
FIRST PERFORMANCES

London, Barbican: Aho's Clarinet Concerto

Concertos for instruments that 19th-century composers wouldn't have touched with a violin bow have become so much the norm that no-one gives a second thought to those for tap-dancer (*grace à* Morton Gould), two timpanists (Philip Glass) or even Kalevi Aho's own recent foray into the rare – but not unprecedented – repertoire of the contra-bassoon, premièred just a few months ago.

Aho's stated aim is to write a concerto for 'almost every instrument in the orchestra' and adding to recent efforts for tuba (2001), flute (2002) and double bass (2005) is his 2005 work for clarinet and orchestra, which received its first performance by Martin Fröst, who commissioned it, and the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Osmo Vänskä on 22 April. Despite a suspicion that Aho's motivation might be to create yet more odd sounds on out-of-the-way instruments, the new concerto is a triumph for more conventional reasons.¹ Contemporary concertos for clarinet often reach for multiphonic techniques to supplement the instrument's natural tendency to quick running passages, jazzy riffings and soulful musings in its lower register. Aho's new concerto features all of the above. Its strengths, however, stem from the absence of the merely innovative and the composer's sticking to almost-classical virtues of variety, drama and memorability.

The 30-minute piece has five movements, each with an Italian tempo-marking. The work is itself titled 'Concerto per clarinetto ed orchestra' so clearly Aho's drawing on classical models is not accidental. In the first movement, marked *tempestoso*, the soloist's 'strike high, loud and then run' approach, while the orchestra hits back with sudden quaver-length chords, soon changes. As violins come in high in their register, *molto espressivo*, what sounded like the soloist's joyous

showing-off seems instead like an anxious attempt to escape a new mood of introspection. After the soloist has listened to a solo flute and dark-shadowed patterns from brass with Harmon mutes, he is left alone to make quiet *tremolando* patterns. These, although they soon develop into a *prestissimo* virtuosic display of Fröst's superb technique (in the second movement cadenza, following *attacca*), never stray far – with their expressive crescendos and decrescendos, their painful oscillations of mood – from something more than mere display.

Although he is only 57, Aho cuts an enthusiastic but slightly conservative figure in interview. The spiky *con brio* third movement shows some distinctly tried and tested virtues. The themes, both for the clarinet and orchestra, are short and well-defined. The writing for solo instrument, while taxing, is idiomatic and allows the soloist to show off his considerable interpretative skills without struggling with extraneous effects. Finally the orchestral material is not simply filling before the soloist's next *portamento*-filled run, wonderful though these are: it is dramatic in its own right.

The quality of writing in the fourth movement *adagio* is even more impressive. After horns and trumpets have left us in a lowering landscape, reminiscent of middle-period Mahler, the soloist's contribution, weaving an unbroken *dolce* line against harp and vibraphone, hardly seems to be a vehicle for the clarinet at all. Think of this rather as a symphony's slow movement for which any contemporary composer would have been happy to take such advantage of a solo clarinet's contribution of grace and melancholy.

There are multiphonics in the weird *misterioso* last movement, but the vibraphone is back; together with Harmon-muted *pp* low brass it again creates an atmosphere where the 'broken' over-blown sound from the soloist is redolent of struggle, even defeat in the soft *diminuendo* closing bars. There is no need here to have ended triumphantly, calling for our attention, just as the work began. Our interest has more subtly been won. In only half an hour Aho has traversed a range of soundscapes with such finesse that the whole concerto is an absolute triumph.

Robert Stein

¹ The Flute Concerto, by contrast – released last year on BIS CD1499, with Sharon Bezaly, the Lahti SO and Vänskä again – shows mostly why there haven't been more flute concertos. The instrument is too unimposing to act as a foil for the orchestra and its familiar breathy, dreamy restraint makes for a work that gets bogged down in its own wistfulness.

London, Barbican: Salonen's 'Wing on Wing'

Esa-Pekka Salonen's music has followed the same trajectory as that of his close friend Magnus Lindberg, abandoning the emphatic modernism of their early works in favour of a much more pronounced role for tonality. But where Lindberg has married the harmonic purposiveness of classical tonality with the myriad timbral resources of modernism, producing both procedures and textures of considerable complexity, Salonen's recent orchestral scores have an assertive, luminous tonal confidence that seems to state 'problem solved' – even if it does so in kaleidoscopically rich colours. His *Wing on Wing* (2004), an orchestral fantasy which received its UK première at the hands of Jukka-Pekka Saraste and the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the Barbican on 12 May, is a tribute to the architect Frank Gehry: Salonen's programme note explains that 'wing on wing' is a sailing term (for a sail-formation presenting maximum sail-area) which Gehry uses as a metaphor for his Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles – the home, of course, of Salonen's Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. The composer further explains that *Wing on Wing*, using 'metaphors of water and wind', incorporates 'the weird sampled sound of a fish from the local waters of Southern California – the Plainfin Midshipman – as an instrument', as also Gehry's 'sampled (and modified) voice here and there'. Among the 'other unusual colours' are two coloratura sopranos – here the sisters Anu and Piia Tömsi – 'sometimes as soloists, sometimes as instruments among the others'. By pairing them at the outset with contra-bassoon and contrabass clarinet Salonen hopes to 'create a new kind of hybrid instrument, a sci-fi fantasy of a union between humans and machines'. At various points, speakers and the scurrying sopranos extend the music into the auditorium.

