
FIRST PERFORMANCES

Amsterdam: ‘Étude pour Espace’ and ‘Varèse 360°’

No festival offering the ‘complete’ Edgard Varèse will quite make good its boast. The lost works stay lost; nothing can reconstitute those torn up or incinerated; the Conservatoire fugues will be deemed too peripheral to perform; the Miró Foundation will (yet again) withhold permission to play the short electronic score for *La Procession de Vergès*.¹ But at least the 2009 Holland Festival’s remarkable ‘Varèse 360°’ weekend of 12–14 June in Amsterdam, staged ‘in the round’ at the Gashouder concert hall, Westergasfabriek,² staked a better claim to completeness than any predecessor. It featured the European première – and first performance since 1947 in any form, anywhere – of the long-speculated-about *Étude pour Espace*; which was also the world première of the new edition and arrangement of that work prepared by Chou Wen-chung, Varèse’s pupil, faithful champion, and long-time guardian of the flame (and the manuscripts).

As is well known, Varèse composed *Étude pour Espace*, for voices and instruments, in 1946–47 as a spin-off (he called it an ‘étude hors d’oeuvre’) from his projected ‘choral symphony’ *Espace*, the major ‘work in progress’ on which he had been engaged since about 1934 and which was destined never to be finished. In itself the *Étude* had considerable significance as the first work Varèse had managed to complete in ten years. He probably had it in mind to produce a work for the Greater New York Chorus, which he had founded in 1941, but that choir had recently been disbanded and the première was given on 20 April 1947 by the New Music Society, which had a only a small chorus. Varèse had intended to accompany the voices with a small orchestra of wind instruments and percussion, but realizing that the wind instruments would not be available, he scored the orchestral component for two pianos and six percussionists. Though apparently satisfied with the structure of the work as it stood, he was bitterly

disappointed with the effect of the pianos, which were never more than a stop-gap, and the piece was never revived. In 1957 Varèse used some brief passages from it, electronically transformed, in *Poème électronique*. He also made three apparently divergent and incomplete sets of revisions on three different copies of the score, which for many years afterwards confirmed Chou Wen-chung in the opinion that it was impossible to perform *Étude pour Espace* again.³ Happily, however, Chou had finally yielded to the entreaties of the Holland Festival and produced a new version ‘orchestrated and arranged for spatialized live concert performance’. Essentially he has scored the music previously given to the pianos for a wind group similar to that required for *Déserts* (though there is still a piano in the orchestra), and made discreet use of sound projection to move some of the music around the performing space.

For Varèsians, this long-belated resurrection of *Étude pour Espace* was a major revelation. It is not, as has often been assumed and frequently stated or suggested, just a ‘sketch’ for a larger piece or a ‘mere assemblage of materials’. It is a work in its own right, and by Varèsian standards not a small one (this performance took exactly 11 minutes)⁴; and it enlarges our understanding of the composer. It’s better to think of it as a cross-section – like those transverse cuts through a massive trunk that reveal the growth-pattern of an ancient tree – through the more than 30 years of ongoing, agonizingly unrealized major projects that went by different names (*The One All Alone*, *Astronomer*, *Espace*) and eventually issued in part in *Déserts* and even *Nocturnal*, but were essentially the one protean creative stream.

The intelligible portion of the text is partly in English (lines from Kenneth Patchen’s *Music for Albion Moonlight*, Varèse here anticipating David Bedford by 20 years) and partly in Spanish (by José Juan Tablada, the poet of ‘La croix du sud’, and ending with a single, aching phrase from St. John of the Cross). It is interspersed, spun out

¹ Supposedly its objections have been overcome for the London Sinfonietta’s re-presentation of Amsterdam’s events next April at the South Bank, but I wouldn’t hold your breath.

² A converted gas-holder, as the name suggests.

³ See for example his comments in *The New Worlds of Edgard Varèse: A Symposium* edited by Sherman Van Solkema (New York: I.S.A.M. Monographs Number 11, 1979), pp. 88–89.

⁴ It can be heard and viewed online, along with several of the other works performed, at <http://www.cultura.nl/page/tv-gids/780003>.

and reinforced by word-and vowel-repetitions and what Varèse referred to as ‘syllables of intensity’, sonorous vocables of the kind he had briefly introduced into *Ecuatorial* and would use more extensively in *Nocturnal* – but not as extensively as in *Étude pour Espace*.

From the perkily martial opening xylophone solo, and the voices in functional harmony that followed it, perhaps the biggest immediate surprise was that the *Étude* is for large stretches a ‘tonal’ work. Its rhythmicized speaking choruses, sonorous organum-like chanting in fourths and fifths, brief solemn interludes of almost Venetian brass, and even triads and dominant sevenths, add up to a sound-picture unique in his output. *Étude pour Espace* has the authentic Varèsian fire and imperiousness and anguish, but also moments of unanticipated gentleness, warmth and longing, as well as passages that linger, in sheer enjoyment, upon quite simple, even homely harmonies. (There would seem to be some subterranean connexion with *Tuning Up*.)

Probably this unexpected efflorescence of tonality arose because Varèse had in mind the limitations and predilections of his New York chorus, with whom he had performed mainly Renaissance music, but there is no feeling of an artistic compromise: rather, of a new blend, for the percussion writing is as intricate as always and the wind instruments frequently pile up typically dissonant stacks of tone. And here one sees why Varèse may have been so dissatisfied with the pianos in the original scoring. The singers’ tonal harmonies give them a solidity in the mass that the instrumental music deliberately avoids through its chromatically dissonant, highly individuated voice-leading. When one takes into account the inevitable and immediate decay of the pitches on the pianos, however loud the initial attacks, the totality of the ensemble must have been unbalanced, with chorus and percussion dominating and pushing the pianos’ ‘atonal’ component into the background. Putting this instead onto woodwind and brass restores the equilibrium – and the tension – between the contrasted harmonic systems.

Tucked away among Varèse’s syllables is the phrase ‘Le Corbu ...’; a prophetic pre-echo, as a decade was to pass before his collaboration with Le Corbusier on the multimedia *Le Poème électronique* for the hugely futuristic Philips Pavilion (largely designed by Le Corbusier’s assistant Iannis Xenakis from an idea of his master) for the 1958 Brussels World Fair. The other novelty of this ‘Varèse 360°’ weekend was the opportunity to hear Varèse’s epoch-making electronic score in the context of Kees Tazelaar’s digital restoration of Le Corbusier’s original montage of still

images, film sequences and colour projections, according to the architect’s detailed scenario or *Minutage* that synchronized music and visuals second by second. The Varèse/Le Corbusier *Poème* was given twice, as the highlight of a symposium held on the Friday evening in the highly appropriate setting of Amsterdam Planetarium (which is in the Zoo, just across a narrow stream from a trio of placidly-pacing Bactrian Camels). This, another building in the round, heard presentations by Kees Tazelaar, Olivia Mattis (currently at work on a full-dress biography of Varèse), and the present writer. Although both Varèse and Le Corbusier spoke of the undesirability of exact correspondence between the music and the projected images, the two renditions – which also correctly began and ended with Xenakis’s ‘intermission music’, the tape composition *Concret PH* – showed there was no simple divorce between ear and eye but a complex counterpoint of divergences and correspondences. The presence and activity of the images also had, for this listener at least, the strange effect of making Varèse’s *Poème électronique* seem approximately twice as long as usual. Another part of this event was a ravishing performance of *Density 21.5* by the German flautist Jana Machalet, as accompaniment to which the Planetarium did what planetariums do, and took us – with mind-boggling appropriateness – on a visual journey from the Gobi Desert to right outside the galaxy.

Another account of *Density 21.5* prefaced *Étude pour Espace* on Sunday, played this time by Jeannette Landré, and this too had a (would-be) apt visual counterpart: a tightrope walker performed a high-wire walk across the Gasholder auditorium (and fell off – luckily there wasn’t far to fall – just as he reached the far end). One must, I suppose, mention the ‘mise-en-espace’ which, under the auspices of Holland Festival Director Pierre Audi, provided a surfeit of visual distraction during the actual concerts. This consisted of video installations and live events masterminded by the Seattle-based video artist Gary Hill.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to present a multimedia Varèse – look at *Poème électronique*, and his plans for a film to accompany *Déserts*. According to Alejo Carpentier, around 1929 he was thinking of presenting *The One All Alone* as a kind of travelling circus in a huge striped tent with actors, mimes and freak-show grotesques. But a lot of the time one felt these particular visuals intruded and interfered with the music, rather than setting off and enhancing it. There were ‘theatrical’ touches. Servitors in black, their sombre garb outlined in fluorescent piping that turned them, when the house lights were off, into geo-

metric schemata (walking hyperprisms?), dragged video-screens to and fro. Soprano Anu Komsa and Jeannette Landré wore doll dresses with variations of the piping, and various wigs. During Saturday's concert a girl squatted on the floor throughout, carefully making origami; she spent Sunday's constructing a spiral made from objects – glass marbles, nails, tribal figurines – selected from the collection of Hill's sometime collaborator Charles Stein (poet, philosopher, and translator of the *Odyssey*) whose table-full of presumably carefully-considered trifles played its own idiosyncratic role in the video sequences. These latter were the main component of the *mise-en-espace*, projected onto three huge screens behind the performing area, onto the walls, and onto a further three screens that hung from the Gasholder's roof and moved back and forth on runners. (The noise of these, emerging at the start of Saturday's concert out of, and nullifying, the dying percussion echoes of *Hyperprism*, did not bode well for how the music was to be treated, but that particular *faux pas* didn't happen again.)

