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## FIRST PERFORMANCES

### Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 2011

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Disembodied chanting voices and ominously tolling bells, transmitted by some unseen agency into an eerily deserted courtyard of unlit and seemingly uninhabited warehouses on a wintry, starless evening: not the start of another baffling case for Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased) but business as usual at the 34th Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. These sounds, comprising the audio element of an installation entitled *The White Forest*, surrounding the forbiddingly-named Bates Mill, were created by composer-in-residence Bent Sørensen and formed part of the annual event's exploration of recent music from Denmark. Including no fewer than eight world premières and sixteen UK premières within its ten day-span, the 2011 festival gave the impression of an institution in rude health, confirming its formidable reputation as one of the most significant new music events in the calendar. In particular, it continued a well-established tradition of providing a platform for British composers more frequently acclaimed abroad than within these shores.

James Dillon, whose time-honoured association with Huddersfield dates back to the very first festival of 1978, provided two substantial works receiving their first performance in the UK. *Oslo/Triptych*, for chamber ensemble, is the second in a set of three instrumental triptychs, each named after its commissioning city: the first, *Leuven Triptych* of 2009, had its UK première at that year's Huddersfield Festival and *New York Triptych* is scheduled to be launched next summer at Darmstadt. Among the typically wide-ranging extra-musical influences on *Oslo/Triptych* may be counted Virgil, Coleridge and Apollinaire, whose texts were quoted in crackly radio broadcasts via concealed shortwave receivers surreptitiously activated by the performers. These texts were barely audible but served the purpose of providing a gritty, urban layer of sound to the refined instrumental palette. Scored for flute, clarinet, modest percussion, piano and string quartet, the work required a hand-pumped harmonium, played by the pianist, making a distinctive contribution to its carefully chosen sonorities. Growing out of an initial febrile dialogue between violin and viola, the half-hour piece achieved a delicate

balance between precisely tabulated material and more improvisatory elements. Its three sections included several far-reaching dialogues between various instrumental combinations, lending a genuine chamber-like discourse to a characteristically challenging statement from Dillon, demanding complete concentration and commitment from players and audience alike. Fortunately the members of the Oslo-based Cikada Ensemble, who commissioned the piece and launched it in the Netherlands a week before its UK première at Huddersfield University's St. Paul's Hall, were fully equal to its technical and interpretative demands. *Oslo/Triptych* joyfully flirted with tonality in its central panel but was chiefly impressive for the inventive use of judiciously selected resources.

St Paul's Hall was also the venue for the second work by James Dillon to receive its first UK performance at the festival. Having reached his Sixth String Quartet, Dillon may be counted among the foremost living exponents of this most intimate genre. Contributions to the medium have appeared at regular intervals throughout his creative life, charting his artistic metamorphoses and mirroring contemporaneous preoccupations. His latest example, written in the summer of 2010, was premièred by the Diotima String Quartet. Dedicated to the memory of trade union leader James 'Jimmy' Reid, it unfolded in one, unbroken and symmetrical arc subdivided into five parts or 'states'. The central section was the longest, hypnotically expanding and contracting upon repetitions of a single tone; this pivotal episode, with its discrete, static material centred on the note E flat, was in stark contrast to the two interconnected outer sections which vividly juxtaposed miscellaneous, contrasting elements, whilst the second and fourth parts distributed a series of sharply-defined figures between different combinations of players.

This poetical and visionary score offered some parallels with sonata form in its use of restated material, transformed by the experience of the 'anti-developmental' central section. Achieving a satisfying balance between virtuosic effects and a compelling narrative, James Dillon's Sixth String Quartet took the audience on a journey which was both innovative and familiar; part of the unique strength of the composer's writing is his ability to

adapt and transform existing gestures and structures. He has no need of obfuscating titles for his string quartets – they embrace and embody the very essence of the genre with their intense and deeply felt discourse.

Also featured in the Diotima players' programme were two world premières. *Adesso* is the first string quartet by the Milan-born composer Oscar Bianchi and forms part of his preoccupation with the notion of 'urgency' in music. Dramatic strength was derived from the tensions between immediacy – seizing the moment – and the more formal conventions of the quartet genre, such as the need for a developing narrative. There was a formidable range of textures due to an imaginative approach to their physical production – use of quarter-tones, pressured notes, *sul ponticello* and *sul tasto* playing; this extended palette helped to challenge the medium's essential homogeneity. Powerfully concise, packing in enough substance and incident for a piece considerably longer than its 20 minutes, Bianchi's quartet impressed with its fresh, revisionist view of the genre.

Also lasting around 20 minutes, Thomas Simaku's Fourth String Quartet (2011) explored the idea of a single line presented in various guises but not stated unequivocally until the sustained low C on the cello in the concluding bars. Its four movements appeared to develop one continuous narrative interrupted by breaks (or silence) rather than dividing into four separate entities. A virtuoso episode for first violin and another involving first violin, viola and cello framed the slow third movement, and the many appearances of the single line were highly contrasting in terms of contour, formation and tension. Assuming a role regularly undertaken at this festival by the Ardittis (who had performed a programme of music by Xenakis the previous evening), the Diotima String Quartet deserve special credit for taking three technically demanding and intricately wrought pieces into their repertoire and presenting them on the same occasion in quick succession. Their accomplished, vital and enthusiastic responses to such exacting new works played no small part in ensuring this event was a notable success.

Perhaps the festival's most prestigious world première was that of Richard Barrett's *CONSTRUCTION* for three vocalists, 16 instrumentalists, electronics and a 16-channel sound installation. ELISION, that cosmopolitan group of new music specialists, was entrusted with the task of delivering this monumental, 135-minute work in Huddersfield Town Hall, three years later than its projected first performance in the city of Liverpool (who commissioned the work during its year as European Capital of Culture). Barrett's

fiercely uncompromising music has enjoyed a high profile at recent Huddersfield Festivals, with memorable performances of *Opening of the Mouth* in 2009 and *Mesopotamia* in 2010. Though both of those works are substantial, *CONSTRUCTION* is conceived on a considerably larger scale, with even broader terms of reference and generating yet more diverse soundscapes. Barrett's new piece is made up of 20 component parts of between one and 15 minutes' duration. These 20 sections are subdivided into four interlocking cycles of five movements each; they occasionally interrupt or bleed into each other but there are also examples of silences between the sections. *CONSTRUCTION*, part of Barrett's 'resistance and vision' series, surveys centuries of thought about urban living, starkly juxtaposing these ideas in their idealized form with the often harsh realities of turmoil and even destruction.

The piece utilizes an idiosyncratic, diverse and in some cases unlikely selection of resources, including elements of Plato's *Republic*, William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, the surreal, empty cities of Giorgio de Chirico, Italo Calvino's Venetian dreams in *Invisible Cities*, the dream-architecture of Francesco Colonna, the ideal societies of Aldous Huxley's *Island*, Farid ud-Din Attar's mystical poem *Conference of the Birds* and 'Germania', Hitler's vision for a new capital city. Barrett poses the question of whether connexions exist between these different entities, rather than actively seeking to uncover any such associations. Another source referenced is Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, where a description of a 'sound-house' was the inspiration for a spatialization system in which partially improvised sounds, vocal, instrumental or electronic were distributed through the Town Hall via a system with two banks of speakers, one at floor level and the other above the audience.

