
FIRST PERFORMANCES

London, Barbican: James Clarke's 'Untitled no.2 for Piano and Orchestra'

In 2006 James Clarke began writing a series of pieces called *Untitled*, which he has described as 'exploring reduced means, clearing the painter's palette and starting with a few fresh colours, with a view to renewing and moving on'. The forces required for the individual works within this sequence range from solo piano (nos. 3 and 5) to four voices with string quartet (no. 4) and ensemble (no.1). The second entry in this series, completed in 2008, is a large-scale piece for solo piano and full orchestra with a modest percussion section consisting of tubular bells, vibraphone and two sets of bell plates.

Untitled No.2 is dedicated to the memory of the American abstract Expressionist painter Clyfford Still, whom Clarke, himself active in the visual arts, greatly admires. As well as suggesting links with abstract art, the title is deliberately non-representational, as the composer didn't want to offer an illustrative guide to the work (what Still used to call a 'pictorial puzzle'), which might reduce its potentiality and send the listener off in specific directions. By avoiding a label, Clarke has signalled his intention to remove any obstacles between the listener and the work itself. In particular, he avoided using the word 'concerto' to absolve listeners from having to concentrate on the relationship between piano and orchestra, so that connexions (and, especially, varying degrees of dominance) between the two entities can arise naturally and suggest themselves as the work evolves in performance. Concerning matters of form, the composer has suggested an analogy with rock strata, so that the piano is not at the forefront of the musical texture but 'should be heard as one layer within it'.

At its UK première at London's Barbican Centre on 29 April 2011, Clarke's *Untitled No.2* unfolded in a single 28-minute span that miraculously combined explosive outbursts with a flinty inevitability. It was an imposing structure whose intricately-balanced sonorities were continually opening up fresh, hitherto-unsuspected vistas. Whilst the solo writing ranged from granitic chords to ornate, filigree embellishments, the orchestral contributions often consisted of a single held note, sometimes succeeding and bringing

new life to notes originating in the piano. Midway through the work, a series of dense, climactic *tutti*s were uncompromisingly loud and in their aftermath, as indicated by the composer in the score, only the resonance from the piano's initial chords remained. Such piercing and intensely dramatic material was often starkly juxtaposed with quietly hypnotic reiterations; these extreme shifts in tone were strongly reminiscent of Anton Bruckner, a composer Clarke admires. If a connexion with the 19th-century Austrian symphonist sounds far-fetched, the sense of having embarked upon a journey undertaken in one tremendous architectural arch, albeit divided into clearly defined, sharply contrasting sections, that one encounters in a great Bruckner *Adagio* movement, was palpable in Clarke's piece. Just before the open-ended conclusion, a brand new colour was added to the instrumental palette in the form of hushed divided strings (vibrato-less throughout) underpinning the piano, a final reminder of the vast potential for self-renewal in the work's judiciously selected sonorities.

Soloist Nicolas Hodges made a tremendous impact in an extremely demanding solo part which scarcely paused for breath. Though fully equal to the immense physical demands made of him in several virtuosic passages, he was even more impressive in the control he exerted in periodic moments of hushed, Zen-like stasis, where piano and orchestra explored a fixed harmonic pattern at length. These magnetically intense episodes focussed on a sequence of finely balanced chords, demanding a considerable degree of concentration from soloist, orchestra and conductor alike. Indeed the contribution of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Ilan Volkov to the success of the performance should not be underestimated. Volkov in particular deserves credit for exerting a firm, though never inflexible, structural grip on this massive multi-layered piece, marshalling his substantial forces to meet its various exceptional metrical, technical and textural challenges.

In common with other British composers such as James Dillon and Brian Ferneyhough who used to be referred to as part of the 'New Complexity', James Clarke has enjoyed rather more success in mainland Europe than the United Kingdom (it is instructive in this regard that the Barbican was accommodating the UK première of *Untitled*

No.2 rather than world première: that was given three years previously in Germany, where Clarke has been especially well-received). It would be good to hear more works from this highly original composer performed within these shores, as he attempts to reconcile his freshly cleansed palette from the *Untitled* pieces with more intricate, fiery material as encountered in his recent Second String Quartet: the incorporation and working-out of these two extremes within future single compositions should make for some exciting, unpredictable results.

Paul Conway

Baku: Qara Qarayev Festival

When you arrive in Baku today, many things impress you immediately. Even five years ago the city was still very much a 'Soviet' one, with numerous buildings half-destroyed or not very well-appointed. The Muslim culture was chaotically coexisting with the heritage of Communism. Soviet-style areas were found next door to new skyscrapers designed by fashionable Western architects, including Norman Foster. Today the range of building works in the city is simply incomparable with any other country. The old town is well preserved and excellently redecorated, but the old districts, full of the flavour of 1930s life, are gradually disappearing: if you want to see them, you should make your trip to Baku immediately. Soon this will be one of the most luxurious, and probably most expensive, world capitals.

Today Azerbaijan is one of the richest countries of the Muslim world, and one of the most culturally aware; it is certainly the richest of all former republics of the Soviet Union. Its cultural orientation has two clear directions. Looking West, Azerbaijan is trying to attract Western specialists, designers, experts and investors. Looking east, it tries to define and to preserve its national identity.

Azerbaijan does have a very complicated cultural history. A typical Arabic country of the 19th century, with Persian characters in use until the 1920s, it became a part of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The Cyrillic alphabet and Cyrillic transliteration were the norm for the seven decades of the Soviet era, until the 1990s. From the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union and up to now, Azerbaijan has been using the Latin alphabet, not least in order to get closer to the Western world. But the language itself is typically Turkic, very similar to Turkish. Links with Turkey are very strong. The TV programmes list 12 Turkish channels, nine Russian, six local Azeri channels,

two from the United Arab Emirates, three from Germany, two from France, one Chinese, one Italian and one British (BBC World). This listing speaks for itself. On the other hand, Azerbaijan still has very strong ties with Russia, and also very important connexions with the Arabic world, particularly Iran. All Iranian poets, including the Sufi, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, are listed as 'national' ones with their portraits displayed in the central square in Baku. Indeed it is hard to draw a distinct cultural or even geographic 'border' between the two countries. Religiously and culturally (despite the difference in languages), they are much closer than Azerbaijan is to Turkey, and hundreds of thousands of Azeri people traditionally live in North Iran.

At present Baku is home to several important festivals (including the International piano festival/competition and the Rostropovich Festival). A new, beautifully designed concert hall is being built for the next Eurovision Song Contest, which is to happen in Baku. The Philharmonic Hall is rather small, but truly beautiful and acoustically perfect. This hall was the main venue in April for a recently re-established Festival in memory of the greatest 20th-century Azeri composer, Qara Qarayev (or, in traditional Russian transliteration, Kara Karaev). Qarayev (1918–1982) was one of the most interesting Soviet composers, a friend and a pupil of Dmitri Shostakovich; he spent his late years in Moscow. In his last compositions he attempted to bring together traditional values of national identity and Western idioms and aesthetics. He is remembered for composing the very first Soviet Symphony with explicit dodecaphonic technique – then forbidden in the Soviet Union – his Symphony No. 3.

Qarayev's son, Faradzh Karaev (b. 1943), one of the most significant contemporary Azeri composers, runs this music festival in memory of his father. The festival was originally established in 1988, but was later abandoned for more than 20 years. It is good to see it re-established and at a full steam now.