The video installations ranged from the whimsical to the downright squirmacious. Before a note had been sounded on Saturday we were treated to film of sheep going about their business. They were very pretty sheep, and cropping the grass in such obvious security one suspected they were meant as a Bachian prelude, but apparently there was no such intention. On Sunday they were goats. Occasionally – as in *Offrandes*, where a schematic of a ceaselessly-turning globe with various objects on its surface appearing from over the horizon and vanishing at the bottom of the screen could easily be justified by some of the text of 'Chanson de là-haut' – the images had some relevance to the music, but more often they diverged completely. This was, we remember, the (supposed) principle behind the Varèse-Le Corbusier *Poème électronique*, though Kees Tazelaar's reconstruction has shown that there was in fact a significant measure of intentional correspondence between sound and image. But Hill's visual components tended to be simple distraction, when they did not actively work against the music. (Throughout *Intégrales*, for example, all six screens showed a hand laboriously building and rebuilding six different columns of pebbles. Inevitably, these became more precarious as they got higher and eventually collapsed. Though this might have had something to say about the frustrations of the creative process, it imported an entirely new set of tensions and rhythms completely at variance with those of *Intégrales* itself. Two-thirds of the way through, the hand abandoned pebbles for fruit, with no better success.)

Chou Wen-chung had insisted, rightly, that there should be no visuals whatever during *Étude pour Espace*, and that largesse was extended to the following item, the *Dance for Burgess* (the swingin-gest, jazziest performance of this raspberry *bonne bouche* that I've heard). The entire event concluded with yet another audition of *Poème électronique*, this time in complete darkness (except for the exit signs, which rather spoiled the effect).

Many of the audience chose to listen with their eyes closed. The performers did not have that option. According to Eötvös, the multi-media component was extremely distracting for the players, who would be trying to follow his beat while images would be moving on a screen behind his hand; he himself had to keep his eyes lowered so as not to see the huge screens in front of him. Despite (perhaps because of) these pressures the performances that resulted were intensely focussed, with a raw edge of absolute conviction and clarity such as one seldom hears in this music. It is difficult to award a palm here – *Amériques*, given in the original 1922 version with 150-piece orchestra, concluded Saturday's concert and was shattering in the circular space; *Nocturnal*, with the superb Hannu Komsa a pitch-perfect soloist, was incredibly evocative – but I'm inclined to think Sunday's account of *Ecuatorial* was the best performance of that amazing work I've ever heard.

It remains a matter for debate whether *Ecuatorial* works better with a solo voice (Varèse wanted Chaliapin, after all) or with unison male chorus, but Peter Eötvös, in post-concert conversation, was sure that when the chorus is as good as the men of Cappella Amsterdam, the latter is definitely to be preferred. It is, after all, a mass prayer, the voice of the tribe. This performance may have been the first in Europe to have been given with a pair of theremin cellos, for which the work was originally written, rather than the Ondes Martenots that Varèse subsequently permitted after Lev Theremin became unreachable in the USSR and his instruments in the US fell into disrepair. Ten have so far been restored to life, largely as a result of the advocacy of Olivia Mattis. Eloquently played by *thereministas* Jonathan Golove and Natasha Farny, these beautiful instruments⁵ are more mellow and more voice-like than the Ondes, and reinforced the perception that these instrumental parts are the real soloists of *Ecuatorial*, rather than the human vocal line.

Calum MacDonald

⁵ For more on the instruments and Varèse's relations with Leon (Lev) Theremin see <http://www.thereminvox.com/story/496/>; and (including an account of the first modern performance of *Ecuatorial* with theremin cellos in Buffalo in 2002), <http://www.peterpringle.com/cello.html>.

Aldeburgh Festival 2009

'Then with a single step your journey starts': the line which ends each act of David Harsent's libretto for Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Gawain* (1991) enshrines an abiding image for the poet which ties in closely with an obsession of the composer's. Their latest collaboration, a 45-minute scena called *The Corridor*, is all about journey's end – for Eurydice, as she goes down to hell, 'step by step': and also for Orpheus, who suffers a different fate by staying alive while 'wedded to my woes', as the Dowland texts which complement *The Corridor* in this two-part 'theatre of melancholy' declare. The steps taken in *The Corridor* by Eurydice (a brilliant Elizabeth Atherton), hauntingly echoed and mirrored in the production's accompanying video projections, are also prefigured in the movements of the two dancers used in the drama's first part, *Semper Dowland, semper dolens*. Here Birtwistle has arranged the seven *Lachrimae* pavans for string quintet, clarinets and flutes (London Sinfonietta, conductor Mark Wigglesworth), and alternates them with seven vocal laments, sung by *The Corridor*'s tenor (Mark Padmore at his most eloquent), in which Dowland's lute is replaced by a harp (Helen Tunstall).

As was widely noted at the world première on 12 June, it was ironic that this doleful ritual should be inaugurating the new Britten Studio at Snape, a central part of Aldeburgh Music's refurbishment of the Maltings site and an event embodying the optimistic commitment to Britten's legacy that distinguishes the Aldeburgh enterprise. Nor were Elliott Carter's new, hard-driven settings of Ezra Pound, *On Conversing with Paradise*, the serene antidote to Birtwistle's deeply-rooted gloom that the title (from Blake, not Pound) might have suggested. The piece was premièred on 20 June by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group with baritone Leigh Melrose, conducted by Oliver Knussen. Carter – frail but indomitable – was there in person, and would be the first to acknowledge the supreme irony of the fact that he has survived to the age of 100 while regularly celebrating ephemerality, not just as the invariable occasion for anger or despair, but as the floating bubble of aspiration and exuberance that underpins the Crashaw-inspired thinking behind his majestic *Symphonia* (1993–7). This grand orchestral trilogy was not on offer at Aldeburgh 2009, yet Carter's response to Pound's turbulent homily in praise of honest creativity, in full consciousness of the fact that ambition invariably exceeds achievement – 'I have tried to write Paradise' – shows that

he has not lost touch with the aesthetic aims of his major works, nor with their intricately impassioned musical character.

Those searching for visual parallels to the contrasts between Birtwistle and Carter might have noted the intriguing juxtapositions between old and new in the Snape renovations, since the architects have made a point of preserving elements of the original 'industrial' plant within the brand new performance spaces. That Britten was also able to find ways of expressing ironic melancholy and celebrating ephemerality could be heard in such brief but powerful inspirations as his setting of Auden's 'Funeral Blues' (14 June). But the Birtwistle strand of the Festival was especially commendable for its reminders of the composer's least emollient phase, the years before *The Mask of Orpheus* that produced a conception as challenging as *An Imaginary Landscape* (1971), given a powerfully concentrated performance by members of the LPO under Vladimir Jurowski (15 June). This bleak In Memoriam left Britten's *Russian Funeral Music* from 1936, heard later in the same programme, sounding more than ever like an uneasy parody of Mahlerian bombast. And what of the six electronic interludes from *The Mask of Orpheus*, newly refurbished and projected round the main Maltings concert hall on 17 June? Even if Birtwistle provided rhythmic templates for Barry Anderson to work with, the result is presumably endorsed by Birtwistle rather than composed by him. Fitting, then, that the stylistic identity of these episodes should be so puzzling, and despite their relevance to the opera's complex symbology, as devised by Peter Zinovieff, much of the Aldeburgh audience was left feeling alienated and estranged.

What brought listeners and performers back into productive alignment was the concert's concluding performance, by an expanded Exaudi (conductor James Weeks) of *On the sheer threshold of night* (1980). As Helen Waddell's version of Boethius's Latin has it, 'On the sheer threshold of night/Orpheus saw Eurydice/Looked, and destroyed her'. Birtwistle's music for this text has an expressionistic austerity that – nearly 30 years later – is still in evidence, yet tempered in *The Corridor* by a more intimate realization and characterization of the essential inseparability of love and loss. The easy alliteration in those two four-letter words suggests cliché, but Eurydice's anger and Orpheus's despair are agonisingly immediate in *The Corridor*'s fractured dance of an ending. Here, as in all the finest Birtwistle, darkness becomes audible.