One of the cycles acted as a kind of micro-opera, setting fragments from Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, whilst the following cycle might be regarded as a five-movement 'violin concerto'. Material from the mini-opera cycle was incorporated into the 'concerto', where the solo violin's 'laments' provided an interior commentary to the more dramatic episodes from *The Trojan Women*. In the *News From Nowhere* piece, four solo wind players each played at least three different instruments, ornamenting a single melodic strand which ran throughout. In contrast, *Island* consisted of almost completely improvised music by saxophonist Tim O'Dwyer and the composer on electronics, together with an instrumental octet which played almost completely notated music,

representing the pressure of coexistence for the pre-planned and the spontaneous in society.

Taking a typically ambitious and politically aware stance, Barrett suggests that out of all the confrontation in the piece's intense and multifarious discourse, there might be forged the blueprints for a vision of how we could improve our society. Thus, the continual interposition of the utopias and the realities is eventually resolved by a substantial concluding portion where the performers freely improvise, in the light of what has already taken place, taking on collective responsibility for the future in an 'opening' out into the world beyond the work through a concerted leap of imagination.

Barrett's *CONSTRUCTION* has supplanted Nicholas Maw's *Odyssey* as the longest continuous piece of music for large-scale forces. A more important consideration than its extended time-scale, however, is the proof offered by this massively brooding achievement, along with James Dillon's recent *Nine Rivers*, that intricate, complex music has the capacity to make big statements on a vast scale with a validity equal to that of more traditional, overtly organic structures. A recording, whether on CD or DVD, would be a useful tool to explore more fully *CONSTRUCTION*'s fascinating pathways and bridges, yet it is really only in per-

formance that such a sophisticated, multifarious and precisely calibrated work can be fully experienced so let us hope further presentations will soon be forthcoming.

Huddersfield Town Hall was also the venue for two significant UK premières. In the first, Rebecca Saunders's *Stasis* was performed by MusikFabrik, who had given the work's first performance at the Donaueschingen Festival. Saunders was composer-in-residence at the 2010 Huddersfield Festival, where her meticulously crafted and deeply resonant pieces proved to be distinctive and haunting. Timbre, space and the placing of sounds were prime considerations for her new, substantial 50-minute work, in which a sizeable ensemble was regularly splintered into smaller and ever-changing groupings. Despite the fascinating, fluctuating sonic tapestries which ensued, *Stasis* managed to retain a perceptible, if highly personal narrative throughout based on an accumulation of tiny moments or gestures. Specks of colour sparked from dialogues between various instruments were gathered into a kaleidoscopic pattern in which the silences between the notes – ranging from apertures to fissures – were as crucial to the overall effect as the executed sounds themselves. Delicacy and fantasy are the hallmarks of Saunders's nuanced soundscapes and the exqui-



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**Dvarionas** Violin Concerto *UK premiere*  
**Sibelius** Symphony No. 2  
*Neeme Järvi conductor*  
*Vadim Gluzman violin*

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*Tõnu Kaljuste conductor*  
*Alina Ibragimova violin*  
*Barnabás Kelemen violin*

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**FRIDAY 20 APRIL 7.30PM**  
**Einojuhani Rautavaara**  
Towards the Horizon *UK premiere*  
**Delius** The Walk to the Paradise Garden  
**Bridge** The Sea  
**Sibelius** Symphony No. 5  
*John Storgårds conductor*  
*Truls Mørk cello*

**THURSDAY 10 MAY 7.30PM**  
**Kalevi Aho**  
Trombone Concerto *UK premiere*  
**Shostakovich** The Bolt – suite  
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*Alexander Vedernikov conductor*  
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sitely fine textures that she spun in *Stasis* were both intriguing and emotive.

Braving the precipitous tiers of the Town Hall stage, members of MusikFabrik moved stealthily and fluently around the building, performing above and behind as well as in front of the audience. Occasionally, the players formed tableaux, adding visual elegance to an intricately-designed piece. This beautifully played (and periodically non-played) performance of an uncommonly subtle creation made a strong impact. Artistic director Graham McKenzie is to be applauded for his continued support of Saunders' instinctive, scrupulously fashioned work.

During the festival's closing weekend, the French Ensemble Linea gave the first UK performance of Brian Ferneyhough's *Chronos Aion*. This took place some five years after the work was completed, an indication of how far British audiences lag behind Ferneyhough's output. Coincidentally, this idea is pertinent to the piece itself, which was built up of tiny sections or gestures (112 of them) and explored the time it takes for audiences to perceive and assimilate those gestures. *Chronos Aion* was teeming with fragmentary ideas for varying forces and teasing in its continual adjustments to the flow of the material – sometimes unfolding in paragraphs, often pausing for breath and occasionally doing both simultaneously so that one part of the ensemble is suspended while other players acted as vibrations of the held notes. A complex work that stretches the audience's ears and capacity to absorb multiple episodes and construct a meaningful narrative from them, *Chronos Aion* seemed to summarize all that is best about typical Huddersfield Festival repertoire – challenging, stimulating and uncompromising.

Consisting of two further UK premières, the rest of the Ensemble Linea's programme was of a comparably high standard. French composer Fabien Lévy's delightfully enigmatic *Querwüchsig* displayed an irrepressible sense of drive and vitality with its rapid glissandi and pointillism. There was an unmistakably Gallic sensibility to these frenetic gestures, like Satie on speed. The second half of the work was more measured, bubbling under with baleful, crepuscular undercurrents before ending on an entirely apposite question mark. Francesco Filidei's *Finito Ogni Gesto* ('Every gesture completed') was a genuinely poignant memorial work for the celebrated Italian writer Edoardo Sanguinetti, who died in 2010. Containing some beautifully fragile and ethereal sounds, thanks to the poetic use of such exotic percussion instruments as a waterphone, this hypnotic piece gradually coalesced from its non-corporeal beginnings, before sliding down to subterranean levels

and finally evaporating into stillness.

This was an imaginative programme, stunningly well played by the Ensemble Linea under their conductor Jean Philippe Wurtz. Care had been taken to present three contrasting new works, creating a real sense of variety, an essential quality not always evident in concerts consisting entirely of new repertoire.

Two significant launches also distinguished the 2011 festival. Written by founding artistic director Richard Steinitz, the book *Explosions in November*, published by the University of Huddersfield Press, is a lavishly illustrated and divertingly recorded history of the first 33 years of a truly international event. Organized both chronologically and thematically, with chapters devoted to performers, composers, premieres and commissions, as well as educational projects, marketing and management, this substantial book has a fascinating and inspiring story to tell and is well worth acquiring by anyone with even a passing interest in the more avant-garde elements of contemporary music from the last three and a half decades.<sup>1</sup>

Surrounded by an exhibition charting the life and work of Iannis Xenakis at Huddersfield Art Gallery, a panel discussion hosted by contemporary arts organization 'Sound and Music' introduced the British Music Collection. This unique resource, much of it consisting of donations from the Composers Guild of Great Britain, formed the archive of the now defunct British Music Information Centre that used to be based in London's Stratford Place. Consisting of some 40,000 scores – published and unpublished – plus official and off-air recordings and background material, it will now be housed in a purpose-built unit within the Music Library of the University of Huddersfield and become publicly accessible in January 2012. Though most of the content dates from the 1960s onwards, items belonging to the early 20th century are included. New material will be added as the collection is developed by SAM and the University in partnership, including a major programme to make as much as possible available online. The library already houses the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival's own archive, launched at the start of the 2009 festival: a repository of scores, programmes and recordings that also includes correspondence from and interviews with some of the most illustrious names in new music from the past three decades. Together these collections constitute the most comprehensive and wide-ranging archive of post-1945 British music in existence.

<sup>1</sup> For a review of *Explosions in November*, see this issue, p. 68 (Ed.)