Cast in a 24-minute span and, the note says, ten sections (the divisions were not always perceptible to the ear), *Wing on Wing* begins with the sampled sounds and the two sisters antiphonally cantillating a folk-like figure, their high lines in stark contrast with the dark and low woodwinds. As the sopranos leave the stage to dash outside the hall, busy string figuration takes over and a storm blows up and dies down again, in orchestral writing of machine-like neatness and precision. Gehry's sampled voice returns before the cantillation figure gently spreads across the ruminative ensemble in easy-going heterophony – is this nature-painting? Salonen (afraid of rousing invasive thoughts of Sibelius?) doesn't say. The sopranos now intone their cantillation from

the front of the balcony, provoking an explosive response from the orchestra, the voices wailing from either side as they climb to the very top of their register. The sampled fish sounds swirl across the hall (the Plainfin Midshipman, Salonen's note proudly reveals, sings an E natural), giving the sopranos just enough time to regain the stage (they must be grateful for performances in small halls) where they spin out a cruelly high ecstatic line, first in unison and then antiphonally. The orchestral textures here – as often elsewhere – are full, rich, even over-loaded: much of the detail is impossible to hear. What promises to be a dance-finale now builds up from the orchestra, urged on by exciting brass riffs and rising woodwind figures, the freewheeling polyphony directly reminiscent of the opening of Matthijs Vermeulen's Fourth Symphony. But it's ain't over till – on this occasion – the two small ladies sing, and architect and fish return to lay *Wing on Wing* to rest.

In spite, though, of the obvious excellence of this performance (and relative familiarity with the recording on Deutsche Grammophon DG002889 477 5375), I'm not yet sure that *Wing on Wing* is quite the sum of its parts. The orchestral writing, of course, is utterly confident and polished, as one you'd expect from a composer who is also one of the most technically assured of today's conductors. But – unlike earlier Salonen scores, not least the *L. A. Variations* of 1996 or the Bacchanalian *Foreign Bodies* of 2001 – there seems to be no real musical purpose behind the work itself, other than Salonen's enjoyment in flexing his musical muscles, nor a distinct harmonic voice: I would recognize a Lindberg orchestral piece from a bar or so, but I doubt I could say the same of Salonen – other, perhaps, than from the sheer luxuriance of the orchestral writing. Maybe the musical purpose of *Wing on Wing* is also none other than the explicitly verbal one: it pays good-natured tribute to Frank Gehry. There are worse reasons for writing a piece.

Martin Anderson

London, Guildhall School of Music: Contemporary Israeli Composers

A world première by one of Israel's foremost senior composers, Yehezkel Braun, and UK premières of music by four generations of Israeli composers, played by a superb young Israeli ensemble Meitar, regaled an audience at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama on Monday 27 March. The event formed the climax of a

concert tour by Meitar to Europe and Scandinavia, which in the UK included three concerts at the Jewish Museum, London, Spiro Ark, and Keele University. Formed by pianist Amit Dolberg in 2003, with performers based in Israel, Paris, New York and London, Meitar specializes in Israeli repertoire as well as works of the St. Petersburg Society of Jewish Music. The group is affiliated to the Los Angeles-based Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity, through which it has also commissioned a substantial number of new compositions, including contributions by their Artistic Directors Joseph Dorfman and Ofer Ben-Amots.² This London debut concert included UK premières of new commissions by the young Israeli composers Ayal Adler and Gilad Hochman, who were both present to receive warm applause.

The programme began with the impressive *Aria for Chamber Ensemble* (2005) by Betty Olivero, one of the outstanding composers of her generation, whose influences derive from her studies in Israel, America and Italy, where she worked under Luciano Berio. Olivero returned recently to Israel, where she is Composer-in-Residence with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra and a Professor at Bar-Ilan University. This recent work was a brilliantly subtle evocation of the East-West synthesis characteristic of Israeli music of the third generation, fully immersed in a musical idiom that is clearly international while responsive to regional accents. It began with an arresting movement full of gestural interest, building around a trill motif in clarinet, echoed by the ensemble. The second movement transformed this trill into an eastern arabesque, creating a beautiful tableau of sonority in its delicate evocative instrumentation and harmony. It was followed by Michail Milner's song cycle *A Child and his Mother* (1921), the première recording of which Meitar are soon to release. Milner (1886–1953), who composed the first-ever Yiddish opera in Russia, was one of the foremost composers of the St Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, the group of Russian musicians many of whom – such as Joseph Achron and Joel Engel – later emigrated to Palestine or America.³ Milner's style here was exquisitely polished, setting Yiddish texts to exotic, whole-tone impressionist harmonies evoking Debussy and Poulenc. The soprano Tehila Goldstein projected the vocal line

with fine focussed tone and clear diction, the two slow songs leading to a playful third song, and a slow ostinato-accompanied fourth.

Yehezkel Braun is particularly renowned for his choral and chamber works, some recordings of which have been reviewed in earlier issues of *Tempo*.⁴ His early Piano Sonata No. 1, composed in 1954, was recorded by (amongst others) Pnina Salzman, the veteran Israeli pianist who has just received the Israel Prize. It is one of the gems of the second generation of Israel music: concise, neo-classical in its first movement, lyrical in its folk-like slow movement, and influenced by Middle-Eastern modality and Israeli folk dance – notably in the finale, a type of mixture of *hora* and Yemenite dance. The Second Sonata, a lengthy work, given its world première here in the presence of the composer, seemed to continue in the tracks of the first, yet also demonstrated some of the new trends of internationalism in Israeli music. The first of three movements is again neo-classical, yet in a different way, largely based on a pun blatantly reminiscent of Beethoven's Sonata in E flat, 'Das Lebewohl', in its strategy of reharmonizing a motif of a falling third at each reappearance. There is plenty of impetus in the recurring two-part contrapuntal transition passages (which have a Bachian feel), and an emphatic thrice-repeated octave acts as a punctuating gesture to articulate structure. The slow movement suggests a music box, with its Alberti bass supporting a modal-whole-tone melody that recalls the First Sonata in its Israeli character; dissonant bitonal comments and gestures spice the background without disturbing the gentle flow, which in the third movement relaxes even further into a somnambulant mood that is interrupted only by the *perpetuum mobile* finale. Here there is clearly the influence of the thrilling Toccatas composed by Paul Ben-Haim 50 or more years ago, and in that respect there seemed a certain anachronism running through the work, an echo of an earlier era of Israeli music. Yet the variety of pianistic textures and gestures, and the coherence of the whole, make it an attractive addition to the repertoire and Amit Dolberg projected its varied moods with admirable skill and artistry.

