto, 26 minutes in duration, consists of seven undesignated movements in a tripartite structure: a five-sectioned rondo, a passacaglia and a finale. There are essentially only two major ideas. The first idea is a trumpet flourish reminiscent of one from the 'Bacchanale' of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*. The flourish and its rapidity are the essence of the rondo's ritornello. The second idea is a 12-tone row introduced as a slow fugue in the second section, and elaborated throughout the rest of the composition.

The rondo alternates fast-slow-fast-slow-fast until the passacaglia heart of the Concerto is reached. Here Rouse reaches for the gold ring on the 12-tone merry-go-round: a row that listeners might hum on the way home from the concert. Alsop, for her part, confessed that it haunted her in her sleep.



The row is psychologically ingenious. In addition to its many intriguing symmetries, it counters strategically placed leaps with a cunning tie across the bar line. The leaps assist immediate recognition in orchestral textures during the passacaglia, but the tie booby-traps the listener into not being able to easily anticipate every note in the row based on the first beat of a measure. The cognitive dissonance between the leaps and the tie help generate the spell that ear-wormed Alsop.

Rather than highlighting soloists, the work passes phrases from group to group within the orchestra. There is a fair amount of repetition – perhaps too much for some listeners – that makes the Concerto easy to follow. Evident throughout is Rouse's mastery of orchestration, and highly charged rhythmic and percussive instincts. Fans of the non-stop banshee-blast *Gorgon*, Rouse's notorious decibel-defying early work, will find much to admire in the Concerto's finale. Those looking for Rouse's neo-Romantic persona of the flute concerto, *Karolju* or *Kabir Padavali* must bide their time for the future. In any case, a raucous standing ovation greeted its conclusion in Santa Cruz, and I expect the same will obtain for subsequent performances – at least in America, where glam, glitz, speed and splash rule the roost.

Jeff Dunn

Brisbane, Australia: Liza Lim's 'The Navigator' at the Brisbane Festival

It has always been a tall order to ask audience members to leave their moral sensibilities with their coats in the cloakroom before entering an experience at the theatre. They arrive clothed with expectations and past experiences, excitement about what the promotional materials and pre-première reviews have promised, yet uneasy lest they find that they have wasted their time and money. No-one ever wishes to have a bad theatre experience, but I think most ordinary theatre-goers would agree: new art is always a gamble. We have all read accounts of premières like this – where those who are not muted in shock are giggling or have already left the theatre in disgust – yet these are the history-making pieces of art, the controversies that draw a wider audience than any new work would dare to hope for. And in an age where the art with real impact and unfathomable depth often comes so close to being construed as farcical and meaningless – a joke played on art critics to test their ability to perceive meaning where there is none – the line constantly trod by new art is often tight-rope thin.

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The promotional material and concert program for the Brisbane Festival's première production of *The Navigator*, an opera by Liza Lim and Patricia Sykes directed by Barrie Kosky, with the Elision Ensemble at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, was ambiguous to say the least, leaving the listener as a complete tabula rasa: the ideal vantage point from which to spot the difference between pseudo-philosophical farce and art with genuine insight and message. Although the opera approaches 1 hour and 40 minutes in length and has no interval, I emerged from the experience feeling as if I knew exactly what was intended by the work and, if pressed, could account for even the smallest of stage props and musical gestures with reasonable conviction.

The primordial flavour of the production was inescapable despite the stark modernity of the stage imagery and the music. There seemed to be a unity of conception here of a kind often striven for but very rarely achieved in opera, and an interaction between musical, verbal, dramatic, thematic and production elements that would be the envy of aesthetic transcendentalists the world over. From this description it is not surprising to find present the very themes to which these aestheticians often appeal: the transfiguring power of the theatre of the ancient Greeks, the alchemical magic of Eros, the Dionysiac command of masked figures, the frailty of the human condition revealed through Tragedy, the dissolution of multiplicity and the cosmic unity of Love-Death.

Even as the lights dim at the beginning of the performance, the perennial themes with which the opera becomes concerned are hinted at. The glittery stage-curtain, which in full house-lights appears somewhat trashy, transforms in the slow (and silent) blackening of the theatre into a shimmering cosmic moment which finally opens on a stark waiting-room with two seated masked figures, one of whom is recorder-virtuoso Genevieve Lacey, whose on-stage solo prelude to the opera, introduced by the shrill of cicadas, seems to act as a lone call from the infinite, the pre-script to the appearance of humankind in the form of the players: The Navigator and The Beloved, and the Three Sirens: The Crone, The Fool and The Angel of History.

Lim's score is a triumph of delicately interwoven lines which savour of celestial insects, scattering and converging as the drama requires and achieving incredible subtlety and emotional range. Moments of meditative contemplation can be quickly made manic and almost vitriolic via entirely organic processes of textural layering and integrated vocal writing. There are no mannerisms with Lim. There are no gimmicks. This remains true despite her inclusion of frog rasps and prairie whistles, the appearance of these instruments being entirely incidental to the composer's treatment of the sounds they produce. The manner in which the visibility of the instrumentalists is utilized to the effect of the drama (although less so here than in Lim's last opera, *Moon Spirit Feasting*) is testimony again to the totality of the artwork conceived. And the flow of focus from the stage-set and vocalists down, past the floor covered with undulating sand of changing colours, to the instrumentalists (especially the protruding shapes of the string bass, contrabass clarinet and contrabass recorder, and the stark interruptions of the electric guitar), and back to the stage, makes for an all-encompassing and integrated production with heightened effect and ubiquitous fidelity to the cause.