To sum up, this was a vintage year for the festival, reaffirming its place at the forefront of international contemporary music events. However, I must conclude with a small but heartfelt plea. Setting an unwelcome precedent, the 2011 programme-book lacked biographies of either composers or performers. Notes on individual pieces, leaning towards the arcane, would surely have profited from the interpolation of some factual context and background. Less advertising and more modest artwork in next year's programme-book, in order to facilitate the reinstatement of detailed profiles of the outstanding musicians and creative talents who ensure the success of this annual occasion, would be much appreciated.

Paul Conway

### New York, Gotham Chamber Opera: Nico Muhly's 'Dark Sisters'

Nico Muhly is probably the best known American composer of about 30 years of age. The level of success of his career can easily be measured by the fact that in a time when practically all compositional activity is strictly a cottage industry conducted by more or less successful self-promoters, his music is published by a major publisher, he has several recordings on major labels, and he has had performances and commissions from some of the most important performing institutions in the world (the Metropolitan Opera probably being the most notable). His music is lively and appealing and is obviously the product not just of a major talent with a penetrating and amazingly varied and non-ideological musical mind, but of a serious and tireless workman with formidable technical mastery. Probably the strongest influence on Muhly's musical development was his experience as a boy chorister in the Episcopal Cathedral in Providence, Rhode Island, which allowed him both to learn the literature of Anglican church music from the 16th century to Herbert Howells and to absorb its sound world and its procedures intimately, from the inside. The textures, sense of line, melodies, and harmonies of that music permeate his work, along with elements of early American minimalist music, particularly that of Philip Glass, which is the other major component of his style.

Muhly's opera *Dark Sisters*, with a libretto by Stephen Karam, which was co-commissioned by the Gotham Chamber Opera, Music-Theater Group, and the Opera Company of Philadelphia, received its first production in New York by the

Gotham Chamber Opera early in November of 2011. Like his other opera, *Two Boys*, which was written more or less simultaneously with it,<sup>2</sup> *Dark Sisters* is concerned with a timely (one might almost say, 'ripped from the headlines') subject, and features current technology as an intimate element of the plot. The story concerns a polygamous family (never identified as to their faith in the libretto, but presumably Mormons), namely 'the Prophet' and his five wives, whose children have been removed by the government due to charges of child abuse and forced under-age marriage. The focus of the work is Eliza, one of the wives – who, while longing for the return of her 15-year-old daughter Lucinda, also suspects that she has been promised by the Prophet as the wife of a much older man, as Eliza herself had been. The situation leads Eliza, who already has doubts about their beliefs, to an ever-greater questioning of her life with the family. One of the other wives, Ruth, haunted by sorrow and regret for the earlier death of two of her sons, has become somewhat unhinged.

The opera opens with the wives mourning the seizure of their children; the Prophet announces that at the command of an angel who has appeared to him, he must go into the desert to pray. He tells the wives that while he is gone they must 'keep sweet'. Eliza has a vision of her daughter which triggers memories of the day of her wedding, when she made her own trip into the desert. After her vision Eliza is submerged in the daily life of the family, which is full of barely-disguised tension and competition among the wives. Ruth, after recalling the deaths of her sons, gives Eliza a letter she has found; it is from Lucinda to the Prophet and reveals that the girl has indeed been promised as a wife. This fact convinces Eliza to revolt against her husband. The act ends at night, with each wife in her room, each one hoping for a visit from the Prophet. He chooses Eliza who, while submitting herself to him for the moment, promises herself to share her own revelation with the outside world.

The second act begins with a television interview of the wives by the 'media personality' King: the Prophet has decided that the exposure of the wives is the only tactic which will result in return of their children. We simultaneously see the wives at their compound being interviewed and the interview as it is broadcast. Although the wives attempt to keep the focus of the interview

<sup>2</sup> The première of *Two Boys* at the English National Opera was reviewed in *Tempo* Vol. 65, No. 258 (July 2011), pp. 56–57 (Ed.).

on their anxiety about the welfare of their children, after repeated questioning by King about their individual lives and beliefs, Ruth becomes increasingly more distraught, and finally Eliza announces that she was married against her will at an early age and that the same fate is about to befall her daughter, which plunges the interview into a chaos which King proclaims great television and tries to prolong. We see in a subsequent 'broadcast' by King that the children have been returned to their mothers. Ruth, made more bereft at the loss of her dead sons by the thought of the return of the other children, throws herself off a cliff in the desert. The opera concludes with Ruth's funeral, where Eliza, who has left the community, is shunned by the remaining wives. Eliza is confronted by Lucinda, who, as a true believer, is enthusiastically committed to going through with her marriage, and tells her mother that it would have been better had she died rather than to have left the family. Eliza is left alone, estranged from the family and especially from her daughter.

The language of the music of *Dark Sisters* combines elements of Anglican Church Music with Coplandesque Americana, Messiaen (particularly *Des Canyons aux Étoiles*, which evokes the American Southwest where the opera is set), and, in the television sequence, elements of minimalism. The span and trajectory of its first act, which runs for about an hour and 15 minutes, is somewhat impeded by rather profuse and cluttered elements of dramatic exposition. It seems long, despite some very striking and compelling moments such as the opening deploration in which the wives mourn the loss of their confiscated children, and Eliza's ecstatic 'starry skies' scene, with an accompaniment featuring celesta, harp, and piano, when she remembers her trip into the desert before her marriage to the Prophet, whose effect lingers in the memory. The second act, about 45 minutes' duration, contains fewer events and is much more efficient and satisfying dramatically, especially in the scene of the television interview and Ruth's soliloquy in the desert before she jumps to her death, where the instrumental details harken back to Eliza's solo scene in the first act. The vocal writing throughout the opera is effective and grateful, and the transparent orchestral accompaniment is colorful and evocative.

*Dark Sisters* was directed by Rebecca Taichman; the set and video design were by Leo Warner and Mark Grimmer of 59 Productions, and the lighting by Donald Holder, all of whom were also involved in the London production of *Two Boys* at the English National Opera. Neal Goren conducted. Caitlin Lynch as Eliza and Eve Gigliotti as Ruth were both compelling and moving, and both

sang beautifully, as did Jennifer Check, Margaret Lattimore, and Jennifer Zetlan, as the other wives. Kevin Burdett was commanding as the Prophet and appropriately energetic and smarmy as King. Kristina Bachrach was Lucinda.

Three recent Decca CD releases demonstrate the faith of that major company in Muhly's ongoing development. A disc by The Los Angeles Master Chorale conducted by Grant Gershon contains choral music of Muhly's which both gives testimony to his devotion to Anglican choral music and demonstrates its results.<sup>3</sup> *Bright Mass With Canons* (written for the choir of St. Thomas Church in New York) is a lively work which, Muhly writes, is a compendium of the 'tropes and moments' that he loved in his childhood music-making. It features long spacious choral lines with a concertante organ part: sometimes, as at the beginning, interpolating chirpy trumpet calls, and sometimes, as in the Sanctus, offering periodic twitches, as well as providing a rather lush accompaniment. The *First Service*, the earliest work on the disc (there is as yet no *Second Service*), written for the choirs of Girton and Clare Colleges Cambridge, strongly evokes the music of Herbert Howells, who is a favorite of Muhly's. Both these works of liturgical music reflect Muhly's thrill at setting texts which everybody knows and which are recited daily; their relative brevity takes into account the fact that in a service, most of the music is listened to while standing. The disc also includes two elaborate anthems. *Senex puerum portabat*, for chorus with brass, is influenced by Byrd's setting of the same text; the way that an insistent repeating pulse-like rhythmic figure in the initial a cappella section morphs into the entrance of the brass, which then blooms into a full accompaniment for the second part of the work, is particularly striking. *A Good Understanding* for chorus, children's chorus, organ, and percussion contrasts aggressively rhythmic, dance-like music with broader melodic segments. Although *Expecting the Main Things from You*, for chorus with string quartet, organ, and percussion, is a secular work, its texts are by Walt Whitman in his most prophetic, biblically-influenced manner. It is the most expansive, most expressively varied, work on the disc, whose outer movements, 'I Hear America Singing' and 'Poets to Come', mostly muscular and rhythmic urban scenes, featuring plentifully illustrative percussions parts, surround the much quieter, contemplative, and pastoral 'A

<sup>3</sup> 'A Good Understanding: Choral Music of Nico Muhly'. *Bright Mass with Canons; First Service; Senex puerum portabat; A Good Understanding; Expecting the Main Things From You*. Los Angeles Master Chorale c. Grant Gershon. Decca B0014741-02.

