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FIRST PERFORMANCES

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 2009

For the 32nd time, a former mill town in West Yorkshire provided the setting for an annual celebration of the breadth and diversity of international avant-garde music. During the past three years of his Artistic Directorship of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Graham McKenzie has broadened the event's range to explore sound installations, sound art and improvisation. Although, along with film shows and workshops, installations remained a constituent element of the 2009 festival, there was also a fresh focus on notated music and its creators. Jonathan Harvey was the composer-in-residence and works by Anthony Braxton and Emanuel Nunes were featured. An underlying thread running through the concerts consisted of music by members of what used to be referred to as the 'New Complexity' movement: thus, world premières took place of works by James Dillon, Richard Barrett and James Clarke, all of whom enjoy an international reputation rather than a local one, with the majority of their music being played abroad. To perform these key creative figures, the international ensembles engaged by McKenzie were no less distinguished: they included the German group musicFabrik, the London Sinfonietta, Remix Ensemble from Portugal, the Arditti Quartet, the Australian ELISION ensemble and the Ictus Ensemble from Brussels. A clear indication of the continued good health of the festival, despite the prevailing economic recession, was the extraordinary number of premières (UK, European and world): over 90 in total, spread over 32 events held in just nine days.

St Paul's Hall provided the venue for the opening concert, devoted solely to the first UK performance of Wolfgang Rihm's *ET LUX* (2009), a sombre and sonorous requiem for four male voices and string quartet, given with massive intensity by the Hilliard Ensemble and the Arditti Quartet. Restrained and devotional, it unfolded with the majesty, bloom and inexorable sweep of a late Bruckner symphony and, at around 60 minutes, occupied a similar time span. However, in its reduced forces, incorporation of polyphonic chants and imitative writing, Rihm's piece was more akin to Renaissance chant than more opulent settings of the mass from the Romantic era. The spacious, broadly-paced vocal lines carried a fragmented, disjointed text derived from the Latin requiem, with a great emphasis in the central section on the titular phrase '…et Lux perpetua luceat eis…', whilst the string players' occasionally sharpened their predominantly airy textures with spiky outbursts. The general impression was of a hushed, profoundly introspective study upon the requiem liturgy, in which a glowing surface of austere beauty periodically exposed more troubled undercurrents. All eight performers were rapt in their dedication to the score, ensuring that its steadily unfurling and shifting paragraphs of sound always engaged the listener.

Returning to St Paul's Hall the following evening, the Ardittis took centre stage. Their outstanding recital, which included a searing performance of Jonathan Harvey's String Quartet No.4 and two notable world premières by James Dillon and James Clarke, demonstrated why these musicians are the foremost executants of virtuosic contemporary chamber repertoire. Dillon's String Quartet No.5, begun in 2004 and completed in 2008, was a tautly gripping one-movement structure related to his piano quintet *The Soadie Waste*, recently released on disc (NMC D131). In a 15-minute narrative of constantly varying perspectives, the score shared archetypal gestures such as *ostinati*, *tremolos*, *pizzicati* and chordal textures amongst continually fluctuating forces (solo, duo, trio and *tutti*). However random the application of these techniques and despite frequent sudden changes in the character of the material, the overall effect was cogent and at times beguiling (with its folk-inflected turns of phrase, this quartet must be numbered among Dillon's least forbidding works). The Arditti players, to whom the work is dedicated, presented it with great empathy, brilliance and refinement, as if it had long been a staple of their repertoire.

Whilst Dillon's quartet displayed the mellower side of his muse, James Clarke's String Quartet No.2 was reminiscent of early Dillon pieces as it fearlessly pushed the instruments' boundaries of virtuosity and probed timbral and textural extremes in a single visceral statement lasting around 19 minutes. Though shunning vibrato altogether, the subtly-evolving material made effective use of such devices as smooth

glissandi, *sul ponticelli* and *sul tasto* playing, distorting bowing techniques and harmonics, real and artificial. Strongly rhythmical ideas and intricate figurations were frequently underpinned by pedal points established by the cello, played *scordatura* with its C string tuned down to B natural. Despite sounding raw and instinctive, the work was meticulously constructed, every spontaneous-sounding effect carefully calculated. An unerringly-placed consonance, in the context of such a multiplicity of dissonances, had the effect of sounding newly minted. Confronting the challenges and traditions of the genre head-on and casually shattering the listener's aural preconceptions of what to expect from a 'string quartet', Clarke's bold and bravura second foray into the medium was exhilarating in performance, especially in the hands of the Arditti players, who met its exacting demands with style and imagination. If the interplay between these musicians had not been so intricate and absorbing, one might almost be tempted to regard the piece in terms of a *tour de force* for four virtuoso string soloists.

New works by James Dillon featured in two other concerts. Most importantly, the Ictus Ensemble from Belgium gave the UK première of *The Leuven Triptych* in an atmospheric, dimly lit Lawrence Batley Theatre. Completed in 2009, this kaleidoscopic and visionary 45-minute work for chamber ensemble made a strong impression. It embraced a dazzling range of sonorities: the instruments required included a prepared piano, hammered dulcimer, steel drums, acoustic, 12-string and electric guitars and a rebec (the stringed instrument of the Renaissance period). The piece was inspired by and connected to the Flemish artist Rogier Van der Weyden's 'Braque Triptych'. There were three movements of which the first contained an actual quotation from a Dufay motet and the third mirrored the first. The extended central movement was particularly evocative; amongst its many felicities were an ethereal solo for tubular bells, a cascading tintinnabulation of dulcimer, 12-string guitar and harp and a trill initiated on the piano, which soon spread to the harp, then other instruments, until gradually the ornamentation had proliferated to embrace the whole ensemble.

Apart from the Dufay quotation, echoes of early music haunted the whole score from the use of harpsichord-like and viol-like textures from dulcimer and rebec, respectively, to the use of a series of pre-recorded spoken Renaissance texts, culled from, among other sources, Alberti's 'On painting' and Nicholas de Cusa's 'Learned Ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*). It all amounted to a close-knit, elusive but richly textured composition, teeming with detail, which created its own hypnotic and rarefied domain. Though presented with controlled energy and powerful concentration by The Ictus Ensemble, *The Leuven Triptych* is a piece that demands further hearings: its secrets were held too closely to allow all its implications to be fathomed from just one encounter.

Back at St Paul's Hall, a recital by Noriko Kawai contained two Dillon world premières. These miniature piano pieces of around five minutes' duration cast a brief but potent spell. *Charm* (2008) and *dragonfly* (2009) entranced the listener with their hushed and jewelled textures. The ethereal, vertiginous heights reached by the spirited *dragonfly* were especially affecting, particularly in Kawai's fastidious and poetic realization.

A former wool blending shed at Bates Mill (which lived up to all the Hitchcockian undertones of its name in the lashing late evening rain) was the appropriately bleak and bracing setting for two tumultuous works by Richard Barrett. On the first day of the festival, *Opening of the Mouth* received an extremely belated UK première, twelve years after it was completed and first performed at the Perth Festival. This multi-layered, uncompromising 70-minute setting of Paul Celan's verses for two vocalists, 11 instrumentalists and electronics unfolded in a series of seven overlapping sections studded with challenging solos. It was described in detail by Tim Rutherford-Johnson in his review of a recent CD re-release of the work in the October 2009 issue of *Tempo* and experiencing this seething, formidably complex, ritual-like piece presented live by the Australian contemporary music group ELISION Ensemble served to endorse my fellow contributor's assertion that this is 'one of the most important compositions of the last 20 years'.[1] In an exceptional performance by the whole ensemble, mezzo-soprano Ute Wassermann was compelling in her fractured, sorrowing articulation of Celan's indicting prayer against a deity who permitted the Holocaust to take place. In truth, the complex filigree writing for the individual instrumentalists and the ingenuity of the vocal parts made the pre-recorded electronics' interpolations sound almost conventional by comparison.

The second new Barrett work was scheduled during the final weekend of events, when *Mesopotamia* (2009) for 17 instruments and electronics received its world première in a concert that also included a rare chance to hear Jonathan Harvey's *Bhakti* (1982). Barrett's new piece, written for and premièred by the London Sinfonietta,

[1] *Tempo* Vol. 63 No. 250 (October 2009), p.78.

