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## FIRST PERFORMANCES

### Glasgow: Anna Meredith's 'Casting'

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12 January saw a memorable event in Glasgow: the re-opening of the City Halls. Thirty years ago the building was a viable modest-sized concert hall – I remember the première of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Stone Litany* there in 1973 – but had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Last year it was renovated and re-designed (rumoured cost £15m), acoustics and sight-lines changed, and new performing spaces, studios, and offices for the BBC added. A new name for the building, The Gait (Scots for *road* or *goat*), was sensibly dropped at the last minute. At the start of 2006 the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra moved into it as its base, this being the orchestra's first re-location since its foundation in 1935.

Most orchestras these days have a 'community outreach' wing, to try to persuade the public that classical music is not an élitist activity; but it must have taken guts for the BBC to present, at the centre of its first-day celebrations, a new avant-garde work specially written for 25 members of the orchestra and 250 local schoolchildren. This was entitled *casting*, and was intended as a tone-poem about Glasgow's industrial history.

The children were ranged round the hall with home-made percussion instruments constructed from 'recycled materials' of wood, metal and plastic. There was also a children's choir and two secondary-school orchestras, and the whole was conducted by Baldur Brönniman and four assistants.

Immense organization had gone into this. Rehearsals had taken place sectionally at different schools, some of the children were too young to read music, and the teachers, coaches and *animateurs* credited were numerous. It wasn't clear who had thought up the concept of *casting*, but writing the score had been entrusted to Anna Meredith, the BBC SSO's junior composer-in-residence. It was her first commission for the orchestra since her post began in 2004.

Meredith seemed to have pulled off a favourite ploy of Stravinsky's, that of getting oneself commissioned to write the kind of music one wanted to write anyway. I can't imagine what the guest of honour, the Lord Provost of Glasgow, made of *casting*, but on its own terms it was vividly communicative despite having no tunes,

no recognizable harmony, no development. Instead it worked on a 'flow' system of tiny repeated motifs, overlapping sound-layers and arresting timbres and musical events, reminiscent of Varèse and early-period Stockhausen. Its sequence of events reflected Glasgow's industrial development from the 18th century to the present day. A quiet opening metamorphosed gradually into a vast hullabaloo of sound (composer's note: 'I imagined valves breaking, pistons running out of control'), then into a series of monolithic sound-blocks which crumbled and rusted, finally to post-industrial dereliction and silence. At this point I, and other listeners who were so absorbed we'd lost all notion of time (*casting's* duration was in fact eleven and a half minutes), realized it was time to clap.

Such full-blown Modernism was unexpected. *casting* was in some ways old hat – its vision of 'the city' as simultaneously energizing and threatening dates back to the 1930s, or even earlier – but its freshness and sensitivity made one almost believe Meredith had reinvented the style from scratch.

But Modernism has drawbacks. Let's explore the historical angles of this a little further. Glasgow's heavy-industry period (c.1820-c.1955) was actually a matter of great local pride, even though the miles of shipyards also represented the city's enslavement to the British Empire. The work was dirty and dangerous, yet the most hi-tech of its kind in the world. Workers' living conditions were appalling, yet Glaswegians persisted in seeing the city as a place of warmth and humour, even romance.

The period produced music: the music-hall song 'I belong to Glasgow'; the wry ballad of Hairy Mary, the Flo'er o' the Gorbals; the haunting late-night blues 'Last Train tae Glesgie Central'. In classical music, the masterpiece is Hamish MacCunn's overture *Land of the Mountain and the Flood* (1887) – a noble vision of a Scotland of fresh air and clean water, written while MacCunn was a student at the RCM, his education made possible by his father being manager of a shipyard in Greenock.

*casting* was innocent of this rich, muddled human past, and didn't make much of the rich, muddled human present either. Indeed, the more one considered our current social problems (e.g.

traffic jams, racial tension, anxieties of single parents, Britain's fuel requirements over the next 20 years) and how they might be expressed in music, the more one suspected Meredith wouldn't be interested in such things, that she isn't really a 'community' composer at all. But this is a talented young Scot, and at 28 has time on her side. It will be interesting to see what she does next.

David Johnson

### London, Barbican: Osvaldo Golijov

Significant musical works frequently gain impact through defying canonic categories, and reaching across forbidden boundaries. Such is the case of the captivating song-cycle *Ayre* by the Argentinian-Jewish composer Osvaldo Golijov, who is currently based in the USA. It received an enthusiastic reception at its European première at the Barbican Hall on 31 January 2006, performed superbly by Dawn Upshaw, for whom it was composed, and the electrifying ensemble 'The Andalusian Dogs'. In one sense *Ayre* follows in the footsteps of Berio's *Folksongs*, an iconic work which 'officially' inspired it, but in another sense the ten-song cycle represents a curious mixture of world music, electroacoustics, music-theatre, and creates its own genre. The cycle explores the confluence of three traditions, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, within the context of their coexistence before the expulsion of the Jews from 15th-century Spain; it develops its varied folksong and poetic sources with a challenging, often paradoxical ethnic mix that also brings in contemporary popular idioms of minimalism, rock and electronics. The cycle is also a vocal *tour de force* for Dawn Upshaw, a display of astonishing skill in modulating the voice in new ways according to the vocal chiaroscuro and ornamentation of traditional Mediterranean folk and popular singers.