Arnold Whittall

London: Brian Elias 'Doubles' at the Barbican, Paul Patterson's Viola Concerto at Hampstead and Highgate Springfest

Brian Elias's *Doubles*, given its first performance at the Barbican on 16 May by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Jiří Bělohlávek, was one of the most impressive pieces of orchestral music I have heard in a long time, rivalled in recent experience only by Matthew Taylor's Second Symphony, which was premièred by Garry Walker and the same orchestra in the BBC Maida Vale studios earlier this year.

Elias' programme note explained that the title 'refers both to the way it is constructed and to the nature of its content. It is a continuous piece made up of six movements, the first three of which are "doubled" in the same order by the remaining three. [...] The forms of each of the first three movements are doubled by the remaining three, rather than any melodic or harmonic elements, and it is this aspect of the piece that was the driving principle'. The structure thus informs the course of events from below, while the surface offers a constantly evolving musical argument articulated across those large spans – and which also doubles (sorry) as a concerto for orchestra of sorts and as a monumentally conceived set of variations.

The large orchestra, which includes two harps and a generously equipped percussion section, is deployed to immediate effect in the furious opening, with emphatic percussion blows and a bold fanfare from six horns, which emerges now and again to bestow thematic coherence; a repetitive harp figure provides another cohesive element. The scoring is dense but not thick: from the start every strand of the texture is audible, with the busy and earnest endeavours of the marimba and other tuned percussion adding a glittering surface to the fantastically energetic stomping progress of the music, which lets up occasionally to admit woodwind riffs. After five minutes the maelstrom seems to abate, but the lull is short-lived and a scherzo section comes darting out, danced by faeries in Doc Martens. A piccolo solo fleetingly suggests birdsong but a timpani pulse renews the onward drive, only for the pace to let up again, revealing nervous activity below the surface.

The first long lines of the piece come nine minutes in, gathering strength after a nervous trumpet solo, the strings darkening and thickening as they begin a lament – which the timpani pulse and chattering woodwinds throw off course; when the strings take centre-stage again, it's with an angry rush and the makings of a storm sequence. The solo trumpet steps forward once more, drawing an

London Symphony Orchestra

Autumn 2009 highlights

At the Barbican:

Sun 20 Sep 7.30pm
Henri Dutilleux *L'arbre des songes*
 Valery Gergiev | Leonidas Kavakos

Sun 1 Nov 7.30pm
James MacMillan *Epiclesis*
 Kristijan Jarvi | Ole Edvard Antonsen

Thu 12 Nov 7.30pm
Jörg Widmann *Violin Concerto*
 Daniel Harding | Christian Tetzlaff

Fri 18 Dec 7.30pm
Henri Dutilleux *Symphony No 2*
 Valery Gergiev

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At LSO St Luke's:

Thu 29 Oct 1pm
Henri Dutilleux *Ainsi la nuit*
 Psophos Quartet

Thu 5 Nov 1pm
Henri Dutilleux *Songs from Chansons de bord*
 BBC Singers

Thu 12 Nov 1pm
Henri Dutilleux *Trois Préludes*
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barbican

angry response from the rest of the orchestra, but it dissipates into long string lines almost as soon as it arrives, amid desolate commentaries from flute, oboe and cor anglais. At a sharp crack from the percussion, the strings announce the beginning of the next section and a wild dance spreads through the orchestra, crashing and furious; two cellos offer commentary and the dance explodes across the orchestra again, the combination of density and energy reminding me of Matthijs Vermeulen's Fourth Symphony, *Les victoires*. Elias's paroxysmic orchestral writing packs even more of a punch, with the phenomenal resourcefulness of the scoring provoking gap-jawed astonishment: among living composers I can think only of Christopher Rouse who can throw an orchestra around with this kind of virtuosity.

The tension and volume die back but the underlying pace does not, suggesting that everything is waiting to blow up all over again. The trumpets throw out another leaping fanfare, but now the energy does seem to be ebbing away, under tolling harps and timpani. The melodic lines again lengthen and thicken, with the metal percussion decorating high violins. The power is now building up once more and a huge wave crests over the orchestra, low brass supporting its weight. The timpani toll anew, and the cor anglais intones an elegy under disconsolate string chords. With a last extended tremolo from harps and marimba and a reference to the opening of the work *Doubles* comes to a close. Intellectually and physically, it's a white-knuckle ride, a thrilling experience, and Bělohlávek and his BBC players gave it the kind of premiere that every composer must dream of.

Three days earlier Paul Patterson seemed just as happy – as well he might be – with the first performance of his Viola Concerto, given by Sarah-Jane Bradley and the Springfest Orchestra (strings only) under George Vass in St John-at-Hampstead, in the concert which concluded the Hampstead and Highgate Springfest. In his directorships of the Hampstead and Highgate Festival (which he has now given up) and the late-summer gathering at Presteigne on the Welsh borders, Vass commissions wisely and practically, and brings his love-children into the world with orchestras constituted from a pool of players he knows and trusts. Skilfully tailored to show off the solo instrument, Patterson's Viola Concerto opens with a solo cadenza, gently plaintive in tone; after two minutes the strings enter with soft tremolo support, establishing a mood that has something of Walton's summer-evening calmness. It then moves into a slow section which brushes gentle lyricism with a touch of angularity, the wistful understatement capturing something of the

instrument's soul – and the hint of tragedy that creeps into the exchanges between soloist and orchestra pointing to deeper emotions below the surface.

The scherzo, rhythmically tricky, plays off viola tone against skittish pizzicatos in the strings and acts as a foil to the overtly contrapuntal quality of the finale, its gleefully astringent glissandi in the violins suggesting a consanguinity with Britten and, perhaps, Seiber. The Concerto taps into that particularly English vein of circumspection, intimating deeper feelings than are apparent on first acquaintance; though only 17 minutes in length, it resonates in the mind long after the final double bar-line. The demands of *Doubles* mean that I'll probably have to wait a long time to hear it again; the sheer practicality of Patterson's Viola Concerto, by contrast, will probably see it in the repertoire of small string groups up and down the country as soon as word gets out.

Martin Anderson

Cheltenham Festival 2009

One of the main features of the 2009 Cheltenham Festival was a marking of the event's 65th year by opportunities to take a fresh look at some of its illustrious past premieres. Time, perhaps, for a reappraisal of that most reviled of forms, the 'Cheltenham Symphony'? Not yet, apparently: this grievous blemish had been reassuringly air-brushed out of the festival's brochure (and, by implication, its history). So, instead of his Second Symphony (a work in danger of qualifying for the noxious epithet), Alun Hoddinott was represented by his Clarinet Concerto No.1 from 1950; other previous triumphs revisited included one of the late Nicholas Maw's *Life Studies* and Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes* as well as more recent pieces by Judith Weir and Thomas Adès.

In truth, this festival has always taken the entirely laudable path of being more concerned with looking to the future rather than archiving its past and, as ever, there were several notable premières. All the examples I was able to attend took place in the congenial setting of the Pittville Pump Room, including the first UK performance of Sir Harrison Birtwistle's *Bogenstrich*, which formed part of his 75th birthday year celebrations. Scored for voice, cello and piano, it was the gem in a recital given by Roderick Williams, Adrian Brendel and Till Fellner. The history of the sequence of pieces that together make up this poignant and subtle love-song to the composer's wife is somewhat involved. In 2006, Birtwistle wrote a short piece entitled

Lied ohne Worte for cello and piano to mark Alfred Brendel's 75th birthday. The pianist's son Adrian and former Brendel pupil Till Fellner played it and the following year Birtwistle wrote another work for the duo, this time a set of expressive variations, which were premièred at the Wigmore Hall. These existing two movements have now been supplemented by a third, also for cello and piano, this time more dynamic (and occasionally choleric) in character, entitled *Wie eine Fuga*. All three pieces are now framed by two settings for baritone of the Rilke poem, *Liebes-Lied*, the first accompanied by piano in the manner of a conventional Romantic Lied, and the second by cello – in which lyricism is intensified into a kind of monody so that the two song-like forces allude, like the cellist's double-stopping, to the poet's vision (and the work's title): 'Yet everything that touches you or me/takes us together like a bow's stroke/that from two strings draws one voice'.