Dolberg also displayed finesse and virtuosity in the rest of the programme with its demanding avant-garde piano parts, especially the UK première of *Reminiscence* by Ayal Adler, a substantial and powerful work in four sections for violin and piano in which the violinist was Asaf

² Joseph Dorfman, composer, pianist and Shostakovich scholar, died suddenly in Los Angeles on 7 June, aged 65, while on a concert tour.

³ For more detail on the St Petersburg Society see Malcolm Miller, 'Conference Report: Potsdam – The New Jewish School in Music', *Tempo* Vol. 58 No. 230 (October 2004), pp. 62–67.

⁴ Eg *Psalterion* in *Tempo* Vol. 59 No.234 (October 2005).

Levy. Adler is one of the promising voices in the younger generation of Israeli composers, who received a doctorate in Canada and whose works have been performed at the ISCM and recorded. The 'Reminiscence' of the title appears in the form of a double allusion in the heartfelt fourth movement, the slow, inwardly serious core of the work. Here microscopic gestures suspended over airy silences give way to a lyrical quotation from Berg's Violin Concerto, the rising and falling intervals themselves alluding to Bach's Cantata *Es ist Genug*. Yet there is equally a mood of remembrance throughout the work, as in the opening three sections, where evocative moods created by slow dialogues between high lyrical violin gestures and low piano clusters are dispelled by dramatic outbursts and fast imitative counterpoint, and, in the final section, an arresting climactic cadenza for solo violin. Though the atonal idiom prevails, the use of microtones and glissandi adds an intriguing richness to the language, again suggesting the theme of fading memory.

Lior by Gilad Hochman is a musical memorial to a close friend of the composer, expressed in two broad movements which move from atonality to a more mellow neo-tonal idiom, with settings of verses, including *Eccelesiastes*, both sung and spoken. The medium was exploited most expressively, with varied interplay amongst the woodwind and strings. More overtly virtuosic was the final piece, *Jazz (À Propos de Matisse)* (1992) by Ruben Seroussi, a leading Israeli composer originally from Uruguay, who frequently finds innovative ways of synthesizing Middle Eastern and western musical elements. Here the topic was that of jazz and the avant-garde, as hinted at in the title, and evident in the vivid energy and momentum of its syncopated ritornello-type structure interspersed ingeniously with ever more extended passages in a complex post-tonal idiom. The exciting performance concluded the programme on a highpoint, capped by one brief, beautiful encore: Gilad Hochman's post-modern arrangement of the song 'Hinach Yafa' (How Beautiful) by A.U. Boskovich, one of the pioneer generation of Israeli composers, who emigrated in 1938 from Romania. The primarily chordal textures of the original were here rendered into a more textural fabric with subtly emphasized dissonances, exemplifying a creative connexion between the earliest and latest generations of music in Israel. It was ideally suited to round off an evening, by this talented ensemble, of highly engaging new compositions that deserve far wider airing.

Malcolm Miller

Birmingham: Morgan Hayes's Violin Concerto

Morgan Hayes has written several works of a concertante nature, but his latest piece for soloist and ensemble is unambiguously entitled 'Violin Concerto' and presents the soloist with a commanding, virtuoso part. Dedicatee Keisuke Okazaki grasped the opportunities for technical display with thrilling intensity in the world première performance at the CBSO Centre, accompanied by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group under Franck Ollu.

In a single, undivided movement of around 15 minutes' duration, the concerto flattered to deceive in its opening paragraphs. A beautiful, arching melody in B flat for soloist and languid duet for cor anglais and clarinet proved to be atypical: the remainder of the concerto was dominated by spiky, rhythmic utterances with a marked improvisatory quality and a torrent of manic activity from the soloist.

A section entitled *Mechanico* initiated a potent rhythmic riff, but the crowning moment in the concerto was the cathartic solo cadenza. Consciously mirroring the effect of Lucky's torrential monologue in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', this solo outpouring gathered together in one continuous statement the brilliant passagework that hitherto had been spasmodic, ramshackle and unhinged.

Markings in the score such as *Grandioso*, *Tumultuoso* and *Desolato*, confirm the composer's conception of the piece as a big, passionate statement, whilst contrasted blocks of sound that frequently cut off into silence reveal the composer's love of Bruckner. In the same way as Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's Piano Concerto is to some degree a work 'about piano concertos', Hayes's piece also addresses the history of its genre with brief quotations from other violin concertos 'washed up on the beach', as the composer put it in his pre-concert talk. An example of this is a quadruple pizzicato chord taken from Stravinsky's Violin Concerto.

A purely musical tension between flat keys and sharper tonalities underlay the soloist's garrulous rhetoric. Hayes writes in his programme notes that he sees the concerto as a 'discourse between an individual and a crowd': it exploited the tensions of solo protagonist against ensemble, yet the former never seemed in any danger of losing the upper hand. Indeed, the technique of the soloist was a key inspiration for the composer in writing his Violin Concerto, and it was ultimately the superb playing of Keisuke Okazaki that proved the most memorable aspect of the première.

A live recording of Morgan Hayes' inventive mini-clarinet concerto, *Dark Room*, completed in 2003, has been recently released as part of the second instalment of the London Sinfonietta's Jerwood Series on its own label (2 SINF CD-2-2006). Mark van de Wiel, principal clarinetist of the London Sinfonietta and one of the work's dedicatees, is the soloist and the conductor is the excellent Martyn Brabbins, who also directs assured performances of *smear*, Jonny Greenwood's love letter to the ondes martenot, and Dai Fuijura's gritty *Fifth Station* on the 38-minute CD single.