There will be questions, no doubt, as to the efficacy of Kosky's realization of Lim's score, considering the seemingly dichotomous nature of the musical subtlety (the instrumentation being complemented by a baroque trio of viola d'amore, recorder and baroque harp), and Kosky's visual language of strap-on genitalia and fantastical masks. And considering the director's predilection for reading death and erotica into a number of scores – including Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, about which at his Berlin production in 2005 he was quoted as saying 'it's a great piece, but you have to bring out the eroticism, the danger, the comedy and the seriousness of it; because at the heart of any great piece is melancholia' – it becomes clear why there is a certain brand of concert-goer who will see mere shock-tactics in the elements which here have been described as an honest exploration of perennial themes; a type of audience who would prefer to have the vision of primordial sex, death, and myth served on a Wagnerian platter (safely consecrated by history), rather than spoken in the language of today.

Since playing to sold-out audiences in Brisbane and Melbourne the opera will proceed in the coming months to the Wiener Festwochen, The Festival d'automne and the International Chekov Theatre Festival in Paris, and there are negotiations underway for performances in Berlin and Holland. Lim will soon take up a post as Research Professor in Composition at Huddersfield University, and it will indeed be interesting to see in which direction she turns now after such a striking and thorough exploration into the depths of our metaphysical struggle towards the infinite.

Sarah Collins

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Cheltenham Festival: Peter Maxwell Davies's Piano Quartet

Meurig Bowen's first Cheltenham Festival as Artistic Director was, impressively, graced by the presence of the Master of the Queen's Music as composer-in residence: concerts featured the English première of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's Violin Sonata, as well as performances of his *Seven in Nomine*, *Lullaby for Lucy* and *O Magnum Mysterium*, the latter composed whilst he was music master at nearby Cirencester Grammar School in the early 1960s. Most eagerly awaited of all, a new work received its world première by the musicians for whom it was written, the Primrose Piano Quartet.

Completed in December 2007, the Piano Quartet is dedicated to Tom McPhail, in memory of his wife, the artist and photographer Gunnie Moberg. Born in Sweden, she moved with her family to Orkney, was photographer-in-residence at the St Magnus Festival from its inception in 1977 and became a close friend of Peter Maxwell Davies. The Quartet aims to reflect her personality and passions, both Scandinavian and Scottish, and her love of the Faroe Islands. Hence, the piece shows both Scandinavian and Orcadian qualities and this eclectic style and diversity of inspiration is reflected in its six strongly characterized, interrelated movements.

Grand and expectant, the opening 'Entrance and Jig' was referred to by the composer in his pre-concert talk as 'like looking down the wrong end of a telescope which slowly moves into focus'. These hints and fragments of theme steadily coalesced through a warmly lyrical Slow Air, a gentle 'Lullaby from Faroe', a remote, Delphic movement celebrating Gunnie Moberg's enigmatic qualities entitled 'Rebus Runarum' and an increasingly intense 'Hortus Conclusus' (a reference, perhaps, to her love of gardening) with restless, dynamic piano writing that led to a plainsong-based final section. This proved to be the destination towards which the rest of the piece had been travelling. Its tonal certainties brought a poignant sense of resolution and an unmistakable feeling of journey's end. Maxwell Davies has previously explored the idea of progressing towards a theme made explicit only in the coda in his *Strathclyde Concerto* No.4 for clarinet and orchestra (1990); in this commemorative context it provided a very moving conclusion to a deeply personal work, which the composer referred to as 'part of a process of trying to make sense of the death of a good friend'.

The score is markedly spare and sinewy; as in his series of Naxos Quartets, Maxwell Davies makes every note work very hard to win its place in the music. Thanks to its intimate nature and an intensely committed performance by the Primrose players, the Piano Quartet holds the attention for each of its 25 minutes and constitutes a very welcome addition to the repertoire.

Other contemporary composers featured in the festival were Arvo Pärt and Veljo Tormis and further world premières included Mark Anthony Turnage's *Air with Variations* (a set of 10 variations on the Londonderry Air) for solo guitar, Michael Berkeley's *When I hear your voice*, for mezzo-soprano and ensemble, Tansy Davies's *Hinterland*, for chamber ensemble with electric keyboard, Joe Duddell's *The Redwood Tree*, for wind band, and Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *My day in hell*, for string quartet. This amounts to an impressive, auspicious debut for Meurig Bowen as Artistic Director.

Paul Conway

London: Globe Theatre 2008 – 'Totus Mundus'

Totus Mundus agit histrionem ('All the world's a stage') is thought to have been the motto of the first Globe Theatre, as the reconstructed Globe's Director, Dominic Dromgoole, noted in announcing the theme for Season 2008: 'Totus Mundus'. As well as Shakespeare's more familiar stalwarts, this year was to include 'his most thrilling and savage satire', *Timon of Athens*. I was most intrigued to go along to review this rarely-performed play, to catch the new score by Django Bates of *Titus Andronicus* fame.[1]

One only had to listen to BBC Radio 3's preview on 16 July, complete with sample extracts in rehearsal, and Bates's lively account on air, to realise we had a real treat in store. 'I go to watch the actors and try to build an atmosphere around them', he expounded, and proceeded to describe how, in choosing a collection of instruments for his score, he 'drew a line (on the map) round Athens', thus incorporating elements from the Balkans – violins, a bass flute, and 'everyone sings'! In fact listening to the richly textured music 'in preview' one was struck by Bates's unique fusion of Balkan, gypsy and jazz elements in continuous flow, which I couldn't help feeling would make excellent material for a CD, much as was Clare van Kampen's Jazz Score for *Macbeth*.[2] Of course in providing exclusively live, acoustic music on the night on stage, above in the musicians' gallery

[1] See my review of *Titus Andronicus* in *Tempo* Volume 61 No. 239 (January 2007).
[2] See my review in *Tempo* 221 (July 2002).