There were resonances with Birtwistle's earlier Rilke setting of *An die Musik* (1988), in which the singer's melodic line is taken up by a group of 15 instrumentalists, as well as with *Pulse Shadows* (1989–96), which amalgamates two separate cycles, one a series of nine settings of Celan and the other nine movements for string quartet; but the new work had a singular beauty and strength of its own. Despite, or perhaps because of, their steady, methodical accumulation, the various movements coalesced beautifully to form one of the composer's most intimate and touching statements, passionate but also reticent. A tenderness was ultimately achieved in the refining process of passing the accompaniment from piano to cello via the three contrasting purely instrumental movements, of which the variations took their natural place as the serene core of the piece, as cello and piano first began to relate to each other on something approaching equal terms. With all three players deeply absorbed in creating the enchanting atmosphere of *Bogenstrich*, its first UK performance proved a memorable experience.

Another erstwhile member of the New Music Manchester group, Alexander Goehr, was represented at the festival by two chamber works, both featuring the clarinet, an instrument which has featured sporadically throughout the composer's oeuvre, from the early *Fantasies* for clarinet and piano op.3 (1954), through *Paraphrase* for solo clarinet op.28 (1969) and the *Prelude and Fugue* for three clarinets op.39 (1978) to the *Three Songs* for voice, clarinet and viola op.60 (1996). His one-movement Quintet for clarinet and strings op.79 (2007), performed with great style by members of the Nash Ensemble, is a glorious addition to the repertoire. Though Goehr referred to it in his programme-

note as 'austere', it struck me as one of his richest and most beguiling pieces, whose civilized and compelling discourse was a genuine pleasure to experience. The other piece, *Manere* op.81 (2008), is a short duet for clarinet and violin in the form of nine realizations of a melisma from a Gregorian chant. At one point towards the end, the composer quotes a version of the chant by Pérotin, almost literally. Written as a sort of addendum to the quintet (the same performers premièred both works), *Manere* was satisfying enough to stand apart from its parent work as another fine example of Goehr's richly rewarding engagement with medieval and Renaissance music. Richard Hosford (clarinet) and Benjamin Nabarro (violin) from the Nash Ensemble were the first-rate performers in its UK première. In his urbane and witty pre-concert talk, the composer described his two recent works featuring clarinet as part of a latter-day attempt to 'do more with less', a variation of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's recent concern, particularly in his series of symphonies and string quartets, to make his notes work harder. In both Goehr pieces, the results were consistently compelling and directly communicative.

My experience of the 2009 festival ended on an extremely optimistic note with the first performance of Philip Grange's thrilling *Cloud Atlas* for symphonic wind band, played superbly by the National Youth Wind Ensemble conducted by Phillip Scott. Based on the novel of the same name by David Mitchell, Grange's work uses the same concentric symmetry as its source, so that the first and last movements share the same argument, as do movements two and six, which employ the idea of distorted mirrors to affect both pitch and rhythm. H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* inspired the three central movements, of which 3 and 5 concern the machine itself, whilst the fourth juxtaposes scherzo-like material with dance-like episodes that gradually change into violent fragments and massive chords, informed by the passage in the novel where the time-traveler witnesses the Earth being pulled slowly nearer the sun. A recitative-like passage for solo clarinet in the second half of the fifth movement reviews the previous movement's ideas, as if recalling the whole experience in a memory.

The NYWE responded keenly to the many challenges of this bold, dramatic and exacting work: in a brief pre-performance address to the audience, Grange confirmed that the piece had been written with no concessions at all to the youth of the performers (average age 17), citing as an example the score's requirements of two tubas and two euphoniums each with fully independent parts rather than merely doubling. He also stated that

he composed with the same level of virtuosity in mind as if this had been a BBC Philharmonic commission, as evidenced by the intricate rhythms and the technical difficulty of the solo writing. It feels invidious to highlight individual contributions, but the deft handling of the important clarinet solo in the fifth movement and the vivid realization of the soprano saxophone writing in the seventh stood out in a performance of remarkable collective virtuosity and outstanding musicianship that augurs extremely well for the future careers of these talented young players.

Paul Conway

London, Southwark Cathedral: Maxwell Davies and John Harle

Two premières marked the twin 800th anniversaries of Cambridge University and London Bridge on 22 June 2009 at a capacity-filled Southwark Cathedral as part of the City of London Festival, superbly performed by the choir of Kings College Cambridge and the Cambridge University Choir and Orchestra under their musical director Stephen Cleobury. The theme of 'solstice' permeated the programme, which opened with the dramatic depiction of light from 'Chaos' in Haydn's *Creation*.

Light as desire and love formed the theme of the Festival Commission, John Harle's innovative, appealing cantata *City Solstice, a Love Song to London Bridge*. It received a stunning world première by the Choir of Kings College Cambridge, with David Goode (organ) and the composer as solo saxophonist. Most riveting in effect were the imperceptible dovetailings of high, sustained notes between treble Sebastien Johns and Harle's soprano saxophone, resounding across the echoing spaces of the Cathedral. Both music and poetry, by John Pickard – with whom Harle collaborated on his 2005 ballad opera – quote the famous song 'London Bridge is Falling Down', alluding to the victory in London of the 11th-century Norwegian King Olaf over Danish invaders. The refrain 'My Fair Lady' appears only sporadically at first, its first full rendition left until the third poem, 'Solstice', in a two-part round sung while the choir gradually withdraws. This is one of several evocative theatrical gestures, the first being at the start when choirboys formed an arch through which the treble entered with a candle and crust of bread. In the final song, 'Sacrifice', the treble is answered by eerie offstage responses, while the music recapitulates the mood and material 'words unwrite as they are written/words

unspeak as they are spoken' from the opening song 'Recession'. The words of this final song concern the myth of children being trapped in the bridge, the creative flow of life, and (to the London Bridge refrain) the 'pleasure of water'.

Harle's style here displays an unusual balance between organic development of a single motif and a postmodern juxtaposition of styles, with archaic liturgical modal textures, arresting jazz modal harmonies and rhythms and acerbic chromatic colouring. The three-note motto, a semitone and minor third, is shaped into an inverted arch – symbolic, perhaps, of the arches of London Bridge. Introduced by the treble at the start, the motto is answered by saxophone arpeggios which recur repeatedly. It permeates the work, especially the saxophone ostinatos and cadenzas, displaying Harle's virtuosity, as in the second half of 'Recession', which is a syncopated 7–8 dance for male alto, organ jazz chords and volatile sax ostinato, with springy choral responses 'Dance over my Lady Lee'. 'Pursuit', the second poem, began with sumptuous a cappella harmonies matching the nocturnal imagery, whilst at its thrilling climax, the arch motto is stridently projected in augmentation for 'We shall build a bridge of fire', followed by a disarmingly touching a cappella conclusion.

Harle's cantata offered a bright contrast to the more sober and even sombre Maxwell Davies works, his bleak yet ultimately ravishing *Solstice of Light* to a text by the Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown composed 30 years ago in 1979, and the final work of the concert, *The Sorcerer's Mirror*, an environmental cantata to the poetry of former poet Laureate Sir Andrew Motion, here receiving its London première. The City of London Festival was an ideal occasion since, though *The Sorcerer's Mirror* was a CUMS commission for the 800th anniversary of the University of Cambridge, where it had received its world première at Kings College Chapel on 13 June, the poem is mainly about London. Beginning 'Midnight and midsummer in London', it goes on to depict 'Rain settling over Camden and Kentish Town' and a '...storm which passes ... towards Kings Cross'. Ostensibly about climate change, yet tackling man's role in the urban and cosmic habitat, the work's colouring is dark, with heavy bass textures, frequent low brass chorales and bass strings creating a perhaps overly ponderous tone. Yet at the same time it is infused with compellingly vivid gestures such as fugati based on sinewy string melodies doubled by voices, mercurial switches from acerbic to tonal harmonies, emphatic word repetitions, fiery climaxes and a strikingly evocative conclusion by a solo treble.

Under Cleobury's masterly command the CUMS Chorus and Orchestra drew impressive sonorities from the initial homophonic textures, which evolve through vivid word-painting, from the opening movement, as the poet steps out 'through the French windows' to see the 'earth more clearly turn', at which point the music shifts to an aptly lilting triple time metre. The earth's 'sleep' is evoked in a low meditative low brass chorale; an ominous timpani beat then announces the 'dark green wind' and the image 'an apple tangles with a bristly vine' elicits dissonant spiky counterpoint. The idea of the 'dark earth wakes and looks on' is conveyed in limping, falling gestures, evocatively shaped by the CUMS Chorus, that lead to a huge and shrieking climax. The tolling timpani beat resumes for the second movement, 'I see what I hear', where the idea of climate change that 'scatters me/over the polar cap and snapped off sea-ice' is suggested in driving accelerating rhythms and a sudden braking as 'icicle grass' is 'sculpted in silence'.