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is the fifth instalment in an ongoing series for musical forces of sundry dimensions collectively entitled 'resistance & vision'. When the original part of the sequence, *NO* (a large-scale orchestral work), was first performed, the composer commented that he had begun writing it when the second Iraq war was being launched; it is not perhaps too fanciful to detect similar concerns behind the latest addition to the set, as Mesopotamia and present-day Iraq share much of the same territory. A source of inspiration Barrett officially recognizes for *Mesopotamia* is Gwendolyn Leick's book of the same title, written in ten chapters, each of which deals with a different city-state of the ancient civilisation, roughly in chronological order as the centre of gravity in terms of culture and trade shifts from one place to another and societies rise and fall. Similarly, in Barrett's piece, there were ten sections, or more accurately 'layers', which were unearthed and reformed as the work evolved, accumulating and paring back detail in the process. Memory played a significant role in the work, as the opening piano statements were both transfigured and recalled by later sections. In the main, Barrett treated his players as a group of soloists, employing the combined forces chiefly at pivotal points in the work's elaborate and expressive 25-minute course.

Despite the rain tamping down on the roof, distracting from the seminal initial piano solo, this reading of *Mesopotamia* made a satisfying and worthy climax to the festival's impressive batch of first performances. The work was expertly performed by the London Sinfonietta players, among whom Sarah Nicholls deserves special mention for her vivid realization of the key piano part (as well as the MIDI keyboard), the root of much of the music, and a latent force beneath its various strata. Pierre-André Valade was an alert and responsive director of the ensemble and its splintered groups and solos, making certain every detail of Barrett's meticulously-constructed score registered.

Rewarding and stimulating, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival of 2009 proved to be a memorable occasion. The mixture of forms and types of music-making on offer, in a wide variety of venues, could scarcely have been richer and there were some outstanding works among its formidable array of premières. (James Clarke's String Quartet No.2, James Dillon's *The Leuven Triptych* and Richard Barrett's *Mesopotamia* are all obvious candidates for a prompt appearance on disc.) The high standards of performance maintained throughout the programmes confirmed the event as the UK's leading new music festival.

Paul Conway

Liverpool, Philharmonic Hall: Weinberg's Requiem

Over the past five years or so the music of Mieczysław Weinberg has been slowly clawing its way towards not just acknowledgement but acceptance as one of the most individual and compelling bodies of work by any composer of the second half of the 20th century. Weinberg's split heritage confused the image and diffused what promotional effort there might otherwise have been: born in Warsaw in 1919 and a resident of the USSR from 1939, when he fled before the advancing Germans, Weinberg as Polish Jew was hardly going to enjoy the same attention from the official Soviet machinery as home-grown composers. By the same token he neither sought attention as a victim (almost Hitler's, almost Stalin's) nor played the politics game; he kept his head down and wrote works that could usually count on performances by the leading musicians of the country to which he gratefully owed his life. Although Jewish elements are a near-permanent feature of his music (sometimes labelled as 'Moldavian' when folk-camouflage was required), they were ethnic markers rather than evidence of religious inclination; not until his very last work, the *Kaddish* Symphony of 1992, did Weinberg venture an explicitly religious Jewish association. Instead, his principal moral impulse seems to have been pacifist humanism: his worklist is peppered with anti-war statements, some of them on a substantial scale. So his decision to write a Requiem, his op. 96, in 1965–67, on secular texts was more probably the result of inner conviction rather than outer pressure from an atheist state – although the very title may have been enough to prevent performance: it had its première only this past autumn, in Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool, on 21 November by the Lithuanian soprano Asmik Grigorian, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir and Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral Choir under Thomas Sanderling. The texts of the six movements are by the Soviet poet Dmitry Khedin, Federico García Lorca, the American Sara Teasdale, Munetoshi Fugakawa (since the Requiem subsumes, virtually intact, Weinberg's 1966 cantata *Hiroshima Five-Line Stanzas*, op. 92), Lorca again, and another Soviet, Mikhail Dudin.

David Fanning's programme-note pointed to recent and contemporary works that proceeded along similar philosophical lines: Britten's *War Requiem* (1962), Penderecki's *Dies Irae* (1967), Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony (1969). In the event, though Weinberg's music is often labelled (neither unfairly nor inaccurately) as

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'Jewish Shostakovich', his Requiem is far closer in idiom to the music that Schnittke was beginning to write in the later 1960s and 70s: spare, astringent, refracted, obsessive. The first movement contrasts a furious tattoo in timpani and piano with a disconsolate soprano line taken up in the second movement by the celesta and harpsichord, which extend it into a manic, seven-minute *moto perpetuo*, into which the men's and children's voices interject *parlando* commentary. An impassioned soprano solo is met by a woodwind phrase that is itself answered by string *pizzicati* – Weinberg makes no attempt to hide his debt to Shostakovich, but the orchestral interlude which now emerges could only be by Weinberg, in the assertive mood of his Twelfth Symphony, with an angular melodic line over a walking bass, delivering punched chords before dying back to admit an elegy from the reeds.

The Teasdale setting begins gently, a contrast to the passion that had preceded it, its growing intensity set in relief by the bare string commentary underneath. Winds solos duet with strings, solo and sectional, and the textures thin almost to nothingness before Weinberg, responding to the text, uses the orchestra for a short passage of nature-painting, something rarely encountered in his music. Fugakawa's text is prefaced by marimba phrases answered by the flutes in clear evocation of Japan, with other unusual colours emerging during the movement: mandolin, vibraphone, woodblock. The bare, static textures heighten the effectiveness of a dance from the flute and side-drum and the relative rhythmic complexity of the writing for the children's voices. The choral imprecation which follows is, I think, the first use of the full chorus in the work and leads to a furious call to arms from the percussion and woodwind; as the choral prayer dies away, a double-bass picks it up, supported by the harp, leading to a beautiful *a cappella* statement (in English): 'No more Hiroshima', repeated after a linking passage of tolling bells and piano under flute and mandolin lines.

Weinberg now interposes a brief interlude in the form of a gentle string elegy set against a two-part cantilena from the boys' voices – stark, but moving. The second Lorca setting begins with insistent descending string *pizzicati*, taken up by three oboes; *arco* strings then offer consolation before the harpsichord takes over the descending string phrase, and the soprano declaims the text over a fractured tissue of harpsichord, mandolin and *pizzicato* double-bass. The consolatory tone at the outset of the final movement may have been dictated by hopes of a performance, just as the choice of its banal text may have been, but the phrases half-heartedly exchanged among the sections of the chorus suggest that Weinberg shared Kafka's view that 'There is hope – but not for us'. The timpani stir up the temperature, provoking a response from the full chorus, but a rocking two-note figure on the xylophone survives a heroic stanza from the horns and transfers to the timpani (recalling Nielsen's Fourth Symphony) to undermine a soprano solo. Harpsichord, piccolo and horns offer last thoughts over a held *pp* string chord and the music dies away.

Is it a successful work? I don't know. Even at its starkest Weinberg's music doesn't normally court the degree of emotional obliquity encountered in the Requiem. But the problem might not lie in the music itself: this performance added over eight minutes to the composer's estimated duration of 52 minutes – a substantial difference – so that an account that respected Weinberg's timing might find tensions and contrasts this first outing failed to generate. One hopes, mind you, that it won't be another 32 years before the piece gets a second chance to prove itself.

Martin Anderson

Liverpool, The Cornerstone: New Music from the Phil – Ensemble 10/10

Ensemble 10/10's regular concert series at The Cornerstone, an impressively regenerated Victorian Gothic building owned by Liverpool Hope University, recently won the RPS Award for 'Concert Series and Festivals'. Post-'Capital of Culture 2008' there is a tangible sense of 'legacy' in the Liverpool arts scene. The full house on 21 October suggested that the city has a considerable appetite for the new, especially when it is presented with the enthusiasm and panache of conductor Clark Rundell and this ensemble. Pieces by Stravinsky, James Wishart, Lou Harrison and John Adams were programmed alongside the first performance of Louis Johnson's *Manifestations*.

Manifestations is a canonic passacaglia whose rhythmic, pitch and formal devices are all carefully pre-planned using a number sequence. Because of or despite this, the basic passacaglia theme is sufficiently characteristic to bear ten repetitions punctuated by bold, bass drum beats. Presentations are subject to temporal shifts, registral displacement, instrumental palette change and other tools of the trade, all effectively wielded, but the impact of the piece is due to an inexorable sense of revelation. From the first, subdued, homophonic string statement with its shadow of low register piano arpeggiations, to the intense, homophonic clarity of the final tutti, one had the sense

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of a monolithic object which endures despite the changing conditions that surround it.

The concert on 18 November included works by Adam Gorb, Matthew Fairclough and Stephen Pratt, plus the world première of Mieczsław Weinberg's one-act opera *Lady Magnesia*. Weinberg was a friendly rival of Shostakovich but his position as a Polish-Jewish exile in the USSR may have contributed to the ambivalence of the Soviet authorities towards his music as well as his subsequent reputation in Russia and the West as a relatively minor figure languishing in the dense, hagiographic shadow of Shostakovich. David Fanning's conviction that this is a body of work ripe for reappraisal has led to the recent spate of performances.