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– with loud playing of metal 'pans' also issuing from gangways of the Upper Gallery, for instance, as the play opens – the role of the music becomes essentially subservient to the plot, and assumes a more 'incidental' role, though that is not an adjective easy to apply to Django Bates as a composer.

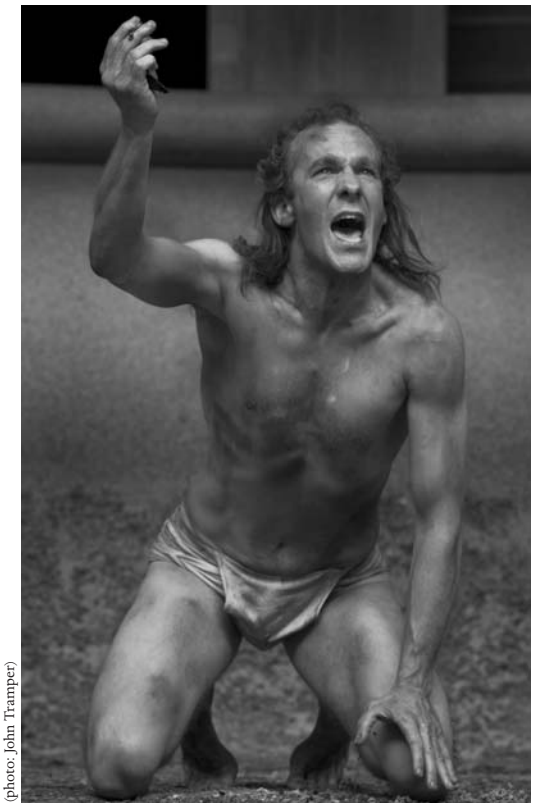
Penning this review (on 26 September) as the Globe Season draws imminently to a close, the parallels between Timon's plight as the profligate, over-generous man of Athens, distributing largesse in banquets to his friends even as bankrupcy threatens, and the UK and USA's current 'credit crunch' are uncannily apparent. Attending the Press Night (on 6 July) the siege of Timon's creditors demanding their money back did smack somewhat of last year's queues outside Northern Rock, but instead of a 'bail-out' by his Government, Timon is forced to flee Athens to forage for food in the desolate wilderness. Here, dressed in nothing but a loin cloth, amidst stony ground, fortuitously he hits gold, but in revenge hands it out to pursuing creditors bespoiled by his own excrement. One hopes things in the USA (as I write, many are waiting for a 'Bush bail-out') don't take a similar turn, metaphorically speaking, of course. As you can imagine, Django Bates's music rose readily to the occasion in Timon's case, complete with two ballet dancers, with harp accompaniment on stage at one particularly emphatic moment in the First Act, followed by a stomping dance. Eastern sounds with violin, cimbalom, flute, and strummed lute (the Balkan *oud*), and haunting rhythmic tones tending to take over the play for a while to exotic effect.

The metallic sound of the hitting of metal 'pans' in the Upper Gallery at strategic moments was matched also by the visual effect of a rope-net above the audience, forming a canopy, not dissimilar in concept to the sinister black one closing out the sky for Titus Andronicus, in which various birdlike 'creditors' lingered only to swoop down on their victim (Timon) throughout the play. Bates says of the metal pans in his programme notes: 'Given the surround-sound possibilities of the Globe, I could not resist using a choir of trembling metal drums (actually steel pans) placed around the audience. Their metallic ring reminds me of money, a big part of this play, and like the bass flute, their plangent overtones create a very special tension'.

As with *Titus Andronicus* in 2006, Bates was collaborating here with director Lucy Bailey, and designer William Dudley, with such ongoing success that one eagerly looks forward to more from this stunningly graphic team, full of intrepid pace and surprises to grip the audience.

There were two new modern plays premièred at the Globe this Season – the first of which was *Frontline* by Che Walker, with music (mainly blues, gospel and rap) by Olly Fox. Based on scenes in the environs of Camden Tube Station, strictly after dark, this bore little resemblance to the street outside a tube station which I've often been through, but then perhaps we do need reminding occasionally of the existence of the assortment of dealers, junkies, ladies of the night, usually 'outside our radar'. A host of young Londoners packed out the Globe amidst pouring rain, and both the music and the acting seemed to 'cut the mustard' for what looked like half of Camden streetlife celebrating there for the occasion.

The second modern play, *Liberty*, proved unmemorable musically and a disappointment dramatically. Based on a plot from the days of the French Revolution, apart from some jolly scenes with revolutionary comrades suitably becapped and pretty aristocratic ladies in the offing, the main thesis of how genuine revolutionary fervour can, as also in Communist Russia, get distorted and corrupted on the way, failed to get across meaningfully, due to a meadering, lengthy, rather cumbersome storyline. Furthermore, as Charles Spencer pointed out in the *Daily Telegraph*



(photo: John Tramper)

Simon Paisley Day as Timon in *Timon of Athens*

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on 5 September, we didn't even get a 'gory guillotine execution'. Experimenting with brand new plays is always a hazard, and hopefully Dominic Dromgoole will continue to champion new writing. I look forward with anticipation to Season 2009.