Farm Picture', a nocturne with expanding and contracting rhythms in woodblock, tam-tam, and vibraphone, evoking satellites passing overhead, demonstrating 'the non-omnipresent invisible haze of technology even in the fields'.

*I Drink the Air Before Me* is the score for an evening-length dance piece commissioned by the Stephen Petronio Company for the company's 25th anniversary.<sup>4</sup> Muhly and Petronio planned for a big ecstatic, celebratory work relating to the weather: storms, anxiety, and coastal living. Framed by solemn plainsong-like music for children's chorus, the final portion setting words from the 19th Psalm ('One day tells its tale to another and one night imparts knowledge to another. Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard. Their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world.'), the work traces a trajectory of increasing intensity, building by means of a 'spiral-shape constellations of notes' into the center of a storm, with climactic, frenetically whirling music. Muhly imagined the six-player instrumental ensemble as being 'a little quirky community of people living by the edge of the sea: a busybody flute, a wise viola, and the masculine, workman-like bassoon, trombone, and upright bass. The piano acts as an agitator, an unwelcome visitor, bearing with it aggressive electronic noises and rhythmic interruptions'. If the choral disc focuses on the influence of Anglican church music on the composer, *I Drink the Air Before Me* features more of his interest in American minimalism, especially in the strongest music on the disc, 'First Storm', and the three sections called 'Music Under Pressure'. The ensemble on the recording consists of Muhly as pianist and close associates of his, along with the Young People's Chorus of New York, and their performance of the work is certainly definitive (even if one can imagine a performance where the words sung by the children's chorus could actually be understood). The section entitled 'Varied Carols', an intense meditation for solo viola, is given a grippingly magisterial performance by the wonderful Nadia Sirota.

The violinist Thomas Gould, leader of the Aurora Orchestra, enthusiastic about Muhly's music after having participated in a performance of *By All Means* (which was written as part of a composers' exchange between the Royal Academy of Music and the Juilliard School in New York),

asked him to write a concerto in which he could play his recently acquired six-string electric violin.<sup>5</sup> Muhly says the resulting work, *Seeing Is Believing*, a single movement of 25-minute length, 'references the ancient practice of observing and mapping the sky', and mimics 'the process by which, through observation, a series of points becomes a line'. The night sky and stars are clearly powerful images for Muhly, since they are behind not only this piece, but the two most striking scenes of *Dark Sisters*. The work begins with the soloist playing urgently plangent melismatic lines accompanied at first by plunks and thumps in the lower instruments, and then by more insistent jagged lines. Chirpy angular figures in the woodwinds lead to an extended section with impassioned soaring long lines that culminates in an exultant climax, eventually winding down to a coda that ends with the soloist playing a gently undulating, slowed-down version of its original music against a vast shimmering background. *By All Means*, the work which attracted Gould, is also on the recording. The terms of the assignment it satisfied were that it should not only have the same instrumentation as the Webern Concerto, Op. 24, but it should also be based on the first three notes of Webern's row for the piece. Muhly finds it inescapable to harmonize such material with post-Wagnerian tonal harmonies; in this particular case it brought to his mind cross-relations in certain Weelkes pieces, and the piece progresses by combining Webern with Weelkes. *Step Team* evokes step dancing and, rather than working with pontilistic textures, focuses on a unified rhythmic agenda which periodically breaks down and scatters, to be marshalled back into line by the bass trombone, the prominent instrument of the ensemble. *Motion*, which Muhly says is about 'the nervous energy of obsessive counting', is based on material from *See, see, the Word is Incarnate* by Orlando Gibbons. The orchestration and instrumental writing in all these works is brilliant and suffused with aural radiance. The disc is completed by three Renaissance English Choral works, *Miserere me, Deus* and *Bow Thine Ear, O Lord* by Byrd, and *This Is Record of John* by Gibbons, re-imagined by Muhly as instrumental works. The performances of all these pieces, by the Aurora Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Collon, have the same brilliance and radiance as the music.

Rodney Lister

<sup>4</sup> MUHLY: *I Drink The Air Before Me*. Alex Sopp, Seth Baer, Michael Clayville, Nico Muhly, Nadia Sirota, Logan Coale, Young People's Chorus of New York dir. Fancieso Nuñez, director. Programming by Valgeir Gírdsson and Ben Frost. Decca B0014742-02.

<sup>5</sup> MUHLY: *Seeing Is Believing; Miserere mei, Deus* (Byrd); *Motion; This Is the Record of John* (Gibbons); *By All Means; Bow Thine Ear, O Lord* (Byrd); *Step Team*. Thomas Gould (vln), Aurora Orchestra c. Nicholas Collon. Decca 478 2731.

## Manchester University: Julio d'Escriván

The printed programme to this 1 December 2011 concert stated:

This event ... aims to introduce our lunchtime concert audiences to one of the most recent and innovative ways of creating music with computers called 'Live Coding'. Live coding consists of starting a musical performance by typing 'the score' on a blank canvas on a computer screen. The score, which can include written words, pictures, expressions and computer instructions is introduced live by the performer, for the computer to create live sound out of it. This visual information is presented to the listeners via a large projection screen on stage, aiming to facilitate the understanding of the sounds being created as the music narrative unfolds ... Julio d'Escriván is one of the Live Coding pioneers in the UK and the world and has distinguished himself for presenting complex computer music language to non-specialised audiences in a very accessible way.

Thus after a few introductory remarks, the concert began with the composer seated facing the audience, the laptop screen he was viewing reproduced on the said large projection screen behind, thus enabling the audience to observe the same 'computer score' which informed the composer's 'performance choices', quite literally 'before their very eyes'. With a screensaver of the Earth seen from space, the screen was divided into two sets of text: the actual user text on the left, while on the right were words from the *Odyssey*. As time wore on it became apparent that this 'commentary' was in fact repetitive, even on some kind of 'loop'. The composer scrolled down and/or highlighted certain words and phrases of user text, ignoring others. This gave the impression that the running order of the composition was largely predetermined, but with the option of omitting certain passages to 'skip ahead' to another section. A reading of the concert programme subsequently confirmed that this was 'code compiling' rather than 'live coding' or, as the composer himself so accurately described it, 'live "tweaking" sound art'.

The resultant impression of the 9-minute composition was of a somewhat random collage of sounds, perhaps not inappropriate for a piece titled *Ensayo sobre la Torpeza (Test on Clumsiness)*. The same procedure was employed for fifth piece in the concert, *Ensayo sobre la bicilleta (Essay about a bicycle)*. The chief differences here were a propensity towards images of (you guessed it) bicycles, and an interaction between a spoken introduction and (you guessed it again) sundry bicycle noises (bells, chains, spokes etc.). Amusing as this repartee obviously was, it didn't continue to amuse beyond the opening stages, and certainly didn't justify a duration of 8 minutes.

