
FIRST PERFORMANCES

Zagreb: ISCM Festival/Zagreb Biennale

The Zagreb Music Biennale is one of the world's venerable new-music festivals. Its early years – the festival was founded by the Croatian composer Milko Kelemen in 1961 – might have been the most prestigious, but both before and since the upheavals of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it has offered an important outlet for Croatian composers and performers themselves, and for foreign music and musicians, to receive an airing in a city always looking to the West for inspiration – and recognition. It's also an uncommonly well-run and friendly festival.

The 23rd Music Biennale this year (15–24 April) was mounted in collaboration with an even grander old lady of the new-music scene, as Zagreb's event simultaneously became the World Music Days of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Running since 1923, the ISCM event has, for as long as I've known it, been regarded as a spent force of dubious modern relevance. When I told a publisher's representative of my acquaintance that I was about to visit the ISCM festival again, he vigorously questioned the point of such a new-music 'ghetto' at a time when classical music as a whole, and not only new work, was struggling to survive. He had a point. And in Zagreb, Henk Heuvelmans, the wise and practical secretary general of the ISCM, wryly observed that these days the World Music Days' longstanding acronym, WMD, had another, more urgent meaning.

It was certainly disconcerting to discover, on looking in on one of the ISCM's general assembly meetings in Zagreb, that all the same problems that I recall beset the organization 25 years ago – achieving parity between the different member organizations, balancing international aims against local agendas, to pick just two – were still besetting it today. The ISCM is, I suppose, still striving to square a circle that, while global in aspiration, is capable in practice only of local and partial resolution. Just like the United Nations or the European Union, unsurprisingly.

What the collaboration between the ISCM and the Zagreb Biennale meant in practice for this particular festival was that the works to be performed were selected partly by the ISCM's international jury and partly by the Biennale committee;

though the fact that Stanko Horvat – now regarded by many as the leading living Croatian composer, at least after Kelemen – chaired the ISCM jury, and Berislav ūipuŕ, artistic director of the Biennale, was also a member, must have permitted sensible arrangements for sheer practicality (and, doubtless, horse-trading too).

This all led, as it usually does with the ISCM, to a number of consequences baffling to the innocent outsider, and still peculiar when patiently explained. To take just a single example, and at the risk of appearing as chauvinist as some of the delegates themselves: why was official British representation in the ISCM's selection this year confined to an eight-minute piano piece by a young and relatively unknown composer? (Phillip Neil Martin, and no disrespect intended to him; during my four days in Zagreb, I did not hear his composition.) Actually, there were, it turned out, two further successful submissions of works by composers resident in Britain made by the ISCM British jury to the international jury. But in both cases, these composers ultimately opted to be identified in the programme book by their country of origin, which in neither case was in fact the UK.

What of the music I managed to hear? Whether selected by the ISCM or the Biennale, practically everything large-scale I experienced was lamentably poor and uninteresting: an evening of ballets performed by the Hannover State Opera Ballet Company; most of the compositions in two programmes of orchestral music (played, with an alarming and surely indefensible lack of rehearsal, by orchestras from Ljubljana and Zagreb); one-act operas by Emil Petrovics ('the Hungarian Puccini') and his pupil, János Vajda (mounted by Hungarian State Opera). Worst of all, the Italian Nicola Sani's much-touted *Diotima e Euridice*, an 'opera for voices and instruments in a prologue and six scenes', looked gorgeous but was incompetently written, amateurishly acted and interminable; Sani's regular appearances in Zagreb seem due more to good local connexions than to talent.

There were, thankfully, also much better things on offer. The 45-year-old Portuguese composer, Miguel Azguime, may, like Sani, risk pretentiousness and be playing the ISCM card as vigorously as Sani plays the Biennale. But his 45-minute *O ar do texto a forma do som interior* ('The air in the text

operates the form of the inner sound world'), described as 'electroacoustic theatre/sound poetry for performer and live electronics', proved not only technologically adroit but emotionally involving in a persuasive account by Azguime himself, developing a nice line in repetitive hysteria. *Hyllus* ('Star') for orchestra, by the 47-year-old Thoma Simaku (a UK-resident Albanian, one of the two incognito Brits referred to above), mixes materials and procedures which sound as though derived from both Sibelius and Birtwistle into a piece of controlled, dramatic and surprisingly individual power – so far, at least, as could be determined from an under-rehearsed performance under the efficient Sian Edwards.

I also enjoyed *Voice*, a spellbinding and room-rattling multimedia performance by the Norwegian trio of Maja Ratkje, John Hegre and Hans Christian Gilje. Best of all were two programmes devoted largely or entirely to Giacinto Scelsi, including a complete performance of mesmerizing intensity of all five of this Italian composer's string quartets by Quartetto d'archi di Torino.

The latter was an excellent example of the Biennale side of this festival's programming. Otherwise, though, the non-ISCM aspects of the event which I heard and saw for myself were not typical of the best I have experienced during more than 20 years of visits to the Zagreb Biennale. I unfortunately had to miss Reinhold Friedl's *Xenakis [a]live!* concert, presented by the German-based group *zeitkratzer*, which by general consensus among those to whom I spoke was the festival's highlight. And I heard little of the input from the Croatian composers themselves, though I rather enjoyed the spare eclecticism of the 74-year-old Horvat's own *Dithyrambos* for orchestra (conducted by Chikara Iwamura), despite understanding that it had suffered particularly badly from lack of rehearsal.

Keith Potter

Three BBC premières: Dean, Martinsson, Cresswell

Time was when it was almost axiomatic that a new concerto would be premiered by its composer, pretty well from the beginnings of the genre until the onset of the recording age, which captured Rachmaninov at the keyboard for his own concertos. These days, though Rachmaninov is barely 60 years dead, composers and performers inhabit such separate boxes that it's a surprise to see a composer step forward to perform his own piece – the more so when the composer is a violist;

the last person to do that may well have been Hindemith. So when Brett Dean came to the front of the Barbican platform on 15 April, to join the BBC Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Ramon Gumba, he became an important link in a fairly short chain.