The Globe could be called the 'theatre that never closes', as even outside the official in-house Summer Season, which ended on 5 October, there are always education projects and outside companies putting on shows. So it was that on 11 October I was invited along to the world première of the opera *The Burial at Thebes*, with music by young Trinidadian composer Dominique Le Gendre, to a libretto by Seamus Heaney[3] and directed by Derek Walcott. The Manning Camerata Chamber Orchestra fielded 13 instrumentalists filling the Musicians' Gallery above the stage, with Royal Opera House conductor Peter Manning at the rostrum below.

This was billed as a 'first' for the Globe, but in fact there is quite a tradition of masques and occasional semi-operatic interludes fed into the Globe's plays in the reign of Mark Rylance, Dominic Dromgoole's predecessor as Artistic Director at the Globe (notably Claire van Kampen's 'Opera within a play' in Peter Oswald's *The Golden Ass* – Globe Season 2002). Thus Globe audiences have come to expect innovative experiences, musically and dramatically, complete with use of trap-doors from above (or below) extruding actors propelled in all directions and also instrumentalists dotted around the audience galleries. (Dominic Dromgoole has kept alive and even added to the technical wizardry, as mentioned above in connexion with *Timon of Athens* and *Titus Andronicus*).

Unfortunately the static nature of the production of *The Burial at Thebes*, both musically and dramatically, on 11 October failed to fully engage the full-house audience, as the production team did not seem to even begin to try to exploit the possibilities to hand, and let a marvellous opportunity slip from their grasp. Staged in modern dress, with modern instrumentation, clearly the aim was to move away from Sophocles's original static format of spoken word and choruses; but apart from the parts being sung, not spoken, we might as well have been back in ancient Greece! (And indeed the first titter of audience response was achieved by John Joyce – described by *The Guardian*'s reviewer on 13 October as 'the gorblimey Guard' – who notably spoke rather than sang his lines.) Perhaps outside productions need to acquaint themselves more with Globe audience expectations, before they venture within the Bard's own precincts.

Jill Barlow

[3] Adapted from *The Burial at Thebes*, Seamus Heaney's version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, first published in 2004 by Faber & Faber.

Manchester, Bridgewater Hall: Halle Taj Festival

As part of their continuing 150th anniversary celebrations, the Hallé Orchestra in conjunction with the south Asian music promoter Milapfest, organized a weekend of Indian culture in June 2008. Although there were numerous daytime recitals and workshops, the headlining events were the two evening concerts built around the talents of their respective internationally famous players.

On Saturday 28 June, tabla virtuoso Ustad Zakir Hussein was the main attraction. Before we got to his input, the Hallé performed alone in works by John Adams and Stravinsky. Despite the connexion between the latter composer's *Firebird Suite* and a work performed the previous evening, these works seemed strange bedfellows for the rest of the programme. To my mind this was a missed programming opportunity in which to present Indian music compositions by the 'world music pioneer' John Foulds, who was not only born in Manchester, but had also been a cellist in the Hallé. Perhaps the Hallé would counter that 'playing safe' was necessary in terms of a generating an audience. If so, I would disagree, as the audience was there anyway, to hear Zahik Hussain and party, who began the second half of the programme with items Hussain had originally written for the cinema, with orchestral backing. This part of the concert featured the least successful music of the evening, presenting 'crossover music' at its least inspired. However, as the orchestral and film music was now dispensed with, it was time for the concert to begin in earnest, although earnest is hardly the word.

Besides his phenomenal technical ability, Zakir Hussain is a natural raconteur and seasoned showman; but despite this, he was almost outdone (almost) by his young sitar player Niladri Kumar, whose pyrotechnics would make even a Jimi Hendrix appear boring, and who found the time to quote random scraps of western classical evergreens (such as *Für Elise*) during his solos. Perhaps such overt self-confidence bordered on self-indulgence at times, but there was no question this ensemble not only knew how to 'work an audience' and did so with considerable panache, but had the wherewithal to amply back up the claims of 'mastery', despite frequently 'playing to the gallery' (and I ought to know, as I usually sit

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there!). The ensemble also featured Dilshad Khan playing the sarangi, a bowed string instrument, the size of a viola, yet played like a cello, but rarely heard due to its painful method of tone production: the strings are depressed directly by the nails of the left hand. But what a tone! The resultant sounds are nearest to the human voice one is likely to hear. The concert closed in spectacular fashion when the ensemble were joined by the aptly named 'Dancing drummers of Manipur.'

On the previous evening a performance had been given by the distinguished sarod player Ustad Wajahat Khan, who was both serious and seriously-minded, as befitted his long and distinguished musical lineage. The sarod itself evolved from other plectrum instruments such as the Afghani rebab. Its name, appropriately enough, is the Persian word for melody. Unlike the better-known sitar, its short-necked, metal covered fingerboard is fretless.[4] To open the concert, Wajahat Khan treated us to nearly an hour of traditional raga and tala improvisation, with the typical tanpura drones provided by his pupil Elizabeth Breuster, and his son Azeem Hussain Khan, with wondrous tabla accompaniment provided by rising local star Shahbaz Hussein.

