

FIRST PERFORMANCES

‘Remembering the Future’: Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, CBSO Centre, Birmingham

‘How do you deal with endings?’, Stephen Newbould, BCMG’s Artistic Director, asked a group of four composers in an interview prior to the ensemble’s final concert of the season, given on 12 June. Perhaps Newbould was thinking out loud: ‘Remembering the Future’ marked his and Executive Producer Jackie Newbould’s last event with Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, after a tenure of nearly 30 years. The CBSO Centre was packed to the rafters for this concert that featured new commissions by Luke Bedford, Richard Baker, John Woolrich and Zoë Martlew: four composers with strong connections to the group. At the suggestion of John Woolrich, in his role as Artist-in-Association with BCMG, the works were scored not for BCMG’s usual larger forces but for Schoenberg’s ‘Pierrot’ ensemble, with various additions and subtractions.

All six pieces in the programme had, if not a valedictory quality, then a dark lyrical beauty, and were leisurely in tempi with two titles suggesting leave-taking. Woolrich’s *Swan Song* (for violin, viola, cello, alto flute and clarinet) was muted and dark-hued, the instruments predominantly hovering in their lowest registers, with its modally inflected polyphony moving through a series of gently fractured events. The whole eventually coalesced into a broad unison line, from which wispy stray notes and fugitive phrases emerged. In the pre-concert talk, Woolrich remarked that he had become tired of the idea of ‘mapping out a piece, knowing in advance who’d done it’; instead the composition process here is ‘about a journey’, an image borne out by *Swan Song*’s wonderfully unforced flow.

For *Hwyl fawr ffrindiau* (Goodbye friends), Richard Baker took the traditional Welsh children’s song of the same name as a starting point. An obsessively repeated series of falling figures for the oboe (Melinda Maxwell) gradually became subsumed in the crepuscular foliage of the five other instrumental parts. When it had disappeared, the process started again, this time with a more insistent oboe phrase, the whole

ensemble only silenced by the intervention of an only-just-audible music box, the original tune emerging bare and fragile.

Luke Bedford’s *In Black Bright Ink* (for violin, bass clarinet, cello and piano) sprang from a subterranean fifth in the piano. From the music’s crystalline murkiness, individual lines and notes emerged, occasionally coming together harmonically, before being once again cast out into isolation. This indecision eventually found unity in a chorale-like procession of tense low chords. If the music’s connection with its title seemed tenuous, this may have been explained by Bedford’s remark (in the pre-concert talk) that the piece was finished before the title (from Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 65*) was chosen.

Zoë Martlew needs no introduction as a cellist, but here was featured as a composer: the concert ended with *Broad St. Burlesque*, her first commission (or the moment for ‘losing my commission virginity’ as she put it). Named after the street that runs alongside Birmingham’s Symphony Hall, her piece celebrates ‘the city’s principal party slag drag’, deriving its pitch material from the letters BCMG and Stephen and Jackie Newbould’s names. Although the music aimed at a jazz-inflected world, even here the result bordered on the elegiac its attractive bluesy lines emerging through a halting series of gear changes.

Finished in 2012, Judith Weir’s *Blue-Green Hill*, which opened the concert, grew out of a short suite of Scottish folk music that she ‘hastily assembled’ for a BCMG tour of India in 2000. Deconstructing the various songs’ primary intervals, the result was in Weir’s happiest vein: primarily melodic, its simple intervals sang out against straightforward, but ingenious, textures. It recalled the lyrical simplicity of her earlier works; a return that was particularly welcome after what has sometimes felt like the dutiful series of larger-scale commissions that occasionally seem to have engulfed her in recent years.

Finally, Howard Skempton’s *Field Notes* (for oboe quartet) made a welcome return. Originally written for a tour around regional village halls two years ago (I reviewed the premiere in *TEMPO* 68/269), here it was heard without the artefacts of its original collaboration with

textile artist Matthew Harris. Yet this somehow intensified the work's strength: strangely timeless, the grave simple polyphony seemed somehow to suspend the formal measure of time.