Dean's Viola Concerto – composed last year to a quadruple commission from the BBC SO, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony and Symphony Australia – begins with a four-minute 'Fragment', which his programme note described as 'a brief visit to a delicate sound-world in which some of the work's main motifs and instrumental colours are introduced in the orchestra, eventually enticing a high, floating cantilena response from the soloist'. I had been expecting a triumphant vindication of the viola – Dean would surely stand up for his instrument in the grand manner. But no: the hesitant entry of the soloist in this prologue was symptomatic of a surprising diffidence in Dean's presentation of his instrument, maintained throughout the Concerto – the composer seems to be siding with the orchestra. The orchestral textures, indeed, are imagined with enormous subtlety: in the 'Fragment', underneath the elegiac viola line, it's all delicate half-lights and crepuscular rustlings. The second movement, 'Pursuit', opens with the strings articulating a figure that animates the orchestra into a wild hunt, the viola holding frenetic, almost hysterical, dialogues with various interlocutors, motifs thrown around with a reckless disregard for propriety. Does the resourcefulness of Dean's orchestral polyphony – reminiscent of Karl Amadeus Hartmann's – stem from his galley days as an orchestral musician? It's almost as if, remembering what it was like, he made sure that everyone has something interesting to do. After ten minutes of an unequal fight the battered viola gives up and sinks back to avoid a ferocious orchestral outburst, venturing out only as the music flies up and disappears.

In the haunted 16-minute finale, marked 'Veiled and Mysterious', the front-desk violas and cellos, then the first violins, clarinets and flutes, float questioning figures which the soloist picks up for a pained disquisition over *sussurando* strings. The full orchestra arises to wrath again, swirling material from the entire piece around the hapless soloist in harmonies that were surprisingly bright in view of the darkness of the orchestral colours being deployed. The orchestra now intones a long, painful, hymn-like passage, spending its remaining passion. The viola is at last free to develop exchanges – with the piano, the two harps, the celesta and tuned percussion – at its own pace. An understated dance figure emerges

pizzicato in the cellos and violas, over which the soloist and woodwinds rhapsodize, the cor anglais adding an autumnal commentary which the viola picks up as the music dies uneasily away. Dean must have been pleased with his own heroic performance – and thrilled by the whipcrack precision of the orchestral playing under Gumba's meticulous direction (underlined at the end of the concert with perhaps the most sheerly exciting account of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* that I've yet heard).

The next work in this trio of BBC premières was the Cello Concerto of the Swedish composer Rolf Martinsson, performed – with evident enthusiasm – in the BBC Maida Vale Studios on 20 April by Mats Lidström and the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Mario Venzago; in this instance the co-commission was between the BBC and Malmö Symphony Orchestras. A slow, dark introduction gradually fills with a growing sense of energy, suggestive of approaching daybreak, and very soon the scoring is very full indeed, with the percussion deployed to thicken and brighten the orchestral colours. A sudden break gives the soloist an extended and angularly lyrical cadenza; it is a full five minutes before the orchestral strings join him in laying down a warm carpet of sound, over which the cello now rhapsodises, with woozy

brass entries giving the music a Hollywood flavour. The cello marks a structural juncture with new material, which is soon submerged: Martinsson's generous orchestration becomes over-scoring at this point, and we could see the cello doing things we couldn't hear. A dramatic outburst from the brass is met by squeals from the soloist and an excited outburst from the timpani, after which the cello attempts to calm things down, aided by an elegiac figure from the cor anglais. Brass and timpani continue to try to turn the music to more violent ways; the cello and cor anglais, supported by harp glissandi, insist on gentler thoughts. Now a Big Tune emerges, overscored once more, to close this paragraph. Another excited recitative, over bright violins ticking at the top of their register and dark lower strings, leads the soloist to a moving passage of ardent, elegiac lyricism, the orchestral swelling into brief chordal comment. The cello seems to gather its breath for a valedictory peroration – but instead launches a fast closing section with more ticking strings and bluesy Hollywood sounds from woodwind and brass. An upbeat tone now infuses the proceedings, with swirling orchestral textures under busy cello chattering-work, and emphatic orchestral chords bring the piece to an emphatic close.



**BBC
Symphony
Orchestra**

Autumn 2005

Friday 14 October 7.30pm
Wagner *Tristan und Isolde*,
 Prelude to Act I
Schoenberg *Erwartung*
Beethoven *Symphony No 5*
 David Robertson *conductor*
 Susan Bullock *soprano*

Saturday 22 October 7.30pm
BBC Symphony Orchestra
75th-Anniversary Concert
Elliott Carter *Réflexions (UK premiere)*
Beethoven *Piano Concerto No 5*,
 'Emperor'
Strauss *Tod und Verklärung*
Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*
 Jiří Bělohlávek *conductor*
 Emanuel Ax *piano*
 BBC Symphony Chorus

Friday 4 November 7.30pm
Pierre Boulez 80th-Birthday Concert
Debussy *Jeux*
Debussy *Trois ballades de Villon*
Boulez *Le soleil des eaux*
Ravel *Daphnis et Chloé*
 Pierre Boulez *conductor*
 Elizabeth Atherton *soprano*
 BBC Singers
 BBC Symphony Chorus

Saturday 3 December
Mahler *Symphony No 9*
 Jiří Bělohlávek *conductor*

Sunday 18 December 7.30pm
Messiaen *Trois petites liturgies de la
 Présence Divine*
Durufé *Requiem*
 Donald Runnicles *conductor*
 Sarah Connolly *mezzo-soprano*
 Christopher Maltman *baritone*
 Steven Osborne *piano*
 Cynthia Millar *ondes martenot*
 BBC Symphony Chorus

Friday 7 October 7.30pm
Xenakis: Architect in Sound
 Queen Elizabeth Hall

Varèse *Intégrales*,
Xenakis *Nuits**, *Sea-Nymphs**,
Schaar, *Alax*
Stravinsky *Canticum sacrum*
 Jac Van Steen *conductor*
 Stephen Betteridge *conductor**
 BBC Singers

Part of **Xenakis: Architect in Sound** at the South Bank Centre.
 08703 800 400 or www.rfh.org.uk/xenakis
 xenakis for tickets and full details.