The concert also featured the second performance of the recently completed *Freedom of the Soul*, jointly composed by tabla player Bhupinder Singh Chaggar and saxophonist Jesse Bannister, a stalwart Indian musician. Partly inspired by the story of the *Firebird* (rather than its music), the 30-minute work deployed a large mixed force of western and Indian soloists, with an expertly prepared children's chorus, together with the Hallé conducted by Ewa Strusinska. The work's 5 sections depicted the various stages in the soul's journey from fear to freedom. Amongst the more unusual instruments featured were: ghatam (a large earthenware clay pot with a very varied tonal range), clarsach (Celtic harp), and piano accordion. The deployment of the ensemble as a whole produced an almost bewildering range of timbre.

The undoubted highlight of the entire festival, however, was the world premiere of Wajahat Khan's *Concerto for Sarod and String Orchestra*. Neil Thomson conducted the Hallé strings section, deputizing for an indisposed Martyn Brabbins at an incredible two days notice. The work was conceived with the bold plan of using a single raga throughout, the beautiful raga *Des*. The first movement, a prayer of love, was slow, without obvious metre, and improvisatory in character, analogous to the opening section of a classical improvisation, where the soloist unfolds the main features of the raga which will be explored in later detail: the alap. In the second movement, a pizzicato tutti depicted the monsoon season prior to soloist's entry, as the strings began to emerge from their largely drone-like accompanying role of the first movement. A pulse (of the rain) was now introduced, which energized the whole atmosphere and moved the music forward. A highlight of this movement was a duet between the sarod and a solo violin. In the highly amusing coda, repeated notes and rising pizzicato alluded to water droplets.

The most telling music, though, was reserved for the celebratory final movement, which began with a whirlwind of a theme for strings, in an exciting rhythm punctuated by silences, with the audience clapping along to the more familiar parts of the tala. The icing on the cake was way in which the sarod then overlaid and developed this basic material, to produce a truly spell-binding tapestry of multi-layered and multi-tempo'd music, whilst sounding breathtakingly fresh and natural. The work concluded with a very joyful theme, which left the audience both uplifted and wanting more. Here was that rare occasion where the sincerity of utterance of the soloist/composer spoke to the audience as one, in a mood of optimism and purity: yet not pure out of ignorance, but worldly-wise. What an achievement!

Tim Mottershead

[4] John Foulds included the sarod, and the sarangi, in the works he wrote or arranged for ensembles of Indian instruments (Ed.).

Lincoln, Drill Hall: Voice and Verse Festival

For a number of years Lincolnshire has witnessed a summer festival of chamber music, featuring international artists and staged over three weekends around the county. This year it was supplemented between 17–20 July by Lincoln's first 'Voice and Verse' festival, promoted by Convivium Music with pianist Julius Drake as artistic director. Two study days on landscape in poetry and painting preceded the festival proper. Other forms of participation included vocal and (for youngsters) instrumental coaching. The Vaughan Williams anniversary provided the festive starting-point with performances on successive days of RVW's song-cycle *On Wenlock Edge* and a work partly modelled on it, Ivor Gurney's *Ludlow and Teme*. To complement *On Wenlock Edge*, Convivium commissioned a piece for high voice, piano and string quartet from David Matthews. Entitled *One Foot in Eden*, op. 107, the 18-minute composition was premièred in the Drill Hall on 19 July by James Gilchrist, Julius Drake and the Emperor Quartet.

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One Foot in Eden is a continuous work incorporating settings of texts by the Orcadian-born poet Edwin Muir – a writer new to Matthews. Initially Convivium's Viv McVeagh suggested Muir's text 'The Difficult Land'. The composer, however, rejected this in favour of a mixed trilogy: the longish rhyming title poem, the early 'Autumn in Prague' and the late 'Sunset', a Munch-like celebration of life whose final word is, literally, peace. Structurally, *One Foot in Eden* shows unflagging harmonic and formal resource. With *Skies Now Are Skies* of 1994, David Matthews created a short song-cycle that was also a string quartet. His Edwin Muir cycle features two substantial interludes for piano quintet, the second in the shape of a passacaglia. Pauses in the middle song also elicit some striking instrumental writing. The opening song has a purely keyboard accompaniment, 'Sunset' a string underlay. Finally, the pianist plays a meditative epilogue looking back to the title poem. In a programme note Matthews pinpoints one of Edwin Muir's larger poetic themes as a 'dream journey through time and place' (Margaret Drabble). It was tenor James Gilchrist's achievement to illuminate this in his agile vocal delivery. Texture recalling the more pellucid moments of *On Wenlock Edge* heightened the impact. Planet Earth's endangered beauties were graphically caught by singer and players alike.

Peter Palmer

London: Spitalfields Festival 2008

Having myself been born in London's East End, and returned to teach there under the ILEA in the mid 1960's, I was fascinated by 2008's Spitalfield's Festival,[5] set amidst the sights and sounds of the famous market and street life, with its rich cultural mix. Walking along to Wilton's Music Hall, one passes reminders of Dickens's London, the old original pub of 'The Artful Dodger', and wending one's way to Shoreditch Church along Old Street, the buzz and heady aromas issuing from the cafes and exotic eating houses on all sides tempts one to linger.

However this year I was bound for Shoreditch Church on Saturday 14 June to one of the climaxes of this year's three week long festival, to experience the labours of the community group 'Rich Mix London'. They had been working all day on composing a piece inspired by Orlando Gibbons's renaissance setting of *The Cryes of London*. Entitled 'Gherkin and Spires', to contrast the new and old skyline. The work was emerging lustily as I came in on the final rehearsal, and did them proud in the performance at 6pm. As Artistic Director Diana Burrell wrote in her 'Welcome' to this year's festival: 'A focus this June is on vocal music – the impulse to sing is universal – this summer the Festival celebrates with "Voice", a weekend of singing – playing host to four exceptional choirs and also giving people an opportunity to take a deep breath, let go and sing'.