Faradzh Karaev (who is half-Russian) lives and works in Moscow. He is a professor at the Moscow Conservatoire, but is often in Baku where he is the artistic director of the State Chamber Orchestra. His music has been performed widely in Russia and in the West. When you listen to it, you will hardly recognize any national Azeri idioms. Karaev's aesthetics – in line with his father's ideas – goes further west. His favourite composer is Alban Berg (Karaev's version of Berg's Violin Concerto for violin and chamber orchestra was performed at the festival by Swiss violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja). Karaev's arrangement of Schoenberg's

Erwartung for chamber forces is often performed. James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, György Ligeti, and George Crumb have inspired his own compositions. Karaev's style is a perfect example of a new universal language rooted in both national traditions and in Western aesthetics without too direct a demonstration of any particular stylistic priorities. His latest work – a Violin Concerto, premièred in Switzerland a year ago – shows his stylistic orientations very clearly. A long and intense composition, it develops from a 'toy'-like, multi-stylistic world of various quotations (Haydn, Mendelssohn) to extreme intensity, with a long climax at the end based on the energy of very gradual organic changes typical of Azeri (and Arabic) Maqam. This brilliant piece was performed by its dedicatee, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, with the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic orchestra under its Music Director Rauf Abdullayev.

The week-long festival included several orchestral and chamber concerts with the programmes alternating Azeri contemporary music (Qara Qarayev, Faradz Karayev, Arif Malikov, Hayam Mirzazade, Firudin Allahverdi, Rufat Halilov, Elmir Mirzoev) and contemporary Western music, presented by the Freiburg Percussion Ensemble (Nicolaus Huber, Steve Reich, Emmanuel Sejourne, Javier Alvarez) and by the 'Reconcile Vienna Modern' ensemble directed by Ronald Freisitzer (Gerard Grisey, Manuela Kreger, Alexander Wagendristel). The Ensemble Ascolta from Germany, conducted by Tutus Engel, played film music from movies of the 1920s and 30s by René Clair, Hans Richter, Oscar Fischinger and Luis Bunuel. The 20th-century classics included works of Webern, Berg, Messiaen, Xenakis, Takemitsu, Lutosławski, with special events dedicated to the music and the ideas of Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Two orchestra programmes (conducted by Rauf Abdullayev and Vladimir Runchak) featured works by two major Russian composers of today: Alexander Raskatov's *Xenia* and Vladimir Tarnopolsky's Cello Concerto *Le vent des mots qu'il n'a pas dits* (soloist Alexander Ivashkin). Both compositions show new directions of post-Soviet music (similar in Russia and in Azerbaijan) in a search for de-contextualisation of the simplest elements of musical language, without clear priorities for any particular stylistic identities.

This second Qara Qarayev festival in Baku was a most stimulating forum, enhancing our knowledge about the diverse cultural life of this dynamic post-Soviet country, with its own old and rich Muslim traditions.

Alexander Ivashkin

London: St George's Church, Bloomsbury: Benjamin Ellen's 'Siksika'

Wailing chants of the Siksika, or Blackfoot Indian tribe in Canada formed the musical inspiration for a striking new Viola Concerto, *Siksika*, by the British composer Benjamin Ellen, which received its European première by Rivka Golani on 15 March 2011. The concerto formed the centrepiece of an imaginatively-conceived programme entitled 'Postcard From ...', which explored the interaction of traditional/regional and contemporary/ international elements in music from Australia, Poland, Estonia, the UK and Hungary, all of it beautifully performed concert by the String Ensemble of the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, a student orchestra conducted by Nic Pendlebury, to a capacity audience at St George's Church, Bloomsbury. The richly resonant acoustics of this, one of Hawksmoor's six London churches, enhanced the String Ensemble's vivid sonorities, whilst the complex and demanding contemporary programme underlined their professionalism and enthusiasm.

Benjamin Ellen composed his concerto *Siksika* for Rivka Golani who premièred it at the Fort Macleod International Festival in Alberta, Canada in 2010. (A new commission was in preparation for the next festival in May 2011, which also featured a world première by Stephen Montague). The ravishing colours, rhapsodic lyricism, the contrasts between inwardly poetic moments and dramatic sections, searing clashes between solo and orchestral harmonies, all reflect what the composer explained as his three sources of inspiration connected to the Blackfoot tribe: namely its geography, heritage and history. First, the vast expanses of Canadian landscapes, with their aspiration to a more individual spirituality, are conveyed in the contrast between sustained harmonic textures, at times coloured with an almost Wagnerian richness, and the soloist's mainly high, chant-like melodic lyricism in the first section. Second, the musical styles of indigenous chants (absorbed from field recordings) permeate the entire musical discourse: the three sections gather impressive momentum through Ellen's economic manipulation of three thematic and harmonic ideas, introduced in an eloquent initial meditation for viola and subdued strings: these are, in turn, a rising seventh gesture, a chromatic falling motif based on the augmented second and a rising minor third motif. The three elements appear to generate much of the material within an engaging and varied sound-tapestry, full of changes of mood, enriched by the addition of oboe and clarinet to the strings. The third source was the historical

narrative relating to the Battle of Belly River, in the late 19th century, depicted in a vigorous fugal section and final dance that aims to contrast the pomposity of the foreign powers and the beauty of local traditions. Yet the work engages us, even so, as a purely musical structure, into which Rivka Golani injected every ounce of intensity and focus and held us spellbound in moments of poetic introspection, such as expressive melodic phrases played against a sustained clarinet pedal, or an arresting high registral melodic passage interrupted by raw left-hand pizzicato. Towards the climactic conclusion, the solo clarinet's theme suggested the wailing chants of the Siksika; yet throughout there was a searing edge to the textures, and an elusive bittersweet modality to the harmony, creating dissonant clashes between competing tonal tendencies. Overall *Siksika* succeeded in creating a balance of musical and programmatic elements that underlined the beauty of a less familiar modal tradition, transformed within a contemporary aesthetic idiom.

Also inspired by traditional materials was the opening work, Peter Sculthorpe's *Third Sonata for Strings 'Jabiru Dreaming'* of 1994, a vivid and potent two-movement piece inspired by and infused with aboriginal and Kakadu music from Northern Australia. Sculthorpe's sheer virtuosity of aural shaping, through repetitive minimalist textures and cross-phasing of competing harmonic implications, as well as swooping glissandi to evoke the cries of the Jabiru – an Australian stork – was thrilling to experience. The String Ensemble conveyed the impetus and driving energy of the first movement with aplomb, the buzzing clusters and unusual gestures vividly realized, as was the lyrical chant quoted in the introduction to the second movement, and the work's evocative, poetic fading conclusion. The performance confirmed Sculthorpe as a highly individual, imaginative figure whose voice should be more widely heard. The 'Postcard from ...' Poland was the *Five Folk Melodies* by Witold Lutosławski, five miniatures projected with fun and panache, as in the pizzicato piquancy of 'Hej od Krajowa Jade', the slinky wit of 'Gasior', with its inebriated violin hiccups, and the jaunty folk dances which framed the work. The piece illuminated how Lutosławski's later, modernist works derive from the folkloristic tendency in some of the more explicitly picturesque pieces of his early period.