The originality of *Ayre* rests in its challenging, often paradoxical combinations of cultures. For example the opening and closing Sephardi songs are set to eastern-flavoured modal melodies that bear testimony to the influences Golijov absorbed during his training in Israel; yet in the first there is an imitative dialogue with a yearning klezmer clarinet (the acclaimed David Krakauer), creating a contradictory connotation of Ashkenaze (Eastern European) Jewish culture. Similarly, the final song's eastern melody, set over a Taverner-like pedal point, soon evaporates into a free, orientalised Miles Davis-esque jazz improvisation. Another contradictory symbiosis occurs in the

lively fifth song, the Christian Arab 'Wa Habibi', which contrasts its beguiling slow guttural hymn-like melody with electronic rock riffs (using sampled sounds of kitchen cutlery and intended to evoke the sounds of street fighting), framed by electroacoustic 'hyper-acordion' glissandi and swoops. The allusion to political conflict was heightened with the use of sampled sounds of Arab street riots as a transition to the second Christian Arab Easter song 'Aiini taqtiru', surprisingly harmonized here in a similar way to many Israeli popular songs.

While these contrasts add an individual take on the originals, some of the arrangements are more straightforward, like the delicately mesmeric interplay of harp, guitar and flute in the moving Ladino lullaby 'Nani', or the virtually literal quotation of the erotic song 'Sultate las cintas' by Argentinian composer Gustavo Santaolalla. Yet this song gains in intensity as the startling interlude within the climax of the cycle, a radical superimposition of the Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish's poem of exile 'Be a string, water, to my guitar', over a multi-tracked phasing of a muesin-style setting of a Hebrew sacred poem 'O God where shall I find you' by the 12th-century Yehuda Halevi.

Whether this unusual combination represents a utopian vision remains a tantalizing question, but the theatrical impact is stirring. It highlights for me the underlying narrative thread of a work which the composer himself has described as being without narrative, merely 'detours and discoveries in a forest'. Yet the clash of oppositions, contemporary and historic, of cultural agendas and elements, overt and veiled, adds a layer of complexity to the appearance of simplicity. It also points, together with the texts, to a search for identity and faith in a context of dislocation and impersonality, a search for a humane world in a world of inhumanity. There is an overarching direction to the work which moves more and more into an inner spiritual world from its more concrete and extrovert beginning. The piece thus deconstructs its own musical agenda, namely the exploration of the fine balance between globalization and regional culture. Unlike popular 'world music', this artistic transformation of traditional elements seeks to heighten the local variants of its constituent styles by crossing forbidden boundaries.

Golijov's achievement is a higher, albeit pluralistic, entity: one which rejects the idea of a melting-pot homogeneity in favour of a savouring of diversity. It touches the pulse of music in the 21st century, and it is this quality which has won him a growing following. His

significance may be compared to that of Steve Reich who, since his first forays into minimalism in the 1960s, has effected an intriguing bridge between classical and popular music audiences. Golijov is set on a similar course, popular without being naïve, simple without lacking subtlety, above all exciting and entertaining, exploring issues of multi-layered identities within a wide, multi-cultural musical arena.

The concert, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra effervescently conducted by Roberto Minczuk, also featured two further UK premieres: *Last Round* highlighted Golijov's Argentinian roots and his love of Astor Piazzolla, with brilliantly sculpted string textures evocative of the swell-and-button harmony of the Argentinian bandoneon. *Tekeyah* (2004) displays a creative approach to traditional Jewish music. Composed for the 2005 BBC film 'A Music Memorial from Auschwitz' for the 60th anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, it pits the cantorial rhapsodizing of a Klezmer clarinet, here projected with intensity by David Krakauer, against the sound of 12 shofars (ram's horns), accompanied by pedal points on electronically transformed accordion. Certainly it is an original concept, and effective as a theatrical gesture, yet as a concert work the piece failed to impress on account of the over-simplicity of the structure and textures, the lack of variety in the shofar patterns and their lacklustre articulation. The world premiere of *Ainadamar Arias and Ensembles*, extracts from Golijov's latest opera based on the life of Lorca, had the most powerful impact. Despite some measure of harmonic stasis and over-transparent orchestration (reminiscent of other American new-tonalist opera composers), the arias, sung by sopranos Upshaw and Jessica Rivera and mezzo Kelly O'Connor, evoked the revolutionary fervour of Civil War Spain with highly-charged energy and Andalusian lyricism, whilst exciting wild dance sequences built from gunshot samples added to the spectacular impression.

Malcolm Miller

### London, Barbican Centre: Simon Holt's 'witness to a snow miracle'.

Simon Holt's brilliant, unsettling new violin concerto, a BBC commission, is subtitled *witness to a snow miracle*. Cast in seven short movements, it is presented as if part of a Renaissance painting depicting the life, death and martyrdom of St Eulalia, a twelve-year old Spanish child who, refusing to worship false gods, suffered a gruesome fate at the hands of the Romans in the

fourth century: her flesh was torn with hooks, flames were applied to the wounds, and her body was buried in hot coals. According to the story, at the moment of death, a white dove flew from her mouth, and a covering of snow fell on her ashes.

Such a vivid, visceral legend has inspired Holt to create a solo part of febrile nervous intensity and extreme virtuosity. This agonized line is confronted with singularly distorted forces. Dispensing with trumpets, violas, cellos, Holt explores the extremities of the orchestra with piercingly shrill piccolos and obscenely grunting contrabassoons. A prominent role for harps was underlined by their positioning in front of the orchestra, at the conductor's feet.

The unconventional nature of the concerto was made apparent at the outset as the work begins with an extended, unaccompanied, cadenza-like passage for solo violin. In an effective touch, near the end of this cadenza, soloist Viviane Hagner, froze in her tracks, as if petrified by a portent of impending horrors. She remained a vivid, eloquent storyteller throughout the work's 20-minute duration, making light of the score's severe technical demands.

In 'the tearing, the burning', harps, crotales and glockenspiel manufactured a grimly automated, clockwork sound. The lumbering orchestral chords suggested an implacable sacrificial religious rite. The still centre of the piece was 'snowfall on ashes', as caressing, feathery string tremolo harmonics traced a patina of frost on which the soloist skated nervously. At one point, in a magnificent gesture of defiance, the soloist played from an independent part at a different tempo from the orchestra. A second cadenza-like passage, even more ferocious than the first, burnt out the movement.