Lady Magnesia was composed in 1973 and is a setting of a domestic farce by George Bernard Shaw called *Passion, Poison and Petrification, or The Fatal Gazogene*. The plot is a love triangle between Lady Magnesia, her lover Adolphus and her jealous husband George, all attended to by a maid, Phyllis. The superficiality of the relationships is ridiculed through numerous stock, melodramatic devices: the heavens rage, there is a dagger and poison and at the denouement Adolphus is turned into a statue. Weinberg takes this material and creates a kaleidoscope of musical topics that similarly parodies musical drama. This is skilfully achieved through a mixture of formal pieces (tarantella, waltz, march), instrumentation (two slightly decadent electric guitars and drum-kit, an angelic choir on pre-recorded tape accompanied by harmonium) and stylistic eclecticism (Baroque affects, the nationalism of The Mighty Handful and a plethora of early 20th-century 'isms' both classical and popular). These disparate elements collect around the *arioso* vocal lines which weave a strangely compelling expressionist narrative and occasionally tip over into spoken word. It is in these vocal lines that one has a sense of Weinberg's own unique voice, which conveys compassion for individual attachments be they material or romantic, nostalgic or neophiliac. Weinberg was a prolific composer and wrote numerous pieces to accompany circus acts. This opera may draw something from the great Russian clowning tradition that Slava Polunin describes as the 'epic-intimate alloy … of absurdity and naivety'.

Emma Morwood, Carolina Krogius, Tom Raskin and Philip Smith whipped along the drama, elaborating the dynamics of the relationships with a variety of semi-staged gestures that worked well in the limited space available. Ensemble 10/10 gave visceral support under the baton of Clark Rundell.

Helen Thomas

London, Royal Academy of Music: Paul Patterson

On 22 November 2009 at the Royal Academy of Music, Paul Patterson's latest work for harp, *Avian Arabesques*, was given a technically assured and engaging first performance by four virtuoso harpists from the Academy Harp Ensemble in a Harp Showcase Concert organized by Skaila Kanga. Whilst to modern audiences, a large group of harps may be something of a curiosity, in the Ancient Middle East it was by no means uncommon: there is, for instance, a relief in the British Museum depicting an Elamite court orchestra of seven harps welcoming the Assyrian conqueror in 650 BC.

Avian Arabesques is the third work[2] Patterson has bequeathed to the harp community; something of substance and technical challenge resisting, on one hand, sub-Debussian post romantic pap and, on the other, sub-Berio avant-garde affectation, preferring to forge a strong personal language from diverse sources such as the Polish School and – not surprisingly in the case of *Avian Arabesques* – Arabic music. The importance of Polish music in Patterson's work has been acknowledged by the Polish composers themselves whom Patterson champions; he has recently received the highest Polish accolade, the Gold Medal, for his services to Polish music.

In much of his work – including the second movement of *Spiders*, his first work for solo harp, and the last movement of *Bugs*, his second for the instrument – one can see the detailed motivic construction and harmonic acerbity which owes much to the tortured and unfathomable black depths of the Polish psyche. However, what sets Patterson aside from the hysterical wailing of Penderecki or the granite harmonic monoliths of Górecki is the humour in works like *Comedy for Winds*, *Time piece* and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

In *Avian Arabesques*, Arabic influences are a strong presence in the second movement, *Legend of the Anka*, depicting the Anka, the mythical Arabian bird that could carry an elephant on its back. It begins with a melodic prelude based, I am guessing, on the mode *hisar*: G A B♭ C# D E♭ F#, coloured with harmonics followed by swooping glissandi. This is succeeded by undulating arpeggios which permeate the texture of the entire

[2] He is currently working on his fourth work for harp, *Spider's Web*, which is a reworking of *Spiders* for harp and chamber orchestra commissioned by the Alvarez Chamber Orchestra for performance in the Plucked from Nowhere season in November 2010.

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movement, caressing and inflecting the Arabic mode which twice glides from g''' down to b♭'' and back up to g'''; it is as if the bird is the melody, whilst the landscape through which it travels is the changing harmonic fields created by the accompanying arpeggios, a landscape moving from homely diatonic quartal harmonies centered around the tonic of G (G C D) via the darker, richer vistas of G, A♭, C, D, E♭ to the climax of the movement at the fourth bar of rehearsal letter O – the Anka has reached Cornwall's verdant strand: the Tristan chord.

The rich fiery harmonies of the *Flight of the Phoenix*, the last movement of *Avian Arabesques*, flicker with even more rapid and unforeseen twists and turns, and it is here that Patterson demonstrates the use of extended techniques which are structurally relevant, not intellectual posturing: whilst much of the swirling fire is articulated in semiquavers at quaver or crotchet distances, nine bars into the movement, a rhythmic figure constructed from semiquavers irregularly grouped in 3+3+2 units cuts through the principal metrical scheme five times, articulated conventionally by plucked the strings in harmonies related to the surrounding textures. However, about two-thirds of the way through the movement, this 3+3+2 gesture is now assigned to quavers, and presented by tapping the wood alternately with the palm and knuckle: to me, the *dum* and *tak* of the Arabic *wazn* or rhythmic system.

The Academy Harp Ensemble negotiated effortlessly this and other extended techniques such as chromatic shifts by pedal changes midnote, the dramatic fingernail glissandi at the beginning of the first movement, *The Hovering Falcon*, and executed the brusque subdued hand slide on the bass strings with a cheeky gesture at the conclusion of the entire work with the necessary nonchalance that such a throwaway idea demands.

If the Elamite court orchestra was capable of similar feats, the highly educated Assyrian king Ashurbanapil would have felt that Elamite music warranted serious attention; perhaps the repertoire of this Ancient Middle Eastern orchestra might have shared Paul Patterson's predilection for harping on with zoomorphic preoccupations: the association of the harp with animals can be traced back at least as far as Queen Shub-Ad's harp from the Sumerian Royal Cemetery at Ur, 2500 BCE, which has the carved head of a calf placed at the end of the sound-chest.

Geoffrey Alvarez

Swansea, Brangwyn Hall: Alun Hoddinott's 'Taliesin'

Taliesin was the last composition completed by Alun Hoddinott before his death at the age of 78 on 11 March 2008. The BBC National Orchestra of Wales, who commissioned the work, gave the première under the baton of their associate guest conductor Francois-Xavier Roth on 10 October 2009 at the Brangwyn Hall as part of the Swansea Festival. This occasion took the form of a double celebration, firstly of Hoddinott's 80th anniversary and secondly the 75th birthday of the venue where the young composer had his formative experiences of hearing live music played by a professional orchestra. Hoddinott's *Taliesin* takes its natural place alongside two other swansongs by leading Welsh composers: William Mathias's *In Arcadia* (1992) and Daniel Jones's *Symphony in Memory of John Fussell* (1992). All three pieces crown a lifetime of orchestral writing in the form of a large-scale symphonic work (co-incidentally Jones's symphony, his Thirteenth, was also first performed in the Brangwyn Hall to mark that composer's 80th birthday).

Though not overtly programmatic, *Taliesin* was inspired by the life of the eponymous 6th-century Welsh bard who came to embody the Celtic spirit. It was cast in the form of one unbroken statement comprising four well-defined and related spans, each corresponding to traditional symphonic movements. Hence, a substantial introduction presenting the work's main material (a memorable hypnotic, ticking ostinato figure and soaring string theme) was followed by an extended, Puckish and fleet-footed scherzo, marked *Presto*. At the heart of the piece was a shadowed, nostalgic slow movement – in effect the last of a long line of 'night pieces' by Hoddinott – darkly brooding and tinged with wistful regret. A vigorous, driving Finale reintroduced material from the opening section and unexpectedly broadened out into a dream-like, radiant coda (based on the work's initial statements) which seemed suspended between this world and the next.

These visionary closing pages could hardly fail to move, given their valedictory context, yet Hoddinott was never a self-indulgent composer and the predominant mood of *Taliesin* was one of optimism, albeit at times toughened by a steely defiance or overcast by a sense of unease. This was assisted by a judicious use of such inhabitants of the lower regions of the orchestral palette as the double bassoon, bass trombone, tuba, tam-tam and bass drum. Familiar gestures and preoccu-

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pations were present throughout the score: the way the work's memorable opening material both launches and continually fuels the piece, for example, as well as the inventive writing for a characteristically generous percussion section (requiring three players) and a bold juxtaposition of violently contrasting elements, notably dynamics and rhythm, into a satisfying, unified whole.