Tickets
 Barbican £20 £16 £12 £8
 Royal Festival Hall £22 £18 £14 £11 £8
 (concessions 50% off, limited availability)
 Tickets for the Xenakis concert on
 7 October are only available from
 the South Bank Centre Box Office on
 08703 800 400
 Call the Barbican Box Office for a free
 brochure with full details of all concerts
 and subscription discounts
www.bbc.co.uk/symphonyorchestra



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**BBC
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The Swedish independent label Daphne has come to the party lately with three recent releases featuring Martinsson's music, each revealing another aspect to his creative character and thus making it the more difficult to pin down. By far the most important is a CD entitled *Dreams* (Daphne 10022), the title of the work which closes the programme, itself named after Akira Kurosawa's film, in acknowledgement of the impact it had on Martinsson when he first saw it in the early 1990s. *Dreams* is a most impressive score: an ambitious 23 minutes in length, packed full of incident and action, kaleidoscopically varied in its material. Not having seen the film, I can't comment on how much Martinsson's score reflects events onscreen; with the material gyrating through a wide range of moods and colours, it functions as an abstract psychological drama though one which, despite repeated listenings, I have not yet sense hang together as a whole. The disc opens with *Kalliope*, (2004), a suite of nine concise movements for strings, each named after one of the nine muses, the idiom an amalgam of Bartók, Hindemith, Hartmann, reminiscent of the liberated tonal idiom of Pehr Hendrik Nordgren in Finland. *Vid tidens slut* ('At the End of Time'; 2002) uses the material of the song 'As Time Goes By' as the background for a narration of poems by Jacques Verup, who is present to deliver the words himself; it gradually blossoms behind the text, which at least this listener wished away: I don't know of any narration-and-orchestra score which really works. This one is sunk when Werup starts singing the tune himself; he should stick to his day-job. *A. S. in memoriam* was written in 1999 as an homage on the hundredth anniversary of the composition of *Verklärte Nacht* (so you can guess who the 'A. S.' is). It is a richly scored and deeply lovely revisitation of the sound-world of that piece, and deserves wide currency: in terms of its emotional impact it's the most successful work of Martinsson's I have heard.

Three Scriabinesque piano pieces by Martinsson – *Libra*, op. 36 (1996), *Gemini*, op. 46 (1998) and *Leo*, op. 44 (1997) – are 25% of a larger work, predictably a *Zodiac* series. They're on a recital of contemporary Swedish composers by Anders Kilström (Daphne 1018); the others are Johan Hammerth, Per Magnus Lindborg, Pär Lindgren, Anders Nilsson and Johan Hammerth, none of whose pieces escape the charge of anonymity. Kilström, though, plays with an excited energy that suggests he disagrees with me.

The third piece of Martinsson from Daphne is a wind quintet labelled *Coloured Flames* (2003–4), a good-humoured, 12-minute rhapsody that occasionally extends to some piquant dissonance. It

shares Daphne 1019 with three other Swedish composers: Gunnar de Frumerie (1908–87), whose Baroque-dance-inspired Suite, op. 71, is an attractive blend of assured counterpoint and warm, Romantic harmonies; Hilding Rosenberg (1892–1985), whose 1959 Wind Quintet is built on a 12-note row, though I heard a kind of good-nature Hindemith; and Daniel Börtz (b. 1943), whose modernism has nothing dogmatic about it – his *Winter Pieces 2* (1982, rev. 2004) enjoys a wide range of stylistic resource, bubbling, surging, stiffening in hieratic sermon, swooning in nervous, *Tristan*-like melodic lines, peeling out as bells, and tumbling into a lively coda. The Amadé Quintet, recently formed by musicians from the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, gives sparkling accounts of all four works.

The second Antipodean up for attention from the BBC SO was the New Zealand-born, Edinburgh-based Lyell Cresswell, whose *Ara Kopikopiko* (the title comes from the Maori word for labyrinth) was a fruit of the Elgar Bursary, administered by the Royal Philharmonic Society: in 2003 Cresswell was its first recipient. It was première, back in the Barbican, on 29 April, under the baton of David Porcellijn. Cresswell's programme note explained the structure:

There are four connected threads to guide the listener through the intercommunicating paths of the labyrinth. The first thread (A) is a reflective theme played by flutes; the second (B) grows from a tiny cell of repeated notes heard first in horns and bassoons over low trilling strings; the third (C) revolves around fleeting, rapid scalar exchanges between various instruments and the different sections of the orchestra, and the fourth (D), like the first, grows from repeated notes – this time culminating in a headlong final dash. These threads are joined together in twenty sections.

The modal shape of that opening flute theme immediately suggested one of the presiding flavours of what was to be a thoroughly agreeable and expertly crafted work. An answering string phrase draws a growl from lower strings and snarls from the brass and then becomes the subject of discussion across the orchestra in what seems to be want to become a piece of Sibelian nature-painting – swirling woodwind reinforcing the idea. The 'tiny cell of repeated notes' in horns and bassoons brings in an element of gruff, sorcerer's-apprentice humour and a lazy-afternoon section proposes a false sense of relaxation, for the entire orchestra is soon alive with the nervous energy that is typical of Cresswell himself.¹

¹ See p.40 for a review of a new chamber opera by Cresswell (Ed.).

It is obvious by now that *Ara Kopikopiko* is a concerto for orchestra in all but name: it is a 24-minute symphonic conversation piece, phrases and fragments thrown around in bubbling good humour – Cresswell’s note suggested the listener might also see ‘the instruments and ideas being treated as tesserae in a mosaic, where small pieces of coloured stone, marble or glass are assembled unevenly to catch the light at different angles’. These detailed textures are offset and put in context by long melodic statements – on the flute at the opening and elsewhere, on the violas and bassoons – which give the work a timeless quality; some of the string-writing brought *Tapiola* to mind. The closing section is a rumbustious dance, all jazzy, dislocated rhythm. Cresswell’s omission of percussion and timpani from his orchestra brought his textures a refreshing lightness – but it cost him a sense of bass-anchorage as well, rather as a meal lacking salt.

All three new works are unapologetically, confidently tonal, though liberally looting the modernist’s toolbox for colour and effect. If the days of the composer-performer are now a long way behind us, so too are the post-War, partisan battle lines where acknowledgement of a key-centre might cost you your university appointment. These days we can have our cake and eat it.

Martin Anderson

Boston & New York: Harbison, Wuorinen, Ueno and Sanford

The last two of the works commissioned by the Boston Symphony to celebrate the first season of James Levine as its Music Director were unveiled by Levine and the orchestra in Symphony Hall in Boston and Carnegie Hall in New York in April. John Harbison, whose *The Great Gatsby* was written for Levine and the Metropolitan Opera, had been working on an opera based on *Lolita* by Nabokov. He eventually decided that the problems presented by the staging of the work were insurmountable, and has, at least for the moment, abandoned the project, which he now considers misguided. He made the same decision in regard to the Fitzgerald novel about ten years before actually completing that project, so in the future this opera may also eventually see the light of day. Meanwhile, just as Harbison’s aborted first attempt at *Gatsby* produced his ‘fox-trot for orchestra’, *Remembering Gatsby*, the work at *Lolita* has resulted in his most recent work for the BSO, a seven-minute overture based on material intended for the opera, entitled *Darkbloom*. Harbison’s

program note for the work does not name either *Lolita* or Nabokov, but speaks only of ‘a famous and infamous American novel’ in which Vivian Darkbloom (an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov) ‘is a just a secondary character’. Harbison chose *Darkbloom* as a title for the work ‘because it effectively conjures up the mood of this overture’, and ‘serves as an emblem or anagram for the complex tragic-comic spirit of the story and its author’. *Darkbloom* itself is attractive and skilfully wrought. A balletic section which portrays two young women playing tennis is the most memorable music in the work.