Orchestral extremes re-emerged in 'witness' with growling contrabassoon, trombone, bass trombone and tuba waddling under shrilly stabbing piccolos and alto flute. Soaring double-bass harmonics produced an uncanny, ghostly effect. 'Torments' unleashed a desperate, deranged solo part, the emaciated orchestral lines reduced to jagged lacerations. In the concluding 'Halo', against an acrid chorale on low woodwind, the soloist slowly and symbolically turned around, audaciously and accusingly ending up with her back completely to the audience, passive witness to her terrible ordeals, as the scoring attenuated and ultimately dissipated.

The BBC Symphony Orchestra, under Jonathan Nott's alert direction, adroitly supported Viviane Hagner's magnificent interpretation of a bravura role. Simon Holt has written works for soloist and ensemble before,

such as *Daedalus Remembers*, featuring solo cello (1995), but *witness to a snow miracle* is his first big-boned, full blooded concerto, albeit one in which, significantly, the violinist and orchestral players are, by design, rarely in accord or communicate directly with each other. A poignant and harrowing succession of emotive tableaux, it is remarkable both for a disturbingly anguished solo part and a judicious use of spare, grotesquely desiccated orchestral textures.

By coincidence, on the evening of the first performance of Holt's piece, BBC4 repeated the Proms première of Thomas Ades's Violin Concerto. These two works, together with Oliver Knussen's triumphant recent contribution to the genre, signify the glowingly healthy state of the British Violin Concerto in the 21st Century.

Paul Conway

## London Reports

### 1) Barbican: Elliott Carter's 'Réflexions'

Perhaps as a taster to *Get Carter!*, the January weekend the BBC Symphony Orchestra would soon be devoting to Elliott Carter, the concert which launched the Orchestra's 75th-anniversary season on 22 October presented the UK première of Carter's *Réflexions*, under its new chief conductor Jiří Bělohlávek – giving a better account of his podium abilities than I had yet heard from him. His cycle of Martinů symphonies on Supraphon (currently stalled, it seems), like earlier recordings and concert appearances, were so rhythmically flaccid that his appointment to the BBC post filled me with foreboding. And *Réflexions* – written in 2003–4 for Pierre Boulez's 80th-birthday celebrations (by a composer 17 years older than him!) – is certainly a piece that will unseat the insecure conductor. But Bělohlávek's precise realization of Carter's score, his insightful attention to detail in the orchestral accompaniment to Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto and his white-hot delivery of Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* have turned my despondency to keen anticipation.

Since Carter's to-the-point programme note consists only of three paragraphs (four sentences), it's worth quoting the second and third of them here:

The piece begins with a roll on a stone ('pierre' in French), after which everything stems from six notes (or their transpositions), spelling **B** (B flat), **O** (G sharp), **U** (C), **L** (A), **E** (E) and **Z** (D sharp).

The work alternates varied episodes with sections that feature soloists or small groups of the ensemble: intro-

duction – solo for contrabass clarinet – episode – duet for bassoon and cello – episode – brass sextet – episode – duet for two flutes – finale.

That terse exordium conceals the startling amount of variety Carter crams into his 14-minute score. As a commission from the Ensemble Intercontemporain, it is essentially a piece for chamber orchestra; heard as here with full forces, the constant textural change is enhanced yet further.

His 'introduction' is a swirling kaleidoscope of bright and glaring sound soon stalled by that whimsical contrabass clarinet – supported by equally whimsical percussion. Increasingly violent interjections rapidly turn *Réflexions* into a mini-concerto for orchestra, as textural unpredictability becomes a watchword for the progress of the piece. A string passage imposes sudden lyricism, below which a Varèse-like primal energy can be felt, boiling away and biding its time. A solo-cello imploration, offset by skittish bassoon, maintains the play of contrasts – of moods as well as of colours: humour trying to push its way through is repeatedly swept aside; the strength of a brief but fierce climax saps swiftly away, leaving lonely flutes keening *à la* Rautavaara. The music rallies to a tutti in the first sustained climax, before it dies down to a bluesy piano and, after a last broad statement, simply stops.

Enough has been written about the sheer wonder of a brain so young inhabiting a body so rich in years, but when you hear an imagination cartwheeling through an orchestra with such assurance, amazement inevitably accompanies admiration. Carter's virtuoso writing for the orchestra – in *Réflexions* coquettish, brittle, impetuous and elemental by turns – requires complete confidence in performance, and there can hardly be an ensemble on the globe that handles such music with the easy aplomb of the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

### 2) Wigmore Hall: Jan Vriend's 'The Anatomy of Passion'

Jan Vriend is a Dutch composer, born in Benningbroek in 1938. A composition student of Ton de Leeuw in Amsterdam, he also attended classes of Xenakis in Paris and took a course in the application of mathematics in music; his own music-making includes conducting and playing the piano, he has many years' experience of teaching and lecturing behind him, and he was also the co-founder of the contemporary-music group that has since become the ASKO

Ensemble. His deep involvement in Dutch music-life notwithstanding, he has made his home in Tetbury, Gloucestershire, since 1984. It was a performance there of the five Beethoven Cello Sonatas by Alexander Baillie and James Lisney in 2002 that stimulated the writing of *The Anatomy of Passion* two years later, after Vriend's excited response to their playing elicited a commission for piece of his own. Baillie and Lisney premiered the result in the Wigmore Hall on 21 December.