Cogently worked out and sparingly but vividly scored, this 25-minute tone poem had a trenchant symphonic drive. However, a comparison with the wider breadth and reach of the composer's numbered symphonies – the organically unfolding Sixth of 1984 (a true single-movement symphony), for instance, or the more forcefully argued, weightier Tenth from 1999 (a work also featured in the BBCNOW's current season) – serves to explain why *Taliesin* was not subtitled 'Symphony No. 11': perhaps it would be more accurate to regard it as a symphonic poem, with a typically acute structural dimension.

The players of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales have premièred many of Hoddinott's works (the first took place 60 years ago when, as the BBC Welsh Orchestra under Mansel Thomas, they introduced the brief *Nocturne for Orchestra*). In this first performance of *Taliesin*, they played with an intense commitment and interpretative flair, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the composer's unique sound-world. François-Xavier Roth, not previously acquainted with Hoddinott's work, brought a fresh and probing approach to the score which precluded any hint of sentimentality; the conductor was particularly impressive in the bracing attack with which he exhorted his players to tear into the infrequent but unerringly placed massive tuttis. Sweeping and inexorable, the single movement's arc was traced in a taut single utterance, however clearly defined, varied and texturally wide-ranging its constituent episodes.

I look forward to hearing this substantial and finely wrought work again. The composer's sheer joy in writing for large orchestral forces sounded deeper than ever, a potent reminder that the passing of this astonishingly prolific and splendidly individual voice has been a genuine loss for Wales in particular and for contemporary music in general.

Paul Conway

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Cardiff, Sherman Theatre: 'Letters of a Love Betrayed'

At the heart of Eleanor Alberga and Donald Sturrock's new opera, *Letters of a Love Betrayed*, lies a question. Can Isabel Allende's original story, on which the opera is based, retain its subtle power within the outsized emotions of opera? Allende's short story occupies a mere ten pages of her collection of short stories, *Tales of Eva Luna* (1989). Although it contains the most visceral of human emotions, its power lies in its fragility and fugitive understatement. It is almost the antithesis of opera.

Letters of a Love Betrayed, premièred on 20 October, was commissioned by Music Theatre Wales and ROH2, following initial workshop extracts developed through OperaGenesis at the Linbury Studio Theatre, London. If we discount the 1994 children's opera *Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs*, also written with David Sturrock, this is Alberga's first full-length opera. It is an impressive achievement by an experienced and versatile composer whose background in dance has given her a natural affinity with the theatre.

Cast in two acts and lasting nearly two hours, it is the story of Analía, an orphaned girl brought up in a convent in the remote foothills of the Andes Mountains in South America. Her uncle attempts to wrest the land that she will inherit when she comes of age by persuading his son, Luis (Analía's cousin), to pay court to her through a series of letters. The sensitivity and rare emotional insight of the letters strongly attract Analía, but marriage to Luis disabuses her of any illusions she might have of her husband; he is violent, drinks heavily and consorts with prostitutes. They conceive a son who seemingly is Analía's only salvation, but a school report from his teacher reveals that the letters that so captivated her were not written by her husband. Following Luis's death in a violent drunken brawl, Analía takes the decision to confront her son's teacher with the evidence that he wrote the letters: she finally meets the man with whom she originally was destined to live.

The character of Analía poses both challenges and potential problems to any composer and librettist. Her emotional growth is considerable, yet the childlike dreamworld she inhabits, which is central to her survival, is enormously difficult to encompass. Donald Sturrock writes, 'Analía is a classic nineteenth-century operatic heroine' but, 'she is more intelligent and self-aware than some of these archetypes'. If this does not convincingly emerge in performance, neither the composer nor the excellent Mary Plazas, who sung the role, are to blame. Both rise to the scene that is the crux of the opera in which Analía, close to breakdown, finds her own salvation, but her character is not sufficiently established in the libretto to carry the weight this requires.

The other dominant theme of the opera is that of the landscape and earth from which the characters draw their sense of identity. Although this is an opera that almost exclusively takes place behind closed doors, the sense of earth and place are palpable in the open-air textures of the music. Alberga's musical personality comes to the fore in the music that reflects most strongly her own Jamaican roots. This can be felt most movingly and effectively in the delicate gossamer textures that conjure the earth and nature of the landscape as well as, perhaps less effectively, in the folk-inspired music of the community scenes, such as the wedding with which the first act concludes.

The music moves, quite effortlessly, between these materials and the harder, more expressionistic world that the tough emotions of the libretto invite. This is one of the work's strengths, although despite Alberga's very real feeling for dramatic pacing and stagecraft, there are long stretches where the music's pacing feels one-dimensional. Perhaps most convincing was the second funeral scene (Act 2) in which the Stravinskyan ritualistic bell-tones underpinning the whole scene rooted it perfectly within the ritualized lives of the community.

Letters of a Love Betrayed does not try to be a ground-breaking or innovatory modern opera, but rather a *good* opera, honest and straightforwardly communicative. Its musical language is eclectic, ranging from a musical vocabulary with its roots in the main figures of mid-20th-century opera and beyond.

This new score has been well-served by Music Theatre Wales, with strong performances in the leading roles from Mary Plazas (Analía), Jonathan May (Eugenio) and Christopher Steele (Luis) and vital playing from the 14-piece ensemble under conductor Michael Rafferty. Colin Richmond's set designs are simple and effective and support Michael McCarthy's unobtrusive direction. At the performance at Cardiff's Sherman Theatre, Arlene Ralph (as the Mother Superior and Gloria) was only able to act the part (due to a throat infection) and Rachel Nicholls took the vocal part with great skill from the pit. *Letters of a Love Betrayed* is an opera that deserves further performances and which has the ability to establish an immediate rapport with audiences.

Peter Reynolds

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London, Wigmore Hall: Simon Bainbridge's 'Tenebrae'

There were plenty of vocal and string fireworks to regale the enthusiastic Wigmore Hall audience at a superb concert aptly entitled 'The Best of British', given by the joint forces of the Hilliard Ensemble and the Arditti Quartet on 7 November 2009. The programme featured two impressive premières by Simon Bainbridge and James Clarke in the presence of the composers, alongside works by John Casken, also present, by Jonathan Harvey and Barry Guy. Both the Hilliard and the Arditti were on tremendous form, their performances reflecting mastery of avant-garde expression, breathing life into new notations, new sound-worlds.

The concert began with the subtle synthesis of Renaissance and contemporary poetic and musical elements in *Sharp Thorne* by John Casken, and Harvey's Second Quartet (1988), in a commanding account by the Arditti who have recently released Harvey's complete string quartets on a Quartet CD to mark the composer's 70th birthday. The Arditti players vividly rendered the volatile, expressionistic surface of the first movement, and the siren-like lyricism of the cello high cantilena of the last movement, supported by high tremolando, which lurches into a furious fugato that frazzles in the cello's stratosphere. In between came the slow movement's hushed, brittle chords which, curiously, anticipated the style of Simon Bainbridge's *Tenebrae* (2009), which later received its memorable world première.

A Hilliard commission, *Tenebrae* is a masterly, chilling setting of Paul Celan's famous post-Holocaust poem on the theme of human suffering. Bainbridge's setting is one of his most arresting, infused, as in his earlier settings of Primo Levi, with original power and compellingly tormented beauty. As well as the interactions that interpret the title, 'shadows', as a 'continuously shifting perspective between the four voices and strings', the finely-honed harmonic and rhythmic gestures convey both the essence and detail of Celan's text, which takes the form of a prayer that inverts the conventional human/divine relationship. Eerie, disembodied, the voices seem at first separate from strings, yet they emerge more confidently, eventually taking the lead. Strings and voices move in blocs like finely calibrated crystals, suspended in silences. As in the hushed shimmers of Bainbridge's orchestral *Diptych*, inspired by Venetian reflections, sound and silence are coupled in an intimate balance of time and space

At the start, the apparently innocent 'Nah sind wir, Herr' ('We are near, Lord') is set to sustained strings echoed in a whispered *Sprechgesang*, or in sustained syllabic pitches selected from the string chord. A climax is reached with the almost violent image 'als wär / der Leib eines jeden von uns / dein Leib, Herr' (as though the body of each of us were your body, O Lord'), the string texture rhythmicized and acerbic, the voices overlapping polyphonically towards a strident 'Herr'. The searing intensity continues in a string commentary, abruptly contrasted by the initial whispered sounds at 'Bete Herr' ('Pray Lord'), an extreme gesture that heightens Celan's ironic reversal at 'Pray, Lord pray to us, we are near'. The accusatory tone is reflected in twisting vocal gestures on 'Windschief' ('Askew we went there') and spectral string trills, *sul tasto, sul ponticello*, for the crescendo into a Munch-like outcry at 'nach Mulde und Maar' ('to the the trough, the crater'). Here there is a separation of bloc-like vocal textures away from swirling strings, as if to underline the inability to express the sacrilegious accusation 'Es war Blut, es war, was du vergossen, Herr': 'It was blood, it was what you shed, Lord'. Amazingly, here Bainbridge subdivides the word 'vergossen' across the voices, as if no individual could pronounce such words, only the communal a capella ensemble, reaching a climactic outburst 'Es Glänzte' ('It gleamed').