Dramatic and sensual, *Dark Room* is a potent fusion of rotting and coalescing materials stimulated by the crumbling majesty of old Tangier and the sharpening images of photographs developing in a 'darkroom'. There are several points of reference to Hayes's Violin Concerto, such as the abruptly shifting borders between solo and ensemble and the heightened, consummating significance of the cadenza. The piece reaches a dramatic focal point when, at a sign from the soloist, the oboist moves from the ensemble and plays from a part uncoordinated with the other performers. The clarinet joins the oboe and is similarly out of synchronization. After a disembodied duet, the oboist ceases

playing and the clarinetist is left alone to give a final soliloquy, leaving the individual with the last word and bringing *Dark Room* to a spirited conclusion. Performance and recording on this London Sinfonietta release are both exemplary and it is hard to imagine the work receiving a more satisfying interpretation.

Another work by Hayes, his *Opera* (2003) for violin and piano, inspired by Danio Argento's film-making, has also recently appeared on disc (NMC D108), and it is to be hoped other works of his, such as his 2005 Proms commission, *Strip*, will be recorded in due course. A major rising talent in the British music scene, Hayes's cultural eclecticism and stylistic diversity does not stifle a recognizable, individual voice and his predilection for traditional forms fuels an invigoratingly fresh approach.

Paul Conway

London: Music We'd Like To Hear, March–April 2006

For the happy few who have noticed it, Music We'd Like To Hear is already proving an oasis of thoughtful and idealistic music-making amongst



Friday 29 September 7.30pm
Dvorák Suite in A major, Op 98b
Jonathan Dove Hojoki
(BBC commission: world premiere)
Beethoven Symphony No 3, 'Eroica'
Jiri Belohlávek conductor
David Daniels counter-tenor

Tickets £24 £20 £16 £12 £8
 *Tickets for 7 October £20 £15 £10
 Tickets for Singers at Six £6, or £3
 to ticket-holders for the evening
 concert in the Barbican Hall

Saturday 7 October 4.00pm
Barbican Theatre
Bartók Music for Strings,
 Percussion and Celesta *
Steve Reich You Are (Variations) †
Steve Reich Tehillim †
 *Alexander Rumpf conductor
 † Stefan Asbury conductor
 Synergy Vocals

Saturday 14 November 7.30pm
Messiaen Un sourire
Matthias Pintscher Reflections
 on Narcissus *(UK premiere)*
Ravel Overture 'Shéhérazade'
Stravinsky The Firebird - Suite (1945)
Matthias Pintscher conductor
Truls Mørk cello

Tuesday 30 November 7.30pm
Ivan Fedele Scena *(UK premiere)*
Rossini Stabat Mater
David Robertson conductor
Majella Cullagh, Patricia Bardón
Colin Lee, Alastair Miles
BBC Symphony Chorus

Friday 8 December 7.30pm
Hans Werner Henze
 Scorbiana sinfonica *(UK premiere)*
Prokofiev Piano Concerto No 2
Tchaikovsky Symphony No 5
Manfred Honeck conductor
Nelson Freire piano

Saturday 16 December 7.30pm
Philippe Fénelon Gloria
(UK premiere)
Poulenc Gloria
Berlioz Symphonie fantastique
Sir Andrew Davis conductor
Christine Brewer soprano
BBC Symphony Chorus

Singers at Six
 St Giles Cripplegate, 6.00pm
BBC Singers
Bob Chilcott conductor
 French music for Christmas

The concert on 7 October is part of
 the Barbican's *Phases – The Music of*
Steve Reich www.barbican.org.uk/reich



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www.barbican.org.uk
 Reduced booking fee online



BBC RADIO 3 90-93FM

the self-serving glamour-fests that generate the most noise on London's new music scene. This composer-curated series, modestly tucked away in the strangely appropriate venue of St Anne and St Agnes' Lutheran Church, EC2 (informal but slightly Puritanical interior; the Ten Commandments for company), presented its second annual season of chamber recitals on successive Wednesdays in March and April; more are planned for next year.

The first concert, curated by Tim Parkinson, featured an *ad hoc* piano trio of Angharad Davies (violin), Swiss composer Stefan Thut (cello) and Parkinson himself (piano). Of the five composers represented, only Alvin Lucier might be called a familiar name; his work *Fideliotrio* (1987) was also the most clearly individuated. As usual for Lucier, a single note provides the material, the piano repeating a single A-natural while the strings, turned inward to face into the piano, execute constant, slow glissandi around it. Given time to tune in gradually to the site of musical activity, to the infinitesimal polyphony of overtones that constitutes the music's salient content, the experience is of cumulative, and finally overwhelming, absorption within the sound.

Next to this exhilaration, Parkinson's choices were low-key but interesting: quiet post-Feldman austerity from Stefan Thut and his fellow Swiss Jürg Frey, and droll reworkings of Schubert and Bossa Nova from Matteo Fargion and Chico Mello respectively. Fargion's *Pinkelpause* ('Piss-Break', 1990) maintains a particularly edgy relationship with its source material, the distortions and cuttings serving to alienate and provoke rather than merely amuse. Although neither Thut's *violine violoncello klavier 1–13* (2005) nor Frey's *klaviertrio* (1989, rev. 1990, 2005) escape the aura of Feldman (or indeed the rarefied Alpine air of late Webern), both are exquisite: the Frey in particular revealed a unique harmonic sensibility and masterly sense of pacing within its refined idiom.

The series' finale, two weeks later, was curated by John Lely. It was fuller of audience, and had a quite different atmosphere: more determinedly Experimental; more retro. Not everything worked. There was something effortful about Satie's *Musique d'Ameublement* at the start of the concert: of course it needs to be heard (or not-heard), but this was unambiguously *there*, effectively forcing the audience to be (conventionally) attentive and respectful where oblivious (knowingly or not) would have been a more telling response. Christopher Hobbs, one of two veteran experimentalists on the bill, then presented some of his recent Sudoku music. This

consists of looped material from the crude children's music software program Garageband, constructed according to number sequences from Sudoku problems Hobbs has solved. Played over loudspeakers, a fragment of a piece for bell sounds hinted at a potentially fruitful exploration of the distinctly creepy effect produced in decontextualising these cheap, synthetic materials – the bland, suburban unreality of the sounds being dehumanized yet further by the unseeing numerical grid. But it was hard to love the following 17-minute manipulation of synthesised drum-kit patterns, and the project felt self-absorbed and quixotic.