Both Levine and Peter Serkin are champions of the music of Charles Wuorinen. Since Serkin also has a long-standing relationship with the BSO and a history with them of presenting first performances (two piano concertos of Peter Lieberston), he encouraged the commissioning of a new concerto from Wuorinen. The result, Wuorinen’s Fourth Piano Concerto, is a large three-movement work lasting about a half an hour. The conception of it is that of a traditional big-time showstopper. The writing for the piano is bold, virtuosic, and effective, and that for the orchestra brilliant, imaginative, and in every way idiomatic. The almost completely static harmonic quality of the work, however, ultimately undercuts its effect, at least for this listener. The program also included an elegant performance of Stravinsky’s *Movements* for piano and orchestra.

The performances of new works by the Boston Symphony are unusual and newsworthy events, even under the orchestra’s current music director, but they are the stuff of day-to-day life for the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, which, under the leadership of Gil Rose, has carved out a precarious but stable existence and established a major place for itself in the musical life of Boston. BMOP’s concert of 27 May at Jordan Hall in Boston was a tribute to Takemitsu. It included the first performance of *Kaze-No-Oka* (Hill of the Winds) by the young Japanese-American composer Ken Ueno, commissioned for the orchestra by the Fromm Foundation at Harvard. There were a number of terms for the commission which to Ueno seemed to be contradictory. The work was to be a concert opener (therefore probably fast and energetic), but a memorial tribute for Takemitsu (therefore slow and sombre); in addition it was to include solo parts for shakuhachi and biwa (the Japanese instruments featured in Takemitsu’s *November Steps*, which was to be included in the concert) and the soloists were to present a separate chamber concert on which they hoped to include an excerpt from the new work. Ueno’s solution was a modular form, modeled

after a work of the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki (a crematorium, whose name gives the title of Ueno's work), with a very brief very fast beginning (the opener part), creating the initial impulse for brooding slower music for the orchestra (the memorial part), followed by an extractable 'cadenza' for the Japanese instruments, performable as a separate piece.

The imposing beginning of *Kaze-No-Oka*, Ueono says, is concentrated on the Japanese concept of *Sawari* (which he translates as 'beautiful noise'). It is dominated by the multiphonics of bass saxophone and contrabass clarinet, rough Bartók pizzicati in the strings, and assorted other thumps and jabs – a strategy also used by Takemitsu in *November Steps* – to bridge the sounds of the music played by the western orchestra with that of the featured Japanese instruments, and also evoke the sounds of winds blowing and just barely heard moanings (some of these latter supplied by the orchestral players). The total effect is grand and sorrowful and very impressive. The 'cadenza' for the soloists is the last music in the piece. It is slightly less effective and less compelling than the orchestral music that begins the work, and one waits in vain for the return of the earlier music. A recurrence of that earlier music, or a situation where the relationship between the piece played by the soloists and the whole of the work comes closer to approximating the relationship of a Berio *Sequenza* and its related *Chemin* would have made the piece even stronger. The playing of BMOP in the Ueno, as well as in the pieces by Takemitsu, and Tan Dun's *Water Concerto* (a maddening piece which was written in a completely masterly manner, completely convincingly conceived as to the sounds of its elements, and just about completely void of any substance at all) was radiantly beautiful, sympathetically understanding, and highly satisfying. A piece of Takemitsu's from the last 29 years of the composer's life would have been welcomed.

The Knitting Factory in New York is very far downtown from Symphony Hall and Jordan Hall in Boston. It was the site of the first performance of a concerto for (highly amplified) cello and jazz band (a very big band, consisting of five trumpets, five saxophones, five trombones, guitar, bass, piano, and two percussionists) by David Sanford's Big Band and Matt Haimovitz. Haimovitz has been garnering publicity lately for playing Bach in nightclubs. With this work he has initiated what seems to be an equally newsworthy project, a series of works for cello soloist with unusual accompanying forces. Sanford's music for the Concerto is engaging and appealing. There was little evidence of the three movements being inte-

gral to the whole work or in much of any way related to each other. Some of Sanford's other pieces, unfettered by the need to write a highbrow piece or to include the cello, were more relaxed and seemed more natural. The playing of all involved was brilliant, assured, and communicative. The Knitting Factory is a fairly small room, holding about 150 people; in this case about a third were standing the whole time. The volume level was high, although not unbearably so, and inescapable. Also inescapable and distracting was the hum of the coolers behind the bar. A good reason, maybe, to stick to concert halls?

Rodney Lister

Edinburgh: Lyell Cresswell's 'Good angel, bad Angel'

Good angel, bad angel is a new 1-act opera, premièred in Edinburgh on 20 May and toured to Glasgow, Peebles and Inverness on 21, 23 and 25 May; it received four performances in all. It lasts almost exactly an hour, and is scored for the slenderest forces imaginable – three singers covering six roles, and an orchestra of four players (bass clarinet doubling B flat clarinet, violin, viola, cello). The story is nasty, centring on the pointless murder of a miserly old shopkeeper on Christmas Day; it slightly reminds one of *A Christmas Carol*, except that it completely lacks Dickens's optimism and hope. The opera supposedly ends with the central character's redemption, but this is ambiguous and pretty hard to follow.

It's tempting to see this piece simply as symptomatic of the parlous state classical opera has reached in 2005; as something thin and joyless, not likely to have many more performances, and organized at great expense and effort. (As well as the seven musical performers, the programme credits ran to 1 acting director, 2 designers, 3 sculptors, 4 dressmakers and 10 financial sponsors; the office work needed must also have been immense.) Yet – though I cannot claim total knowledge of the *oeuvre* of Lyell Cresswell, who was born in New Zealand 60 years ago, and has lived in Edinburgh for about 30 of them – this was clearly one of his finest scores; the limitations of his musical material had spurred him to outstanding unaccompanied vocal writing, dramatic string trio sounds, endless inventive use of the different sizes of clarinets. Ron Butlin's libretto was also highly skilled, written mainly in everyday English and thus easy to follow, but at no point becoming ungainly or embarrassing when sung. And then there was the original story.

Robert Louis Stevenson's short story *Markheim* was published in 1887, probably written a year or two earlier. From a literary point of view it isn't one of his better pieces, and is interesting mostly as a practice run for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But it has its own power and atmosphere.