The cathartic climax inaugurates of a change of mood and harmonic colour, where the earlier taut, tense atonal dissonance shifts to a softer, more triadic near-consonance. The quartet provides a transition, with *flautando* and other effects in its highest registers, and a scampering second violin line which infiltrates the entire quartet, pointing to the more reconciliatory tone. The vocal texture introduces octaves and unisons, smoother intervals, as at the 'Augen und Mund stehen so offen und leer, Herr' ('Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord'), underlining the internal rhymes of 'Leer ' and 'Herr'. At 'Wir haben getrunken, Herr. Das Blut und das Bild' ('We have drunk, Lord. The blood and the image…'), richer organum-like chords convey the eerie imagery, while the gradual recession of texture suggests the spirits returning to the shades in a calmer mood. All join together on a distinctive triadic harmony at 'Bete, Herr' (Pray, Lord), where the strings' F sharp major cluster is shadowed by the vocal E flat triad, whilst for the concluding repeat of the opening phrase, 'Wir sind nah' ('we are near'), voices shadow the strings' bitonal B flat/C mixture with a B major triad, a curious consonant resolution, spiced with otherworldly dissonance.

While *Tenebrae* moves from a fragmentary, slow and quiet start through an intense catharsis, James Clarke's *Untitled No.4* (2007), commissioned for the Bonn Beethovenfest and here receiving a splendid

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UK première, emphasized continuity evolving towards fragmentation, its minimalist-like repetitions becoming increasingly chromatic, nervous and fractious. The lack of title, as in other recent works, may reflect Clarke's abstract approach; evident in the way two Ovid extracts (about summer, from *Fasti*, Book 4, and winter, from *Tristia*, Book 3) are used primarily for texture rather than meaning, superimposed and intertwined. Though similar to Stockhausen's *Stimmung* in its sustained extended quasi-consonant harmonies, framed by a sustained extended dominant and inflected through texture and register, there was far more variety, contrast and drama here, with accentuation, articulations and note-bending, and really imaginative interactions keeping the surface buoyantly alert. Despite shifts to different harmonies, there was a strongly unified harmonic field, rendered more complex through effects like sustained violins playing clashing seconds against the bass, or imitative vocal textures enriching subdued declamatory strings. Overall the piece is full of interest and beautiful sonorities, engagingly, artfully shaped.

Barry Guy's *Un Coup de Dés* concluded the evening with wit and panache. Mallarmé's text is used, as with Berio and Nono, as a semantic-sonic play on words. The texture was buoyantly filled with cross-accents, foregrounded words, and witty linking gestures such as sighs and glissandi, the singers' quasi-theatrical gestures bringing it frothily alive.

Malcolm Miller

London, Royal Festival Hall: Steve Reich

Ever since performing the world première of Sir John Tavener's ground-breaking fantasy, *The Whale* – during the 1968 Proms – the London Sinfonietta has firmly positioned itself at the forefront of modern-day music, more recently developing an immense enthusiasm for the highly distinctive sound-world of the incomparable American minimalist composer Steve Reich. Branded as 'the most original musical thinker of our time' and also 'among the great composers of the century', there can be no doubt that he has challenged the occasionally downbeat public view of modern music with his completely new approach to composition, embracing colour, texture, pulsing harmonics, hypnotic rhythm and innovative melody. Reich is totally commit-

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ted to live music, but as he never wishes to close any musical doors – or to impede harmonious progress – he is dedicated to the idea of merging it with electronically-generated sound. This convinced him – in 1982 – to fire up the first of his four *Counterpoints,* all of which unite live flute, clarinet, cello and guitar with a dynamic, pre-recorded sound-world, comprised of similar instrumental groups. His fundamental aspiration is 'to make beautiful music, above everything else, without abandoning the idea that it has to have structure'.

As Reich has only just accepted a significant new commission from the London Sinfonietta to compose yet another *Counterpoint*, he responded positively to an invitation to discuss his thoughts and ideas at their new Headquarters, in Kings Place, just before an intriguing concert at the Royal Festival Hall, dedicated to four of his immensely varied works. During an hour-long session in one of the meeting rooms there, he reacted dynamically to questions from the BBC Radio 3 commentator, Robert Worby, expressing himself vigorously and articulately – from time to time displaying a keen sense of humour.

On the following day, London Sinfonietta linked with the American ensemble, Bang on a Can All-Stars, to give a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, totally dedicated to Steve Reich's music, whose popularity was demonstrated by a highly enthusiastic full house. Although *Music For 18 Musicians* was scheduled as the final showpiece, the evening went dramatically into full swing when Steve himself signalled the Bang on a Can percussionist, David Cossin, to bond with him in *Clapping Music*, 'creating a piece of music that would need no instruments at all beyond the human body', as he described it. This was immediately followed by *Electric Counterpoint,* during which electric guitarist Mark Stewart performed skilfully against the pre-recorded tape, progressively unlocking many lines of inventive music in order to create a mesmerizing texture– from which emerge some incredibly melodic and cadenced patterns.

Following on from his innovative *Sextet*, for four percussionists and two keyboard players, came the highlight of this astounding 'Reich-night' – *Music For 18 Musicians*, integrating Steve himself, on piano. The overall pattern of this whole work is defined by the opening harmonic sequence which is strongly outlined during its first five minutes of 'pulse' – the 13 remaining sections then following without a break, each based on a separate chord and ending with a magical return to 'pulses'. Near the beginning, human voice merges ethereally with all instruments, gradually increasing the intensity of this masterpiece, enabling it to achieve an ecstatic sound-world, linking the four female voices with a highly inventive, rhythmic, structure by means of modern sound technology – unquestionably one of the most spellbinding musical creations of the late 20th century.

Following this rousing performance, the London Sinfonietta – and its many wholehearted supporters – will be co-operating intensely with Steve Reich, from now on, regarding his latest new commission, which is to be the next significant chapter in his hypnotizing *Counterpoint* series. *London Counterpoint* is to be composed for an ensemble of up to 15 musicians, each of whom will be playing against a pre-recorded line, employing the virtuosic solo sounds of the London Sinfonietta for its eagerly anticipated world première – scheduled for the 2013 season, or hopefully earlier.

John Wheatley

Birmingham, CBSO Centre: David Sawer's 'Rumpelstiltskin'

Described in its publicity material as 'a grotesque fable for our times', David Sawer's new version of the Grimm brothers' *Rumpelstiltskin* proved hard to categorize; the score defines it as a ballet, yet although there was a substantial amount of mime and movement on stage, the music played such a key role that at times it felt like an chamber opera without words. In fact, it could be viewed as a contemporary reincarnation of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's potent music theatre pieces of the late 1960s, especially *Vesalii Icones* (1969).

The project reunites Sawer with director Richard Jones and set designer Stewart Laing, the creative team that gave us the barbed, Expressionist opera *From Morning Till Night* and, more recently, the less exalted satirical operetta *Skin Deep*, whose excesses and indulgences are refreshingly absent from their latest collaboration. Spare and focussed, *Rumpelstiltskin* is a grippingly told tale which stealthily draws the audience in to the dark and damnable world of its six protagonists and deftly exploits its minimalist, portable set and reduced instrumental forces to establish its own weird authentic inner landscape in eight taut scenes crammed into a 70-minute span. The stark, graphic production created a grim (as well as Grimm) atmosphere, emphasizing the story's most sinister and disquieting aspects: the Miller's Daughter is harassed and brutally exploited by all the male figures and the final reversal of fortune, with Rumpelstiltskin's downfall (stunningly depicted in an adroit piece of physical theatre), leaves an equally nasty taste. There are no real

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heroes in this story where greed is the prime motivation and all the characters have their price – 'a grotesque fable for our times' indeed!