James Saunders's ongoing modular work *#[unassigned]* is now a well-known quantity, having occupied him exclusively since 2000; the instalment performed here was unusual for its relatively extended length (an hour), which allowed both listeners and composer to explore the work's endlessly expanding universe more fully than usual. It was also a particularly ethereal version: Angharad Davies (violin) and Andrew Sparling (clarinet) contributed the most tangible material, predominantly patches of long, high impure tones, harmonics and glissandi; Michael Parsons held sustained notes on a chamber organ while slowly drawing the stops in and out; Tim Parkinson performed various inscrutable (and inaudible) actions inside and outside the piano; and Saunders and Lely manipulated everyone's sounds via laptops into an attenuated sonic atmosphere. The result had a transcendental quality, recalling the vast spaces of late Nono but with a less dramatic, more purified – Cageian – sensibility. The final 20 minutes did drag, but it would be churlish to call the piece overlong: it felt like a deliberate *ne plus ultra* in Saunders's output, a testing of boundaries, an unrepeatable achievement.

The evening, and the series, ended with a celebratory performance of John White's *Drinking and Hooting Machine*, on the day of the composer's seventieth birthday.

James Weeks

St Albans Abbey: Joseph Phibbs's 'Tenebrae'

Joseph Phibbs, born in London in 1974, received his early musical education at the Purcell School, where he was inspired by an Indian teacher, 16th-century harmony and poetic texts, before proceeding to Kings College, London, where he studied composition under Harrison Birtwistle.

Numerous important commissions followed: I well remember hearing his fifth BBC commission, *Lumina*, broadcast from the BBC Last Night of the Proms 2003. This atmospheric piece already marked him out as a brilliant young composer raring to go, introducing his own stunning soundworld with flair for dizzy high registers, heady bursts of bold brass and percussion, and eerie sequences from the strings.

Phibbs describes how, on a visit to St Albans at Christmas 2004, he was 'struck by the extraordinary acoustic effect of the first carol, the (cathedral) choir singing from the far end of the Abbey'. So when commissioned later to write a new work for St Albans Bach Choir, to be performed there, he incorporated an 'offstage' chamber choir of choristers into the piece, as well as a high soprano soloist, to join them offstage too.

The world première of the new work, entitled *Tenebrae*, duly took place at the Abbey on 1 April 2006, before a full house audience, with the celebrated solo soprano Lesley-Jane Rogers reaching stunning top B-flats with ease, surrounded by around 20 boy and girl choristers and lay clerks. The angelic sounds issued from behind the altar for the opening 'Kyrie' and then from beyond, distantly intoning further texts from the Latin Mass, deftly interwoven and alternating with the poetic texts sung by the main choir. As Lesley-Jane Rogers told me after the concert, 'In fact during the noisy orchestral opening of the ensuing setting of the "Sonnet: The Uncertain Battle", (for the main Choir) we (herself and offstage choristers) went quickly up the long spiral staircase to sing above from the organ loft, gathered round the organ console'.

Seated myself near the back of the Nave, I caught the full impact of the mystical balance between the nearly 200-strong Bach Choir, in full view on stage in front of the altar, and the 'misterioso' sound of off-stage choristers and solo soprano wafting from heavenly realms above and beyond. In his pre-concert talk Phibbs had mentioned sometimes using the device 'to add weight you add to top, not bass', and this was certainly a feature of both his Proms piece (*Lumina*) as well as here in *Tenebrae*. Another feature is that he likes to choose texts that suggest 'movement', so his stormy battle sequence (using David Gascoyne's 20th-century sonnet) was followed by the awesome sequence 'The World', leading onto the intrepid 'Sic Vita', featuring bursts of 'low bassoon' and 'biting trumpet sounds' as Phibbs himself describes them. Stunning top notes from Lesley-Jane (*senza*

vibrato' throughout) intercept from afar to punctuate this vivid fast-moving setting of Henry King's 17th-century poem, amidst rapid percussion and searing strings.

By contrast in one of the closing sequences, the Agnus Dei, two muted trumpets and mournful drums from the Herts-based orchestra, Sinfonia Verdi, added darker tones to enhance the dulcet sound of the offstage choristers, soon joined too by the main Bach Choir, all under the steady baton of St Albans Abbey's Master of Music, Andrew Lucas, to realize true 'Tenebrae' indeed.⁵

Jill Barlow

London, Reform Club: Bayan Northcott's 'Fandango' for harpsichord

A première always generates a sense of anticipation: the antique surroundings of the Reform Club in London's Pall Mall, an attractive (and predominantly Baroque) programme and the promise of fine wine combined to create a singular and curiously appropriate atmosphere for the première of Bayan Northcott's most recent piece on 6 April.

The *Fandango* was written for its performer Chau-Yee Lo in the first months of 2006. It's a quirky, playful piece that owes much of its appeal to the musical gestures it borrows from its Spanish model. These fragments are captured like sonic glimpses from another culture and subtly embroidered into Northcott's own language, replacing the obsessive rhythms and harmonic circling of its forebears with rhythmic dislocations and harmonic false relations. The five-minute work opens with dramatic gestures and a frantic dialogue between composer and performer which then gives way to the dance proper, full of contrapuntal motion and free flowing music. After a slower central section the opening music returns, elaborated and cross-cut, before a final return of the opening and a dramatic upward rush brings the piece to a close.