Markheim is a hedonistic man-about-town, at 36 already on a downward slope. On Christmas Day he calls on the shopkeeper, ostensibly to buy a lavish present for his fiancée, actually to murder the old man and seize his savings, which he believes are in gold and hidden somewhere in the house. Only the murder goes according to plan. Then interruptions start: two drunken revellers, come to serenade the old man (this section is amusingly accompanied by the Scots folksong *The ball of Kirriemuir*); the Visitant or good angel / bad angel, a supernatural personage who offers to show Markheim where the gold is stashed but warns him, if he takes it, he'll lose half on the stock market and fritter away the rest; then the old man's daughter (a servant girl, in Stevenson's original) who, on learning of her father's death, breaks into an aria of the 'O my darling daddy' type. While she's singing this, Markheim realizes that he'll have to kill her as well in order to cover up the first murder. He's about to do that when there is a further and final knock on the door. The police? The daughter's boyfriend? God? Whoever it is, it's clear that Markheim's plan has failed and that the fresh start he wanted in life is right off the menu.

The review in the *Scotsman* expressed a hope that the piece might become a popular Christmas show. No, it wouldn't! Despite its many contemporary features – for example, the way the *mise en scène* suggested that the story was happening in present-day Glasgow, instead of in Victorian London – this was élitist violence, not the kind for the general public. *Good angel, bad angel* was nevertheless a triumph for the singers Allison Cook (daughter), Richard Burkhard (Markheim) and Martin Robson (angel); for producer Benjamin Twist; and especially for William Conway, who had commissioned the piece under the umbrella of the Hebrides Ensemble in Edinburgh, and conducted it while also playing cello in the band.

David Johnson

Birmingham: Norgård, Skempton, Weir, Anderson

The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra celebrated the birthday of Hans Christian Andersen, 200 years to the day, with a world pre-

mière by Per Norgård. His 50-minute 'fairytale cantata', entitled *Will-o'-the-Wisps Go to Town*, was inspired by one of the great Danish author's last stories.

In Anderson's autobiographical tale, uncharacteristically bleak and disillusioned in tone, a fairy-tale writer's muse has left him due to the debilitating effects of war. The Marsh Witch tells the writer about the Will-o'-the-Wisps and Andersen's original story ended abruptly with their arrival. Contemporary Danish poet Suzanne Brogger has updated the tale and placed the Will-o'-the-Wisps in today's urban life. Unsurprisingly, their temptations are futile amid the corruption of modern civilisation. The ending is cautiously optimistic, however, with a hymn to fairytales that can come knocking on anyone's door.

Norgård required mighty forces for his new work: a large orchestra, including a group of young percussionists, was joined by narrator Simon Callow, mezzo soloist Helene Gjerris as the Marsh Witch, a mixed chorus representing the townspeople (also incorporating soprano and tenor soloists) and a children's chorus divided into the town's children and the marauding Will-o'-the-Wisps.

The style of the piece was enjoyably eclectic. The opening orchestral '1864 Overture' began as a Mahlerian idyll with pastoral woodwinds suggesting the Danish countryside. Gradually the tone became darker and more stridently self-conscious, reflecting the rising tide of nationalism and militarism. The overture ended with the chilling sound of an air-raid siren. The ensuing jazzy section for chorus and children's chorus recalled Gershwin and Bernstein, the *Sprechstimme* of the Marsh Witch's diatribes inevitably evoked Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (a speciality of the mezzo soloist), the stirring rhythmic patterns of the young percussionists were Stravinskian, whilst the movingly uplifting ending had an unmistakably Tippett-like sense of wonder and mysticism, celebrating rebirth and hope through the power of fairytale. Nevertheless, Norgård's piece spoke with his own voice, albeit one of many accents, and formed an intricate, multi-layered structure.

There were hints that it might have worked even better if it had been staged, or at least semi-staged. Visibly restricted by the confines of Birmingham's Symphony Hall stage, the performers very occasionally managed to bring to life with brief gestures the latent drama underlying the cantata. The Will-o'-the-Wisps themselves, clad in bright yellow and adorned by eye-masks with flashing lights made a splendid effect, yet seemed hemmed in and hampered by their

arrangement in serried ranks. Such elfin mischief-makers should surely have lurked and scurried about the stage.

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group's latest programme in their excellent 'Sound Investment' series bravely dispensed with a conductor and contained world premières by Howard Skempton and Judith Weir. Skempton's *Ben Somewhen* was inspired by a set of 15 cartoon-like drawings by Ben Hartley and its deft wit and idiosyncratic sketchiness successfully captured the droll essence of its inspiration. Skempton, a miniaturist by nature, is a master of the loaded epigrammatic gesture, as his many deceptively simple works for solo accordion testify. His new piece took the form of a 12-minute concertino for solo double bass and ensemble cast in one pithy single-movement divided into 15 sections. The bass, expertly played by BCMG's John Tattersdill, didn't act as a showy solo instrument, but pervaded the textures, charmingly underpinning, sometimes in mordant canons, the activities of the other seven instruments, especially harp and woodwind. A fragile, beautiful piece which didn't yield up all its secrets at first hearing, *Ben Somewhen* finds its composer at his most porcelain and laconic. There was a strong undertow of sadness too, the music at times weighed down by its lower strings (the score calls for two cellos as well as bass soloist) – indeed, one could imagine this music accompanying a poignant suburban-set Mike Leigh film.

Judith Weir's two world premières were both created in collaboration with Indian storyteller Vayu Naidu. Legends formed the basis of these fables with music – the Greek myth of *Psyche* and the Tamil epic of *Manimekalai*. Weir, whose operas reveal a natural affinity with storytelling, was at her most self-effacing, using the sparest of textures to complement and embellish the narrative seamlessly, always taking her cue from the dramatic possibilities in the text. Elements of spontaneity were built in, too, though on first hearing, these were hard to discern – a tribute to the excellence of the small ensemble of BCMG players, for whom improvisation is as embedded in their musicality as sight-reading. The exoticism of Weir's scoring led to some memorable interludes with horn and saxophone and some effective dialogues between the ensemble and Sarvar Sabri's tabla. In sum, an enchanting and imaginative set of collaborations, which pared Weir's art down to the bone and yet retained her lyrical, expressive essence tailored to Vayu Naidu's expert narrative skills.