The influence of sacred vocal chant on Arvo Pärt is well known, yet in *Summa* – an adaptation of a vocal/instrumental work for string orchestra – the effect was a serene, saturated texture of interlocking motifs and simple harmonies with a non-climactic design. While this was a 'postcard'

from Estonia to the UK, the next 'postcard' was an engaging and mysterious piece, in the short, subdued yet silvery and suspense-filled *Pero's Bridge* by Matthew Gordon, a postgraduate student at Trinity Laban College, which here received its world première. The title refers to the story of a Bristol bridge named after the 18th-century slave Pero Jones, who served a Plantation owner. The composer described the piece as an artistic reflection on his own history and that of his home city of Bristol, with its slave trade connexions. The material is ingeniously derived from the musical pitches of the word Bristol, elaborated as overlapping gestures in different registers (including some very high harmonics), which are repeated with subtle changes in a series of variations, the slithery mirror-like flickering effects gradually gaining momentum.

The final work to crown the concert was a 'Postcard from ...' Hungary, in the form of a fiery and urgent performance of Bartók's *Divertimento*, with a particularly translucent account of the Nocturne slow movement, and an ebullient Hungarian dance finale; it was stirringly conveyed, and under Pendlebury's assured and dynamic command affirmed the first-rate qualities of the String Ensemble.

Malcolm Miller

Buxton Opera House: 'Fantastic Mr Fox'

English Touring Opera recently toured the UK, presenting Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*; the pairing of two Puccini shorts, *Il Tabarro* and *Gianni Schicchi*; and a new (at least to the UK) offering, *Fantastic Mr Fox*. The complete tour took in 17 UK venues, though *Mr Fox* only played at 12 of those: I caught it on 7 May. Each performance of the opera took children from two local schools to play the parts of fox cubs, and trees. Based on Roald Dahl's famous story, first published in 1970, with a libretto by Dahl's biographer Donald Sturrock, the project was originally conceived in the mid-1990s but the original composer pulled out by summer 1996, leaving a hole in the plans for a late 1998 première. However, Sturrock and Dahl's widow Licity attended *Emmeline*, an opera by the American composer Tobias Picker (b. 1954); and on the back of its success, Picker was picked, and agreed to undertake the *Mr Fox* project, which duly premièred on schedule. (*Mr Fox* thus became the second opera based on a book by Dahl, the first being William Schuman's *A Question of Taste* of 1989, based on a short story. Subsequently Peter Ash, the original conductor of *Mr Fox*, wrote *The*

Golden Ticket, based on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which premièred in 2009.) Despite being a reported triumph, *Mr Fox* then languished until the 2009 Wes Anderson animated film (featuring the vocal talents of George Clooney and Meryl Streep) provided the opera with a new leash of life, leading to its crossing the Atlantic to be revived in this new slightly revised and scaled-down ETO production.

The opera's opening music was attractive, and certainly child-friendly. The evocative set functioned at two levels: the upper parts of the set were intended to represent ground level, whilst the stage floor represented the fox's underground earth. On other occasions, the upper parts were ignored in order that the stage floor could instead represent ground level (the wood, the farm, etc.). A short-lived scene-setter cast Mrs. Fox (Miriam Sharrad) in the role of narrator (thankfully this was the only part of the opera in spoken rhythm) to introduce the fox family. Next came the appearance of the three villains: 'Boggis, Bunce, and Bean; one fat, one short, one lean' (Henry Grant Kerswell, Mark Wilde, and Maciek O'Shea) a chicken, goose and cider farmer respectively. Ready caricatures, Bunce was slightly developed by being turned into a Frenchman, and lover of *foie gras*. In short separate arias, which then combined as an ensemble,

the three were immediately revealed as bunglers at loggerheads, as they discussed the problems of money and ... the fox! However, whilst these characters displayed the menace of the original story, there was little evidence of their revolting personal habits and lack of bodily hygiene which in the original story makes their eventual comeuppance all the sweeter.

In the next scene we found Mr. Fox (Nicholas Merryweather) singing a fetching aria which described the simple pleasures of the countryside at night. During this life-affirming song he meets Mr. Badger (Greg Tassell) the headline of whose newspaper informs us 'Hunt Back On!' which Mr. Fox dismisses offhand. Mrs. Fox sings tenderly to warn him of the danger of underestimating the trio of farmers, as Fox goes through his pre-raid routine. This proves a timely reminder, for in the very next scene Mr. Fox is under attack from the perhaps not-so-bungling-after-all trio (who had their own highly effective pre-hunt malicious mutterings): he escapes with his life, but with the loss of his tail. Next came the first of a number of interludes; the dance/chorus of trees, featuring local children, which provided the opportunity to reset the main stage for the aria, quite literally 'a lament of a tail'. This began as an aria for Mrs. Fox, in which she first cajoles her husband, then



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reaffirms her commitment to him: she is in love with him, not with his tail. This led seamlessly into a rousing ensemble piece, 'the plan', in which the fox clan (Mr. and Mrs. plus senior fox cubs Jennie and Pennie, played by Martha Jones and Abigail Kelly) plot their revenge.

Although rather early for an interval (roughly 35 minutes in), in other respects this would have provided a suitable halt to Act 1. Instead the curtain was lowered for an orchestral interlude, and the end delayed for a further 25 minutes (therefore getting a tad on the long side for children) while the farmers vented their chagrin at capturing only the tail, by employing a digger (the gladiator-style costumed Fiona Kimm) to excavate the foxes' earth and finish them off once and for all. The amusing scenes were complimented by a Wallace and Gromit-style parody of Brad Fiedel's music from the 1984 film *Terminator* (and that's a compliment, by the way). At the climax, with the earth dug out (cue: bleak static music, with pedal notes, and intermittent piano and gong sonorities) the farmers think they have achieved their aim, when, surprise surprise, the corpse turns out to be ... the tail again! As an aside in the middle of this long scene, Miss Hedgehog (Catrine Kirkman in a superb costume) sings an attractive aria in which she seems resigned to a fate of perpetual spinsterhood.

Prior to the second half Miss Hedgehog gave a plug from the balcony for both the children's merchandising (including *Foxtales*, a workbook/CD compiled from primary school workshops across the UK) and the children's chorus (Trees again) which opened Act 2. As the purpose of this chorus the first time around was to provide the opportunity for a scene change, its deployment here seemed redundant, and was in fact succeeded by two awkwardly-placed scenes: the unveiling of (the detail of) the 'revenge plan', followed by a very short scene (front of curtain) featuring Boggis and Bunce. Stage now reset yet again, the first part of the plan was initiated as Fox, Badger, and Mole (Stuart Haycock) broke into Bean's cider store. This introduced the new character of Rita the Rat (Caryl Hughes), a kind of self-appointed security guard, whose duties included a liberal sampling of the goods in her care. Her perpetually semi-inebriated state was depicted firstly by Klezmer-style dance, and later by a Marlene Dietrich-style song. Fortunately, the crew are able to win Rita round, on the promise of dealing with a 'monster', which turned out to be a Porcupine (Adam Tunncliffe) who, equally fortunately, provided love interest to save Miss Hedgehog from her aforementioned perpetual spinsterhood. This acted as a trigger for a courtship scene featuring a

duet-cum-dance (the music, almost sounding like slow-stride piano, being amongst the most touching in the opera) which formed an aside to 'the party', which celebrated the success of 'the plan'. It then only remained for a mock-stately chorus to toast 'the most fantastic fox on the planet', prior to a scrumage for food. The opera, conducted by Timothy Carey, lit by Guy Hoare, and directed by Tim Yealland; played for 1 hour 50 minutes including a 20-minute interval.