The harpsichord is hard to write for idiomatically – the contemporary repertoire is full of examples that either use the instrument's

⁵ Phibbs's *The Village of Birds*, commissioned by the Britten Sinfonia, received its world première from them on 14 March 2006 at West Road Concert Hall, Cambridge. The concert was recorded and broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 7 April as the main work in their Lunchtime concert centred on works with East Anglia connexions, as Phibbs had studied on the Britten-Pears Contemporary Music Course earlier in his career and lived in Ipswich.

sonorities without reference to its traditional textures (which can sometimes sound like a desperate attempt to do something new with an old instrument), or that sound poorly conceived, as if their composers couldn't quite get the sound or physicality of the piano out of their mind. Northcott's piece avoids both of these perils – particularly in the way it exploits the harpsichord's resonance, the subtleties of registration and density of sound, and the timbre's percussive elements. It's an exemplary display in taking the textures and idioms of an instrument with a tradition and carving something refreshing and unexpected – it received an exemplary première, too, Chau-Yee Lo playing with tremendous clarity and conviction and making light of its technical intricacies (and generously repeating the performance in the second part of the recital). Perhaps the piece is a little too respectful at times: the purist in me feels that the too-literal references to the genre's characteristic turns of phrase and rhythm dilute its personal identity. Nevertheless, it's a significant and successful addition to the repertoire of an instrument which since the heady days of Landowska and Kirkpatrick seems to have lost some of its interest to contemporary composers.

James McWilliam

London, Wigmore Hall: Coro Cervantes (from Argentina to Andalucía in 16 voices)

On 1 June 2006, as part of the then-current 'Ginastera Festival', Coro Cervantes celebrated its 10th birthday by giving a performance of some colourful 20th-century Latin-American and Spanish choral works under its conductor Carlos Aransay, accompanied by Alberto Portugheis, who is also chairman of the Latin American Music Society responsible for the festival of this important Argentinean composer. One of the highlights was Ginastera's *Hieremias prophetae lamentationes* op.14, a powerful a cappella work which can also be heard on the CD *Oratio* (Guild GMCD 7266) recorded by Coro Cervantes in 2003. The two works by Ginastera heard in this concert come from his first period – of 'Objective Nationalism', in his own words – in which folk influences were still very much to the foreground. However, whilst not using avant-garde techniques such as serialism, which were to feature more prominently in his later works, his use of strident fourths and driving rhythms may owe something to the Schoenberg of the First Chamber

Symphony as much as his awareness of chordal spacing idiomatic to the guitar. Ginastera's artistic achievement against a backdrop of political intolerance and fascism was put into eloquent perspective with a pre-concert interview with Georgina Ginastera, his daughter.

The entire programme traced a trajectory from Argentina to Andalucía, the concert beginning with Argentinean composer Carlos Guastavino's *Canciones Indianas* – a biting, almost Coplandesque C-against-C# and 3-against-2 cross-rhythm enervating the wild 'viente norte', and expansive harmony giving genuine Latin expression to the setting of 'jardin de amores'. Carlos Aransay conveyed these contrasting moods with equal authority and he displayed even greater versatility when he almost danced through the Oscar Escalada's Swingle-like arrangements of Piazzolla's tango-inspired works *Libertango* and *Verano Porteño*, the choir similarly unphased by the stylistic diversity of the programme.

2006 is also the 70th anniversary of the assassination of the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca, so it was a fitting tribute to that master that the concert should end with a setting of his *Romancero Gitano* by Castelnuovo-Tedesco accompanied sensitively by Mexican guitarist Morgan Szymanski.

The concert was held in the *Wigmore Hall*, and it is a credit to the conductor, the 16 singers and the acoustics that all the words could be heard – even the differences between Argentinean and peninsular Spanish were observed (the Latin 's' sound becoming 'th' in Spain for example). Coro Cervantes has a unique position in music-making in this country, being the only professional choir devoted to Hispanic classical choral music, their repertoire ranging from that associated with St. James of Compostella and Miguel de Cervantes to César Cano, the latter just one of the many living composers (1st prize, 'Juan Bautista Comes' Choral Competition 1997) featured in the CD *Oratio* that also includes Javier Busto, Cristóbal Halffter and Antón García Abril. The choir's first recording, *O crux* (CD Guild GMCD 7243) was chosen by *Gramophone* magazine in December 2002 as one of the 'CDs of the Year/Critics' Choice'.

Geoffrey Álvarez

London, RCM: Joseph Horowitz 80th Birthday Concert

A sparkling 80th Birthday Celebration for Joseph Horowitz, held at the Royal College of Music on 26 May 2006, highlighted his masterly oeuvre for

brass band and wind orchestra. The concert was performed superbly by leading RCM ensembles to an enthusiastic audience, in the presence of the composer, who was also one of several conductors. Horovitz is known above all for his unique neo-classical jazz synthesis, a style which evolved following studies in the early 1950s with Nadia Boulanger, and is evident in such popular works as the *Jazz Concerto* and *Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo*. While his works cover a vast spectrum of genres including chamber music (his Fifth String Quartet featured in the PLG's recent Jubilee Season), ballets and operas (most recently *Ninotchka*, based on the 1939 MGM film starring Greta Garbo), it is to the repertoire of brass and wind music that Horovitz has made a particularly significant contribution.

The distinctive originality of Horovitz's brass and wind music resides in his incredible subtlety of scoring and idiomatic use of the instruments, enabling them to sound nimble and delicate, or rich and mellow where necessary, in textures ever interactive, full of delightful imitation and dovetailing. If his music displays neo-classical formal clarity and balance, its jazz tendencies generate constantly unexpected gear-changes, symmetries and metric displacements – so that, while many works are balletic in character (a result of extensive experience as an opera and ballet composer) the dances are always upbeat, never straightforward. Equally fresh and imaginative is his tuneful, tonal harmony, often infused with what might be called a Horovitzian gesture that reappears in various guises in many works, a witty chromatic pirouette around the cycle of fifths that spins dramatically only to land gracefully within the music's flow.