I think it's far to say that the visual access to the computer score presented the audience with both advantages and disadvantages, depending on one's point of view. Whilst it provided an insight into how this kind of music is created, by force of practicalities the visual information preceded the sound, which sometimes took away any potential element of surprise; it also tempted one sometimes to predict what resultant sound might shortly appear from a given visual or worded signal. For example, 7 minutes into the first piece (and we already knew that was 2 minutes from the end as all timings were indicated in the printed programme) came the screen instruction *outro* (that's *coda* to *Tempo* readers) with the description 'glimmerpulse'. Of course, the audience were free to ignore the screen, but this obviously wasn't the intention, and the majority if not all of the audience did as expected, as this was presumably the best way to get the most out of the experience.

The one remaining 'solo' piece, *The Blank Page* (title inspired by Frank Zappa) was a slightly different proposition, as it did feature 'live coding' using the stimulus of a word offered at random by the audience: 'meringue'. The first five letters were introduced one at a time, and the last three ('gue') together, which had the effect of building up the piece in layers that were then manipulated. The resultant sound was a complex electronic version of a fast-paced disco instrumental to a 'high energy beat' (think Thomas Dolby meets Ministry of Sound) with d'Escriván in his element, jiggling about like a celebrity DJ – much appreciated by the mainly youthful student audience. This time the piece ended not with the instruction *outro* or *coda* but 'kill'.

The remainder of the concert consisted of three pieces played by a live performer, enhanced and manipulated through the computer by the composer. The shortest of these was *Insect Medium* for violin (played by Ellie Gaynard) which juxtaposed long sustained notes and repetitive fragments, with insect noises and more pseudo techno-dance music. The violin phrases (probably unintentionally, but I mention to suggest the flavour) sounded slightly reminiscent of the frantic fluttering flurries of Sciarino's *Caprices* for solo violin. The computer screen this time resembled a 'garage band' type format, rather than a representation of the score. Again the composer enjoyed himself hugely, and so did most of the audience. This was easily the best of the three pieces, because (at three minutes) the shortest. The remaining two pieces were for tenor sax (soloist Ben Cottrell). The screen consisted of the largely traditionally-notated sax score, and the composer's garage-band-like 'text' (hence the title *Garabesque Machine?*). The



overall effect of the six-minute piece could be summarized as short snatches of sax melody (by turns lyrical or rhythmic) manipulated and/or reinforced/amplified by the computer, sometimes as a glorified sound effect (akin to that produced by foot pedals in popular music) sometimes as a rather humorous echo-like accompaniment. The other sax piece, the nine-minute *eBop*, which closed the concert, was very similar in terms of procedure and sound. What did the composer add this time? Despite some highfalutin justification in the programme notes, basically this: nothing more than 'atmosphere' to what would otherwise (excepting his trademark quirkiness in varying degrees, and a very loud 'foghorn' ending) have likely been perceived as a very ordinary piece.

One wondered to what extent the 'created on the spur of the moment' element was largely cosmetic. It was possible to imagine virtually every detail of the soloist's input being manipulated in some slightly different way from performance to performance, without substantively altering the overall impression of the piece – but that could be said of a lot of music. It was also difficult to imagine a forum for this music outside of the cloistered environs of a university concert series: and that could be said of a lot of music also. That is not to deny that d'Escriván has reached a large public in the field of music for films and commercials, and some of the above comments suggest that some of this music would easily pass muster at a rave. Nevertheless it's difficult to imagine it being programmed in serious concert series, other than as an element of passing novelty value.

Whilst it made for a refreshing change that a concert of contemporary music should deliberately (rather than unintentionally) amuse, nevertheless a little slapstick goes a long way, and it was difficult to imagine wanting to hear it again anytime soon. On the basis that this is unlikely to happen with any great frequency ('live', anyway) perhaps that doesn't matter, or, in a perverse kind of way, is all to the good. Nevertheless, if those who dreamed of working with electronic music (such as Busoni) or those who actually worked with it (such as Luigi Nono, painstakingly taking days to produce what could now perhaps be achieved in seconds) had had access to the current technology, one can't help feeling they would have produced something more interesting and substantial.

Tim Mottershead

### London, Royal Opera House (Linbury Theatre): Tarik O'Regan's 'Heart of Darkness'

Having followed Tarik O'Regan's meteoric rise, establishing himself as one of the UK's most successful young award-winning composers as he commutes between Oxbridge and the USA,<sup>6</sup> I was most intrigued to be there for the world première of his debut opera *Heart of Darkness* at the Linbury Theatre (ROH) on 1 November 2011.

Based on Joseph Conrad's novel of the same title, written in 1917, dubbed 'highly autobiographical' in John Stape's programme notes, this is self-evidently a fiendishly difficult literary narrative to portray in operatic form, especially for a young fledgling composer like O'Regan (born 1978) even with his commendable ambition, daring and enterprise. Already the inspiration for Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and a radio adaptation by Orson Welles (1938), the tale is assumed to be set in the Congo from where Conrad himself returned after an eight-month stint in 1891, later characterizing Europe's Conquest of Africa as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience'. Conrad tells the tale of Marlow, an old sea captain, looking back on his traumatic experience in this colonial territory.

For his operatic version, O'Regan sets the action 'concurrently on a ship moored in the Thames estuary and many years earlier, during Marlow's expedition to Central Africa', as emphasized in the Opera's synopsis. However we are for the most part stuck on the Thames, with merely verbal reminiscences to convey the story, with much talk of 'rivets' to recall hold-ups when the boat was damaged in the said African location, many years previously, awaiting repair. In efforts to re-enact other reminiscences, featuring shady dealings in lucrative 'loot', ivory in boxes is moved around, like shuffling deck chairs on the *Titanic*, but this does little to liven up the scene.

My conclusion was 'quite nice atmospheric music from the orchestral pit, a bit low on significant arias in the first half, but what about the Drama?' However in the second half of this 75-minute opera we did at last get real action, with a shift of scene to Central Africa with the appearance of Kurtz, whom Marlow has travelled far to locate, laid prostrate on a plinth – a shady character, much besmirched by the ivory trade, who

<sup>6</sup> See my reviews for *Tempo* No. 237 (2006 – the CD 'Voices'), No. 249 (July 2009 – 'Martyr', to commemorate St Alban), and 258 (October 2011 – CD review 'O Guiding Night' sung by The Sixteen). *Tempo* No. 237

after his delivery of tortured arias dies uttering the words: 'The horror, the horror', hinting at the true extent of the 'white man's burden'. We are also treated to dramatic arias in full flood from the River Woman, but generally speaking O'Regan had a tendency to centre the music in the pit rather than in operatic arias on stage. His gift for orchestration gave us beautifully sculptured, ephemeral imagery, using celeste, harp, untuned percussion, and 'indigenous instruments replaced by guitar' as the composer himself mentioned in the pre-performance talk, 'merged together into a resonance' – and as mist spread over the Thames boat from the wings and real water lapped on stage, in fact you could have heard a pin drop in the audience, whose attention was well held.

As O'Regan himself writes in his programme-notes, 'The greatest encouragement and challenge has been from Conrad himself, who in a preface to the work written in 1917, described it in directly musical terms: – 'like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck'. Which it did – but for opera, we need more drama and actual action on stage.

The libretto was by Tom Phillips, but restricts itself entirely to words from Conrad's novel and autobiographical navigational diaries, etc. Co-production was by Opera East, with ROH 2.