Almost exactly half-an-hour in length, *The Anatomy of Passion* tries to be many things at once, with only partial success. It opens as it means to go on, being both playful and serious, grand gestures accompanying scurrying jests, and warm, even Debussian, harmonies underlying angular expressionist shapes. Vriend's note explained that, conscious of contributing to such a distinguished tradition, he was careful to find the balance that would let the cello speak without shackling the piano. In the event, he puts the cello through its full paces, the lyricism of the Romantic mainstream sitting in shifting harmonies, spiked with microtonal glissandi and bolstered by atonal passage-work in the piano, his absorption of the grand Romantic manner into a mildly modernist framework reminding me of the Finnish composer Kimmo Hakola. Much of *The Anatomy of Passion* is ferociously busy, the headlong pace occasionally faltering to allow the instruments to dwell on particular sonorities; the swirl of notes sometimes hints at other works, half heard in the storm, but they pass too quickly for identification (there's apparently a reference to Xenakis in there, but I doubt I'd have recognised that anyway).

From time to time Vriend will remember that the cello is primarily a singing instrument and allows a shorter shape to blossom into long, lyrical lines before being sucked into the vortex again. The impetus relaxes to allow a series of brief phrases to be repeated as some sort of mantra, and some bluesy piano-writing brings in a hint of jazz. What would seem to be a scherzo section now steps forward but is interrupted by a slower passage before the helter-skelter resumes. In the coda the music takes on a flirtatious and buoyant mood, and at last appears to be moving forward to a distinct goal, but a static passage of piano chords and cello harmonics puts the brakes back on before the momentum gathers anew and the piece hurtles to a close.

In a pre-concert talk Vriend had tried to explain the structure using diagrams, but it was no clearer in the music than it had been beforehand. The problem lies in the generosity of invention: rather than develop the ideas he has already posited,

Vriend prefers to generate new ones, but constant textural variety means no long-term structural variety, and the unceasing kaleidoscopic change begins to pall two-thirds of the way through. Baillie and Lisney, though, played as if they believed in every note of it. A second hearing might well allow me to perceive more cohesion than first time around – but it might also confirm the impression that the material does not justify the length.

### 3) Queen Elizabeth Hall: Erkki-Sven Tüür's 'Noësis'

In 1999 Isabelle van Keulen gave the first performance of Erkki-Sven Tüür's Violin Concerto, and has since shown the work the kind of sustained attention that would earn the deep gratitude of any composer. So it was natural that, looking to commission a work she could tour with her husband, the clarinettist Michael Collins, she should turn to Tüür, and that he should leap at the chance: in normal circumstances a concerto for such an unusual combination might not expect many outings, but in this instance they are guaranteed. Van Keulen and Collins gave the world première in Detroit on 17 June 2005, with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra under Neeme Järvi, standing in for his indisposed son, Paavo (a friend of the composer since adolescence). Its first European performance took place on 5 February in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, with van Keulen and Collins again the soloists, and Paavo Järvi now able to step up to the podium, conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra in a space too small for music of this power and density.

'Noësis' is the Greek word for the process of cognition and understanding; here it points to the each soloist's gradual acceptance and adoption of the highly differentiated material of the other – a symbol of tolerance and understanding. Yet *Noësis* does without specifically 'melodic' material as such: the soloists survive on a wiry diet of runs, fragments, rocking figures, gestures, derived from two constantly developing complexes of scales (as the composer's programme note explained), which furnish the genetic material for the entire piece. Nathan Milstein once memorably described Stravinsky as being 'made of angles', and *Noësis*, too, is spiky, edgy, densely argued. As so often in Tüür's music, this piece seems to delve deep into some primal past where the superficial niceties of civilization are an irrelevance. Although the score observes the standard fast-slow-fast concerto-outline (played *attacca*), there's also a hint of the concerto grosso in the first movement, in the alternating



prominence of soloists and orchestra, though this procedure is adapted from an altogether older model, too: the basic pattern of *regilaul*, or Estonian runic song, where the lead singer posits a line which is then repeated by the other singers – ‘a motif is performed by a soloist, then repeated and augmented by the orchestra’. When the solo lines play against the larger instrumental body, it is often in the complex textures of Ligetian micropolyphony.

Not quite 20 minutes in length, *Noësis* begins with the brass breathing through their instruments as a swelling brass chord generates an upward-rushing scale, picked up by the clarinet; held strings then provide a launch-pad for the violin, whose scale drops downwards. Initially, the two instruments – the clarinet insouciant and jolly, the violin sterner – insist on their different directions, with further swelling chords from woodwind and brass punctuating the solo flourishes, until each begins to adopt material from the other (remember the mutual exchange of atoms when a policeman sits on his bicycle in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*?).

In the edgy calm of the slow central section, clarinet and violin, now reconciled, gently intertwine like courting doves, often doubling each other or tucked tight behind in imitation; sometimes one will offer comment on a thought suggested by the other, all the while supported by luminous orchestral lines flecked by metallic percussion. The strings shimmer with growing hints of the ‘bird-flock’ cluster-effect – a simultaneous suggestion of size and weightlessness – that Tüür must first have encountered in the music of his teacher, Lepo Sumera. The finale is a wittily galumphing, slightly manic dance, as if brewed from a mixture of elements: wildly dislocated Stravinsky, hectic jazz combo, swirling quasi-minimalist patterns, driving brass toccata, the soloists desperately pirouetting around each other as the lusty rhythmic drive of the orchestra sweeps them onwards. Finally, the energy seems to blow itself out and a tam-tam stroke pulls down a veil of silence.

The performance, though only its second-ever, seems to have been flawless and, though *Noësis* is no easy listen, the sheer physical impact that is a hallmark of Tüür’s music earned the composer a rousing reception from the QEH audience.