All these qualities were manifest in a programme that reflected both the serious and lighter aspects of Horovitz's oeuvre, from the early, burlesque *Music Hall Suite* of 1964 to the compellingly expressive *Ad Astra*, a 1990 RAF commission for the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain. The concert was launched by the scintillating *Sinfonietta* (1971), the first of Horovitz's many National Brass Band Championship test pieces. Zone One Brass, under the baton of RCM Head of Brass Nigel Black, projected its propulsive main theme with exciting ricochets and suspense, while the pastoral slow movement flowed with sheer enjoyment around harmonic highways and byways, leading to an explosively exuberant finale. More overtly neo-baroque was the *Concertino Classico*, commissioned as part of the 1985 Bach

Tercentenary for the Danish Hjorring Brass Band. Here cornet soloists Gemma Fuller and Lucy Leleu, conducted by RCM graduate Simon Dobson, projected their frothy contrapuntal intertwining with virtuosity, and, as in a remix of Bach's double violin concerto, created a ravishing aura of suave lyricism in the aria-like slow movement.

The popular *Music Hall Suite* received a witty, delightful reading by the Anglo-Portuguese Quintet, with stunning close harmony in the 'Adagio Team', and punchy humour and vitality in the faster dances, notably the parodistic finale 'Les Girls'. One of the expressive highlights of the concert was *Ad Astra*, its autobiographical programmatic idea, based on Horovitz's memory of the Blitz in London as a teenage Jewish-Austrian refugee in Britain, conveyed through richly elegiac textures contrasted by threatening thematic elements, with echoes of Walton, Finzi, even Strauss. The RCM Wind Orchestra, conducted thoughtfully by Janet Hilton, RCM Head of Winds, brought plenty of dramatic tension, especially in the final paragraph where a solo trumpet taps out a morse-code SOS and clarinets spiral in ascending triads, suggesting a lone fighter-pilot's spiral towards the stars.

The concert gave occasion to enjoy two of the most demanding works under the authoritative, commanding and remarkably supple baton of the composer. In Zone One Brass's performance of the virtuoso *Ballet for Band*, each of the varied characters came alive, notably the 'Till Eulenspiegel' horns of the first movement, a dreamily beautiful slow waltz movement, and a brilliantly ironic finale, with burlesque trombones, infused with concision, purpose and momentum. The RCM Wind Orchestra's performance of *Dance Suite* (1991) was equally impressive. Its initial march-gavotte is inflected with intriguing chromaticisms, there is a mesmeric mood to the tripping slow movement with its almost Mahlerian, even Straussian echoes, rounded off by a breathtaking rondo finale, full of witty allusions. The unexpected birthday presentation to Horovitz of Zone One Brass's special insignia underlined that distinctive quality of communicability which makes the composer's music for brass and wind an appealing contemporary contribution to the repertoire. It added a touching gesture to this worthy tribute to one of the RCM's most distinguished Professors and Fellows, whose works continue to inspire generations of composers and musicians, and delight audiences the world over.

Malcolm Miller

Wandsworth, National Opera Studio: Will Todd's 'The Woodlanders'

Will Todd, born in Durham in 1970, the grandson of a coal miner, has an extensive output of compositions to his credit, including highly-charged operas and oratorios, often centred around themes from the North East, notably the workers' struggle against early 19th- and 20th-century injustice and oppression. Todd's emotive opera *The Blackened Man* was premièred at the Linbury Theatre, Covent Garden, in September 2002 (see my review in *Tempo* Vol.57 no.223, January 2003), and went on to the burgeoning Buxton Opera Festival in 2004, to much critical acclaim.

'Composing is about creating the emotional moment', said Todd when I asked him about his approach to his latest theatre project for 2006. 'Audiences have to be moved to laughter or tears. We take them on a journey'. The occasion was the première, show-case performance of his new opera *The Woodlanders* at the National Opera Studio, Blackburn Hall, Wandsworth, where Todd is composer in residence, on 6 April. Drawing his subject from Thomas Hardy's novel of 1886, Todd here collaborates once more with his librettist Ben Dunwell in a performance which has been in workshop at the Studio since October 2005. The National Opera Studio was established by the Arts Council as a link between the music colleges and the six main UK opera companies, providing a master course for young, exceptionally talented singers and répétiteurs, to prepare them for professional careers in opera. It boasts an impressive array of alumni, including Lesley Garrett.⁶

It is not often a music critic is afforded the opportunity of hearing 'voices of the future', so to speak, in embryo, and in such a concentrated form, with no fewer than 11 graduate singers all giving their all, with feeling, in a première concert version of the core episodes of this new work. The performance was ably backed by répétiteurs Andrew Griffiths and Katrine Reimers at two grand pianos, under the baton of Todd himself, with narration by Ben Dunwell throughout. Lively percussion was provided by Richard Benjafield – I particularly liked his atmospheric crescendos on the tamtam and other devices at key points as the romantic/tragedy drama unfolds.

The *Woodlanders* is a typical Wessex-style Hardy tale, with heroine Grace Melbury (vibrantly sung by Mairead Buicke) returning from a year of education to her isolated home village, greeted by her indulgent father, most impressively rendered by tenor Paul O'Neill. I must stress that all 11 soloists were very competent in their roles, but the ensuing build-up of dramatic tension, as the poignant plot of betrayal and revenge unfolds, was accompanied by over-projection at times, considering the limited size of the Studio and close proximity of the audience of enthusiastic devotees of the genre. For instance, it was good to introduce the very able soloist, Kate Valentine, to co-star as Grace Melbury, so that she also got experience in the role, but at this highpoint in the opera most of the soloists were tending to overproject, with occasional hardness of tone, so Kate's best singing in fact came later in the work, where she came into her own with vibrant sound quality. Ben Segal (Beaucock) notably managed to fulfill a forceful role in the following 'Rumours' sequence, whilst also maintaining fine sound quality. I found Seung-Wook Seong's deep baritone promising, while Eamonn Mulhall and David Soar also shone.

I loved Todd's lyric 'Not a bad life', as Grace's old nurse muses on her unmarried state, and of course the whole work does indeed tug at the heartstrings in true Todd style: we expect nothing less from this collaborative Todd / Dunwell duo. I look forward to a fully staged follow-up of the complete opera, with full orchestration, in due course. Even in this embryo state it has dramatic tension and lyrical flow.