Under the direction of Martyn Brabbins, the 13 instrumentalists from the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group formed three distinct groups: woodwind (including bass clarinet), brass and strings, with harp embellishing all three (strikingly, there was no percussion). The players provided emotional expression for the silent performers and often helped to drive events forward. They literally took centre stage at several points: the ensemble was divided into two groups on opposite sides of the performing area and at key moments, instrumentalists were required to move across the stage from one group to the other. Occasionally distracting, these regular perambulations added an element of ritual and periodically altered the perspective of the sonorities, though it was not easy to find a good dramatic reason for them; in the scores of Thea Musgrave, for example, where instrumentalists are called upon to perform, they invariably react against each other or exhort other players to participate.

Often pitched at the extreme ends of the sonic spectrum, from subterranean muted tuba and bass clarinet to ethereal string harmonics and harp, Sawer's tellingly restrained but expressively-charged score was alive with descriptive touches, economical but effective: such as the sombre, ominous-sounding opening dance scored for bassoon, tuba and double bass accompanying the pacing feet of the Miller as he attempts to evade the bailiffs, and the intricate string lines accompanying the transformations of straw into gold. In a particularly memorable gesture, the wedding of the Miller's Daughter to the King took place to a splendid tintinnabulation of bell-like sonorities from the wind instruments, followed by three dances of great rhythmic intricacy.

Among the dancers, Sarah Fahie deserves much praise for her wonderfully outlandish, almost vaudevillian turn as a tramp-like Rumpelstiltskin; never played for sympathy, her heinously charismatic interpretation of the role added to the shocking effect of the character's ultimate fate. In counterbalance, Bryony Perkins was outstanding in illustrating the uneasy evolution of the Miller's Daughter's from hapless victim to sneering vanquisher.

Martyn Brabbins brought his customary attention to detail and ear for instrumental colour to the score, remaining admirably unflustered by his restless, intermittently mobile forces. The growing constriction and shadowing of the music, helping to pull the strings of the characters towards their fate, was brilliantly achieved in this première performance, in which the BCMG players were ideal interpreters of Sawer's virtuosic and often challengingly exposed expressive lines.

Paul Conway

London, Purcell Room: Tzvi Avni's transfigured modes

On 29 November 2009 in the Purcell Room, the winners of the 2nd International Israeli Music Competition, the London Myriad Ensemble, gave the UK première of Tzvi Avni's Woodwind Quintet (1959) in a concert organized by the Jewish Music Institute. This fresh and engaging ensemble is technically well equipped to paint Avni's harlequinade of heterogeneous winds with colours drawn from a vivid palette; their initial sketches are confident and accomplished, but the vibrant characters demand, at times, a more reckless impasto.

The piece begins with a jaunty bi-modal introduction, the bright upper two woodwind instruments apparently in the A mixolydian mode, the last note of the entire work, the darker lower pair coloured with a rich, B♭ apparently from the A phrygian mode which stridently contradicts the B natural in the other mode. The horn, the only brass instrument in the wind quintet, follows a little later; playing an 8-note motiv whose pitches (D E♭ F and G♭) and snaking demeanor recalls the melody of *Yedid Nefesh*,[3] by the 16th-century Palestinian Cabbalist Eleazar Azkari, a poem that contains the tetragrammaton in an acrostic. Thus this ritual gesture introduces another 'wrong note', E♭ interrupting the arrival of D on the other instruments: *they* had been descending diatonically step wise towards this pitch, now thrown into a chaotic mélange of modal multiplicity, octatonic and heptatonic scales intermingling. Amidst the confusion, the horn reaches D after only five quavers of this 'Nefesh' theme, the other instruments achieving this goal much later at bar 6, uniting in a syncopated cadential gesture harmonized by the quartal complex A, D, G, C, drawn from the A phrygian mode of the beginning, now re-interpreted as D Aeolian, the upper instruments re-heard as D major.

The flute then presents a variant of the Nefesh motif dovetailed with an extension of the opening motif, beginning and ending with the catalytic E♭

[3] Idelsohn, Abraham Z., *Jewish Music in Its Historic Development* (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1929; repr. New York: Dover 1992), p. 421.

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which serves to announce the arrival of the first subject of a sonata-allegro structure beginning in D mixolydian. The exposition is concluded by shrinking the quartal cadence to a five-note chromatic cluster centered around D, retaining the piquancy of the E♭ whilst the recapitulation is heralded by a GP of one beat, the first and second subjects subsequently presented in reverse order, the first subject on the clarinet bearing a striking resemblance to the first theme of the last movement, *Furioso*, of Malcolm Arnold's Sonatina for clarinet and piano of 1951.

The second movement, 'Variations', begins with an undulating theme in the A *tefilla* (hypophrygian) mode used for High Holidays by the Oriental and European Sephardim, initially extended down to F (as in Ashkenazic practice) with a theme that begins with a contour similar to many chants in the *viddui* or Lot mode, a major five-note scale segment, surprisingly used for penitential prayers. The bar-lengths of each of the seven statements of the theme contract and expand symmetrically, menorah-like, about a central section of seventeen bars with the exception of the sixth section: 14:13:13:17:13:16:14. The ornamentation of the earlier variations is increasingly suffused with chromatic colourings from other modes and melodic arabesques. Later, the note values of these chassidic or cabbalistic divisions are shortened to demisemiquavers and quivering trills are added until the theme shimmers with the radiance of a late Beethoven quartet.

The scherzo and trio moves from A to F#, the scherzo, reminiscent of Beethoven's *Alla danza tedesca* from op.130, in five-bar phrases of 3/8 or 4/8 length, with one 5/8 as a conclusion to this section. The trio is introduced by a variant of the 'tedesca' theme, whose last, expected A natural is forcibly replaced by the subversive Bb, 'wrong' in the opening of the work, but now the harmonic pedal, throbs softly but incessantly in a duple 2/4 metre, counterpointing the principle triple 3/8 barring. Overlaid against this is the Nefesh motiv as a ten-quaver theme: the prodigal B♭ of the introduction of the entire work has become the cornerstone of the structure.

The fourth movement is a *dialogo elegiaco* between the clarinet and horn: the pleading rhetoric of the horn – melodic leaps spanning treacherously wide intervals – was executed effortlessly by Paul Cott.

The first phrase of the last movement, *allegro giocoso*, a five-bar fugue subject, chugs along amiably on the lumpen bassoon – distilling, in a single line, the thematic essence of the first six bars of the introduction to the entire work, concluding with an ascending cadential flourish in fourths, originally a quartal chord using the same notes. Towards the end of this movement, this phrase is transfigured by being played magisterially in augmentation on the horn, now twice as slow, placed regally amongst the other players paying homage in a chattering stretto texture. What happens after this, I urge the reader find out from the published score: be assured that B♭ plays a major role …[4]

Geoffrey Alvarez

London, King's Place: 'Beyond the Loop' and 'Sonic Explorations'

King's Place, London's brand new concert/arts complex just off Kings Cross/St Pancras station, down York Way, has already got off to a flying start.[5] Attracting new as well as traditional audiences with its daily razzamatazz of mainly short, 45-minute slots in its two purpose-built concert studios (Halls One and Two), there is a real buzz about the place, already much acclaimed in the media for its classical/jazz/modern contemporary repertoire and ace acoustics. In October 2008 I was so struck by young composer and lead viola virtuoso John Metcalfe, with his band, that on noting he was returning to curate a whole week of evening concerts for Kings Place in October 2009, I was determined to go along to follow up my previous coverage of him for Tempo: he is quite one of the most dynamic and vibrant additions to the classical/jazz/live electronics scene I've experienced in years.

But first I took in another 'not to be missed' series, 'Sonic Explorations', curated by Jonathan Harvey in the previous week. Having reviewed his *tape and organ* and *Mortuos Plango* for *Tempo* in recent years, I was determined to hear more of his unique acoustic/electronics approach 'live'. In a collaboration with London Sinfonietta and their Sound Intermedia, this was a week of 'live sound,and live electronics,and interactive media', to quote Andrew Burke of London Sinfonietta in his programme notes.

On Saturday 3 October, following Harvey's own *Other Presences*, there were two premières by aspiring new composers with lively new ideas, but lacking enough cohesion and structure to

[4] Score available from The Israeli Music Institute P.O.B. 51197, Tel Aviv, Israel. Catalogue number: ISI 6524. **http://www.imi.org.il**, E-mail: **musicinst@bezeqint.net**

[5] See my review (*Tempo* Vol. 63 No. 248, April 2009) of its much-heralded Opening Festival of 100 concerts over five days in October 2008.