The aforementioned other Dahl opera, *The Golden Ticket*, drew negative criticism on many fronts when it was produced at the 2010 Wexford Festival, not least that of a lack of memorable music. Whilst it would be unfair to say *Mr Fox* was bland or lacking in character, the music wasn't tremendously interesting either. (Having used the story myself in children's composition classes, I'm almost tempted to say that with such a fine story and such lively characters it's difficult to go wrong, but as things *do* go wrong, I won't.) The music served its purpose in complementing the story, rather than adding anything new. And this was the problem of the production as a whole: though the design by Neil Irish and Sarah Bacon; and costumes by Karen Large, really were first-class, it was seemingly content to bask in the reflected glory of Dahl's story rather than add something vital of its own. This was even true of the use of humour: whilst certainly in evidence, it was merely transferred from what one finds in the book, rather than being enhanced, with the use of the original words the most effective parts.

One flaw, however, was that in Dahl's original tale, the 'revenge plan' is that the woodland animals carry out their raids via a network of tunnels between their new den and the farmers' stores which enables them to remain permanently underground; otherwise the animals would have been no safer than at the outset of the story from being hunted down by the farmers. That this crucial plank of the plot was omitted in order to simplify the story (or perhaps not made sufficiently clear, due to the way that the stage had to function in quick succession at ground/underground levels) was a definite weak spot in the opera, since it relied on the audience's prior knowledge. (It is somewhat ironic that Dahl's first draft, changed at the suggestion of editor Fabio Cohen, had the animals stealing from a supermarket, although the underground tunnel was already in place.)

Another criticism of *The Golden Ticket*¹ was that whilst the opera appeared to be directly aimed at children, few were present. Where/how to pitch

¹ George Hall, 'The Golden Ticket' *The Stage* 18 October 2010.

a children's story is always a difficult balancing act, not to say something of a gamble. Happily a well attended Buxton Opera House had quite a large number of children in the audience: at the curtain-call, the villains of the piece were, quite rightly, given a thorough booing. So despite one or two concerns, the opera worked on that level at least.

Tim Mottershead

London, Wigmore Hall, Durham Cathedral: James MacMillan

Seraph, James MacMillan's new piece for soloist Alison Balsom, premièred by the dedicatee with members of the Scottish Ensemble at the Wigmore Hall on 17 February 2011, is a tightly-constructed three-movement concertino for trumpet and strings of around 15 minutes duration. Though its title derives from the solo instrument's associations with angels, the music itself, especially in its driving outer movements, rarely sounded celestial, more frequently suggesting the trumpet's equally powerful connexions with outdoor, hunting pursuits.

Two ideas dominated the opening movement. The first, which launched the work, was reminiscent of Prokofiev, brisk, spiky chords accompanying an airy trumpet tune that impishly distorted the initial theme of the finale of Haydn's Trumpet Concerto. By contrast, the second main idea was songlike and ruminative, the strings nostalgically calling to mind Vaughan Williams in their gently shifting harmonies and modal inflections. Both these clearly-defined subjects were developed in a rigorously worked-out sonata-form movement, in which MacMillan seemed to be gently amused by the formal conventions he was observing. Providing a reflective, calm centre, the central *Adagio*'s principal theme was allotted to solo violin and *tutti* strings, upon which the solo trumpet offered disjointed and disaffected commentary. In the movement's later stages, the forces dwindled into a pensive and wistful duet for muted solo trumpet and solo violin, though even here these two apparently irreconcilable protagonists showed a striking lack of concord in their bruised and brooding lines.

Marked *marcato e ritmico*, the finale instantly restored the implacable dynamism of the opening movement with an intricately elaborated canonic idea, gruff and unwieldy, introduced on low strings. Acting as an effective foil, a vaulting secondary theme, lyrical and passionate, reminded me of Andrzej Panufnik, specifically

his *Sinfonia Rustica*: that great Polish composer's lifelong search for a convincing balance between impulse and design seemed to be one in which MacMillan was also actively engaged in this well-proportioned but emotionally connected piece. A substantial cadenza-like section, consisting of a solo trumpet line accompanied by *tremolando* strings, led to a brief restatement of the main theme on upper strings before the work finished on a sustained and defiant closing trill from the soloist.

Though by its very nature a smaller-scale work than MacMillan's imposing, fully-fledged trumpet concerto *Epiclesis* of 1993 (also in Balsom's repertoire), *Seraph* succeeded as an engaging showpiece for its soloist and accompanying string players. If the tone was waggishly eclectic in the outer movements, veering between lyrical late-English pastoralism and rhythmical East European neo-classicism, the slow movement articulated a deeply-felt sense of alienation, which was as affecting as it was unexpected in the context of the piece's overall buoyancy and dapper high spirits. The trumpet was MacMillan's own instrument and his command of its range and diversity of tone from precise, militaristic attack to golden, melancholic *cantabile* was much in evidence. Alison Balsom's rendering of the demanding solo part was unwaveringly fine. She negotiated its more virtuosic elements with finesse and resourcefulness, whilst the *Adagio* brought out more profound aspects of her musicianship. Leader Jonathan Morton contributed in no small measure to the damaged beauty of this fragile and introverted central movement, whilst the technical assurance and emotional responsiveness of the Scottish Ensemble players, under Morton's direction, gave much pleasure throughout.

If the crowd-pleasing *Seraph*, a diverting example of the secular side of James MacMillan's recent output, was clearly designed for the concert hall, his new setting of the Latin mass for a *capella* mixed voices, *Missa Dunelmi*, took its place at the very core of a religious service, as Durham Cathedral Choir, who commissioned the piece, gave its first performance at Sung Eucharist in Durham Cathedral on 27 February 2011. A committed Catholic, MacMillan has composed a considerable amount of sacred music, including several mass settings. His extensive involvement in writing specifically for the church appeared to inform the refinement and cogency of the concise *Missa Dunelmi*, whose four sections, experienced as part of the liturgy, struck me as essentially intimate and practical.

Though the character of the mass setting was predominantly measured and simple, it contained

passages exhibiting more elaborate treatment, such as the appropriately florid, Baroque-like lines of the joyous Gloria and the concluding Hosanna section of the Sanctus. Whilst the elevated tessitura in these episodes occasionally stretched the voices, the composer's vocal 'effects' always sounded entirely appropriate, never drawing the listener's attention away from the text. Rather, the periodic use of ornamentation and moments of heightened emotional intensity convinced as a direct and honest response to the words of the mass.

James MacMillan studied in Durham in the early 1980s and was a regular visitor to the cathedral. *Missa Dunelmi* was written with this venue and the Durham Cathedral Choir in mind and it is easy to imagine MacMillan's lucid and sincere setting taking its place alongside Byrd, Stanford and Britten in the choir's existing repertoire, particularly given their committed and radiantly sung première of the mass under Master of the Choristers James Lancelot's sympathetic direction.

Paul Conway

London, Bridewell Theatre: Robert Hugill's 'When a Man Knows'

Grand opera is often based on bloodthirsty sagas of intrigue and revenge, invariably over affairs of the heart, but in Robert Hugill's new one-act opera *When a Man Knows*, based on the play by Alan Richardson, the revenge of the 'Woman' is unusually unremitting and enacted in a hidden-away, static, dark place.