At this point an extended fugato develops in strings, the melody returning chorally after the rich, if dour repetitive climax at the cosmic image of 'starfields' where mythical gods are playing

games with the universe; at the end of the third movement, a galvanic clashing climax depicts the 'burnt offerings' of a polluting society. The fourth movement, 'Here comes the rain', begins dramatically with propulsive brass, as the poet's lawn becomes a 'Sorcerer's Mirror' for global warming, flooding and natural calamities: Maxwell Davies here uses intriguingly triadic harmonies and dancing metres, yet plunges once more into a mire of bass clusters, the evocation of a storm which eventually passes in the final movement, 'unraveling downhill', while the garden 'returns to grass again'. It was an inspired touch to bring the treble, here the pure-toned Sebastien Johns, to sing the final lines, where the poet, standing for society, is no longer innocent but self-consciously 'crouched like a guilty thing', aware of the consequences of environment misuse, 'the bare horizon behind me and beyond it the other cold planets in their broken chain'. Symbolizing the need for responsibility towards the future, perhaps, it is the treble who draws one into the dilemma, the chorus echoing the phrases 'bare horizon' and 'cold planets' and 'broken ...' over a deep orchestral bass, in a thought-provoking, atmospheric conclusion.

Malcolm Miller



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Petworth Festival: Tavener's 'Towards Silence'

Founded in 1978 by local composer, Robert Walker, who had lived in 'Brinkwells', the cottage previously occupied by the one-time celebrated resident of nearby Fittleworth – Sir Edward Elgar – the Petworth Festival opened, in July 2009, with only the second English presentation of perhaps the most meditative of recent works by Sir John Tavener. Having got vigorously underway with the *allegro-adagio-presto* pattern of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the Special Opening Concert was completely transformed as the 16 string players from the Medici, Finzi, Harpham and Court Lane Quartets then moved on to its centrepiece, composed by one of the most spiritual composers of modern times. Sir John Tavener had himself moved into the surrounding Downs, in 1991, when suffering from his serious heart condition, Marfan Syndrome. About 18 months ago, he had been inspired to write *Towards Silence* as a direct expression of his extreme fascination with creativity and consciousness, employing four string quartets and a Tibetan Bowl to convey a meditation on the four esoteric 'Atma States of dying', concluding with 'Turiya – that which is beyond'.

Led by his violinist friend, Paul Robertson – who had also recently suffered from a serious heart condition – the Medici and the three other, faintly illuminated, quartets gradually assembled in the four corners of the nave of the 14th-century Church of St. Mary the Virgin, commanding the centre of Petworth – the requisite 'spiritual space', as prescribed by Sir John himself. The Tibetan Bowl was located next to the chancel arch, mainly for acoustic reasons, thus permitting its gentle sounds to be perceived throughout the Nave.

As ethereal string music moved onward from silence, the serene beauty of the four movements – Waking State, Dream State, Deep Sleep and 'that which is beyond' – floated calmly around the Nave. More intense moments occurred when haunting 'raags' were droned by members of the Quartets, accentuating the tranquil atmosphere of the strings as they continued to transmit the tranquillity of the music into the cool church atmosphere.

Accompanying all this, the Tibetan Bowl was 'singing' as it was stroked quietly and occasionally rung, whilst the constantly varying timbre – occasionally enhanced by glissando and pizzicato – and clarity of the 16 string players relentlessly expressed the sounds of Sir John's deeply meditative response to sorrow, transcendental meditation and death, as their music drifted above the audience, creating an otherworldly realm. With the

Tibetan bowl continuing to 'sing' gently, all the string players gradually reduced the intensity of sound, until this 'soundtrack of the soul' moved peacefully 'towards silence'.

As the final moments of this ecstatic masterpiece were realized, the audience slowly departed with no applause whatsoever – as appropriately requested by the composer.

John Wheatley

Oxford, Sheldonian Theatre: Donald Swann's 'Perelandra'

There can be few of a certain age who don't know – or still sing – 'The Gnu' or 'The Hippopotamus Song' from Flanders and Swann's 1950s hit show *At the Drop of A Hat*. But who would have guessed that Donald Swann (1923–94) composed not just successful revues and numerous musical plays in the 1940s and 50s, but went on to compose four operas? In reverse order, *The Visitors*, based on a Tolstoy original; a Christmas opera, *Candletree*; *The Man with 1,000 Faces* in 1964 to a libretto by the celebrated and even infamous Colin Wilson, in 1964; and immediately preceding that his first, *Perelandra*, based on an allegorical sci-fi story by C. S. Lewis.

To some *Perelandra* seems like the crucial missing link: the work which establishes Swann firmly among serious non-Serial composers of his day. The opera was something of a hit with Broadway critics after a New York performance followed its first (and only) staging at a Pennsylvania College; Glock-era British critics were more reserved, and despite an abbreviated rewrite the work all but disappeared.

It was to rectify a perceived injustice that a new concert performance of *Perelandra* was mounted in Oxford on 26 June. Akin to a 1950s post-film noir genre, the opera evokes a kind of Zoroastrian battle between good and evil on an other-earthly planet, continuing the drift of Lewis's earlier work, *Out of the Silent Planet*. Old Possum's (T. S. Eliot's) Practical Trust and the Dorothy L. Sayers Society helped fund it; a particular achievement here was that Swann's archivist, Leon Berger, and conductor Jonathan Butcher, of Surrey Opera – both knew Swann in later life – sought to restore the original, uncut version first heard (unstaged) at Cambridge in 1964.

What emerged? Swann shrewdly suggested it might be viewed as an 'operatic oratorio – vocally dramatized theology', which is roughly what it is, with a kind of J. B. Priestley tinge and a *Peer Gynt/Pilgrim's Progress* feel, too, as the slightly pi

hero with an Iris Murdoch-sounding name, Elwin Ransom, encounters a naked Green Lady on the planet Venus, tussles with a Tolkienesque large spider and worsts the badgering Lucifer figure, Weston, whose aim is to subvert the intentions of the God-Being, Maleldil.

Some good performances helped give *Perelandra* a decent outing: Norwegian-born Håkan Vramsmo, serene, soothing and mellifluous, excelled as the youthfully doughty warrior of God, Berger himself in good fettle as the spluttering, hapless villain. A boy soloist did well in one touching, almost Rutland Boughton-like set-piece, while Neil Jenkins and Rupert Forbes, who as talented undergraduates both sang in the original Cambridge performance, were outstanding, although sadly their roles disappeared after the first part.

The choruses, while less subtly responsive to Butcher's finely modulated conducting and clear leads, alternated between the bracing and the near-banal; solos from the choir generally bettered the ensemble. David Marsh's libretto sometimes flowed, sometimes hobbled.

But some moments shone through. A couple of gorgeously counterpointed trios; the solo 'Lord of all Worlds', in which English folkiness mixed with vaudeville, taking Swann back to his *forte*; or an orchestral Aubade to match Bliss's choral one. For incongruous reasons, Swann has the monarch (Alexander Anderson-Hall) dismiss the animals near the end with a sort of full-blooded Marseillaise.

John Amis narrated magnificently: well into his eighties, what an old pro he still is. The other chief treat was the orchestration: Swann didn't do it himself, but handed over to former BBC Third Programme colleague Max Saunders (1903–83). If little else about *Perelandra* quite merited the term 'masterly', that aspect certainly did.

Roderic Dunnett

London: Royal College of Music: Stokowski's Symphony

The celebrated conductor Leopold Stokowski may well be the Royal College of Music's most internationally distinguished alumnus, certainly the most famous, and they did him full justice when the RCM Sinfonietta conducted by Robin O'Neill performed his youthful Symphony, billed as 'World Première', on 7 May in the RCM's Amaryllis Fleming Concert Hall. This was a concert of which any orchestra could have been proud, and the epic brooding musical landscapes

of the Stokowski were followed by a dancing performance of Ibert's sunny Flute Concerto in which the distinctive flute tone of soloist Alison Murphy – clearly a player with a considerable future – was enchanting. Her playing of the gorgeous slow movement was pure spun-sugar, quite lovely. After the interval the orchestra played Debussy's *La Mer*.

Stokowski was born in 1882 at 13 Upper Marylebone Street, later New Cavendish Street, and he attended nearby St Marylebone School where he sang in the choir, and was a chorister at St Marylebone Parish Church. He went to the RCM when only 13 and was a student of Stanford and Walford Davies, becoming assistant organist to Walford Davies at the Temple Church. Appointed organist at St James's, Piccadilly from 1902 to 1905, he moved to New York on being appointed organist and choirmaster of the huge Episcopal society church of St Bartholomew's on Park Avenue and East 50th Street, at the early age of 22. Each summer he travelled to Europe, notably to attend Nikisch's masterclasses, and it was on one of these trips he was offered the conductorship of the Cincinnati Symphony in 1909. In 1912 he went to Philadelphia where he remained for a quarter of a century.