Julian Anderson's latest work as composer-in-association with the CBSO highlighted the City of

Birmingham Symphony Chorus, whose director, Simon Halsey, conducted the world première of Anderson's *Four American Choruses*. With no accompanying instruments, the choir was thrust centre-stage and relished every opportunity afforded them to show off their impeccable intonation and ensemble. The texts were drawn from 19th-century gospel hymns, but Anderson strongly resisted any temptation to scatter his choruses with snatches of the original tunes. 'Beautiful Valley of Eden' divided the choir into four choruses, each with their own rhythm and tempo. The Ivorian results projected spontaneous joy rather than arid complexity: a musical *tour-de-force*, which the Birmingham singers pulled off most persuasively. By contrast, the concluding 'At the Fountain' was an intimate setting, with spotlighted individual voices periodically piercing the full texture. The overall effect was unexpectedly confidential and deeply affecting.

Paul Conway

St Albans: Guy Dagul's 'Grand Fantasia'

Guy Dagul, already established as one of the UK's most sought-after composers of music for TV and Film, with successes in Hollywood, Channel Four (*The Investigators*), BBC (notably his score for the docu-soap *Paddington Green*, screened June 1999) and Carlton's *Return to the Wild*, has now composed his first serious concert piece.² This is a *Grand Fantasia* for piano duet and strings, dedicated to his parents, the world-renowned Piano Duo of Harvey Dagul and Isabel Beyer. It was given its world premiere by them on the occasion of their Golden Wedding Anniversary Concert on 30 January in St Saviour's Church, St Albans before a packed audience.

Harvey and Isabel, whom I've long known as local colleagues, have made it their life's work to take the humble Piano Duet 'from parlour to concert platform', gaining critical acclaim for their exposure in performance and on CD of Schubert's Duets, Dvorak (*Slavonic Dances*) and Ravel's *La Valse* transcribed for four hands at one piano, for instance. Though not personally a regular connoisseur of the four-hand repertoire, right from the first bar of Guy Dagul's *Grand Fantasia* one could immediately recognize this as a new master 'showpiece' of the genre. The composer takes the first five notes of the first movement, and the first four notes of the finale, of his parents' favourite work – Schubert's *Grand Duo* (Sonata in C major,

² For more information on Guy Dagul see his website www.mcsmusic.com/frameset_composers_start.html

D.812) as a 'composite theme' on which to base his own *Grand Fantasia*. Personally I feel this exotic, virtuosic, concerto-style work owes little to Schubert but much to Guy Dagul's rhapsodic ease of flow, born of constructing many an emotive film score. Harvey Dagul (primo piano) rose to the occasion with a brilliant expose of cadenza-like passages high in the treble register, and Isabel Beyer echoed his cascading arpeggios, encompassing swift changes of key and tempo, with many a rising *accelerando-crescendo* backed by searing strings: another veritable *Rhapsody in Blue* is born, but this time for *four hands*.

But how did Guy Dagul achieve this heady impact? The striking opening, with Isabel Beyer (secondo piano) in sombre tones, accompanied by the small string orchestra (conducted on this occasion by James Ross) soon gives way to the introduction (primo piano) of the composite theme or 'leitmotiv' which becomes the 'idée fixe', returning jauntily throughout the work but each time with some degree of variation.

As the composer explained after the concert: 'The work was originally planned broadly in the form of "theme and variations", but ended up instead as a "journey round my parents", with memories of everything they've played, as I spent most of my early years as a young child exploring under their grand piano as they practised. In fact I develop the 'leitmotiv', which keeps coming back, more in cinematic terms and it could equally well suit a film score.

Guy Dagul was classically trained as a pianist, rather than primarily as a composer. His score is refreshing and vibrant but tends to defy structural analysis, written as he describes it in 'freeflow fantasy style', without specific sections or movements. On the other hand different metronome markings, key-changes and rhythmic diversions abound, as do ornamentation and arpeggio effects to add brilliance especially to the dominant primo piano part. One can spot what he terms 'cribs' from other Schubertian favourites of his parents, such as an extended allusion to the composer's famous *Fantasia in F Minor* (D.940). The work closes, after a heady build-up and crescendo, with a grandiose Finale.

Jill Barlow

London, Morley College and Leighton House: Mátyás Seiber celebrations

With Tippett and Rawsthorne centenaries this year, Mátyás Seiber's (1905–60) might have been overlooked, but Morley College, prompted by the

composer's daughter Julia, made sure it was not with a well-devised festival comprising four concerts, two lectures (by Michael Graubart and Hugh Wood – both names familiar to *Tempo* readers, and the latter currently especially featured) and an exhibition. Seiber was one of a number of continental arrivals, the others including Gerhard and Reizenstein, who remained here to our considerable benefit, in Seiber's case becoming a much sought-after teacher of composition. Morley was a fitting focus for the celebrations, having welcomed him onto the staff in 1942 after more august, and blinkered, institutions had shown no interest. The subtitle of the festival – 'From blue notes to twelve notes' – neatly encapsulated his wide ambit. As Robert Hanson pointed out in his notes, 'his refusal to accept the mutual exclusiveness of different types of musical study and practice, first shown publicly in his jazz course at Frankfurt, came to typify the man'. This is in direct line with the Morley philosophy since the days of Dr Hanson's reforming predecessor Gustav Holst, who is reported in the College's magazine of December 1917 to have insisted that the terms 'classical' and 'popular' were misleading: there was only 'good' and 'bad' music. (The danger now, as Wood pertinently observed, is that students reluctant to accept the authority of the teacher prefer to think their own opinions equally valid. Seiber would have had no truck with such self-deception. Ruthlessly honest yet tactful in discussing a student's work, he adopted the Socratic approach by indicating a passage and asking 'why did you do that?' After listening patiently to the reply, he would quietly explain the fault and request a revision for the next lesson.) Sadly, older pupils like Fricker, Milner and Banks are not around to discuss how he would see an extended piece through to completion. But more recent ones were present at the festival, including Graubart and Anthony Gilbert (also featured in *Tempo* recently), who can corroborate Wood's testimony to Seiber's belief that composition should be taught as a discipline grounded in tradition and the classics, backed up by thorough analysis and imitation of Bach inventions and Haydn minuets.