The 'Rich mix' community item, acted as a 'potboiler' to precede the first main concert of the evening-by the renowned 'The Clerkes', from Oxford, under musical director Edward Wickham in collaboration with the energetic, enterprising composer Christopher Fox (b. 1955) in the world premiere of Fox's new 'take' of Gibbons's *The Cryes of London*. The original Gibbons being in the form of an 'In Nomine', The Clerks duly processed down the central aisle chanting in liturgical style after the opening bars had issued forth from the gallery behind the audience. However, I am reliably informed by Christopher Fox that his own modern influence was there right from the start, subtly interweaving fresh elements, and certainly 'cries' issued forth from all round the sides of the audience as the composite work unfolded. As Wickham explains in his programme notes: '*City Cries* runs as an interrupted musical sequence, framed by processional chant: as well as Gibbons and Fox, it features music by William Cornysh, Jean de Ockeghem, John Taverner, Antoine Busnois and Anon'.

Particularly of note were allusions to 'L'Homme Armé' (secular tunes were used in the Latin Mass till banned by Rome in the 16th century, so sources such as 'L'Homme Armé' have survived despite censure), the lovers Robin and Marion, and the anonymous gentlewoman from the song 'Fortuna desperata'. Regarding the latter, as Fox himself confirmed when I asked him after the concert, set in a 21st-century casino the young lady sings: 'in our casino everyone is king', and pleads for assistance in her 'desperate' straits. Here there was much overlapping of melodious entreaty in the lament, joined too by other lady clerks. At crucial points throughout the work, poignant woodwind accompaniment was provided by 'Reed Rage'. Due to the complexity of the text and score, with Fox's modern words and episodes interspersed throughout, one could hear this work several times and still find a wealth of new gems within it.

City Cries included the staggeringly effective call by the Town Cryer for information on a lost child, also alluding here to the well-known carol: 'Lullay, lullay, thou little tiny child', especially

[5] See my review of Spitalfields Festival 2007 in *Tempo* Vol. 62 No. 244 (April 2008), p.41.

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the verse recording King Herod's slaughter of the Innocents. There was, too, a short, powerful 'Pater Noster' said to have been written by a local composer/dignatory, to be sung outside his own house by his funeral procession on his demise. Breaking abruptly into present day mode, the work also contains a short slot of around 2 minutes wittily composed by Fox around small ads from the free newssheet *London Life*, spam e-mail, billboard slogans etc under the title '20 Ways to Improve Your Life'.

I really regret missing this year's Wilton Music Hall event, 'Rational Rec' (7 June) with 'interventions' by Michael Finnissy, plus-minus, Mark Knoop, and 'the vacuum cleaner', etc. I must catch up with them all next year. However, I did stay for the equally major second concert on 14th June: the UK première of Rodion Shchedrin's hour-long work *The Sealed Angel*. Sung by the combined choirs of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge and Kings College, London, with the very able oboe soloist Clare Wills, this proved to be a most impressive, in-depth work, based with some circumspection on a selection of Russian Orthodox texts.

In his programme notes, Calum MacDonald gives an excellent analysis of the intricacies of the work and how it came to be composed in 1988 to celebrate the millenium of Russia's conversion to Christianity in 988. As he explains: 'Throughout the summer of 1988 government-supported celebrations took place in Moscow (where *The Sealed Angel* received its première) and other cities, many churches and some monasteries were reopened, and it was permitted to broadcast church services on television. Nevertheless, although the process of 'perestroika' had begun … it was still advisable for a composer to disguise any outright commitment to writing religious music. This is why *The Sealed Angel*, which is a setting of a selection of Russian Orthodox liturgical texts, bears the subtitle: "Choral Music after Nikolai Leskov"'. (Significantly 'The Sealed Angel' is the title of Leskov's 1873 short story of an icon painter who lovingly restored one of his works after it had been deliberately damaged by state officials by having hot sealing wax poured over it.)

Obviously Shchedrin's work must be heard with all this historical context in mind. A plaintive note from the solo oboe opens the work, the choir creeping in with atmospheric humming and undulating haunting melody, breaking into emotive crescendos, typical of Russian Orthodox liturgy, but with a feeling of suppressed emotion pervading, so holding back. Firm bass entries from the men, also typically Russian, intervene at times, at one point breaking into a powerful growth of dynamics followed by alto solo melody. There is a frequent use of atmospheric humming, here with the men's hands vibrating on their mouths to add impact. A big 'Sea of Sound' develops, with intensity, again typical of the Russian church tradition, as it yearns to burst fourth again into the sunlight and the mainstream.

The work is written in nine movements, but breaks between movements were hardly discernible in this UK première, but the mens' stamping of the feet to the beat, rich-textured harmony, with high-register sopranos rising to a crescendo, then descending again, culminating in sudden rise to a shriek, marked out a powerful central movement in the work. Then came a quiet reprise with solo oboe arpeggio effect, against background humming from the choir, the oboe then developing into angular mode, with stark bugle-like sounds, resolved into mournful melody.

During the subsequent movements we had a moving alto solo, the ladies stabbing with staccato syllables, and then a more peaceful interlude, some almost bagpipe-y sounds at times, eerie liturgical effects from the choir, in the setting of the candle-lit church, some quiet pleading, some extremely deep tones from the men, leading onto intensity from the solo oboe, against humming, and a final long sustained note from the choir, plaintive oboe – and silence … before applause during which the composer himself came forward. This slightly repressed work could clearly be strengthened at will, to accord with the passage of time.