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impress at this first airing, in my opinion. Duncan MacLeod's world première *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, commencing with arched melody from the sole instrumentalist on stage, the viola, was soon rudely interrupted by the abrupt intrusion of a shock entry, a blast, of electronic growls from all sides of Hall One: presumably the 'Bad Boy' had arrived. Spasmodic,quirky episodes ensued, seemingly at random, ending in darkness on stage enveloping the motionless soloist. A good idea, which could be further developed (maybe the lack of sense of direction was intrinsic).

The UK première of the youthful Natasha Barrett's *Deconstructing Dowland* was billed to show the guitar 'in all its facets' which it did, but we heard little of the basis, Dowland's song 'Can She Excuse my Wrongs'. An opening snatch of this song would have helped in establishing quite what was being 'deconstructed', let alone 'reconstructed', but maybe my expectations of the concept are plain old-fashioned. The piece seemed to me to consist mostly of no real statement of the Dowland, but mostly a tumultuous reaction to it from the live guitarist, with remote, vague, 'sound over' from the song, wafted to us softly from beyond, electronically, with seemingly little connexion between the two. Again maybe that was the whole point of the piece – deconstruction par excellence. Of course after that Jonathan Harvey's own works came across with enhanced impact and clarity. I particularly liked the oboe version of his Ricercare una Melodia: this was absolutely superb and demonstrated just what the new young composers in the field could well aim at, in their own several ways.

Later in the evening, also curated by Jonathan Harvey, we were treated to superb renditions of '20th Century Classics – 2', including, notably, Varèse's *Poème électronique*. Then followed Stockhausen's graphic *Pole for 2*, complete with emerging seascape image on screen and spontaneous input from short-wave radio 'processed live by computers'. (One or two purist members of the audience, much wedded to this work from the 1970s, felt they discerned some 'cheating', ie the short-wave radio input was not quite fulfilling the spontaneity Stockhausen had ordained.) 'Sophisticated electroacoustic music live in real time', to quote the programme-notes, seems to be the requirement, and they're probably still arguing about it. I learned a lot from the experience, an opportunity to hear these rarely-performed works realized authoritatively, and particularly enjoyed Berio's *Naturale* complete with lovingly overlaid, prerecorded vibrant Sicilian folksongs, projected elecronically and 'commented on' by live viola and percussion on stage.

And so to the virtuoso John Metcalfe, of 'Beyond the Loop' (the title of his curated week at Kings Place).[6] So, impressed by his virtuoso skill as lead viola with his John Metcalfe Band, I planned to hear them to comment in greater depth on his return to Kings Place on Friday 9 October – but due to a change in programme, we got him playing sedately with the rather staid Duke Quartet instead. (I gather his band played the previous night!) However I was glad to catch up with the Duke Quartet as they had attracted so much media coverage in October 2008 for their rendering of Steve Reich's iconic *Different Trains*. Of course it's important to witness this, Metcalfe's more academic, meditative side. One point of considerable interest in their meticulous rendering of Cage's 'String Quartet in 4 parts' was the 'tuning down' of the cello, detuning to A, Db, Gb and C, which as a former second study cellist myself I found intriguing. Played to a half-full Hall (unusually sparse for Kings Place) the somewhat esoteric nature of their programme made it all a bit dreary, if painstakingly done.

However the Hall soon filled up with a lively young audience for the next item on the programme – at 9pm – which was what I'd come to hear: The Durutti Column, led by Vini Reilly, classically-trained pianist and virtuoso guitarist, and all round 'legendary' Manchester musician Bruce Mitchell, with Metcalfe keeping fairly low profile on the viola, and others. A great time was had by one and all on this, King's Place's dedicated jazz night (free jazz in the foyer and beer battered fish and chips in the bar, at a price). Crowded and spirited was the word, but good attention was paid to the music especially that dedicated to their mentor Tony Wilson, who had died in recent weeks, and who had first put the band together for their original record label, Factory Records, in 1978.

Emotive, electrifying, 'cuts the mustard' with strong beat, much trumpet, guitar and ecstatic percussion is how one could sum it up, but you'd need to be there in the thick of it to really take it in. With perspiration running from brows, and hydrating bottled water to hand on stage, one learns that Durutti Column took their name from a Spanish Revolutionary and cartoon characters from 1966.Their new album 'A Paean to Wilson', with 'musical experimentation able to flit from classical – to House – via Opera', sums up their intrinsic versatility, in relaxed mode.

Moving on to Saturday 10 October we had yet more 'experimentation' with live group extempo-

[6] And of 'Big Chill' fame – his annual Aug festival in Herefordshire with '10,000 people standing in bare feet in the rain' – see again review of the Kings Place Opening.

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rization to an electronically-portrayed evolving score on screen from the two young composers, John Metcalfe (who trained originally at the Royal Northern College) and Simon Hale (Goldsmith's College, London). I found this enterprise quite amazing, breathtaking, as The Bays under conductor Jules Buckley, with the 40-piece Heritage Orchestra, and the two composers join forces. As they describe it in their programme notes:

> This collaboration is unique, and the concept simple but terrifying. Walk on stage and start composing (using Sibelius notation software), from scratch. No safety net. No pre-composed ideas or templates, just a blank score. The orchestral musicians play from monitors linked to the composers' computers. Jules Buckley … working from the ever-developing on-screen scores, brings in the musicians as he sees fit. The Bays respond. The composers respond … And so on. Suddenly you realize you are in the middle of a never-to-be-repeated aural experience which could move in any direction at any time. Scary, but unbelievably exhilarating, for both audience and musicians.

Sitting in the darkened Hall amongst the packed, completely captivated audience, I can fully confirm all this: truly a unique happening, a roller-coaster experience, complete with 'hit everything in sight' from The Bay's drummer Andy Gangadeen, who worked himself up to a veritable lather, as well as striking solo input from Bob Dowell (trombone), Tom Richards (alto and baritone saxophone) and trumpeter Gavin Broom, as the piece built in intensity, moving on from climax to climax, to almost hypnotic effect. 'We never rehearse', they assured me, just turn up and play, and couldn't do the same performance twice!

Jill Barlow

Cambridge: Giles Swayne's String Quartet No.4 'the turning Year'

For Giles Swayne, the string quartet genre in particular is charged with resonances from the past, including the magnificent series of 13 quartets by his cousin, Elizabeth Maconchy. Swayne has composed examples at regular intervals during his creative life (the first was performed in 1971, the second in 1976 and the third in 1993). His latest, subtitled *the turning Year*, dates from the summer of 2009 and was premièred at that year's Cambridge Music Festival by the Solstice Quartet at the West Road Concert Hall on 16 November. The composer has known these young players since they began performing together at Cambridge University and he has dedicated his new work to them.

As its title suggests, *the turning Year* takes the form of a journey through Nature's annual cycle, and is cast in four movements corresponding to the four seasons (in his entertaining and informal pre-concert talk, the composer remarked that he might well have called his quartet 'The Four Seasons' if someone else hadn't beaten him to it with that particular title). Swayne's overriding intention in the work was not to write a slavishly programmatic piece but rather to create a musical analogy for the ebb and flow of growth and life, in the form of a piece which starts from almost the lowest point in the year – in December, just before the winter solstice – undergoes the revolutionary processes of growth and decay, and finishes at the point where it began.

Each of the four movements contains three sections which relate to the months of the year and have their own eight-note mode and keynote. In order to make the listener aware of the arrival of each month, Swayne raises each section's keynote by a semitone so that the return to the music of the opening in the final bars of the last movement also signals a return to the tonic D. This progression is mirrored in the gradations of tempi, with a steady acceleration from winter to summer solstice followed by an inexorable return to the pulse of the initial material by the end of the piece.

An expressive, quasi-improvisatory unaccompanied cello solo launched the opening December section of the Winter first movement; this eloquent soliloquy led into a broad cello theme supported by simple chords from the other players in their lower registers. The cello melody's final ascent to a high E flat signalled the start of January: a barren, chilly, directionless section, this was the slowest point of the piece in which an icy, vibrato-less four-part canon transmuted into a funeral-march over a repeated two-part phrase on viola and cello. The arrival of February slightly increased the pace: trills, repeated notes and *pizzicato* phrases suggested stirrings of life which proliferated and climaxed on a series of six high chords, ending the movement.

Spring began with a solo for the first violin marked 'rhapsodic, rubato and testosteronissimo', an unequivocal statement of this movement's preoccupation with sap rising! All four instruments joined together for a deliriously extended, lolloping dance-like passage alternating 4/8 and 5/16 bars, marked 'Mad as a March hare' that is, to quote the composer's programme notes, '(for those nerdishly interested) an isorhythmic canon which explores all the permutations of an eight-note phrase'. As this feverish episode proceeded, it was garlanded with trills and ornaments. March continued with what Swayne has described as a

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'cheesy' little riff (reminiscent of an old Broadway love song) which built to a climax: a series of very simple chordal phrases redolent of Giordano's 'Caro mio ben'. In April, the reference to spring was firmly underlined by a series of stomping chords alluding to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. A wild fugue precipitated a massive *tutti* statement of the subject, after which the music fragmented into May: this month received a more straightforward treatment in the form of a calm melodic line accompanied by gentle rustling.

