

## CDs AND DVDs

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: *Voces Abandonadas*, *The Missing Nail at the River*, *Blaupause*, *Blueprint*, *Romanska Bågar*, *Aimide*. Nicolas Hodges (piano) Wergo WER7356-2

This recording contains Walter Zimmermann's work for solo piano from the period 2001–06. There are five pieces, the longest, at 40 minutes, being *Voces Abandonadas*. All the music was new to me, and although I saw there were substantial liner notes, I decided to start my investigation by hearing what the music had to offer on its own terms.

*Voces Abandonadas* is a work in two large sections. I don't know what I was expecting, but the music immediately plunged me into a world of very old fashioned modernism. There was nothing remotely novel either in the harmonic language or the musical gestures. Both were redolent of new music more than half a century ago, copious sevenths, ninths and tri-tones, a few tone-clusters, everything highly fragmented within a general, loose atonalism. This was not the whole story, however for the music was less abrasive, but also more self-aware than its twentieth-century forebears. This was partly because the composer allowed older configurations to seep in – an occasional Debussy-like chord, an odd triad, a fragment of a diatonic scale, even a quote from Schumann (but so brief it may have been Feldman) – partly because the phrases themselves lacked their familiar rhetorical vitality (underlined by the predominantly soft dynamic), and, finally, because the spaces between these brief gestures were so uniform. It was as if these tired remnants from the past were being offered as part of a collection of *momento mori*.

Why was the music like this? Musically there didn't seem quite enough in these old shards to engage me and so I turned to the liner notes. These informed me that the work was based on two collections of aphorisms by the Argentinian writer Antonio Porchia (1885–1968) and that Zimmermann followed the structure of Porchia's book of 514 aphorisms, creating a corresponding musical image for each, and then, like a conscientious bureaucrat, marked his score with the number of the parallel

aphorism from Porchia's book. Composing the work over a protracted period, he added to it as one would make regular entries in a diary.

This explained the aphoristic nature of the music, but it raised further questions. A book of aphorisms can be dipped into at will and there is usually no reason to read it in sequence from beginning to end, but Zimmermann's music is a lengthy span that has to be taken as a whole. This difference cannot be overlooked. A further question arises. If you take a book of aphorisms, rob it of all its linguistic content, and then use the husk that remains to structure musical material, is this an interesting process in itself? One can understand it as a method of generating musical material, although comparable methods are now commonplace in this post Cageian world, but of course it says nothing about the resulting music as an imaginative experience.

Other pieces on the disc may not be as fragmented as this opening work but they do share the same general musical language and all tend to be derived from extra-musical events that link to the composer's life. My favourite was *The Missing Nail at the River*, a title that refers to Zimmermann's visit to Charles Ives's birthplace in Danbury, Connecticut. The house was being renovated, and finding a discarded nail on the veranda, Zimmermann took it away as a souvenir. The title also refers to the hymn, *Shall We Gather at the River*, an Ives perennial, whose notes are played on a toy piano simultaneously with others on the regular piano. Although I know the hymn tune well, I failed to recognise it, only learning of its presence later from the liner notes. Somewhat abashed, I listened again, this time concentrating on the toy piano part, but the hymn, ever slightly more discernible this time, still remained vague because it is only heard in very slow motion. The timbres of toy piano with the real piano were fascinating, however, the toy piano automatically bringing distant echoes of John Cage.

The opening movement of *Aimide* is also memorable. Written in immediate response to the destruction of the World Trade Center and based on the civil rights anthem 'We shall overcome', it is a moving and poetic reflection on the

tragedy. Here one clearly hears fragments of the original song coming through like a vague but all-embracing shadow. It really was compelling; because it has more diatonic elements than *Voces Abandonadas*, these familiar outlines appeared like lost memories.

Two inter-related pieces are included, one with a German title, *Blaupause*, the other called *Blueprint*, the equivalent English word. They are intriguing. The liner notes say the second piece has an identical structure to the first but where the former has rests, the latter has notes, and visa-versa. It also tells us that exactly the same pitches are used in both. It sounds attractively elegant. The problem arises in listening: although the opening pitch of each is indeed the same, those that follow are not. The second problem is that there seems to be less space in *Blaupause* than is needed to contain the notes of *Blueprint*. Perhaps these issues could be resolved with the score, but lacking this, the liner notes give partial information that only creates further enigmas. It all gets even more complex when we learn that *Blaupause* is a re-tracing of passages in an earlier work by Zimmermann which arose from an involvement with a

philosophical treatise by Giordano Bruno, *De Umbris Idearum* (1582), in which 'Bruno describes "ideas" as being contained in the light that comes from the heliocentric solar system: these ideas affect human beings through the "shadows" they leave in the soul'. The notes conclude 'the piece ... finally reveals its own philosophical implications: the unison does not come to pass, even though it makes an attempt'. What does this mean? The ever-present danger with such material is that it can easily slip into pretentiousness.

Nicolas Hodges plays with great clarity and proves a persuasive advocate. The music is not particularly demanding technically but Hodges has a wonderful touch and creates a piano sound that is humane and responsive. The recorded sound is also good and particularly admirable in its refusal to draw attention to itself. Zimmerman's vision remains conservative, but if you have a taste for this old-fashioned sort of modernism with associated enigmas, then perhaps this is for you.

Frank Denyer