Jill Barlow

Presteigne Festival: Matthew Taylor's String Quartet No. 5

With its combination of adventurous and appealing programming, young and exciting performers and diverse talks and events all crammed into just six days, the Presteigne Festival continues to delight and surprise. As usual, a number of themes and anniversaries were covered, including the 60th birthday of 'featured composer' Michael Berkeley, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Olivier Messiaen and the 50th anniversary of the death of Vaughan Williams. New works premièred at the festival included *Lost Lanes – Shadow Groves* for clarinet and string orchestra by James Francis Brown, *Maelienydd* for strings and wind quintet by Adrian Williams and *Nightswimming* for piano trio by Joe Duddell.

[6] A CD of Hyde's works is to be released on the Toccata Classics label (see **www.thomashyde.co**.uk).

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Among the festival commissions, Matthew Taylor's String Quartet No. 5 was outstanding, underlining the composer's natural affinity with the medium. It is cast in three linked movements, each more spacious than the last. The opening *Allegro con brio* is forthright, highly charged and fiercely combative, perhaps surprisingly so for this outwardly affable composer. A unison figure heard at the outset provides the material for nearly all the main ideas in the work; another significant motif is presented in wide octave leaps in contrary motion. Parallels with the opening of Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, op. 95 were happily acknowledged by Taylor in an illuminating pre-concert talk. After a sustained climax and at the point of greatest intensity, a gripping Fugue appears. This signals the start of the quartet's central movement, whose purposeful, wide-ranging main theme is introduced by the first violin. The tempo change to *Moderato* creates a feeling of greater breadth, though not yet relaxation. Eventually, the mood becomes more serene and delicate as lyrical episodes are gradually introduced. Finally, the quartet eases into an *Adagio*-Finale in the shape of a gentle Lullaby, inspired by the recent birth of the composer's daughter. All strings are muted throughout this last movement, which never rose above *piano*; the work floats away to a peaceful, lilting conclusion with a softly rocking motion.

Though it only lasts a quarter of an hour in performance, this imaginative, accomplished work cast a potent spell over the audience attending the première in the Welsh border town's St. Andrew's Church. All four members of the Dante Quartet were visibly engaged with the piece, highly responsive to its subtly evolving character. Vaughan Williams' Sixth Symphony follows a similar trajectory from volatility to stillness, although in that post-war masterpiece the finale is an unsettling and bleak vision of the future, as distinct from Taylor's reassuring, calming lullaby. In this final movement's closing pages, the Dante players were particularly impressive, maintaining a firm, smooth tone even when they reached the borders of inaudibility. It was very moving, even audacious of the composer to end on such a soothing, consoling and optimistic note in these troubled, turbulent times and the performance did full justice to his courageous, poignant vision.

It is good news that Matthew Taylor has already been commissioned to write two more string quartets. His contributions to the genre are developing into one of the most satisfying series of our time.

Paul Conway

Frognal, Hampstead & Highgate Festival: Thomas Hyde's 'Stephen Ward'

They say that if you can remember the 1960s you weren't there, but many of us have youthful memories of the infamous Profumo Affair (1963) dominating BBC news bulletins, with reports of antics in the swimming pool of Cliveden and fear of state secrets compromised, as the glamorous model Christine Keeler appeared to be consorting with both the M.P. and Minister for War John Profumo and the Russian attaché Captain Ivanov at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. The young, up and coming composer Thomas Hyde (b. 1978, London) seized the moment to take up the Profumo Affair theme at this year's Hampstead and Highgate Festival with the première of his first staged music-theatre piece, *That Man Stephen Ward*, on 11 May at the Lund Theatre, University College School, Hampstead.

Having been invited along for the first performances of some of Hyde's earlier short choral and ensemble works in both St Albans and London in recent years, I was most intrigued to see how his meticulous, rather academic, but always accessible style would adapt to such a change of direction, but his sheer vigour and intrinsic sense of drama won the day. The much-maligned figure of Stephen Ward was well portrayed by bass/baritone Andrew Slater, in this fast moving musical drama scored for male voice solo, dancers and instrumental ensemble, directed by Yvonne Fontane, with libretto by David Norris.

There was much use of a backdrop of radio news bulletins rudely interrupting the narrative as the dire story unfolds, followed by a flashback to the scene as Ward, the high society osteopath, finds Bill Astor stretching out a hand to claim back the key to Spring Cottage, Cliveden, in the middle of a clinical massage therapy session. Masked waiters and cabaret-style parties, love scenes between Keeler and black boyfriend Johnny Edgecombe, followed by shots ringing out as he angrily pursues her when she flees to the safety of Ward's flat, were all skilfully narrated by soloist Andrew Slater in fine lyrical tones. The instrumental ensemble, placed to the left of the stage under music director George Vass, ratcheted up the tension as the police arrived, and at other high-points in the saga, with drum-rolls, edgy, often high-pitched woodwind, soulful strings, piano effects including plucking the strings, and tapping of claves and other percussive devices, to excellent effect.

A cello sounds to accompany 'All right, party's over', from the police, as Andrew Slater doubles up to play other roles as the narrative requires.

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Figures such as Profumo are allowed to leave the scene with a 'Good night, my Lord', from the police. Stephen Ward is left as the scapegoat 'facing the music' in more ways than one, at: 'perhaps you'd like to come down to the station with us Dr Ward', as he's arrested a few days later on what many found the somewhat dubious charges of 'living off immoral earnings' etc; whereas he saw his role as: 'all I did was favours to my friends'.