Jill Barlow

London, Leighton House: piano music of Peter Feuchtwanger

With its eclectic array of Middle and Far Eastern styles and sounds, the piano music of Peter Feuchtwanger strikes a resonant note with the pulse of 21st-century post-modern piano repertoire. Thus the recent debut release of his oeuvre on CD, performed with aplomb by the British pianist Haydn Dickenson, is an event to be celebrated. The launch of the CD⁷ was marked by a recital given on 12 May before a capacity crowd

⁶ See www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk

⁷ 'East' – Haydn Dickenson plays Piano Music by Peter Feuchtwanger. Music Chamber CD MC0001.

in the suitably exotic ambience of Leighton House. It represented a triple debut: a debut recording for the pianist, the first CD of all Feuchtwanger's piano music (three pieces were recorded in 2001 by Beata Wetli on Wiediscon WD 9450), and the first release of a new record label specializing in contemporary music: Music Chamber, whose director Richard Caruthers introduced the evening.⁸

Feuchtwanger is perhaps best known as a pedagogue: his students number a string of concert pianists and he gives regular masterclasses internationally. Yet he is also a pianist and composer whose compositions are far less well known to the public, though they have been performed by leading concert artists as well as by his pupils. All his works were composed between the 1950s and 1990s and are improvisatory in idiom, often hypnotically minimalist and repetitive, imaginatively evoking Eastern instruments through an individual use of piano technique: repeated notes, overtones resonating over held pedal notes, and dissonances such as seconds and sevenths evoking and influenced by the myriad microtonal modes and scales of the Middle and Far East, the Balkans and Macedonia. Dickenson, a student of Feuchtwanger for several years who has immersed himself in Indian music, proved an ideal interpreter: he performed with an uncanny affinity for Eastern instruments, making the bright Steinway sound in turn like the Persian Santur (a type of dulcimer), Kannon and Indian Sitar. The exotic scales and highly ornamental textures created a meditative aura tinged with reflective inward improvisatory spirit well suited to the ambience of Leighton House, with its Moorish and Far Eastern collections.

Feuchtwanger himself introduced his oeuvre, describing how his earliest works were composed in Palestine, later Israel, where he moved as a child with his family to escape persecution in his native Germany. He recalled how his earliest musical influences were derived both from Arab musicians he had befriended as a youth in Druze and Bedouin villages, and from the Western classical tradition. Indeed his first published work, *Variations on an Eastern Folk Tune, Books 1 & 2* (1957–8) – featured on the CD though not in this recital – is based on a Middle Eastern folk tune subject to transformations in an eclectic array of genres, ranging from Arab debkas, through Romanian, Greek and Yugoslavian, as well as Sephardi and Indian idioms. Premiered by Malcolm Binns, it won the 1959 International

Viotti Competition. Later he developed a love for Indian music, studying Sitar as part of an Indian and Arabic music degree at SOAS in London. Feuchtwanger's mastery of the Raga in his own music led to commissions for the Cheltenham Festival, and his works were taken up by Yehudi Menuhin, and inspired the famous recording with Ravi Shankar, 'East Meets West'.

Well-known pianists who have performed Feuchtwanger's works include Craig Sheppard, the dedicatee of his *Study No. 4 in an Eastern Idiom (Tariqa 1)* (1982), with which Dickenson launched his recital, and which evokes the sonority of the Persian Santur through overtones and added resonances. This work allies Feuchtwanger with his fellow German-born Israeli composer Yehezkel Braun (b. 1927), whose recent piano Trio, entitled *Psalterion* (reviewed in *Tempo* No.235), is a ravishing synthesis of Santur with a Western piano trio, and based on Arabic modes. Feuchtwanger's piece features an ever-present open-fifth drone with constant embellishments around it that eventually sweep up and down keyboard with an almost Flamenco effect, contrasted against short simple refrains and silences. The *Study no.1 in an Eastern Idiom* that followed was more dramatic, individual pitches etched out, plectrum-like, and embellished with trills. The *Study No.3 in an Eastern Idiom* (1963) impressed as an astonishing imitation of the sitar's distinctively rich timbre, with febrile Satiesque textures, high registers and nuanced chromaticism. Of all the works played, the *Study No. 6 in an Eastern Idiom (Tariqa 2)* (1986) was the longest and most intensely passionate, almost expressionistic. Its mesmeric pedal point gave rise to luminescent overtone patterns, with a whirlwind of ornamental gestures leading to silences, sustained reflective individual pitches, tinged with plangent dissonance. The final *Study No. 7 in an Eastern Idiom – Dhun* (1992) displayed the most compelling harmonies, a mellow, rustic, tonal flavour enveloped in subtle embellishments radiating a mood of calm, warmth and reflection.

During the recital Feuchtwanger's work was interspersed by an interesting choice of contrasting piano music, Bach's Sonata in D minor BWV 964, in turn propulsively polyphonic and dreamily lyrical, Medtner's *Fairy Tale* op.51/2, a frothy theme disguised in rich Rachmaninov like textures, and Chopin's *Variations Brillantes on a theme from the opera Ludovic by Herold and Halevy* op.12, an intriguing fusion of French grand opera and early Chopin. The contrasts highlighted the static contemplative beauty of Feuchtwanger's works all the more, and a repeat of the *Study No.7* offered a relaxing encore.

⁸ Peter Feuchtwanger's music and other Music Chamber albums may be downloaded from www.music-chamber.com.

Though it is but a handful in quantity, the special quality of Feuchtwanger's oeuvre represents an intriguing and appealing contribution to piano repertoire responsive to the creative fusions of diverse multi-cultural influences in the 21st century. The CD includes illuminating notes about the various sources of each work and the specific Eastern patterns and techniques employed. Resident in London since

the 1960s, Feuchtwanger, though he clearly stems from the aesthetic tradition of Israeli composers in the 1950s who aimed for a fusion of European and Eastern idioms, has broadened his stylistic palette through the bold use of Far Eastern influences. His clutch of unique improvisatory compositions radiates a tantalising synthesis of eastern sounds with the western instruments and techniques that both beguiles and entrances.

Malcolm Miller