In contrast to its profuse predecessor, which was teeming with detail, the third movement (Summer) was noticeably short (Swayne had in mind Shakespeare's 'And summer's lease hath all too short a date'). It began with a solo for second violin, echoed by open harmonics from the other three instruments. The first violin joined the second and both instruments climbed gently upwards, conjuring up a bucolic idyll, whilst underneath, the viola and cello (*sul ponticello* and *staccato*) rapped out the outlines of 'Sumer is icumen in'. A pair of cuckoos was briefly depicted before the arrival of July: in this sizzling episode, details were difficult to distinguish, suggesting the brightness of the sun; a concluding duet for violins over a *pizzicato* accompaniment came to a squeeze-box-like chordal climax.

The fourth movement (Autumn and winter) began with a freely expressive, song-like viola solo. The September music moved gradually into the stratosphere until a relaxation of tempo marked the arrival of October with the two violins playing overlapping melodic lines (the composer was thinking of the implacable industriousness of bees at this point). Two alternating high chords heralded November, a brief section consisting mainly of a melody for first violin – over a *pizzicato* C sharp, underlining the fact that the piece was nearly back to D (and the month of December) where it began. The cello reintroduced its broad melody, and the work ended with a short coda for the cello, derived from the opening bars so that, as in Swayne's Second Quartet, the whole composition is framed by a prologue and epilogue for solo cello.

This quirky, intricately-wrought and highly individual contribution to the string quartet genre made a very strong impression in its first performance. The various programmatic elements and allusions to other works and styles, though inventive and highly effective, never detracted from a taut and compelling argument whose wise and skilful balance of emotional intensity and intellectual grip was worthy of Maconchy herself. All four members of the Solstice String Quartet rose magnificently to the score's many challenges,

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including their crucial exposed solos at the start of each movement. It is very good news indeed that they are to record Giles Swayne's quartets for Delphian in 2010.

Paul Conway

Cambridge Soviet Music Conference Report

The UK première of a half-hour love duet from Vano Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship* (1947) formed a highlight of a concert to mark the climax of a thought-provoking conference '1948 and all that: Soviet Music, Ideology and Power', presented by the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), Cambridge University on 27–28 November 2009, and organized by Marina Frolova-Walker, Reader in Music History at the university. The conference as a whole highlighted how much fascinating research has emerged in recent years due to the opening up of former Soviet archives.

As we heard from Frolova-Walker, it was the critique of Muradeli's opera which had been the pretext for the notorious anti-formalist Politburo resolution in February 1948, which denounced leading composers such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khachaturian, and put pressure on Soviet composers to follow a Social Realist path. Yet Muradeli's opera, performed by Julia Traustadottir, soprano, Nicholas Morrell, tenor, with the pianist Kate Whitley, emerged as remarkably tuneful and diatonic in style, with echoes of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, far from the 'formalism' for which it was castigated. Frolova-Walker argued that Muradeli, an ardent Stalinist, had aimed to compose a social-realist opera, yet had inadvertently celebrated a Georgian hero who was perceived as a threat by Stalin, leading to the banning of his work, along with an opera by Zhokovsky. In a deeply-researched paper, she highlighted the intricate web of relationships within the musical and party bureaucracies affected by the decree, and by looking at patterns of awards such as the Stalin prize, showed how contemporary musical life was swayed by political diktats and preferences.

The broader background to the February 1948 resolution was traced in a brilliantly detailed and overarching survey by the historian John Barber (Cambridge University), showing it to have been an expression of anti-Western culture at the climactic stage of the worsening Cold War. The resolution had already been shaped in 1947 by the newly-appointed Foreign Minister Shepilov, a musical amateur with conservative tastes. Hence the denunciation of Muradeli and Zhukovsky's operas were merely pretexts for the more iron-fisted attacks on major figures – although Barber argued that the musical decree had only a limited effect by comparison with other more crucial aspects of the State machinery. Jana Howlett (Cambridge University) traced the deeper jealousies and frictions that led to the banning of Muradeli, whose music had earlier been used for a 1940 film *Along Stalin's Way* extolling the leader, which Stalin did not like, and which was made by Jewish, 'non-Russian' film makers. The fact that the decree was the only one on music in a collection of 125 decrees showed that it was pretext for an organizational change to complete what had been left unfinished in 1936 (the year of the *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* denunciation) – namely the creation of a composers' union to assert tighter control of artistic creation.

That the resolution formed part of the Cold War cultural politics was also evident from the resolution passed at the Conference of Composers and Critics in Prague in May the same year. As Michael Fjeldsoe (University of Copenhagen) showed, the drafter of that resolution, intended to win over East and West European composers, was Hanns Eisler, who had survived the McCarthy trials, and was a bridge between East and Western communism. Fjeldsoe showed how Adorno's critique of Soviet cultural control, published only in 1953, was in fact written in 1948 as a response to Prague; drawing on unpublished correspondence, he showed that Adorno recognized Eisler's involvement since the two had co-authored a book on Film Music containing similar arguments. Though Adorno suppressed his authorial identity to avoid persecution, he later published it under his own name in 1954, to re-assert his claim.

There was a fascinating paper by Kiril Tomoff (University of California, Riverside) drawing on a unique source of box office receipts of operettas performed in the 1940s; one of his startling conclusions was to show how, after 1948, there was a clear public preference for Viennese 'classics', Lehár and Kálmán, in the regions, such as the Ukraine, while new Soviet operetta was mainly preferred in the capital. Other papers included a discussion of 'The Problem of Formalism' by Ildar Khannanov (John Hopkins University), and Tom Miller (U of California, Berkeley) on field recordings of Yugakir Songs from the Upper Kolyma region which, in their expression of a spiritual identity, he argued, transcended Soviet control. Wider repertoire including the music of Galina Ustvolskaya and Alfred Schnittke were considered by Rachel Foulds (Goldsmiths College, London) and Ivana Medic (Manchester University) respec-

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tively, whilst a particularly involving piece of research was the examination of the Prokofiev-Eisenstein collaboration in *Ivan the Terrible*, by Kevin Bartig (Michigan State University) which, drawing on previously unknown archival sources, showed their deliberate technique of audio-visual dislocation for aesthetic purposes.

Amongst the distinguished panel of speakers was the noted American musicologist Richard Taruskin, doyen of the polemical revisionist/counter-revisionist Soviet music debate. His entertaining pre-conference talk, provocatively titled 'Suicide Notes, Faked Memoirs, Toasts to Killers: The Wonderful World of Russian music' and given as the Sixth Dame Elizabeth Hill Memorial Lecture at Clare College, offered a marathon survey of the emergence of nationalism as a central theme within music historiography. He referred to three main areas of contention: the impact on musical hermeneutics and analysis of Tchaikovsky's suicide, of Shostakovich's *Testimony*, and Prokofiev's laudatory Stalinist works. Taruskin, who cast a special radiance on the lively discussions, gave a masterful paper about the apparent folksong quotations at the heart of Prokofiev's *Symphony-Concerto*, op. 125. In a richly-laced contextual discussion drawing on style and sources, he used Hans Keller's 'functional analysis' to argue persuasively that what seemed ostensibly like a quotation of a well-known Marching Song, 'Nash tost', turned out also to be a variant of the work's main theme, orientalized with characteristics of Jewish folk music from Belorussia. His reading touched on issues of intentionality in Prokofiev's work, and sparked lively debate, especially with one of the speakers, Simon Morrison, a Prokofiev authority, who recently published research on the 'quotation'.

The paper acted as a scintillating coda to the conference, the proceedings of which one looks forward to with anticipation, as also to the performance and recording of some of the neglected works discussed. These include some intriguing 'Melodeclamations' from the 1920s by the composer Yakov Polferov (1891–1966), given their UK première in the final concert, recited by Vladimir Orlov (a Cambridge research student who gave a paper on Prokofiev) with the pianist Yulia Vorontsova, alongside works by Mieczysław Weinberg (Eugene Feygelson, violin, Rebecca Herman, cello and myself, piano) and songs by Prokofiev sung by the Muscovite soprano-scholar Svetlana Savenko.

The conference offered a chance to deepen understanding of an era that has a continued topicality, reflecting current interests in music under totalitarian regimes and the interfaces of music and politics.

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