Quite when in his early career did Stokowski write this striking and quite individual work? We are told the full score was lost long ago, and only a set of parts remained, which suggests it may have had an early play-through or rehearsal. The parts look old-fashioned in their orthography, suggesting it is early, and it must pre-date all Stokowski's celebrated orchestral arrangements. Yet the very individual scoring is the work of a master, someone widely experienced with the late-romantic orchestra and with a remarkable ear for sonority, who knows how to get what he wants.

After Stokowski's death in 1977 his music went to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where the curator Edwin Heilakka reconstructed the full score from the parts. My friend Edward Sargent reminds me it was one of the Stokowski scores we inspected in 1980 when I visited Curtis with him. It was probably soon after that the score had a read-through by Curtis students, and possibly there had been one in the early 1920s, but until Edward Johnson drew the RCM's attention to it there is no record of any public performance. It is a considerable discovery, however, and deserves to be played by leading orchestras, and it has to be said that the RCM's young players, directed by Robin O'Neill, did a remarkable job. The student performers seemed to be gripped by the epic landscapes which Stokowski paints in the space of exactly a quarter of an hour.

The music is notated in two movements which run without a break, and indeed without a score one would have quite believed it to be a one-movement work, more brooding tone-poem than symphony. Stokowski writes for a vast orchestra, which nevertheless only sparingly erupts in great tuttis – there is much solo work for the first flute, brilliantly played by Rachel Harston, for muted trumpet (Robin Totterdell) and brass; and its threatening fantastic character is particularly coloured by the lower reaches of the orchestra and the unusual assembly of two tubas, contrabassoon, bass clarinet and contrabass clarinet. The quiet shimmer of the tam-tam which opens the proceedings and punctuates the music at intervals, the sound of bells, and the driving drum-rhythms (all the percussion players were confident yet sensitive in their roles) give it a threatening character all of its time.

The work is undated, but from the aural influences in the score we may deduce its composition date within ten years or so. A clue comes in the references to other works of the time, and I am grateful to Edward Johnson for reminding me that Stokowski first conducted Elgar's First Symphony and Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* in 1912; Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead* in 1913; whole *Ring* programmes from 1913 onwards; Debussy's *Nocturnes* in 1914; the Berlioz *Fantastique* in 1914; Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony and Scriabin's *Divine Poem* in 1915; D'Indy's *Istar* in 1916; and many now faded names including Rabaud, Schelling, Stock, Vogrich, Sandby, Kalinnikov and Zimbalist.

The overall sound of Stokowski's Symphony is certainly Russian, with a chromatic, exotic tinge, and one is constantly aware of a range of stylistic references which pin it to the period leading up to and during the First World War. Chromatic instrumental treatment suggestive of the later works of Scriabin and the Russian modernists, and passing references to Debussy and Ravel, even Elgar, would put it later in this time, suggesting perhaps a wartime score. One would love to see the original manuscript, if for nothing else to discover how programmatic a work the composer intended. With its bleak ravaged instrumental landscapes, its muted distant bugle-calls, its tolling bells, its impassioned battles, one would not be surprised to find it is its composer's reaction to the news of war in Europe. Notable are the quite individual sound of the frenzied outbursts at the beginning of the second movement, the appearance of a rising trilling motif on the oboe marked 'Eroico' and the subsequent elegiac dissipation in brooding expressive phrases. Coloured by harp glissandi, those trumpet calls and the bells, this

was all enormously powerful, and was very convincingly played. But the question has to be asked – could this be a fragment of a larger work?

Lewis Foreman

London, Wilton's Music Hall: Finnissey's 'The Transgressive Gospel'

'I'm not part of the God Squad!' exclaimed Michael Finnissey when I asked him about his approach in his long-awaited oratorio *The Transgressive Gospel* on the occasion of its world première at Wilton's Music Hall on Friday 12 June commissioned by the Spitalfields Summer Music Festival. Speaking with him as he relaxed before the concert, I mentioned having read somewhere, that he regularly helped out by playing the organ at his local church. 'No, it's my partner who plays the organ there,' came his robust reply. 'If I put my head inside the local church they usually hide'. (Metaphorically speaking, I assumed, much as others of us with even relatively modest radical ideas can encounter a somewhat apprehensive reaction from more traditional members of the congregation, even if regularly practising our faith).

The Transgressive Gospel takes its initial inspiration from a chance encounter Finnissey had in his youth in 1968 with a 'Holy Man' priest of the Greek Orthodox Church. As he confided to us in his pre-concert talk ('in conversation' with Diana Burrell, the Festival's Artistic Director), he wanted to respond in some significant way and explained: 'I can't bake a cake, all I can do is write a piece of music'. Apparently he's been trying to do just that in response to Archbishop Anthony since his first abortive attempt in 1971, not to fill a 'god slot', but just in his own way.

Finnissey was pleased the world première was housed in a theatre, as that's where much of his career has lain, in theatre music, and as the piece is 'not a comfort zone'. The oratorio is based on the famous biblical text from St Mark's Gospel (authorised version) chapter 15 verse 28: 'And the scripture was fulfilled which saith (Isaiah ch. 53 v.12) "And he was numbered with the transgressors"'. This refers to the fact that, as Mark tells us, 'And with him (Christ) they crucify two thieves, the one on his right hand, and the other on his left'. Using substantial amounts of 'poetic license' Finnissey succeeds, by dint of setting more vivid passages from, variously, Tyndale's 1526 English translation of the bible (for which he was burnt at the stake for heresy), allusions to Rimbaud's *Season of Hell*,⁶ and the Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene. He coins the term 'transgressive texts'

to describe all these sources, including St Mark's Gospel, under the same umbrella. The fact that his programme notes don't go so far as to clearly differentiate his sources when employed in the fast-moving drama of the epic Gospel story, means the reviewer is left with shrewd guesswork as one's main textual guide, apart from obviously recognizing St Mark's familiar words when they appear in their various versions.⁷ However, I intend to try to concentrate on Finnissy's amazingly accessible portrayal of the Gospel narrative, in words and music, eschewing detailed textual analysis except where the source seems self-evident.

The piece came across to me as something of an 'antidote' to Finnissy's cult status *English Country Tunes*, as the flagrantly flamboyant, rebellious 'angry young man' of the latter has matured into the relatively reflective, meditative sound-world of his *The Transgressive Gospel*, even though that has its occasional angular jolts, percussive claxons etc to catch us unawares lest we drift off into our own 'comfort zone' – it wouldn't be Finnissy without cultural shocks to keep us on our toes. As he conducted the two vocalists and Ixion Ensemble, his steady beat and (dare I say it) air of thoughtful integrity impressed.

Finnissy's introduction of Blues-style into the score – well portrayed by singer Kate Westbrook (described by a singing professor sitting next to me as having a 'chest orientated voice' – owing something, I felt, to having sung Brecht/ Weill) – was in order to give a 'more contemporary setting ... not very tidy, not very cosy, but tough ...!' as Finnissy asserted defiantly in his preconcert talk. In fact this element, as well as the scriptural passages in Greek masterfully intoned by baritone Richard Jackson, dominated the work to compelling narrative effect – a work that communicates, and to my mind tells a story accessible to the man in the street, if at all familiar with the Gospel of St Mark, and even despite its two-hour duration.

The oratorio (though it has no chorus) is in three parts, following the Gospel Passion narrative and also incorporating George Herbert's cycle of poems 'The Church', though this was very subsidiary. In his programme notes Finnissy also lists musical references he's made to Bach's Mass in B Minor, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Coptic Chant, Tippett and Bernd-Alois Zimmermann – 'both advocates of diversity and inclusiveness'.

⁶ The excerpts from Rimbaud do not combine well with the various versions of St Mark's Gospel, in my opinion, not being 'Holy Scripture'.

⁷ Subsequent to writing this review, I have managed to ascertain via Finnissy's publisher Oxford University Press that the phrase oft-repeated in the text – 'This is the Transgressive Gospel' – in fact derives from a 15th-century Aramaic version of St Mark's Gospel.

Ixion Ensemble, under Director Andrew Toovey, came into their own with Finnissy at the rostrum in this his long awaited 'magnum opus', sporting not only vibrant violin, viola, cello and versatile pianist Philip Howard, but also cimbalom and accordion – sometimes played almost like an organ, as someone near me in the audience whispered. The composer had described the scoring for the ensemble as 'very occasional pizzicato (strings), but nothing (hidden) inside the piano, all very conventional'.