Jill Barlow

### Arts Centre, Aberystwyth: Nicola LeFanu's 'Dream Hunter'

Nicola LeFanu's latest opera, her seventh, is a powerfully concentrated one-hour music drama for chamber forces, which raises searching questions about the enforced domesticity of women and explores a disturbing blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Set in late 19th-century Corsica, *Dream Hunter* suggests affinities with LeFanu's full-length, two-act opera based on Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1992), in that it is an allegorical and enigmatic tale of the foreboding that surrounds an impending wedding. The story revolves around Catarina, a *mazzera* gifted with 'second sight'. Her strange and violent dreams of hunting foretell injuries to, and, ultimately, the death of the man to whom her elder sister Angela is betrothed – the opportunist Sampiero, dissolute and lubricious son of the local mayor. The sisters live in the rundown farmhouse of their father Domenico, a widowed smallholder and a weak

drunkard. Catarina is dismayed that Angela's wedding will mean their father's property will end up with Sampiero, whom she knows to be a philanderer. Having apparently inherited the power of prescience from her mother, Catarina is greatly troubled by her nightmarish visions, which are revealed to be genuinely prophetic, and she is left with an agonizing question: if the *mazzere* foresee death, do they also cause it?

With only four characters and a story which unfolds in the span of one evening, poet John Fuller's elliptical libretto provided sufficient scope for the singers to establish their personas, whilst managing to incorporate a considerable amount of incident within the opera's relatively brief duration. Impressive and affecting stage presences, soprano Charmian Bedford and mezzo Caryl Hughes as Catarina and Angela respectively had the full measure of their complex and demanding roles, which required a truly dramatic sensibility as well as mastery of wide-ranging vocal lines. By contrast the two male parts, which amounted to little more than caricatures, were unsympathetic to an almost comical degree. Tenor Brian Smith Walters lurched, bear-like, around the stage, fuelled by greed and lust, whilst baritone Jeremy Huw Williams, as Domenico, had the even more thankless task of portraying a sketchily-defined, alcohol-befuddled individual, foolish and ineffectual. Carmen Jakobi's stage direction was economical but telling. With the action taking place entirely on one set – Domenico's farmhouse, divided into living/kitchen area and bedroom – the narrative was able to flow naturally and without interruption. Significantly, the male and female characters were often polarized on stage, a physical manifestation of their contrasting personal freedoms. An ever-present moon was the only symbolic object on display; the remaining 'props', such as a couple of chairs and a kitchen table, were entirely functional. Indeed so sparing was the production's use of objects that the processes of washing-up and cooking were entrusted to mime.

This minimalist approach onstage created genuine opportunities for the figurative, suggestive powers of music. Nicola LeFanu responded to the challenge with a subtle yet vivid score of notable colour and redolence, suggesting worlds of feeling in a single phrase and teasing out rich sonorities from a restricted but shrewdly selected palate of flute (doubling piccolo and alto flute), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), tenor trombone, a few percussion (requiring just one player), harp, violin and cello. She established a strong sense of place in the introductory bars with judicious use of maracas and thrumming, guitar-like ideas on solo

cello. With the lightest of touches, the protagonists' personalities were sketched in and laid bare: thus, when the lecherous Sampiero appeared, muted trombone slides and xylophone flurries slyly hinted at the degrading as well as the buffoon-like nature of the man. LeFanu showed her operatic (and dramatic) mettle with an intricately-scored quartet where each of the four characters sang to themselves in an internal monologue, lost in their own thoughts. One of the opera's high-points, for me, was Angela's aria, a heartfelt and sincere soliloquy on marriage, men's infidelity and the plight of secluded and trapped women. Delicately wrought and directly presented, this poignant song formed the emotional heart of the piece.

A potent use of folksong helped to underline the disparities, both in terms of liberty and disposition, between the sexes. We were first introduced to the sisters, quietly singing a simple, artless song to the moon whilst they prepare the evening meal. Having consumed the meal, washed down with copious amounts of alcohol, the two men formed a base counterpart to this by later intoning, with intoxicated gusto, a raucous traditional song whose low humour featured witless references to chestnuts and udders. After this, Domenico uttered the acutely incongruous observation, 'Women, what would they do without us?' before collapsing into a drunken stupor.

The opera ended with a beautifully expressive, extended aria for Catarina, broad and expansive, seemingly reaching into infinity as the handful of notes which populate the closing bars, scored for stringed instruments only, are stretched out and finally extinguished. The marking is *Dolce – firm but very gentle*, mirroring precisely the character's quietly dignified and courageous resolve to come to terms with her powers and be true to herself: 'Wherever I may be, I shall know how to live. I shall follow my own path Hunter not hunted, till I reach my end'.

Conductor Odaline de la Martinez has a long-established understanding of Nicola LeFanu's evocative sound-world, as evidenced by her 1992 recording of the composer's monodrama for soprano and ensemble *The Old Woman of Beare* (1981) and a 1994 Cardiff Festival performance of LeFanu's first opera, *Dawnpath* (1977). Hence, there was an unmistakable air of authority in her interpretation of the score of *Dream Hunter* and she drew out sensitive and atmospheric playing from the chamber ensemble of seven instrumental players from her new music group Lontano. A lamentably paltry turnout at Aberystwyth's Arts Centre for the world première of this eloquent new opera was emphatically not a reflection on

the quality of the piece itself, but should give Nicola LeFanu's publicists considerable pause for thought. This wise and compassionate stage-work, from an instinctive and accomplished operatic composer deserved far more extensive and effective promotion.

Paul Conway

### Manchester University: Anthony Burgess's 'Glasgow Overture'

The prolific English novelist Anthony Burgess (1917–93) is also known as a playwright, translator, biographer, editor, writer of screenplays, and general cunning linguist. It is less well known that he composed throughout his life. It was therefore fitting that the English première and second-ever performance of his *Glasgow Overture* (dedicated to the city and first performed there in 1981) should be given in the city of his birth: Manchester, in a taut performance given on 1 October 2011 by the Manchester University Symphony Orchestra conducted by Mark Heron.

Burgess often made the claim that he had only turned to writing to provide a posthumous income (for his second wife) following a terminal diagnosis in 1959. But even on his own admission Burgess (not even his real name, which was Wilson!) was notorious liar. When asked 'On what occasions do you lie?' he famously replied 'When I write, when I speak, when I sleep'. Given that he survived for another three decades, even his claim to terminal illness cannot therefore be regarded as fact with any certainty. Whether fact or fiction, it is easier to conclude that Burgess worked hard to create a mystique about himself, which provided a useful promotional angle (quite apart from his obvious literary talent), by adding spice and colour to the life of a writer – which he himself said was, by definition, a boring and uneventful profession.

On the literary scene it seems reasonable to assume that Burgess imagined himself somewhat 'at the cutting edge' in terms of his Joyce-influenced experimentation with language in his early novels, and indeed in his summary edition of Joyce, *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (1966). But what about his musical talent? *Glasgow Overture* provides no evidence that he was similarly interested in the linguistic experimentation being undertaken by numerous contemporaneous composers. But perhaps he did this in other works? So what did it sound like?

Scored for large orchestra, the *Glasgow Overture* opened with major-key bustle which recalled Malcolm Arnold and Walton at their most jovial;

'Jupiter' from Holst's *Planets*; and generic 1950s film music, in a very agreeable mix. A few minutes in, the pace slowed a bit to present music which again had a cinematic bent. Whilst not exactly a master of orchestration, Burgess was obviously more than merely competent, and if one had an adverse criticism in this department it would be that he seemed to succumb to the temptation to use nearly everything nearly all of the time. Billed in the programme as 10 minutes, this brisk performance came in a shade under nine, which is still fairly lengthy for an 'occasional' overture of this kind, yet the piece certainly didn't seem overlong. With a modified reprise of the 'Jupiter'-type theme in the closing paragraph, Burgess demonstrated he was able to marshal his forces effectively. In fact the piece seemed to be really hitting its stride when suddenly it was all over. The verdict? Impressive stuff: 10/10 for effort, certainly uplifting, hugely enjoyable, and definitely worth a second hearing. And that's the truth!