The selection of Seiber's own music drawn on in the festival well illustrated his versatility. Some of the *Leichte Tänze* in popular and jazz styles were crisply played on the piano by Joan Taylor. Accordion pieces, the *Irish Suite* and *Crackerjack* by a certain G. S. Mathis (his pseudonym) were performed by a cohort of Morleyites and Julie North. There were sets of folksongs: choral – the Yugoslav and Hungarian, fervently sung by the Morley Meridian Choir under Paul Webster – and solo – the Greek and French, sung with admirable

expression and breath control by Simon Biazeck, tenor) with, respectively, Webster on piano and Peter Martin on guitar. Biazeck and Martin also gave an excellent account of Britten's *Songs from the Chinese*. Seiber admired Britten for his consistent development as a composer. Other composers featured inevitably included Bartók (*Four Slovak Folksongs*) and Kodály (*Dances from Galanta* and *Homo perpende fragilis*, of which the tortured harmonies expressed his grief for a pupil whom he esteemed highly). Michael Tippett, musical director at Morley when Seiber was appointed, commended him to the Dorian Singers as their first conductor, and Dr. Hanson directed Morley Chamber Choir in gems by Gibbons and Tomkins, as well as more modern pieces, which that enterprising group had sung under Seiber's meticulous direction. Tippett, too, was represented on this occasion by *The Windhover*, the spirituals from *A Child of our Time* and *Dance, clarion air*, all sung superbly by the Anton Bruckner Choir under Christopher Dawe. The first of these was written for Morley in 1942, and its difficulties led this listener to wonder how on earth the amateurs of the time coped with it. Holst liked to stretch his performers, and Seiber's Lear *Nonsense Songs*, it has to be said, are also no pushover.

The climax of the festival came with his first Joyce cantata, *Ulysses*, which poses its own special problems of performance. It says much for Dawe's control that he held the combined, and totally committed, forces of the Anton Bruckner and Morley Chamber Choirs and Morley Chamber Orchestra together in the complex third movement ('a kind of Scherzo', said Seiber). In spite of the odd missing or mistimed instrumental entries, he succeeded in conveying the drama and, at other times, the sheer magical beauty, of the writing. He was ably assisted in this by impeccable singing from the solo tenor, Jeffrey Lloyd Roberts. If Holst's 'Neptune', Schoenberg's op. 19/6 (quoted) and Bartók's 'night music' come to mind as one listens, all are completely assimilated in this inspired and carefully crafted work. It is reprehensible that, in a country which boasts a long and healthy choral tradition, there is still no commercial recording.

As an important postscript, on 6 May the Edinburgh Quartet played all three string quartets at Leighton House, under the auspices of the Hungarian Cultural Centre and repeating a programme from Cambridge the day before. The works' diversity, reflecting the influences Seiber experienced at different periods, was highlighted by their juxtaposition. No.1, written when he was



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19 but not published until 1956, bears the imprints of Kodály and Bartók: a nicely spun sonata movement, an expressive *Lento* with haunting folk-like melody, and a rumbustious dancing Rondo. No.2 (1934–5) inhabits the sound-world of Schoenberg and of Berg's *Lyric Suite*, relieved by characteristic humour in the *Intermezzo (Alla Blues)*. No. 3 (*Quartetto lirico*), once in the repertory of the Amadeus Quartet, retains 12-note elements most clearly in its central *Scherzando*. But this appealing work lives up to its subtitle, from the melting opening phrase (reminiscent of Berg's op. 3) to the final, dying cello murmurings.

The enterprising Edinburgh group managed to produce Magyar-like contrasts of fierce intensity, intimate reflection and sheer abandon by turns. Their interpretations of these rare works would (will?) make a perfect CD. Together with Morley's celebrations, performances of other works in Budapest, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Cambridge, Paul Szábo's Hungaroton recordings in preparation and the forthcoming book by Graham Hair (Edwin Mellen Press), they should leave us in no doubt of this composer's worth. David Lumsdaine and Anthony Gilbert have helped Julia to set up a website (www.seiber2005.org.uk). A future festival might explore the music of Seiber's pupils, and would itself be in no way lacking in variety.

Alan Gibbs

**London, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden:
Lorin Maazel's '1984'**

I have had occasion to be sniffy about Lorin Maazel's music in these pages before (*Tempo* No. 218), not least because of its sheer lack of profile, of any hint of individuality. So it was with exceedingly modest expectations that I took my seat for his first opera, *1984*, the world-première run of which began on 3 May. Even so, I was disappointed: no ditchwater is as dull. The basic problem is the absence of any discernible personality in what Maazel writes: the musical language of *1984* is a thin gruel boiled up from left-over Prokofiev, Copland, Bartók, Ravel, Janáček, whatever was lying around the mid-20th-century chopping-board of Maazel's memory as he put the piece together. Add a secondary deficit: there's absolutely no sense of dramatic tension – the work unfolds at the same plodding pace throughout. Now sprinkle with the kind of mistakes you might expect from a rookie operatic composer. The opening 'Hate' chorus, for example, revealed instantly what was going to be a recurrent difficulty: the scoring and an over-ambitious tempo

combine to make the sung text difficult to understand. Maazel repeatedly doubles vocal lines in the orchestra, sacrificing their clarity.

The libretto, by J. D. McClatchy and Thomas Meehan, reduces Orwell's terrifying vision of totalitarian control to cartoon-story-board simplicity, the characters demoted to caricatures. As Winston Smith and Julia, Simon Keenleyside and Nancy Gustafson delivered impassioned performances that couldn't begin to save the day. Opera can generate emotional tension like no other art-form, and Orwell's stark prophecy may yet attract the composer it deserves. But all Maazel produced was a grim musical.

One moment in the work did give me pause for thought, when Winston, under interrogation, asks his tormentor O'Brien how the Party managed to subjugate the entire people. O'Brien's answer might have come unedited from one of George Bush's post-9/11 speeches:

Individuals, faced with chaos and terror,
Surrendered their rights for the greater good.
In place of freedom, we give them order.
In place of memory, we give them slogans.
In place of love, we give them an enemy.

Covent Garden's recent record in new opera is disastrous: Nicholas Maw's ill-judged *Sophie's Choice*, Thomas Adès's anonymous, anodyne *The Tempest* and now this cardboard box. In the course of the love-duet towards the end of Act I Julia sings: 'To hide an emptiness is the hardest secret: I tried'. Maazel didn't try very hard at all.

Martin Anderson

**London, St John's Smith Square: Vasari Singers
Anniversary commissions**

The Vasari Singers, now well established as a much-acclaimed London-based chamber choir, celebrated their 25th Anniversary this year with a concert at St John's Smith Square on 15 May featuring short specially commissioned works by ten notable British composers. As conductor Jeremy Backhouse described to me, a private preview of the works, all on sacred themes, took place at Tonbridge School Chapel in February, in the presence of the composers, thus setting up a 'dialogue' on interpretation. Although strictly speaking of amateur status, the choir has achieved much critical success, winning the Sainsbury's Choir of the Year Competition, appearing on BBC Radio 3 and at major venues, and has shown a distinct interest in commissioning new choral works in recent years.