Ward's eventual tragic suicide, taking an overdose on the last day of his trial, with the quote: 'I was always afraid of this, the moment they threw me to the dogs', was well staged. As the lights fade on the slumped figure, we get high-pitched woodwind, powerful strings and soft tapping of claves from the percussion.

Thomas Hyde clearly has dramatic as well as musical potential,[6] and his work drew a full-house, enthusiastic audience. including his old teacher David Matthews, who said: 'I always knew he'd be good!'

Jill Barlow

London, South Bank Centre: Gérard Grisey's 'Les espaces acoustiques'

With Olivier Messiaen's centenary – 10 December – fast approaching, the aura of the great master was still hovering intensely over London's South Bank Centre on 16 October as the London Sinfonietta crossed the threshold of the magical world of spectral music, originally created by four of Messiaen's intuitive young pupils, who had been working with him in the Conservatoire in 1973. The contemporary Paris-based group L'Itineraire had been founded in that same year by the Ondes Martenot enthusiast Tristan Murail, together with Gérard Grisey, Michael Lévinas and Roger Tessier, developing their passion for finely-tuned textures and novel harmonies, whilst exploring the world of 'sound spectra', a transcendent gateway to an innovative soundscape, viewed by many as one of the most significant developments of late 20th-century music. During the ensuing years, Grisey began to regenerate the parameters of his compositional language, creating vibrant combinations of sounds and imprecise pulses, harmonies and textures, always subjected to continuous evolution – 'music is what sounds become' being one of his main principles. This ground-breaking approach also motivated the French-Canadian composer, Claude Vivier, to become wholly absorbed with spectral techniques during his visit to Europe in 1979 – as is coherently articulated in Bob Gilmore's 'On Claude Vivier's "Lonely Child"' in *Tempo* Vol. 61 No. 239 (January 2007).

Grisey's *Les espaces acoustiques* – a major cycle of six pieces formed between 1974 and 1985 – was about to be presented in its entirety for the first time in the UK, a unique musical event by any standard. His music is based on sublime, infinitesimal transitions rather than on definitive contrasts and, as the elegant figure of Paul Silverthorne emerged gradually from a darkened stage, his viola soliloquy demonstrated, with didactic clarity and supremely artistic control, precisely what spectral music actually says: the viola here being dissected by Grisey as a generator of harmonics, repeating a five-note sequence to which a doubled B is added on the lowest string, almost like a loud heartbeat. From then on, the cyclic form of *'Prologue'* was built around variable repetition and process, expanding swiftly into wildly hysterical spirals – as Grisey put it, 'a dialectic between form and frenzy' – preparing the ground for the even further complexity and colourful orchestration that was due to arrive shortly.

Stage lighting formed a coherent part of the presentation and, as it intensified, a modest ensemble transmitted an asymmetrical flow of musical image and sound intensity under the firm direction of yet another Messiaen pupil: George Benjamin, renowned in Europe as a resourceful conductor and highly inventive composer. After the mounting tension, progressive relaxation and soporific moments of *Périodes*, all conducted with calm serenity and distinguished authority, he confidently entered an even more imaginative sound world: *Partiels*, for 18-strong ensemble dominated by woodwind – regarded by many as a startling introduction to a completely new form of sound and resonance. The music, bursting into the acoustic panorama with bold trombone, evolved dynamically under George Benjamin's cool control, constantly transforming mysterious chords and the surface texture of bells, gongs, rustling paper effects and brushed percussion into a format seldom far from the world of repetition – even minimalism on occasion.

The Royal Academy of Music's 'new music group', the Manson Ensemble, had now enlarged the assembly to orchestral level, joining the rear of the platform to assist with *Modulations*, which – according to George Benjamin, in his pre-concert interview, had seriously influenced him way back in his student days, around 1976, prior to commencing his first composition, *Ringed by the Flat Horizon*. Opening on a slightly humorous note – a floodlit young cymbalist slowly drawing his discs apart for a resounding clash, then backing off due to a sudden light fade – the orchestra now

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became involved in lush spectral music, supremely controlled from the dais. Dedicated to Olivier Messiaen, this particular piece began to express – with brass, especially trombone – stark visions of profound canyons and gleaming stars, a haunting and timely tribute to the great man himself.

Transitoires came next, as the fast-growing 84-strong orchestra became immersed in sudden gloom, against inventive force fields from bass drum, contrasted with light flute trills, violin and then solo double bass and bass clarinet. Once again, Paul Silverthorne's viola eloquently introduced the ultimate section, which included a quartet of solo horns, transforming their energy to *Epilogue* with reverberating calls, gradually converting to a later form of minimalism as rhythmic piano joined with menacing percussive moments, all building up to an unpredictable, volatile, conclusion with a colossal bass drum beat – vigorously superimposing Grisey's 'the dreamlike time of the cosmos'.

Having begun with a mesmerizing viola solo 'monody', the musical scene had grown relentlessly to a full-orchestral panorama, expressing fond memories of Messiaen and his spectral pupils with otherworldly resonance and filtered note-clusters in every register. Inspired by George Benjamin, the London Sinfonietta and Manson Ensemble blend had just succeeded in flamboyantly communicating every incandescent moment of Gerard Grisey's 'great laboratory' of acoustic spectra to a large audience, all of whom were now displaying overwhelming enthusiasm.

John Wheatley

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