Tim Mottershead

### London, Barbican: Neil Brand's 'Underground'

My most recent exposure to the art of music to synchronize with vintage silent films came when I reviewed organist David Brigg's magical extemporisations at St Albans Abbey for a screening of *The Phantom of The Opera* during the St Albans International Organ Festival in July 2003. Although 21st-century composers often seek to combine screened graphics to illustrate their scores (or vice versa), live music for Silent Films is a genre all of its own. As Fox Studios, often thought of as pre-eminent in the field, points out: 'Films of the era had a variety of situations with regard to original music. Some may have had a score specially composed for a live Hollywood premier, but then when presented in other cities might have relied on improvised music from different musicians'.<sup>7</sup>

So I was intrigued to go along to the Barbican on 5 October for their special screening of *Underground* (1928), lovingly restored by the British Film Institute with new score by Neil Brand and performed live by the BBC Symphony Orchestra to a packed audience of film buffs and connoisseurs of the genre.

They were not disappointed. The music rose admirably to the challenge with finely judged synchronization at key points in the drama of love, rivalry and revenge, culminating in a highly charged chase onto the tube lines, with mood swings from whimsical lyrical romance on the strings and piano, to the build-up of tension and then crashing of cymbals and big brass sounds for the hectic Finale. Along the way there were cameo details, such as a scene when the young hero buys a new hat to impress his young lady, with strains of 'Where did you get that hat?' worked into the score. There was also particularly skilful synchronization, at the point where a young urchin plays a mouth organ on screen, exactly mirrored by the sound issuing from a percussionist playing a melodium at the back of the orchestra. 'I told him not to play too well to make it more true to the film sequence', said Neil Brand when I asked him about it after the show. Similarly the sound of a penny whistle played by a bystander on screen, was realised by a piccolo from the orchestra.

As Brand writes in his programme notes: 'I dragged others of my composition heroes into the frame, and you will hear echoes of Malcolm Arnold, with his playful, unapologetic use of popular tunes in orchestral guise, Richard Rodney Bennett's jazz-tinged menace and soaring, theatrical love themes – even John Barry's pounding brass writing and full-tilt percussion in the final chase'.

*Underground*, directed by Anthony Asquith, son of the Prime Minister, was the first feature film to use the tube system itself as a location and, as Brand emphasizes, 'filming extensively at Waterloo Station, and Lots Rd Power Station, with full co-operation of company chairman Lord Ashfield'. I found considerable sociological interest in the film's portrayal of the day-to-day life of the travelling public, who interacted with each other as they crowded into the original cranking lifts (many of which still await modernization today) and arranged themselves on the new-look 1928 escalators which, despite all pretensions to the contrary, did offer the occasional chance encounter fueling dreams of romance, and hence the convoluted love triangle which serves as plot for the film. And convoluted it is indeed, and as the several young ladies involved in the main plot all look rather similar, and the final 'chase' doesn't really come up to the antics and stunts of a Buster Keaton, it is not surprising that apparently the film was not top box office in its era. By contrast I found reference on Silent Film archive sites to Fox Studios' *The Iron Horse* (1924), to a live score: 'darkly plodding staccato piano piece in this classic silent film score as the heroine lies tied to the train track. The chug-along feel is maintained by

<sup>7</sup> See [www.foxclassics.com](http://www.foxclassics.com).

a tense hammering of chords in triplets depicting machinery and chaos set in motion without end in sight ...'. The genre of the Silent Film revival is suddenly flooding back to me.

Jill Barlow

### **Boston: John Harbison's Sixth Symphony**

John Harbison and James Levine first met at the Salzberg Seminar on opera in the summer of 1984, shortly after Harbison had conducted his first work commissioned by the Boston Symphony, his First Symphony, at Tanglewood. A few years after that, Levine was to have been the pianist for the first performance of Harbison's song cycle *Simple Daylight* with Dawn Upshaw, for whom it was commissioned by Lincoln Center. As it turned out Levine did not have time to learn the part, which Harbison has said was the hardest piano music he ever wrote. Levine nevertheless became a major advocate of Harbison's music. He conducted the first performance, in December of 1999, of Harbison's opera *The Great Gatsby*, which was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera to celebrate Levine's 25th anniversary with the company. Levine included Harbison's Third Symphony on his first concert as music director designate of the Boston Symphony in January of 2003, and Harbison's *Darkbloom, An Overture for an Imagined Opera* was one of the works commissioned to celebrate Levine's first season as the BSO's music director in 2004–2005. Levine subsequently commissioned Harbison's Fifth Symphony and Concerto for Bass Viol and conducted the first performance of his Double Concerto, and along with the Boston Symphony commissioned the Sixth Symphony to be the culmination of a two-season cycle of performances with the orchestra of all of Harbison's symphonies.

Just as Levine has been an advocate of Harbison's music, Harbison is great admirer of Levine, who he describes as being the biggest influence on his later musical life, not merely through his conducting, but through conversations about music and observation of his rehearsal of all kinds of music, and the Sixth Symphony is intended as a sort of portrait of Levine. By the time Harbison finished the work in the fall of 2011, however, Levine had been forced by health difficulties to step down from the directorship of the Boston Symphony, and the work's first performance was conducted by David Zinman, another long-time champion of Harbison's music.

Although the symphony appears to have four movements, it is actually a three-movement sym-

phony preceded by a song, setting a poem by James Wright entitled *Entering the Temple in Nimes*, which is accompanied by a smaller ensemble. The song is an intense and serious conception which provides the thematic material for the whole symphony, its implications and ramifications resonating throughout the main body of the work. The shape of the opening melodic gesture of the vocal part, an octave leap followed by a falling major second, is a major motivic element of all the movements. After a rather grand chordal opening, the second movement, the real beginning of the main structure, starts a long sustained and intense melody, reminiscent of the beginning of the last movement of the Mahler Ninth Symphony, built from the initial shape of the song, which is spun out over the length of the movement, accruing over its course a contrapuntal web. The third movement is a rambunctious, American-ish scherzo aptly marked *Vivo, ruvido* (lively, rough). Towards its end it dissolves into disconnected shards of the opening song, winding down into a quiet ending, marked by the recurrence of the distinctive sound of the cimbalom, which appeared initially in the music accompanying the last line of the poem and which colors key moments of each movement. The final movement traces another arc melting into material reminiscent of the song before ending rather abruptly. The Sixth Symphony is one of Harbison's most satisfying works, due both to the beauty of its material and orchestral sound, and the ingenuity of its structure.

Rodney Lister

### **Manchester University: a sonata-fragment by Shostakovich**

Marc Danel, violinist of the Quatuor Danel, and David Fanning, piano, performed the UK première of this sonata movement on 19 January. In the absence of a printed programme note, Professor Fanning gave a spoken introduction, in which he outlined the background to the music. He began by stating that what was billed in the programme as a 'sonata movement' was in fact more a sonata fragment. Composed in about 1945, and therefore contemporaneous with the composer's Ninth Symphony, this was, he opined, the best of Shostakovich's fragments currently released for study or performance by the composer's estate. At an estimated 4 minutes, and not quite representing the full exposition of the said sonata, it was suggested that this would have made for a complete movement of perhaps 11 or 12 minutes: accordingly any completion by other

hands would involve composing up to double the amount of the original material. This was cited as the main reason given by Alfred Schnittke for declining the offer of the Shostakovich Estate to undertake a completion.