#### 4) St Paul’s, Knightsbridge: John Kinsella’s Third Symphony

For some years John Kinsella (born in Dublin in 1932) juggled the demands of composing and his daytime job as Head of Music of Radio Telefís

Éirann; in 1988 he threw in the bureaucratic towel, and the pieces have been tumbling out of him ever since, chief among them seven of his now nine symphonies. The four that I know (Nos. 3 and 4 were released on Marco Polo in 1998, although that recording now seems to have been withdrawn) reveal that here is a man who speaks, as the phrase is, with the breath of a symphonist: there is nothing mannered or artificial in his orchestral writing, and his structures have an organic, unforced feel to them. But although he is plainly one of the finest symphonists at work today, his work has not much percolated into programmes outside his native Ireland.

All the more enterprising and valuable, then, that on the eve of St Patrick’s Day the London Irish Symphony Orchestra (formed only last year) should present the UK première of Kinsella’s Third Symphony (1989–90). The work is subtitled *Joie de Vivre*, although Kinsella keeps you waiting for your joy: it opens with a long and introspective bassoon solo (it’s a brave composer who will do that post-*Rite*, though Kinsella manages to avoid any echo of Stravinsky) which eventually generates the beginnings of the *Presto giocoso, vivo* dance-rhapsody that forms the first movement, its feet in Irish folksong, its symphonic lineage traceable back to the Moeran G minor Symphony and, a generation earlier, the Stenhammar Second in the same key, both pointing back to Sibelius, who is still a readily detected influence here.

This is gloriously open-air music, effortlessly energetic, instantly atmospheric, the now buoyant bassoon returning to re-animate the music when the pace flags, and again to introduce the spacious *Adagio tranquillo*, the second of the two large panels that form the bulk of the half-hour work. It builds from an elegant and lyrical saxophone solo to a series of powerful climaxes over rocking string figures that bring to mind early Sibelius, particularly the tone-poem *The Wood-Nymph*. (In view of the dance-inspired first movement, the sight and sound of the saxophone in the orchestra prompted me to ask the composer afterwards if the Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances* had been anywhere near his mind when he was writing the piece; no, not all, he said, his evident surprise confirming his words.) The bassoon solo, returning to lay the *Adagio tranquillo* to rest, is now interrupted by an intemperate marching figure, which seems to threaten a brusque and martial finale; instead, it turns out that we are already in the coda, and the Symphony swirls to a swift and emphatic close – too soon? Those stomping march-rhythms do indeed have the makings of a wildly exciting

symphonic finale, and the music seems to stop before they have had their gruff say. Always leave them wanting more, they say, but it does seem to me that – magnificent though this symphony already is – it's short of the ten minutes of finale that Kinsella dangles before us so temptingly.

An unexpected treat had come in the first half of the concert, sandwiched between Mozart's *Exultate, Jubilate* and a rare outing for Seán Ó Riada's *Mise Eire*: the brief but effective *Aisling* ('dream' or 'vision' in Irish) by the 20-year-old Solfa Carlile, a student of Joseph Horowitz at the Royal College of Music. A mere three minutes in length, *Aisling* is remarkably adept at conjuring up instant atmosphere. It's Irish right from the opening bars, with two modal flutes rhapsodizing over a carpet of strings, continuing in an idiom as unashamedly Romantic as the easier-going Bax. The biographical note in the programme stated that Carlile, from Cork, 'hopes to pursue a career in composing and orchestrating for film and television'. Here's evidence she already has the ear for it.

The orchestra – conducted by Marion Wood for the Kinsella and Nick Newland for the Carlile – was undermanned (underwomaned, perhaps, since the men in it were comprehensively outnumbered) and under-rehearsed. But then these things are always chronically underfunded, and the music emerged unscathed all the same. And one has to be grateful for any efforts that allow a Kinsella symphony to be heard live in central London.

### 5) Deptford Town Hall: Alexander Levine's 'Here the Joy Returns'

I have to confess that until very recently I hadn't heard a note of the music of Alexander Levine, born in 1955 in Moscow and a UK resident since 1992. Being now acquainted with some two hours and 20 minutes of his music, it is perhaps a little early to wonder in print if he might be one of the more important composers at work today, but I can safely say that – here, at least – he works on a scale and with an emotional range that bring thrilling results.

Those two hours and more of music are accounted for by only two works: Levine is plainly a man who likes to use a large canvas. His *Here the Joy Returns* is a massive polyphonic cycle for piano composed between 1997 and 1999; it was premièred on 27 February by Jonathan Powell in Council Chambers in Deptford Town Hall, under the aegis of The Centre for Russian Music of Goldsmiths College. The spark for the work was the composition of a prelude and fugue for saxophone quartet; Levine's ground-plan was

originally for a suite of six large-scale preludes and fugues, but in the event one of the fugues was dropped and its prelude transformed into 'Three little nocturnes' which provide an effective staging-post on this epic, 70-minute journey. The scale of *Here the Joy Returns* and its essentially polyphonic nature sites it squarely in the tradition of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier', Reicha's 36 Fugues op. 36, Busoni's *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues op. 87 and Stevenson's *Passacaglia on DSCH*. In the pre-concert talk – which began with a fascinating introduction to earlier Russian polyphonic cycles from the Ukrainian pianist Tanya Ursova, now also London-based – Levine called on Bach, Scarlatti and Rachmaninov as important influences on his approach to the keyboard, but his music ranged far more widely, pulling in elements of Scriabin, Ravel, Berg, Sorabji, references to jazz, minimalism, flamenco, Arabic melismata; its frames of reference are exhilaratingly compendious.