'The Man is tied up in a deserted Warehouse. Why is he there? The shocking truth is revealed', are the words setting the scene for us. In fact the stage was in such darkness on the night I went along, for the second of three performances given 31 March–2 April at the Bridewell Theatre off Fleet Street, that the ensemble of instrumentalists on left of stage were affected. 'Could we please have more light on this side? My cellist is having to play from memory as she can't see the score', pleaded conductor David Roblou, as the lighting team struggled to adjust things. Soon we were well underway again, and the cellist resumed her repeated staccato low E's, denoting the eerie sound of a dripping tap, duly increasing the mental torture of the solitary manacled Man who gradually became visible to the eye amidst the gloom on stage.

'Grabbed from behind, bag over head, handcuffed, thrown into the back of a van' is the sorry

tale of his kidnap, sung with due dramatic impact by young baritone Dario Dugandzic, the 'Man'. In fact his remarkably buoyant, fulsome tones throughout were most memorable, and the main highlight of this unusually stark drama. 'I'm only just developing my voice, trying to explore', he said when I congratulated this young singer from Yugoslavia after the show. With the distinguished baritone Ian Caddy directing this opera, I'm not surprised Dugandzic got to give of his best.

The scene on stage remains static, with a Greek-style chorus of two singers, alto and tenor, further narrating the Man's plight, with intermittent arias and 'dialogue' from our hero bemoaning his inexplicable incarceration. However soon he discerns noises offstage, and above, as little by little his captor and tormentor, the Woman (Zoe South), makes her presence felt in the shadows, soon to break into an aria, heralded by the clarinet which for the first time enters the fray with a short motif. With skilful adapting of the lighting, by Matt Haskins (to make up for the shortcomings of the torch meant to be in her hand), the plot moves on to a confrontational dialogue between the Man and Woman, during the initial stages of which the hood is removed from his head. But she duly keeps her distance, as tension mounts, as he stretches out as far as his chains allow.

Almost reminiscent of some of those Radio 4 afternoon plays of man / woman interplay and suspense, it emerges that the Woman is clearly guilty of kidnap, false imprisonment, and intent to commit manslaughter, by abandoning the Man, her victim, to die alone, unheard. This is in revenge for a holiday 'romp in the hay' she had with him some time ago, when she believes he infected her with HIV. What is more, three of her male relatives were her accomplices: 'two brothers, one brother-in-law', as she reveals, singing of her success in her carefully planned scheme to capture him.

The opera is well delivered and directed, with an interesting score that has expressive arias, recitatives, duets, with much of the dialogue between man and woman over a ground bass. The idiom is tonal, but one of the Woman's final arias uses a 12-tone row, as she bloodthirstily lists the torments he will endure during his slow death: 'You die. Not yet. Throat's dry, Thirst's raging, ... Eddie alone, nothing to do but think'.

The opera starts and ends with the sound of the dripping tap, hauntingly suggested by the cello, which was apparently what sparked off Robert Hugill's initial idea for how to stage the opera.

I started to imagine the opening of *When a Man Knows* with just a solo cello playing, appearing out of the darkness. Instead of an overture

there developed a prelude whose abstract quality I rather liked', he writes in his programme notes. I liked it too. Hugill is clearly a composer of discernment, imagination, and drive, and his score encompassed many a gem, including an arioso, fearsome duet with the Man, as the Woman spells out her plan of revenge, with torrid passages for violin, cello and piano, and a cliff-hanger at the end. At the sound of a banging door the woman departs. All we hear is the dripping tap. Silence. Then chorus: 'Will she be back?'

Jill Barlow

50 Years of the International Contemporary Music Festival in Zagreb, Croatia (MBZ)

In historically very delicate circumstances, while Europe was divided into its Eastern and Western portions – that is to say in 1961, in the former Yugoslavia – Croatian composer Milko Kelemen boldly initiated its bi-annual International Contemporary Music Festival in Zagreb. Better known as the Music Biennale Zagreb (MBZ), it became one of the best-known festivals of contemporary music (along with Warsaw Autumn, which started in 1956). Well-known composers, conductors and performers came from all over the world to open a new chapter in our contemporary music history. While very young, we experienced such new sounds as Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, or Stockhausen's *Zyklus* for percussion and *Gesang der Jünglinge*, or Lutosławski's *Trois poèmes d'Henri Michaux*, among many others. Yet after 50 years, in the Festival's 26th edition (7–17 April 2011), apart from three guest orchestras (Wrocław Philharmonic, Plovdiv PO and The Orchestra of the Arena di Verona Foundation) all the other performers – opera and ballet companies, orchestras, chamber music ensembles and almost all the soloists – were local ones and showed their highest performance level in all kinds of contemporary repertoire. In the context of a retrospective over its past 50 years, some of the Croatian composers' works were performed again, and confirmed their acclaimed reputations (Malec, Kelemen, Horvat, Radica, Bergamo, Kuljerić, Detoni, Josipović, Šipuš), alongside the newest generation, from whom operas and ballets have been commissioned.

During the anniversary celebrations in Zagreb, the annual ISCM World New Music Days Festival was held there, with a symposium and concerts at the usual venues (both the Lisinski Halls and the Mimara Museum). In 2004, the ISCMWNMD,

in partnership with Music Information Centres (MIC) around the world, started a competition for young composers. This year, in Zagreb, the first prize was handed over to the winner, Chiu-Yu Chou from Thailand (born in 1981) for her First String Quartet, performed majestically by the Croatian Song Quartet. This gave rise to the question: Why did the prize go to a perfectly-written string quartet (an old European tradition transferred to Asia?!) rather than to an innovative piece, as we had expected after experiencing *Music for Baroque Orchestra* by the young Turkish composer Erman Özdemir (b.1978) performed by the wonderful Garestin Ensemble (from Varaždin). The work combines archaic melismatic writing with thoroughly contemporary sounds in a perfect new symbiosis: all characteristics demanded by the conditions of the Competition. Out of more than 400 entered compositions, ten (one from each category) were selected and premièred, among them a work by the young Belgrade-born Milica Djordjević,² who is already well-known. This was her new and by no means easy to perform *Journey of a Weather-beaten Skeleton* for orchestra (only four orchestral works were selected out of 120 submitted), played by the Croatian Radio SO under conductor Luca Pfaff.

The World New Music Days concluded with a concert by the unique Ensemble Zeitfluss from Graz (Austria). First, we heard last year's prizewinning piece (by the Australian Katia Beaugeais), but we were definitely and deeply impressed by the Zagreb première of the 20-minute *Dove of Peace – Homage to Picasso* (Chamber concerto No.1 for clarinet and ensemble) written in 2010 by Benet Casablanca Domingo (1956),³ conducted by Edo Mičić, with a memorable soloist in Davorin Brozić. The earliest piece in date to be heard at the Biennale was the recently-discovered short Piano Concerto from 1942 by the budding avant-gardist Bruno Maderna, at that time only 24 years old, following its première in 2009 in Verona (Aldo Orvieto, piano, with Orchestra of Verona under the baton of Marko Letonja). Bearing all the master's later characteristics, it was truly an exciting experience. The music of the Italian composer Giampaolo Coral, a regular guest at the Zagreb Biennale, who recently passed away, was more present this time – which was a noble gesture.

Three introductory lunchtime concerts took place in the venues of the newly-opened Museum of Modern Art in Zagreb, with students from the Zagreb Music Academy (and, from Belgrade,

² Born in 1984, has studied in Strasbourg, at IRCAM in Paris, and currently in Berlin; has received Arditti Quartet commissions, etc.