The music began with a typically tortuous low pitched solo violin line, which was soon accompanied by gently flowing triplet arpeggios from piano, in *allegretto* tempo. This opening paragraph was succeeded by a brief unison passage which led to music of a darker hue, consisting of a march-like piano accompaniment combined with an insistent repetitive descending figure for violin, which Professor Fanning had earlier likened to the second subject (the flute theme) from Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony. This material became increasing strident and built to a climax, before subsiding to music of a more subdued nature. Later the march-like music returned, but in a neat reversal the piano now presented the melodic figure, whilst the violin delivered a strident *pizzicato* accompaniment. Indeed, just as this gripping passage really seemed to be taking flight, it suddenly ended mid-sentence. Whilst one can appreciate Schnittke's reasons for leaving well alone, the lack of a satisfactory conclusion makes one wish that other completions may be forthcoming.

Tim Mottershead

### London, Globe Theatre: 'The Word is God'

To celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible, completed 1611, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre entitled its 2011 Season 'The Word is God', commencing with a cover-to-cover undramatized reading of the Bible around Easter, and only interrupted by performances of a small-scale touring production of *Hamlet*, proclaimed as one of the greatest cornerstones of the English language, that opened on the Bard's birthday, 23 April. The Globe's 2010 award-winning production of *Anne Boleyn*, with new music by William Lyons, highlighted the young Queen's interest in the new Tyndale Bible, one of the forerunners of the King James edition,<sup>8</sup> so was duly staged again as part of 'The Word is God' Season. The 2011 biblical theme also centred, by contrast, on a revival of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, and a modern staging of the medieval 'Mystery Plays'.

However to give some attention to other new scores earlier in the Season, I first went along to the Globe's latest production of *Much Ado About*

*Nothing* which opened during May 2011 with music by Stephen Warbeck. The play opens with preparations for the evening 'masque', a brilliant opportunity for playful deceit and intrigue, all aimed at furthering the course of true love for the intermittently reluctant pair, Claudio and Hero, and the ever-quarrelsome Beatrice and Benedick. Lively woodwind, including a serpent, and syncopated percussion, from the Musicians' Gallery and on stage, lent an appropriate touch of jazz style. A side-drum was introduced as the masque commenced.

Shakespeare's text clearly designates 'Balthazar, musician' on stage with songs and ditties at crucial points as the plot unfolds, and a Spanish guitar duo added atmosphere. There was also a clever use of the 'pregnant silence' as the subterfuge and false modesty of the two lovelorn pairs eventually reveals itself to be but a 'mask' for underlying mutual longing, well reflected in Warbeck's subtle illustrative music. Charles Edwards was outstanding in his role as Benedick.

'Everybody loves a villain', as the saying goes. However there is something of an ongoing fascination with Dr Faustus, judging by his place in literature, drama and music, precisely *because* he sold his soul to the devil in return for 24 years of magical power and knowledge, with Mephistopheles as his servant, rather than despite of it. Summer 2011 has seen the heroic revival of Havergal Brian's epic *Gothic Symphony* at the Proms, with its clear allusion to the Faustus legend, and by sheer coincidence Shakespeare's Globe featured a revival of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* with new incidental music to match, by composer Jules Maxwell with Genevieve Wilkins, musical director/percussion. As the *Evening Standard* reported, 'Genevieve's little band performed with gusto'.

Those familiar with the use of acoustic music at the Globe will understand that apart from a few exceptions such as Claire van Kampen's jazz score for *Macbeth* in the early 2000s, Django Bates scores and Nigel Hess,<sup>9</sup> music for the plays is for the most part intermittent background atmospherics from the Musicians' Gallery etc, with the occasional illustrative solos, instrumental or vocal: i.e. one often has to pin back one's ears to define it, swept along as one is by the fast flowing dialogue and action on stage. Vibraphone, and marimbas, and subtle percussion set the scene early in this play, giving us atmospherics from the Musicians' Gallery as Dr Faustus sells his soul to the Devil on stage below, duly signed in blood. Amidst all the period late-16th-century text, at one point we had a prominent solo on a modern cello, lyri-

<sup>8</sup> See my review in *Tempo*, January 2011.

<sup>9</sup> See my previous reviews for *Tempo* annually since 2002.

cal and melodic, which quite took me by surprise. I have in my notes that later a lute is played on stage, lyrical and flowing, possibly seemingly by Mephistopheles himself, and the play ends with a modern tenor horn and trumpet, heralding Dr Faustus' descent to Hell, as the clock chimes ominously. I felt this music for *Dr Faustus* came up trumps for subtlety and variety.

In his article in the Globe programme entitled 'From Everyman to Superman', Neil Rhodes, Professor of English Literature and Cultural History, University of St Andrews, writing about 'the long tradition of native English religious drama that survived well into Elizabeth's reign and upon which *Dr Faustus* draws' explains that 'This comes in two forms: the Mystery or Miracle plays, which were pageant dramas, representing the Bible story from the Creation to the Last Judgement, performed by various guilds of workers, and the Morality Plays which were allegorical works that dramatized the battle for the human soul and the path to salvation. Both forms mix Christian moral teaching with scenes of black comedy, low trickery and farce, but it is the Morality plays, rather than the Mysteries that provide Marlowe with a template for *Faustus*'. Which brings us neatly to the 'Globe Mysteries' of which I attended the press night on 10 August: poet/playwright Tony Harrison's new version of his much longer Medieval Mystery Plays cycle originally staged at the National Theatre some years ago. This I found superb, warts and all.

As with the artisans in *Midsummer Nights' Dream* performing 'Pyramus and Thisbe', progress was at times suitably halting and rough and ready. In true Medieval 'English Mystery Cycles' tradition, performed by trades guilds, often staged on roving pageant wagons from village to village, the scene shifted rapidly, often precariously, from Creation to Last Judgement, taking in a lengthy staging of the Crucifixion *en route* with burly carpenters

scratching their heads as to how to manage to get the weighty wooden cross in place. As I overheard an audience member saying to a friend in the outside courtyard in the Interval: 'I'm not staying for the second half, as it's all the Crucifixion and then Jesus just goes to Heaven or Hell'. Perhaps she actually was referring to the groundlings being divided in half by the master of ceremonies at the Last Judgement – one side to Heaven and the other to Hell.

What of the music? I felt here composer Olly Fox really came into his own, though the volume of the music needed turning up a bit at times for full impact. However in the King Herod dance sequence we had apt accordion input, striking clarinet solo in almost trumpet style, followed by drum rolls. After the Interval, during the faltering erection of the very heavy giant cross on stage by reluctant artisans, we had a sudden jazz outburst, with zurma and soprano saxophone, syncopated jazz-style accompaniment from an upright piano on stage, followed by a dirge with solo kaval in quieter moments. In the 'Doubting Thomas' sequence, weird high-pitched screeches intervened at intervals, issuing forth from a 'saw' in the percussion group. Throughout the evening there were splendid soprano solos from Rhianon Meades on stage, suitably draped in a cowl or other medieval robing as she also represented various female roles in keeping.<sup>10</sup> So over to Olly Fox to carry on the good work in future Globe Seasons. (I gather he was there on Press Night, in true Globe tradition still 'taking notes' with presumably ongoing revisions to the fast-evolving score).

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', is how St John's Gospel famously opens in the King James authorised version of 1611. Whether Catholic or Protestant I can see no other translation bettering that in our English language.

Jill Barlow

<sup>10</sup> A few days later a drama review in *The Guardian* noted the soprano solo and felt 'more music' would have helped the drama along.