In 1964, after hearing Ronald Stevenson's recording of his own *Passacaglia on DSCH*, William Walton wrote to its composer that

It really is tremendous – magnificent. I cannot remember having been so excited by a new work for a very long time. [...] I was gripped at once & became more & more enthralled as the work unfolded itself. It never let's [sic] one down, always at the critical moment, some new invention, either musical or pianistic, carries one on & in spite of it's intellectual [sic] & emotionally controlled complexities, to me, even at the first hearing, it was clear, lucid and comparatively easy to follow.<sup>1</sup>

Walton's words apply as appositely to *Here the Joy Returns*. For all the intricacies of the piano-writing and the generous scale of the conception, the cycle has the elemental urgency of a river in spate; it demands enormous stamina of the performer, who has to express a gamut of moods and feelings, from introspective filigree nocturne to ecstatic Niagaran flood. Of course, the play of energy is carefully husbanded across these 70 minutes: the free invention of the preludes is often harmonically static or indecisive before each of Levine's monster fugues goes barrelling off in pianistic invention of prodigious generosity, the contrapuntal textures maintaining the impetus and sense of direction. Levine frequently spoke of 'beauty' in his introductory comments; the joy of the title likewise radiates through this extraordinary work.

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated 18 December 1964, reproduced in facsimile in Colin Scott-Sutherland (ed.), *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music*, Toccata Press, London, 2005, pp. 96–97.

The performance, too, was extraordinary. Jonathan Powell's series of Sorabji recordings for Altarus, and the public outings with which he prepares for them, have demonstrated that, no matter how complex the patterns of notes in front of him, Powell can Hoover them up with the ease of an elephant sucking up strawberries; he seems able to ignore technical difficulty and concentrate on the larger message of the music. His small but privileged audience stumbled out into the night in a state of dazed exhilaration, abubble with excitement. It was a triumph for both composer and performer.

As Levine's *Here the Joy Returns* feeds off the western contrapuntal keyboard tradition, so the other work of his that I've heard, the eight-movement *a cappella* choral suite *Kolokola*<sup>2</sup> (the title refers to the tolling of bells) flows from that of the Russian Orthodox church; here his (not too distant) ancestors are Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Grechaninov, Schnittke. *Kolokola* was written in 1998–2000, much of it in parallel with *Here the Joy Returns*, and joy is likewise the prevailing sentiment here – the first movement, indeed, is labelled 'Novaya Radost' – 'The New Joy'. The sound of bells is threaded through almost all Russian music: Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich are unthinkable without the sublimation of bell sounds. Bells, of course, toll at funerals as they peel at weddings, and Levine's music ranges accordingly, from exultation to elegy; he also makes catchily ironic use of folksong. The texts (two by Levine himself, the others by the poetess Ekaterina Gorbovskaia – Levine's wife, who also supplies the English translations in the booklet) range from traditional imagery, in two *stradanie*, or village chants, to contemporary political message. Levine allows himself the clusters and dissonance of mild modernism but the structures are built on emphatic tonal centres, giving the music a clear sense of purpose concordant with the optimistic message of *Kolokola* as a whole. Levine handles his choral textures with a Pizzettian richness and freedom, the lines swooping and swinging like (the image is insistent) so many bells. Such music is meat and drink to The BBC Singers, of course, and they give it a sparkling, ringingly confident performance.

Another composer happy thinking on broad outlines is Francis Pott (born 1957), whose 125-minute *Christus*, a 'Passion Symphony for Solo Organ', evolved over four years (1986–90).<sup>3</sup> Pott states that:

The five movements of *Christus* trace respectively the Coming of Christ; Gethsemane; the Via Crucis / Golgotha / the Deposition; the Tomb; and, finally, Resurrection, portrayed not as a prolonged psalm of victory already attained but as a vast struggle towards ultimate triumph.

Pott invokes Carl Nielsen's principle of progressive tonality as a dominating influence on the shape of *Christus*, which exhibits a clear sense of overall harmonic direction despite its vast scale and incidental variety: the work does deserve its symphonic label. The first sentence of Pott's booklet note nonetheless disassociates *Christus* from the French organ symphony – and yet, although it is true that this is not merely a modern recasting of the Widor or Vierne model, *Christus* does owe a good deal to a different part of the French organ tradition, the branch that goes back, via Jehan Alain, Gaston Litaize and Jeanne Demessieux, to the Baroque miniatures of composers like Balbastre, Couperin and Titelouze.

Within the clearly tonal framework, Pott's language is remarkably free, ranging from a carol-like simplicity to angular, post-Messiaen chromaticism where a local tonal centre is all but obliterated – Pott observes that 'listeners may sympathise with a treasured dry comment by the composer Patrick Gowers, who observed that he did not think he would care to be asked to sing doh'. As its fiercest, in the overwhelming climaxes of the central passacaglia, *Christus* has an elemental power which pins you to your seat when heard live; even in this recording (itself live, in fact, made on the organ of St Peter's, Eaton Square, London), there is a physicality to the sound which leaves you elated. The idea of joy as a religious experience is a near-constant in the music of Olivier Messiaen (although, of course, you find it also in composers as unlike Messiaen as Gustav Holst, in *The Hymn of Jesus*), and the exultation of the closing 'Resurrectio' lines up *Christus* in the tradition of Catholic confessional music, with the tonal struggle between C and F sharp symbolizing the clash of good and evil. But you don't need to share Pott's religious premise to partake of the excitement of his final transfiguration: the symbolism may be straightforward but the music marries considerable textural sophistication with a direct and inspiring life-urge. I was pleased to see from Francis Pott's note (though I haven't yet identified it in the music) that the fourth movement of *Christus* 'embodies momentary homages to the much mourned Robert Simpson, one of the great symphonists of this or any age'. Simpson died during the composition of *Christus* and so could not have known the music but I'm sure he –

<sup>2</sup> ALEXANDER LEVINE: *Kolokola*. BBC Singers c. James Morgan. Albany TROY736.

<sup>3</sup> FRANCIS POTT: *Christus*. Jeremy Filsell (organ). Signum Records SIGCD062.



likewise setting aside its religious impulse – would have been thrilled and delighted by it.