High-points included the building to big-sound, tumultuous climaxes where the taut Gospel narrative required, with Richard Jackson's baritone voice rising to a high falsetto, as Christ breathes his last on the cross and 'the veil of the temple was rent in twain'. This was preceded by loud percussive 'claps' from ratchets wielded by the accordionist and cellist at crucial moments, enough to wake up anyone at the back of the packed audience: no 'comfort zone' allowed.

However the real gem of the work, to my mind, came with passages from the Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene. St Mark's Gospel, in the Tyndale translation, tells us how on Easter Sunday morning: 'Now Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, oute off whom he cast seven devyls'. Then Finnissy goes on to quote from the Gnostic Gospel:

Firstly there is darkness
Secondly desire
Thirdly ignorance
Fourthly the excitement of death
Fifth the dominion of the flesh
Sixth the wisdom of fools
Seventh wrathful judgement
That which surrounded me is overcome

Accompanied by short spurts on the strings and tremolos on the piano, both voices join forces, the work then rising to a heady 'Dies Irae'-style Finale, ending 'uncomfy' but somehow managing to be lyrical as well.

Jill Barlow

London, St Mary's Church, Putney: Fibonacci Sequence

The Fibonacci Sequence's lunch-time concerts at St. Mary's Church right by the river in Putney High Street are unique. The church and its excellent café (on 22 May there were, in addition, colourful food stalls outside that made me wish I had not had lunch already) are light and welcoming, the concert atmosphere informal and relaxed, but the performances highly disciplined and at

the same time full of expression and excitement. The programme centred round Gillian Tingay's brilliant and joyful harp playing, and was unique in another respect, namely the seamless incorporation of two young guest artists from the Royal College of Music, the cellist Corentin Chassard and the tenor John McCunn, into the ensemble led by Gillian Tingay and the Fibonacci's excellent oboist, Christopher O'Neal.

The programme characteristically consisted almost entirely of little-known pieces, most of them of the 20th century but all of them fresh and immediately approachable. Christopher O'Neal, introducing William Alwyn's recently-rediscovered *Suite for Oboe and Harp*, written for Leon and Sidonie Goossens in 1945, reminded us that in the 1930s, Alwyn was considered somewhat *avant garde*, but the Suite consists of three delightful, melodious dance movements, modally coloured, the oboe integrated into Alwyn's expertly-fashioned harp writing, the only hint of modernity being an expressive section in five-time in the final Jig.

These days one is tempted to forget that Gabriel Fauré's *Après un Rêve* was originally a song before all the world's cellists appropriated it, but today Corentin Chassard's cello was accompanied by harp instead of piano, which somehow took the piece out of the drawing room and into a Romantic world all of its own. Chassard's introverted, thoughtful style and veiled tone (sounding at times like a Baroque cello with gut strings) suited the piece perfectly. It was followed by a two-movement Fantasia by Telemann, originally for unaccompanied flute, but today played on the oboe by Christopher O'Neal, giving Gillian Tingay her only rest in the entire programme. O'Neal played with extraordinary ease and fluency, incorporating the low notes that adumbrate the harmonic bass effortlessly into the line.

Next came two solo harp pieces. *Chanson de la Nuit* is a brilliantly-written, atmospheric tone-poem by Carlos Salzedo, full of the special effects and techniques with which he almost single-handedly created 20th-century harp-writing, which was played equally brilliantly and poetically by Gillian Tingay, her ease of manner failing to disguise her virtuosity. *Watching the Wheat*, a charming piece based on a simple song-like tune that returns at the end, enclosed in brilliant figuration (where Tingay's internal balance was perfect, making one listen for the kernel of tune while never obliterating it), was by Thomas. Thomas? *Grove's Dictionary* lists some 20 composers called Thomas, but I guessed the 19th-century opera composer Ambroise Thomas (and an originally French title), the tune perhaps from one of his

operas – until I did some online research and discovered that it was by the Welsh composer John Thomas and is based on a traditional Welsh song. Ah well, win some, lose some; but the piece and Tingay's performance were a delight.

The final piece was by far the most unusual and interesting. André Jolivet's *Suite Liturgique* consists of settings of Salve Regina, Alleluia, Magnificat and Benedictus for tenor with varying combinations of cor anglais alternating with oboe, cello and harp, with an instrumental Prelude, an instrumental Interlude between the Benedictus and the surprisingly short vocal and instrumental Finale, and – strangely! – a Musette between the Magnificat and the Benedictus. A musette was a small Baroque bagpipe and the dances played on it had pastoral associations; in the context of liturgical texts addressed to the Virgin Mary or dealing with the coming of Christ, could the Musette be an evocation of the shepherds watching in the fields? At any rate, the Suite is a powerful and expressive work of real stature, at times chromatic and harmonically bold. The ensemble was joined by the tenor John McMunn as well as his fellow-guest from the RCM, the cellist Corentin Chassard. The latter's veiled tone and rhythmic understatement led occasionally to a slight tonal and emotional imbalance, particularly because John McMunn sang with unusual fervour and passion as well as with accuracy, musicality, clear diction and an intense, focussed tone, but overall the performance matched the stature of the work and formed the climax to a most rewarding concert.

Michael Graubart

London, Wigmore Hall and Bauer & Hieber: McCabe and Röntgen two-piano premières

There's a special excitement to the sound of two pianos on the hunt – a physical thrill that a single instrument can't produce. And though there's a huge repository of two-piano works waiting to be discovered by the listening public, soloists don't seem to roll up their sleeves and sit down with their colleagues. So all power to 'Piano 4 Hands', the duo formed by Joseph Tong and Wake Hasegawa and first heard in 2002 – as with so many young musicians, thanks to the Park Lane Group. This spring and summer they notched up no fewer than five first performances between two concerts. The first of them, in the Wigmore Hall on 29 March, presented a world première, their commission, in the form of John McCabe's *Upon Entering a Painting* – at 19 minutes in length, a major addition to the piano-duo repertoire.

McCabe's programme-note gave the inspiration of the piece as 'the kind of painting which, as you gaze at it, seems to draw the onlooker into the frame, indeed into the very painting itself' and cited the Rothko exhibition at Tate Modern last year as its 'specific trigger'. He adds that the

opening and closing sections of the piece, with their gradual thickening of the harmonies and (at the end) equally gradual thinning, reflect this sense of stepping forward into and backward out of the work' and that 'The inner life of the faster sections [...] reflects that extraordinary, teeming inner life of the brush strokes.

So it might not be taking matters too literally to hear a dislocated figure in the *primo* at the outset of the piece as an allusion to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It occurs during the disjointed exchanges between the pianos which form the first panel, leading to a wild climax, with bird-like calls in the *primo* answered by rippling figures in the *secondo* – suggesting a conversation where the parties are only half-listening to each other. The *primo* now introduces another rippling figure, which the two instruments discuss at length, making the irruption of block harmonies à la Hindemith all the more effective a contrast. The *primo* punches out a quasi-minimalist chordal sequence (a remembrance of Rothko?), prompting the *secondo* to a toccata-like, mechanical response. A bluesy feel emerges, with the *moto perpetuo* of the *primo* pushed on by chords in the *secondo*, but instead of growing to a climax it sinks into becalmed impressionism before the *moto perpetuo* resumes, lurching forward in off-beat enthusiasm, an American flavour (Rothko again?) perceptible as the minimalist phrase again asserts itself, to increasingly frantic commentary from the *primo*.

The Mussorgsky allusion – if such it be – now returns in glassy *primo* octaves over sonorous chords at the bottom of the *secondo* instrument, and the two pianos slow drift apart, back into their half-listening indifference, and the music sinks into chordal silence. There's a manic quality lurking in the piece that this first outing didn't quite capture; I imagine that Tong and Hasegawa will be finding all manner of further pleasure in this resourceful piece as it settles into their repertoire.

Their cache of premières was substantially expanded in an all-Julius Röntgen recital in the basement of Bauer and Hieber on Great Marlborough Street on 6 June – four of the 14 two-piano works he composed, from a Scherzo in 1879, when he was 24, to the *Variations on a Norwegian Folktune* from the year of his death, 1932. The *Variations on a Theme of César Franck*, which date from 1903, opened the evening: theme and 12 variations, the last of them fugal, lasting 17 minutes, and unashamedly Brahmsian, as much of

Röntgen's music is – although the entirely personal quality of his later harmony is especially clear in his orchestral writing, as the ongoing recordings of his 22 symphonies on CPO are making abundantly obvious. The eight-minute *Passacaglia on a Theme by Donald Francis Tovey* (1921), by contrast, is Bachian, unsurprisingly in view of the form; more surprisingly, Röntgen makes little use of a chromatic twist in the theme until a chordal variation towards the end, where it generates a degree of dissonance. That early Scherzo, seven minutes in duration and gloriously vigorous and spirited, could come from a lost Brahms symphony – although the trio is oddly Debussyan. It is the only one of those 14 pieces that was published – so some of these UK premières may also have been world premières, although Röntgen, a supremely practical musician, will doubtless have played them with friends. The 22-minute *Norwegian Variations* contains some wonderful music and quite a bit of padding, to boot: an extensive introduction ripples up and down the keyboards, letting slip fragments of the tune before it is stated in full; it returns in a grandiose statement to launch the magnificent final paragraph, the rippling likewise recurring to lay the folksong to rest.