Vladimir Gligorić⁴) who performed, in various settings (violin solo, piano duo, sax and piano, voice, etc. to quartets and organ), about 30 chamber pieces by Croatian composers from 1950 up to today. This was the idea of Katarina Krpan (the head of the Piano Department) who later (with her colleague Vlasta Gyura) played all the three volumes of Ligeti's *Études pour piano* in a magisterial way, thoroughly *au fait* with the composer and his music. That was not the case with the pianist Damir Gregurić with Boulez's⁵ Third Sonata; he played it in an almost hostile manner without any insight into this author's works (unlike, for instance, Pierre-Laurent Aimard or Tamara Stefanovich). For the first time at the Zagreb Biennale, the famous LP Piano Duo (Lončar/Pavlović) presented two impressive evenings (Stockhausen's *Mantra* and, the next evening, various less well known composers), and the Zagreb Piano duo D&B (Dubravka Vukalović and Bruno Vlahek) played Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen*.

Another first performance in Zagreb was Penderick's newly-written Horn Concerto (which received its world première in Bremen in 2009) under the composer's baton with the Zagreb Philharmonic and the virtuoso soloist Radovan Vlatković; the evening ended with a sumptuous orchestral piece, *Garden of Epicurus*, by Dr. Ivo Josipović (who since 2010 has been President of Croatia). The same evening, the previously-announced performance of *Turm-Musik* by Branimir Sakač (1918–1979) – one of the founder of the MBZ and first avant-garde serialist in Croatia – was cancelled, just as we were prevented from seeing in Zagreb, live from Split, the announced world premier performance on the 16 of April, the comic opera *The Marshal* by Silvio Foretić (who had written his own libretto, adapted from the screenplay for the famous movie with the same title by Ivo and Vinko Brešan).⁶

The idea and initiative to commission and give live broadcasts of five music-theatre pieces, three operas and one ballet from the regional National

Theatres, came from the Biennale office and proved to be something new and innovative. With great expectations in Zagreb, we awaited the first direct broadcast from the Osijek Opera House: *Kings and Grooms* by Sanja Drakulić, concerning a tragic episode from early Croatian history. Its sensational scenic unfolding and realization, along with all the performers, kept our attention, although the music failed to play a focusing role for this sombre content: a gloomy past with a view from today's perspective could be very challenging. A misunderstanding of what music could do in a contemporary 'Gesamtkunstwerk'.⁷ *Stribor*, the second opera (from Rijeka), based on a children's story by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić about a bewitched forest, had very good and eloquent music by Ivan Josip Skender and adequate singers, with fabulous scenic solutions (as in a Marionette theatre) plus colourful but sometimes exaggerated costumes, showed in its dramaturgy a degree of confusion. The ballet from Varaždin Theater on the subject of a young man who feels as *Nobody* in his surrounding, was only partially successful, though the young dancers were all musically very elastic and playful.

The concluding evening of the Biennale, held in Zagreb at the National Theatre, was 'Air': an accomplished ballet performance, including video projection, to an impressive sonic appeal by the young and very talented Krešimir Seletković – a combination of electronic and classical music – played by the famous Cantus Ensemble under its founder and conductor, the composer Berislav Šipuš (the artistic director of the MBZ). This year Cantus celebrates its tenth anniversary: our congratulations!

The actual 50th anniversary ceremony of the MBZ 2011 was opened by the Choir and Orchestra of the Zagreb Music Academy with their conductor (the composer Mladen Tarbuk). There followed an unforgettable evening with the Croatian Radio SO under the baton of Tonči Bilić, performing the Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra by its recently-deceased conductor and composer Igor Kuljerić: the soloist was an exemplary multipercussionist, namely Ivana Bilić (the composer's daughter). There was another guest appearance from the region, the new music ensemble MD7 from Slovenia with its conductor Steven Loy. It would be invidious to single out individuals from among the young performers (there were so many good ones), but I should just

³ Commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic for Ensemble 10/10; première at the Cornerstone, Liverpool, 19 May 2010.

⁴ Already known in Zagreb for his exceptional interpretation of the solo piano piece *Jubilus* by Ivo Josipović.

⁵ Boulez has never come to Zagreb for the Biennale, nor has his music ever been played there before.

⁶ After many interventions the first performance still took place this season, on 25 May: 'The composer and librettist Silvio Foretić, with the conductor Ivo Lipanović and the stage director Mario Kovač at the helm of the soloists, Choir, Orchestra and Ballet of the Croatian National Theater in Split, realized our first tragicomic docu-opera as a spectacular performance emphasizing visual attractions ... leaving our imaginations to find their orientation in a labyrinth of bizarre adventures!' (Tonči Šitin, *KLASIKA*, 2 June 2011)

⁷ The author of this article is a long-time visitor to all the European Opera houses from London to Bayreuth, and Festivals of Contemporary/New Music theatre pieces (the Munich Biennale, for example).

mention the newly formed quartet NEW SAX 4 and the *biNg bang* percussion group with their leader, the famous Igor Lešnik (they have released a whole CD of his music). Besides other experiences late in the evenings, mostly short dance performances, we listened to the music of a great number of well-known composers (including a gratifying number of women composers, eg Indra Riše, Doina Rotaru, Tsippi Fleischer, Mirjam Tally). Unfortunately not one evening was consecrated to the organ (there is an excellent one in Lisinski Hall). Still, there were so many happenings, sound installations, concerts and so on, that over these 10 days the MBZ fulfilled our expectations with good music and excellent performers, in accordance with its jubilant theme MIRABILIA MEMORABILIA – *Magical Reminder*.

Donata Premeru

The Cornerstone, Liverpool: Anthony Gilbert's 'Encantos'

At the heart of their enterprising programme including works by Detlev Glanert, Daniel Kidane, Adam Gorb and Robin Hartwell, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's new music group Ensemble 10/10 under Artistic Director Clark Rundell gave the first performance of Anthony Gilbert's *Encantos* for voice and chamber ensemble. This work was originally written in 2004 for Marie Vassiliou and Endymion and scored for soprano, clarinet, guitar and vibraphone. In its new expanded version for soprano, flute (and alto flute), clarinet, trumpet, vibraphone, piano, violin, viola and cello, the score has yielded none of its intimate delicacy, yet its subtle and sweeping vocal line, superbly realized by the dedicatee, is now set in a ravishing array of accompanying sonorities.

Casting a spell far beyond its 15-minute duration, *Encantos* (meaning 'spells' or 'charms') consists of six settings of anonymous symbolist poems in Spanish. Gilbert already has a number of fine song cycles to his credit, concerning for example love (*Love Poems*, 1970) and the beauty of nature (*Inscapes*, 1975); his latest example explores the subject of inner conflict, following a young woman's odyssey of self-discovery (emotional, creative and spiritual), closely reflecting her personal struggle.