Jeremy Filsell's playing on this two-CD set is no less astonishing than Powell's was in *Here the Joy Returns*. Both are masterworks which, delivered in performances of transcendental virtuosity, take an honoured place in the inexhaustible mainstream of musical humanism. You emerge from the experience of either with your spirit refreshed.

#### 6) Linbury at the Royal Opera House: Tobias Picker's 'Thérèse Raquin'

*Thérèse Raquin*, the third of Tobias Picker's four operas, was composed in 1999–2000 and first performed at the Dallas Opera in November 2001, a production released soon after on a two-CD set from Chandos (CHAN 9659), to general acclaim. *The Wall Street Journal* called Picker 'our finest composer for the lyric stage'; *Opera Now* found *Thérèse Raquin* 'a meaningful opera infused with moments of searing reflection and luxurious sensuality'; Annette Morreau in *The Independent* found the score to be 'of far greater sweep and complexity [than *Emmeline*, Picker's first opera],

bound by plainly audible leitmotifs that frequently appear in varied guises' and admirably compared its fluent use of set pieces with Britten's in *Albert Herring*. The first European outing of *Thérèse Raquin* came in the form of a chamber version prepared by Picker for Opera Theatre Europe (or 'opera-te', as they seem to like to style themselves) and premièred – as their inaugural production – at the Linbury at the Royal Opera House on four nights from 14 March.

Gene Scheer's libretto pares down Zola's 1867 tale (his first novel, in fact) of adultery and murder in Parisian poverty to a trim and elegant libretto, rhyming couplets subtly strung through his prose to keep it moving forward. But, *pace* the ecstatic reaction to the Dallas production, I was far less impressed by Picker's music than I expected to be. The supposed contrast between the two acts – passionate, tonal, yearning in the First, before Thérèse and her lover Laurent murder her husband, and angular, chromatic, unsettled in the Second, after the deed has begun to poison their existence – didn't tell as it might. The vocal lines seemed mired in a relentless dry recitative that, only occasionally in the First Act and rarely in the Second, flowers into genuine



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lyricism over an instrumental accompaniment that offered little variety or contrast. The leitmotifs seemed insufficiently distinct to do their duty effectively. And that despite what seemed to be a cast with no real weaknesses, and particularly impressive performances from the French mezzo Isabelle Cals in the title role and Australian soprano Miranda Keys as the neighbour Suzanne Michaud. Emma Wee's single, multi-purpose set emphasised the caustrophobic atmosphere *chez les Raquin*. Still, it didn't seem to add up to the sum of its parts. So was all that early enthusiasm just standard Texan hype? Something told me otherwise: Picker's tunes, though I'd hardly noticed them at the time, were still rolling round my inner ear days later. Was there something about the score that hadn't survived the performance? I duly ordered a copy of the Chandos recording and discovered that *Thérèse Raquin* is indeed everything those first reviews said it was: well paced, both dramatically and musically, directly and unfussily communicative – in short, its success was well-deserved.

What had gone wrong was the Linbury itself. As far as the acoustic is concerned, you might as well be singing in a hole in the ground. The gallant soloists of Opera Theatre Europe could do little more than face the front and bellow, with obviously effects on their ability to project musical line and dramatic development. Obviously, an ensemble pared down to 18 players will forego much of the impact of the full symphony orchestra, which Picker deploys so skilfully in the original work: three violins couldn't begin to generate the carpet of string sound that gives Act One much of its sensuous appeal, but sunk in the Linbury's anechoic pit they could barely be heard. Granted, the odd moment of ragged ensemble pointed to lack of rehearsal time (these things are always run on a shoestring), but a more responsive space might have allowed the reduced forces to redeem themselves through a gain in textural clarity and in intimacy. The real hero of the hour was the conductor, Timothy Redmond, who didn't drop a stitch, his unflagging alertness maintaining the pace over the two hours the work requires (the pocket scoring doesn't impose any cuts on the music itself). In an ideal world everyone involved would re-assemble in an acoustic which would do their efforts justice and where you could hear what gives *Thérèse Raquin* its *frisson*. In the meantime you can always turn to the Chandos recording.

Martin Anderson

#### Channel 4: Judith Weir's 'Armida'

Although composed during the Iraq war, *Armida*, Judith Weir's new 50-minute opera for television commissioned by Channel 4, is an expression of her personal responses to all the armed conflicts she has lived through as reported by the media, and particularly through television coverage.

Based on Tasso's epic tale of forbidden love at the time of the crusades, the story has been updated to a Middle-Eastern desert during a military occupation. Armida (Talise Trevigne), a Metropolis TV news reporter, falls in love with Rinaldo (Kenneth Tarver), a sensitive officer in the occupying 'peace-keeping' army. Torn between love and duty, they escape to the city. In her final broadcast, Armida announces the end of the war: 'No one has won; they all gave up at once and found some better things to do'. The closing message of regeneration and renewal is charily positive: Metropolis TV's new gardening show features soldiers planting vegetables and bushes in the desert, taking literally Rinaldo's earlier off-script message to the occupied people, 'together we could raise something new that puts down roots'. The last images of Armida and Rinaldo dancing on a beach fade to the flickering fuzz of a signal-free television screen.

A media-drenched desert war is a problematic context for an opera, and Margaret Williams's direction responds with flair and imagination: handheld camera shots create an authentic, documentary style. Ingeniously, the action is periodically shot through simulated television broadcasts and even mobile phones! The results are unsettling, an Orwellian vision of a media-controlled society.

As in her previous operas, Judith Weir wrote the lyrics. She was particularly inspired by the many blogs kept by people directly involved in the Iraq war and the feelings of boredom, discomfort and longing suggested by the soldiers in the army camp scenes ring true. Talise Trevigne's Armida is a strong, well-defined female lead: a charismatic, astute character who powers the narrative. Another key character is Metropolis TV's weather-girl (Donna Bateman), whose regular meteorological pronouncements have a cosmic, ominous force: 'Weather has power. It changes our lives'.