Martin Anderson

University of Chichester: Contemporary Music Group:

Created in 2007 by the innovative young pianist, conductor and composer Adam Swayne, Chichester University's Contemporary Music Group has once again combined with one of the United Kingdom's foremost promoters of modern-day music, CoMA Sussex, to present several ground-breaking compositions – including two world premières – to an audience consisting of students, new music enthusiasts and regular concert-goers. This organization has a cutting-edge profile, commissioning British and international composers to write music that may be creatively challenging, but which is still within reach of the technical abilities of local ensembles, particularly the group of 22 gifted musicians in attendance at the soaring, fully glazed, modern concert centre – the Chapel of The Ascension, at the hub of this audacious University's campus.

An atmosphere of suspense and excited anticipation was clearly evident on 29 March 2009 among all those present. It rapidly increased when, without warning, computer-generated alarms, whistles and shrieks invaded the Chapel, signalling the conductor, Adam Swayne, to emerge at

the double, eagerly directing an enterprising presentation of a recent work by the Royal Academy of Music's Head of Composition, Philip Cashian. *Mechanik* is a musical version of an Eduardo Paolozzi sculpture and, as it moved inexorably onward with hard-edged mechanical rhythm, the conductor and his 20-piece ensemble responded enthusiastically.

There could have been no more obvious contrast to such a vigorous start than that which followed – the intense, lingering, chords of Morton Feldman's illustrious *Christian Wolff in Cambridge*, indicative of his poignant memories of visits to an old acquaintance at Cambridge University, Massachusetts. Adam Swayne then launched his ensemble into an even more innovative sound-world, created by the American Robert Ashley, perhaps better known for his operas and theatrical works, incorporating sophisticated electronics. As he incessantly repeated 'she was a visitor', he was gradually merging with a slowly expanding progression of word and sound – from members of the ensemble now mingling with the audience – to produce a chant-like effect as the sounds moved outward from the nearest performer to the furthest.

Once this had faded away, the conductor and his ensemble began to wander eloquently around the building, creating the distorted voice and instrumental sounds of a world première by an old pupil of Olivier Messiaen – Patrick Harrex's experimental 'Instruments and Voices'. Eventually returning to his stand, Adam coordinated the moving climax, which was building up steadily from fragmented sounds into a sustained chromatic chord.

After another rhythmic world première, written and conducted by local musician, Peter Owen, and a repeat of the John Cage-influenced *he was she was* by the Irish composer Jennifer Walshe, two more highly distinctive sound-worlds followed. Howard Jones's *The Illusion of Progress* had been inspired by M. C. Escher's surreal image 'Ascending and Descending': an accurately-drawn fantasy building was immediately portrayed with constant percussion and ground bass, logically concluding with a series of crescendo chords, intensely reflecting the composer's belief that 'progress is an illusion'.

Referring to his fascination for mathematics and the Golden Section (not a mile away from the prevailing musical direction of his old Head of Composition, Simon Bainbridge), Alexander Campkin introduced the final work, another dedicated performance of his fairly new *Counting My Numberless Fingers*, which had received its first Sussex performance in the same setting last Christmas. Opening with its lively 5/4 tempo, the

harmony grew relentlessly dissonant, until the ensemble achieved an effervescent, radiant, conclusion, dominated by exhilarating piano – Adam Swayne directing the final moments of the concert with his customary flair and dynamism.

Such an adventurous range of magically rendered contemporary music received an astonishing response from a wildly enthusiastic audience.

John Wheatley

London, St James's Church Piccadilly: Yehezkel Braun

Sumptuously textured, energetic and expressive, the *Sonata a Quattro Mani* by Yehezkel Braun (b.1922) formed an exciting highlight of a stunning London debut by the prize-winning Kanazawa-Admony Piano Duo, at St James' Church, Piccadilly on 13 July (it had been previewed at St Barnabas Church, Ealing on 10 July). Presented jointly by the Jewish Music Institute, SOAS, and the Beethoven Piano Society of Europe, the concert was dedicated with affection to the memory of the BPSE co-founder and Vice-Chairman Carola Grindea, a renowned pedagogue and author, founder of the international organizations EPTA and ISSTIP, who died on 10 July aged 95. The programme also featured Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* in the composer's own virtuoso duet version (op. 134), and Mendelssohn's dazzling *Allegro Brillante* op. 92 to mark his bicentenary.

The expressive richness of Braun's *Sonata a Quattro Mani*, composed in 2004, points to its personal significance: it was dedicated to the memory of Braun's composition teacher Alexander Uriah Boskovich (1907–64), and received its world première in Israel by Miriam Boskovich, the composer's widow, with Hemda Raz. One of the main ideologues of the Israeli 'Eastern Mediterranean' school of the pioneer immigrant generation of the 1930s–40s, Boskovich's style was modal, melismatic, and dance-influenced. Like Ben-Haim, he aimed to evoke a middle-eastern Jewish and Arabic soundworld through the adaptation of Western forms and harmony. For Braun, who emigrated to British Mandate Palestine as a child of two from his native city of Breslau in Germany, 'as well as a guide he [Boskovich] was a friend'. Braun espoused the Mediterranean style from his early works such as the Piano Sonata No. 1 (1957), yet unlike other Boskovich pupils such as Tzvi Avni, who later pursued more Modernist approaches, he continued and extended that style, albeit in a more subtle form, throughout his prolific out-

put, producing a wealth of popular choral works and a sizeable instrumental oeuvre including several works for piano, and piano four hands. The influences of both Arabic and Jewish musics and Gregorian Chant, on which he is an authority, are evident in his intriguing, individual blend of tonal and modal harmony, often evoking the melisma of plainchant and the sounds of middle-eastern dances and instruments.⁸

Such a distinctive blend was evinced in this Sonata, of which Braun has written 'the whole piece is permeated by the spirit of my teacher Boskovich and by the spirit of his time. It shows through in its transparency and in the modal character of the melodies'. Certainly the intriguingly unpredictable type of modal tonal space, shifting in and out of bi- or whole-tonal effects, is reminiscent of Debussy and contemporary minimalism, further echoed in the relentless ostinatos and pedal points, with themes guided through a richly textured linearity to an unexpected yet persuasive goal. The richness of texture of the flowing, expressive first movement, 'Meditazione', was evident from the very first bell-like sonorities that echo magically through the undulating tapestry of arpeggios. With the duo's superbly controlled articulation and broad sweeping phrases, rippling arpeggio textures flavoured with delicately modal harmonies rose and fell like waves, reaching the highest peaks before supply receding to a soulful resolution.

The second movement, 'Rondo in moto perpetuo', offers a dynamic scherzo-like contrast, its additive rhythms, like a syncopated gigue, suggestive of middle-eastern dances. The duo's intrepid,

racy agility propelled the contrasting *staccato* and *legato* variants of the terse falling main theme with panache, the quick-fire imitations and rollercoaster passagework driving with exhilarating zest, and building to almost orchestral levels of richness, yet punctuated with unpredictable, poignantly hushed modal cadences.

The variation finale, 'Tema con variazione', is based on a Boskovich song about the Negev desert, its modal melodic contour formed of alternating seconds and a falling scale. About the variations the composer has written that

The extreme simplicity of this tune hides a complexity in a deeper sense. Boskovich has composed quite a few tunes that are more beautiful and more exciting, such as 'Dudu' and 'Hinnach yafa'. My reason for choosing this arid tune as a theme for variations is that for many years I saw in it a mystery calling for interpretation. The variations are my attempts at understanding this mystery.

The theme is introduced boldly in a bare octave texture at the start, and returns, after the increasingly complex variations, in a similarly simple yet emphatic fashion at the end. In between, the variations flowed seamlessly in ever more complex guises, with dramatic polytonal triadic clashes and incisively syncopated rhythms, impelled with vitality. If traditional in form, each movement has original structural features, coupled with colourful use of the duet medium, and a poetic expressivity that makes it highly effective in performance; evidence of a composer who, in his late eighties, is still remarkably at the height of his creative powers and inspiration.

Malcolm Miller

⁸ An aspect discussed in my review of his *Psanterion* for Santur and Piano Trio in *Tempo* Vol. 59, No. 234, October 2005.