The composer was first presented with these poems as far back as 1953 and they have been brewing in his mind ever since, though it was not until 2000 that he began work on the first of them, *Tinos* (senses), in which the poet celebrates

the three states of emergence into a new state of being, using symbols of colour, from dove-grey through roseate shades to a revelation in carmine. The second poem, *Frescura* (cool) is full of word-play and double meaning: the young woman seeks to draw her inspiration – poetic, erotic or all three – from the spirit of a spire, inhaling its silken breeze in her imagination. In *Filis* (grace), body-language symbolizes four stages in the discovery of physical (or possibly spiritual) love. *La Torbellina* (a woman as whirlwind) is derived from an anonymous poem dating from the middle ages; it describes rebellion at the thought of becoming a nun. *Hueca* (a woman emptied) is an anonymous poem from the same period: 'alone and destroyed shall I go down to the waters of love and of sadness, and alone shall I bathe'. The final poem is *Ensueño* (reverie), in which the abrasiveness of a nun's habit is a sad substitute for her former silken robes, but dreaming of them brings, for an eternal moment, an 'intrusion of happiness'. In this last setting, the singer is initially coldly detached, increasing in emotional warmth as the song progresses.

Gilbert varies the instrumentation astutely, so that the second setting dispenses with woodwind, whilst the following song highlights flute and woodwind and omits the strings. Similarly, the vibraphone features in the fourth setting, but gives way to the piano in the fifth. Only the opening and closing settings require a substantial ensemble, lending the work a satisfying sense of symmetry despite its traversal of a considerable emotional journey from first bar to last. From the cycle's mid-point, the scoring becomes in each successive song less florid, more *ostinato*, ending with the quiet sound of bells (the last, magical chord of the piece consists of bowed vibraphone, piano and lower strings). Gilbert effects a further transformation in that the score gradually deepens and mellows, so that the cello is absent from the first setting, joining in later in the cycle, whilst from the fourth setting onwards the flute is exchanged for an alto flute. The expressive vocal lines, often couched in long-breathed phrases, exquisitely convey every nuance of the text. Poised and controlled, lyric soprano Marie Vassiliou caught the essence of these gnomic, jewelled settings with their Ravelian, even at times Webernian, fusion of precision and beauty. Her commanding stage presence, clarity of utterance and flexibility of tone made a considerable contribution to the success of this first performance.

Sophisticated and understated, *Encantos* was a vivid, poetical response to a series of haunting texts. Anthony Gilbert handled his reduced forces with immense creativity, expertly temper-

ing unflagging invention and a winning sense of fantasy with a sharp ear for the telling sonority (exemplified by a sparing but unerringly judged use of *tremolandi* and mutes). In his programme note, he expressed the hope that his music would communicate the poems' concealed messages: in my opinion, he succeeded marvellously, his skilfully crafted, laconic textures acting as a glorious channel for the poet's most intimate, often covert, feelings. It is to be hoped that Clark Rundell and his impressive Liverpool players will record *Encantos* shortly, in order that its rare enchantments can be more widely experienced.

Paul Conway

London, Coliseum: Nico Muhly's 'Two Boys'

The string of miscalculated new operas staged at the Royal Opera House in recent years inspired suspicions that Nico Muhly's *Two Boys* – premièred by English National Opera just down the road at the Coliseum on 24 June, a co-production with the Met in New York – would not do anything to reverse the trend. Blessed come-uppance: though *Two Boys* is not a *Tristan de nos jours*, it is consistently inventive and elegantly crafted, with Muhly's often diaphanous scoring repeatedly pointing to the resourcefulness of his imagination. And Muhly's imagination wasn't the only one that contributed to the success of the evening: Bartlett Sher's direction, Michael Yeargan's infinitely adaptable sets, the sensitive playing Rumon Gamba coaxed from his musicians and the uniformly excellent solo and choral singing, Donald Holder's resourceful lighting and, above all, the often breathtakingly beautiful animations and projections by a three-man team at Production 59 (Leo Warner, Mark Grimmer and Peter Stenhouse) made this one of the most satisfying operatic premières I have experienced in years.

Craig Lucas's libretto is very much a product of the age: the teenage Brian (an impassioned and credible Nicky Spence) meets the winsome (he hopes) Rebecca (Mary Bevan) in an internet chatroom and is drawn into the catastrophe about to befall her – she has tumbled into the clutches of a spy-ring which is threatening to kill her. Events online spiral out of control, and the outcome in the real world is a stabbing – one boy lies dead, and Brian, the other, is caught on camera leaving the scene. That's the apparently straightforward case with which the opera starts, as Detective Inspector Anne Strawson (commandingly sung by Susan Bickley) tries to make sense of the digital world from her analogue one. As she hears Brian's con-

fession – his narrative is the backbone of the plot – she gradually uncovers a web of deception in which no one seems to be who he or she says (s)he is; eventually she stumbles on the huge lie which underpins the entire chain of events.

The opera begins with a rising four-note figure presaging a kind of mildly Janáčekian minimalism, a feature characteristic of the score as a whole, though Muhly's repeated patterns can remain minimal or expand into larger paragraphs as required – as you might expect of a musical language that seems to marry Glass and Britten. The refined, often weightless delicacy of Muhly's orchestral writing contributes passage after passage that kisses the ear on its way past, but his harmonic palette is even more impressive than his command of colour: there are progressions of such exquisite beauty they sent shivers up my neck. Muhly's memories of a cathedral-school childhood must have come to the front of his mind when he was composing the extensive choral passages: the chorus, almost a Greek chorus, emerges from the shadows to pass quasi-religious comment on the action as if from a position of questionable moral authority – music of glorious strength and purpose, the closing chorus in particular: Muhly could fashion a choral suite from *Two Boys* that would bring the house down.

Its multiple virtues aside, *Two Boys* isn't entirely successful: the radiant quintet that ends the first of its two acts (each just short of an hour in length) underlines the lack of set pieces elsewhere in the work – if Muhly had allowed himself the occasional closed form, it would have helped give a clearer overall shape to the music which, as it is, simply unravels; it might also have allowed him the starker contrasts that would have sharpened a rather weak sense of direction. To my mind there's a flaw in the otherwise refreshingly unconventional libretto, too, in that the motivation for the action on which the entire plot hinges is not projected as it should be; instead, it seems to hang on a whim. Nor is it clear whether Muhly – who talks of himself unexcitedly as an 'urban homosexual' – intends the increasingly explicit (verbally rather than visually) homoeroticism of the plot as a tilt against operatic convention, or at the precepts of prejudice, if anything of the sort; he might reasonably respond that a gay composer should approach homosexual relationships as naturally as a straight one presents heterosexual encounters. Most of all, since Muhly's plainly afraid neither of melody nor of consonance, it's surprising that he didn't allow himself more lyricism in the vocal writing.

You can do things in opera you can't do in any other art-form, but time and again these days audacious stagings seem to trample the com-

poser's face in the mud in a search for dramatic effectiveness: here, by contrast, each element seemed to bear the others in mind so that *Two Boys* becomes much more than the sum of its parts. The projections – of geodesic designs or tumbling clouds of geometric shapes morphing into weightless vortices of undefined entities – alternate with the text messages of the drama being played out below them, to give a visual presence to the exchanges in cyberspace. The huge blocks on which the images are projected then turn out to be frames with transparent gauze stretched over them, concealing members of the chorus who now intone their disapproving commentaries, their faces lit from below by the laptops they carry, like monks with candles, as if the entire space were transformed into some kind of cathedral. The design highlights the subtle differences in the music with which Muhly depicts the two colliding worlds. Deft touches of humour lighten the growing darkness of the plot.

In short, *Two Boys* is such a heartening operatic debut that its minor misjudgements can be laid aside to make room for the genuine gratitude such wonderful music should inspire. Nico Muhly will turn 30 between my writing this review and your reading it. If he can produce something of such quality at so young an age, he seems set fair to write something of lasting value before he's a lot older.