The composer expertly grasps the challenge of writing for the medium of television. Unlike grand opera unfolding in long set-pieces, TV flips scenes constantly and Weir brilliantly matches the split-second changes of image and mood. Often only a handful of portentous marimba taps shade a desert scene, whilst the Metropolis bulletins are

launched with a vapidly chirpy 'jingle'. Though the opera is 'through-composed', moving too swiftly to accommodate extended arias or recitatives, one glorious exception is a love scene, containing the beautiful, sensual saxophone-gilded duet, 'Did you ever think in the whole of your life?'

To balance the *verité* filming style (*Armida* was shot on location in Morocco), the enchanting sorcery of Tasso's original story finds expression in the magical instrumental writing. The score requires ten players, divided into part jazz ensemble (saxophone, trombone, drums bass and piano), part classical chamber ensemble (clarinet and strings). The music dips deftly in and out of these groups, and they come together in the Finale as Weir irradiates the dancing scenes with exotic, folk-like music of hesitant cheerfulness, perfectly capturing the story's closing mood of cautious, conflict-weary optimism.

I hope Judith Weir will create a Suite from *Armida*, or, as Nigel Osborne did with his recent opera, *The Piano Tuner*, weave some of the sensuous, hypnotic material into a separate chamber piece. Such delightful rococo fantasy music deserves to be liberated from its media-bound source.

Paul Conway

### London: Music at the Globe Theatre, 2005 Season

The 2005 Season at Shakespeare's Globe – featuring *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, *A Winters Tale* and a modern version by Peter Oswald of Plautus' *The Storm* – centred on shipwrecks, stormy weather, etc but was in fact entitled 'The Season of the World and Underworld'. With the Globe's illustrious Artistic Director, Mark Rylance, bowing out in December 2005, after a ten-year reign, the team seems to have worked overtime to exploit in depth the Season's theme with psychological overtones often leaving not only the audience completely baffled, but distinguished drama critics too.

However, what of the Globe's music, which Mark Rylance himself described to me when I met him in 2000 as 'replacing lights and set'? Rylance's equally illustrious wife and co-director Claire van Kampen has done sterling work over the years weaving specially composed incidental music into the productions, delivered from the Musicians' Gallery on full view above the stage, or even on stage itself, using exclusively acoustic instruments sometimes from the period,

sometimes excitingly innovative combinations with saxophone, ethnic percussion etc.<sup>4</sup>

This Globe Season's *Tempest*, with Mark Rylance himself playing Prospero skilfully combined with two other characters simultaneously, was variously described by the national press as 'dizzying confusion' (*Daily Telegraph*); with but three actors in Jacobean costume playing all the parts, plus the addition of three female dancers in jeans and leather jackets, Nicholas de Jongh in the *Evening Standard* proclaimed: 'I have never been so flummoxed by a Shakesperian production in my life'. The in-depth Jungian analysis, taking up several pages of the lengthy programme notes, indicated a level of intricacy and self-indulgent navel-gazing, far too esoteric to my mind, with for instance Ariel and Miranda played by the same actor, and Caliban played by Alex Hassell in period blousy costume as he doubled up for two other characters as well. The phasing in of solemnly intoned music from the Musicians Gallery, all in four-part harmony based on lyrics of Robert Johnson, and fugues of his contemporary Michael Maier from the court of James I – quoted by van Kampen as representing 'unearthly sounds and sweet aires', did add eerie layers of mystery to the Jungian concept, with singers suitably shrouded for atmosphere. Her skilful adaptation and interweaving of these sources for this production is yet but another example of the fruits of her painstaking research, and the use of high-pitched solo soprano and countertenors projected especially well, re-scored for modern ears..

Undoubtedly the prize for best production at this Season's Globe must go to the revival of *Pericles* directed by Kathryn Hunter, already recently famed as an actress in the title role of the Globe's *Richard III* and *Taming of the Shrew*. Her amazingly graphic re-enactment of the sea storms, complete with actors swinging precariously from ropes from the galleries, as they battle with the sails against the howling gale, marked a welcome return to action drama at last. Amazing big-sound storm effects were improvised using a range of conventional and other percussion instruments of North African and Middle Eastern origin, under the direction of composer Stephen Warbeck. We were also treated to Gower as a West African calypso-style 'griot' (storyteller) character, played by Patrice Naiambana, who took liberties with Shakespeare's immortal lines to act as singing compère complete with African goge, a single-

<sup>4</sup> See my review (*Tempo*, July 2002) on the use of authentic Burmese temple gongs for *Cymbeline* and the *Macbeth* Jazz score, available on CD.

stringed fiddle, quizzing the audience on the progress of the plot in humorous vein to keep them on their toes. Perhaps it takes a female director to thus restore the balance and carry the ever-loyal Globe audience along with her to compensate for the *Tempest*.

For playwright Peter Oswald's new version of Plautus's Graeco-Roman *The Storm*, Claire van Kampen's imaginative use of fragments of music by Mesomedes, a Greek composer brought to Rome by Nero in the 1st century AD to compose for the theatre, rescored for modern instruments

—notably saxophone and percussion, combined with special storm sound-effects on vibraphone and drums, served as a point of interest in what was otherwise a rather unmemorable production. Mark Rylance, cast as a rather apologetic Monty Python-style Weatherman, amidst farcical burlesque and pantomime, played to a less than capacity audience. Let us hope that the Globe will learn, from its 2005 experimentation, how to build a brighter future for 2006 under a new incoming Artistic Director—Dominic Dromgoole.

Jill Barlow