BCMG would be nothing without the superb body of players it has fielded over the decades, and the level of dedication here was no exception: oboist Melinda Maxwell gave a moving improvisation in honour of the departing Newboulds. Two short encores ended the evening: *Secret Psalm* (1990) for solo violin by Oliver Knussen (a long-standing associate of the group) was played with undaunted sweetness and precision by Alexandra Wood, and Howard Skempton sent the audience on their way by playing his accordion piece, *One for the Road* (1976).

Peter Reynolds

LCO Soloists + NU:NORD, Roundhouse Dorfman Hub, London; Riot Ensemble, St Leonard's Church, London

Despite the ever-dwindling pot of public money available to exploratory musicians in the UK and elsewhere, various ensembles are nonetheless busy making hay whilst at least a little sun still shines. In London in the space of only a week or two in the second half of April, for instance, audiences could catch a series of new music recitals given by the Park Lane Group of young musicians, an evening of premieres with the Workers' Union Ensemble, and concerts by the Riot Ensemble and by the London Contemporary Orchestra Soloists. Other cities, from Glasgow to Birmingham, enjoy a similarly wide range of activity.

The liveliness and freshness of the UK's contemporary music scene was reflected in the LCO Soloists and Riot shows, given on 25 and 29 April respectively. Each attempted to present an eclectic mix of new music in approachable but exacting ways that brought out the unique qualities of each piece whilst also providing audiences with clear narrative entry points to the music, the latter coming largely via engaging spoken introductions. These were provided on the one hand by Mira Benjamin (Co-Director of the new music network nu:nord and violinist for the evening) and Robert Ames (Artistic Director and violist of the LCO), and on the other by Aaron Holloway-Nahum and Adam Swayne (Artistic Director/conductor and Programme Director/pianist of Riot Ensemble).

The style of presentation and the setting likewise contributed to each concert's effectiveness.

For example, the church acoustics and backdrop of Riot's show produced a vivid sense of occasion and drama, whilst the in-the-round intimacy and flexibility of the LCO Soloists' concert, which either saw the audience arrayed around the string quartet or vice versa, created a loose but immersive feel. An eight-channel speaker system around the perimeter of the Dorfman hub contributed further to that immersion when deployed in a few of the pieces (including a late-addition *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* by Jonathan Harvey).

Both concerts also made unusual but welcome choices in how each programme played out. Riot's performance unfolded without an interval, for starters. In addition, the three movements of Evan Johnson's evanescent *L'art de toucher le clavecin 3* were distributed across the programme (as requested by the composer), whilst a short selection of *in memoriam* piano pieces was charmingly played by Adam Swayne about midway through in tribute to their composers, Peter Maxwell Davies, Pierre Boulez and Steven Stucky. The LCO Soloists' show, for its part, abandoned a conventional interval in favour of brief but relaxed breaks between each piece.

In both cases, some thoughtful programming and presentation allowed audiences easy access to the music. This is to the good, and those involved should feel encouraged to continue along these lines. I did wonder at times, however, if the tactic of providing detailed introductions to each piece might not be a little self-defeating. This is a larger issue that applies far beyond these two shows, of course, and it would be unfair to expect them to provide a definitive answer to the conundrum of how best to connect audiences to new music, but nevertheless they spoke to the problem in notable ways.

In the LCO Soloists concert, for instance, composer Eric Skytterholm Egan's introduction to his piece *Through the Embers*, as intriguing (and indeed speculative) as it was in its references to Adams and Carwardine's *Last Chance to See* and its oblique descriptions of musical detail, ended up imposing on the mind a narrative shape of coming together and apart that one then couldn't help but hear in the performance. The piece consists of sonically and gesturally distinct and unpredictable music on the theme of growth and decay, full in this performance of unusual skittering and scraping from a spatially arrayed quartet whose playing was productively misaligned throughout. The piece, however, worked best when it seemed to go *against* the grain of Egan's broad outline, the slivery string