Martin Anderson

London, Senate House: Ferneyhough Symposium

The presence of the composer himself at 'Brian Ferneyhough: A Symposium' on 23 February 2011 gave a special aura to the fascinating programme of scholarly papers, panel discussions, film and concert, to illuminate and celebrate the oeuvre of one of the most formidably challenging composers of our time. Presented in association with the BBCSO's *Total Immersion* weekend, by the Institute of Musical Research, London University, in association with Goldsmiths, Royal Holloway and Kingston University, and generously sponsored by the John Coffin Trust, the event attracted to the Chancellor's Hall a full audience of scholars, musicians and music lovers to hear an unusual mix of eminent academics, interpreters and musical personalities shed new light on Ferneyhough's music. Much credit is due to Paul Archbold, of the Goldsmith's Centre Contemporary Music Cultures, for the smooth and successful organization.

The balance of the day was excellent, with two paper sessions alternating with two panel discussions, followed by the composer's keynote address, film and concert to conclude. The opening session began with an introductory survey paper, 'The Class of '43: a context for complexity', by Arnold Whittall, which gave a much-needed historical and aesthetic context. Hanging his narrative on key dates (such as the ubiquitous 1934, which saw the deaths of Elgar, Delius, Holst and the birth of Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies, Peter Dickinson and William Mathias), Whittall singled out some decisive polarities in new British music symbolized by the 'nonet of composers born in 1943' – Ferneyhough's birth year was shared by composers as diverse as Gavin Byars, Roger Smalley and Stephen Montague. Whittall concluded by stressing the need for a fine balance for the avant garde, exemplified in the work of Ferneyhough, between tendencies to reject conservative coherence, and towards incoherence avoiding anarchy.

Ensuing papers focused on particular works. In 'Ferneyhough's Doomed Oracles' Lois Fitch (Edinburgh Napier University) gave a subtle and richly-laced discussion of the relation of words and music with particular reference to the Fourth Quartet, a piece that would return for analytic investigation later in the afternoon. Fitch explored the work's symbolism as a 'right of reply' to Schoenberg's Second Quartet, through the use of voice in second and fourth movements, and illustrated the literary influence on Ferneyhough's techniques such as pitch-filtering, as used in Matlow's filtering of Ezra Pound's 'Cantos'. The composer Julian Anderson characterized Ferneyhough as a 'Romantic', whose emphasis on the 'Ecstatic' placed his work in a tradition covering Scriabin, Charles Ives, Tippett and Finissy, as also the literary work of St Augustine, Blake, Hölderlin and Rilke. This 'ecstatic' quality was evident in moments of 'breakthrough' between the mundane and the eternal in works such as *Transit*, as for instance where 'normal' processes are interrupted by the looping of six voices in a static hexachord – evoking, for Anderson, eternity. In a fascinating analytic paper 'Polyphony of polyphonies: Ferneyhough and prima prattica', Fabrice Fitch (RNCM) explored the composer's reinterpretation of pre-existing music, showing how the new work represented a 'homage', with the source evident only as a 'trace presence'. Fitch analysed the *Motetus Absonetus*, a multiple parody and palimpsest of the 13th century Montepelier Codex, showing how Ferneyhough filtered and dovetailed the original in complex ways; his insights were confirmed and elaborated by Ferneyhough himself in informal conversation.

Chaired by Christopher Fox, the first panel comprised the Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich, one of the early champions of Ferneyhough's music in Europe, with composers Michael Finnissy and Roger Redgate. Halbreich recalled his years as Festival Director at the Royan Festival in France, and his bold programming of Ferneyhough premières in 1974–5. For Michael Finnissy, Royan was well known for Xenakis and spectral music at that time and was considered 'a cauldron of activity' in contrast to the UK. Halbreich avoided classifying Ferneyhough as modernist or postmodernist, preferring instead to consider him a radical, in the tradition of other radical composers, the greatest being Bach. Was his 'complex' style a sunset or dawn?, Fox asked, to which Roger Redgate answered that it was a way forward which would turn out to be 'the most important' since he 'speaks to the ear and to the heart'.

The second paper session presented three analytic approaches. First Cordula Patzold, in 'Some aspects of *Carceri d'Invenzione III*', explored pulse cycles with logical increases in rhythmic densities and recurrent chords. Klaus Lippe's 'Medium/Form Relations in the Fourth String Quartet' was a sketch study illuminating filter processes,⁸ while flautist Matteo Cesari took a performer's approach to consider 'The Achievement of the Unachievable or The Absurd Hero', in relation to *Sisyphus Redux* illustrating it with a film of his own performance in a workshop with the composer before a group of students.

Such practical issues of performance came to the fore in the second discussion, in which Professor Amanda Glauert (RCM) chaired a panel comprising Irvine Arditti, leader of the Arditti Quartet, with two of the performers of the evening concert, violist Bridget Carey and oboist Christopher Redgate. Irvine Arditti's performer's perspective offered some very concrete 'tips' about the mastery of such challenging scores, especially rhythm. Using 'irrationals' as a case in point, he described that one could calculate different divisions to simplify the patterns. He described the sense of exciting responsibility in giving first performances, bringing a piece on paper to life, so that audiences would experience it as 'the piece'. Though Ferneyhough's music was 'like any other music', one gained experience about what to

look out for, for instance the use of microtones, and irrationals. Regarding the process of preparation, Arditti described his 'silent score overview' in which he would make initial calculations: it was necessary to look at all aspects at once, so that from the very start 'you want to be playing music, after all!'. Christopher Redgate spoke about the excitement in new music of the renewal of the instrument and its possibilities, whilst Bridget Carey, though recalling how she had at one time been 'frightened to go near a Ferneyhough score because of their look', stressed the value of making the effort to think a lot about it, since it was 'beautiful music ... with beautiful lyrical lines to be found in it'.

The keynote paper of the Symposium was given by Ferneyhough himself, an introductory talk to the film documentary in which Paul Archbold traced the Arditti Quartet's preparations for the première of Ferneyhough's Sixth and latest String Quartet. Ferneyhough started began by introducing the work as the last of a series of works from 2006–2008, expanding the notions of intersectional polyphony. He explained the use of 'confusion' as method, confusion in the sense of 'understanding something as something else', where materials intersect and affect one another, and one thing is heard as something else. Taking as his starting point Webern's late style, he showed how here the polyphony was more elevated, tactile and concerned with time: a matrix of multi-voice motion, sound-fragments within a matrix of rhythmic structures (the order and instruments pre-determined). It was both concerned with time and 'out of time'. He explained how he had explored the possibilities, almost as an experiment, of creating a web of durations within each layer of texture, simultaneous or overlapping, which would articulate the contrast between measured or experiential time.

The day concluded with a welcome opportunity to hear Ferneyhough's music in live performance by the excellent Ensemble Exposé conducted by Roger Redgate. *La Chute d'Icare* (1988) featured Andrew Sparling as soloist, whilst *Incipits* featured Bridget Carey, viola and Julian Warburton, percussion, with the ensemble. Following *Flurries*, the concert concluded with the UK première of *O Lux* (2005) for ten instruments, a fitting climax to a memorable Symposium, full of insights.

Malcolm Miller

⁸ A version of this paper is scheduled for a future issue of *Tempo* (Ed.).

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Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Music 2011

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