At their 25th Anniversary Concert on 15 May Will Todd opened with his *Angel Song II*, coming across in true Todd style with ethereal impact. As he himself describes it: 'The text is designed to create the echo of the word "Hosanna", but with no consonants, so that the music feels as if it is coming from on high'. A well-defined melodic line is gently woven by divided sopranos, above what Todd describes as 'aleatoric' textures of the accompanying voices. This technique works well, with later use of whispering effects, and soft bass entries, gradually interwoven. Todd revealed after the concert that we will have to wait for *Angel I*, scheduled to appear in his forthcoming project – a full-scale Christmas Oratorio.

What was quite noticeable to my mind during the evening was that broadly speaking it was the new works with the most clearly defined concepts which scored best in communicating with the audience, given that the suggested duration for each commission was apparently approximately five minutes. The prime example of this, of course, came with the much experienced Ward Swingle (of Swingle Singers fame), whose exquisitely-designed *Give us this Day* enchanted the audience with its sheer lyricism. A master of the art of the five minute slot – and longer works of course where appropriate – born in 1927, this near-octogenarian can teach a thing or two to his younger colleagues who sometimes fall into the trap of trying to fit too much material into a short time-span.

Francis Pott's *The Lord is my Shepherd* suffered from its nature as an extract from a longer work to be performed by the Singers at a later date. Gabriel Jackson's piece had a complexity which perhaps was too ambitious for the choir, who seemed insecure at times, as they did also in Humphrey Clucas's *Hear my crying O God*, praiseworthy though this piece was and indeed as all these works were. Barrie Bignold's *Peace* was particularly well received by the audience, despite some occasional lack of clarity in the harmonic textures.

Will Todd shone with the sheer simplicity of his concept, as did also Stephen Barlow with his *When I see on Rood*, another piece in atmospheric vein, using a most evocative anonymous early medieval poem with middle English text, well sung by Vasari with great sensitivity. Philip Moore's *I saw Him Standing*, based on the graphically enigmatic poem of a farmer's wife who died in 1805, rang true, particularly the second half. I also enjoyed Richard Blackford's *On Another's Sorrow*, but most of all Jeremy Filsell's masterly *Mysterium Christi*, complete with 'motto' chordal idea at 'Oh Christ in this man's life', and full organ

accompaniment played by the composer himself with due gusto. The proclamatory points in the text were well projected by the hard-working Singers and the tritonal falling 'Peace' phrase also. Altogether this enterprising concert was a most festive occasion for Vasari Singers and was much enjoyed by the audience that packed St John's Smith Square.

Jill Barlow

London, Barbican: Taneyev Mini-Fest

The Russian National Orchestra and Moscow State Chamber Choir conducted by Mikhail Pletnev presented two unusually distinctive concerts at London's Barbican Hall at the end of March,³ starting with *John of Damascus* of 1884 – Taneyev called it Cantata No 1 – and ending the following evening with his tumultuous Cantata No 2, *On the Reading of a Psalm (Po prochtenii psalma)*, from 30 years later. Although not claimed as such, the latter was surely a British première: not even that champion of the choral festival, Sir Henry Wood, seems to have done it.

The celebrated contrapuntist Sergey Ivanovich Taneyev (1856–1915), pupil of Tchaikovsky and teacher of Rachmaninov, Lyapunov, Glière and Scriabin, the author of *Invertible Counterpoint in the Strict Style*, was preoccupied with contrapuntal theory and technique and disapproved of the 'Mighty Handful'. Yet on this evidence he was a Russian nationalist in spite of himself, the fervent opening *Adagio* of *John of Damascus* having the colours of Russian Orthodox music with a liturgical chant more familiar from its appearance in Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. In the final choral apotheosis of *On the Reading of a Psalm*, first heard in March 1915, the resonances of Russian Orthodox style must have fuelled its considerable initial acclaim, for Taneyev's St Petersburg audience surely viewed it as a strongly nationalist statement in the face of German militarism. Soon afterwards his pupil Rachmaninov was to have an overwhelming success in Moscow with his heart-on-sleeve rapprochement with Orthodox *znamenny* melodies in his *Vigil*, and for similar reasons. Two years later both works became victims of the revolution because of their religious agendas, and were long unheard.

³ Wednesday 30 March: Taneyev: *John of Damascus*, op 1; Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 2; Taneyev: Symphony No 4; Thursday 31 March: Scriabin: *Réverie*; Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No 3; Taneyev: *On the Reading of a Psalm*, op 36. Nikolai Lugansky was the piano soloist on both evenings.


2005 | 2006 highlights
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We were alerted to *On the Reading of a Psalm* in 1995 by the issue of a live performance from 1977 conducted by Svetlanov with the Yurlov State Choir and USSR Symphony Orchestra.⁴ More recently Pletnev and the Russian National Orchestra have recorded it again,⁵ though the new disc does not efface Svetlanov's headlong reading. The work certainly grips, Pletnev eloquently placing the telling detail in its vast fresco, and the mighty climaxes were blazing, breathtaking, in the hall. The mezzo-soprano Marianna Tarassova was even more persuasive in person than on disc in her passionate supplication for truth and brotherly love. Yet for a composer preoccupied with form and classical models, the structure is unwieldy: in three movements, each in three parts. The first consists of three mighty choruses, and the second of chorus, solo quartet and quartet and choir. Only in the final movement do we have dramatically contrasting textures with an orchestral interlude, mezzo solo and a final double chorus. As a powerful 20th-century farewell to the past, the work could not have been more eloquently

championed, Pletnev and his largely Russian forces clearly believing in their task: a splendid discovery.

The triumph of both evenings was due to the Moscow State Chamber Choir, sixty strong for *John of Damascus*, increased to 76 by members of L'Inviti Singers for No 2. The choir was founded in 1972 and has been directed since then by Vladimir Minin who acknowledged the considerable applause on both evenings. They belied their size with a remarkable body of tone when full out, and the hammer and tongs closing pages had a thrilling impact in the hall. A capacity audience for both performances doubtless came to hear Nikolai Lugansky's sweeping, eloquent performances of Rachmaninov's Second and Third Piano Concertos, while the notably Russian timbre of the orchestra underlined the nationality of Taneyev's Fourth Symphony, a work of enthralling detail in performance but curiously lacking in features that linger in the memory.

Lewis Foreman

⁴ Russian Disc RD CD 10 044, now deleted.

⁵ Soloists, choirs and the Russian National Orchestra conducted by Mikhail Pletnev. Penta Tone Classics 5186 038