FIRST PERFORMANCES

BBC Proms Premieres: Dusapin, Weir, Larcher

Pascal Dusapin is a French intellectual – he cites the philosopher Gilles Deleuze as a particular inspiration – whose generation (he was born just a few months before Michel Houellebecq) are now to the fore following the death of Pierre Boulez. A student of Xenakis in Paris, he sometimes gives the titles of his works a linguistic quirkiness, as in for example, *Ici, Iti, Incisa* and *Indeed*. His comment on *Outscape*, his second cello concerto, that 'it's difficult for me to explain my work because the substance of thought is confused with the flow of music' is – given his musical pedigree and cultural milieu – unsurprising.

Dusapin's more recent pieces, including both cello concertos and purely orchestral works such as *Seven Solos for Orchestra* (1992–2009), show quite a change in direction from his earlier ones – of which more later. *Outscape* was written for Alisa Weilerstein, who gave the work its UK premiere (as well as the world premiere in 2016). Weilerstein has characterized the piece as having both an 'aching lyricism' and 'urgent drive', a fair summary of *Outscape*'s prevalent atmosphere and a good enticement to listen. Her emotionally strenuous performance – accompanied by her brother Joshua Weilerstein and the BBC Symphony Orchestra – also made as good a case as could be imagined for the work's qualities.

These qualities centre on a slow, lyrical struggle, in which the cello and orchestra are partners. The cello writing is by turns ruminative and forceful, with much use of double- and triple-stopping, holding long, sustained mainly low notes; solo passages often gutter out in tremolandos. Much of the concerto's energy is provided by the cello, in thinly textured duos and exchanges between soloist and orchestral players, notably the bass clarinet. Significantly, in a concerto largely devoid of extremes of volume or emotional weight, passages of increasing drama are unresolved, and the piece ends characteristically in a moment of irresolution. *Outscape* is a better work than Dusapin's first cello concerto *Celo* (Latin for 'I keep silent', 1991) though sharing a similar sometimes meandering style. That *Outscape*'s nearest relative is Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 2, with its prominent percussion, slow introspection and near-folk-dance like passages tells you both where Dusapin's music is these days and how broad his appeal yet might be. His pieces have been performed little in the UK, though two CDs just released by Aeon (String Quartets Nos. 6 and 7 on AECD1753 and *Item*, a selection of works for clarinet and cello, AECD1756) usefully highlight how his music has evolved from more experimental, more timbral concerns. Surely the time for wider recognition in the UK has come.

Trailed by BBC Radio 3 as a 'truly dramatic piece', Judith Weir's cantata *In the land of Uz* sets one of the Bible's great stories: Job's horrendous suffering at the hands of Satan, his doubting struggle and final acceptance of the ways of the Lord. The drama and anguish of Vaughan Williams's version *Job* is unsurprisingly far from Weir's approach. She prefers, in the words of her beloved Emily Dickinson, 'to tell all the truth but tell it slant', and her own setting of excerpts from the Book of Job emphasises rather the philosophical and reflective aspects of the narrative rather than the slaughter and existential dread.

The texts were performed by the BBC Singers and five instrumentalists from the Nash Ensemble, along with Adrian Thompson (tenor), Stephen Farr (organ) and Charles Gibbs as the narrator; the whole ensemble was conducted by David Hill – his leave-taking from the choir. Outside of her operas, *In the Land* is one of Weir's longest works and packs in several hundred words in a little over half an hour, making use of a narrator (as she did in *Concrete*, 2007) to convey the philosophical range of the narrative even though some of the extracts are bizarre choices – enumerating the names of Job's wives for example.

Unfortunately, much of the writing for lightly accompanied chorus is slow, unison and ponderous. As Anna Picard wrote in a 2008 review 'Weir can zoom in on a colour or a fragrance . . . but she cannot sustain a narrative'.[1] That analysis has never been more true than in this latest

[1] Anna Picard, 'Judith Weir', *The Independent* 27 January 2008, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/judith-weir-barbican-hall-london-774421.html (accessed 21 September 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217001000 Published online by Cambridge University Press

world premiere. Weir is at her best in some wonderfully simple writing for obbligato viola (here the excellent William Coleman) and soprano saxophone (Christian Forshaw – the only way in which Weir's Job resembles Vaughan Williams's). If the viola's repeated rocking phrases call to mind that other English religious classic for ensemble and chorus, Vaughan Williams's *Flos Campi*, that is no disadvantage. Similarly, if the lamenting high-pitched B-flat saxophone puts one in mind of the oboe in Bach's 'Erbame Dich', that is a subtle ghost Weir can draw on naturally. There is much 'darkness and death' sung and spoken in the cantata, the chorus have their burden of narration too, but not for the first time, Weir does most with simple single-line instruments straining, lamenting and rejoicing where words after words have gone and failed.

Thomas Larcher's (b. 1963) interest in disturbed states of mind is particularly evident in his chamber music, including *My illness is the medicine I need* which sets monologues by psychiatric patients, or *A Padmore cycle*, an excellent piece setting truly strange Swiss poetry, where Larcher's Romantic philosophy of 'insight by seeing the world strangely or obsessively' is to the fore. Not only does Larcher's philosophy draw on Romanticism but his music draws on and challenges that approach too.

Larcher's only work for chamber orchestra to date, the 15-minute *Nocturne – Insomnia* dates from 2008 but was revised and given its second performance at the 2017 Proms by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Robin Ticciati, nine years after the Nieuw Ensemble toured it around The Netherlands for its world premiere. Here as in the third and fourth movements 'Sleepless 1 and 2' of the Third String Quartet 'Madhares' (2007), or the Fourth Quartet 'Lucid Dreams' (2015), sleep and its disturbances are opposed. In *Insomnia* sleep is unsurprisingly tonal, slow, scalic and regular. This is where we start, in the almost parodic 'child practising scales' sequence of the first part. Sleep deepens very quietly and the strange and subtle demons of night's imagination – trumpet overtone glissandi, high long-held accordion notes, low double-bassoon thrummings – create a descent into rest thwarted by the disfigured memories of day.

In the second section – double the tempo of the first – rhythmic patterns beat furiously while a hexacentic's (a rock-climbing tool) scrapings provide the cue for the chariot of sleep to gather pace and volume and thunder out of control. Like bad dreams, *Insomnia* has a slightly manic and unstable quality, yet never reaches that point where near-madness can illumine the self that Larcher achieved in 'Madhares', *A Padmore cycle* or *My illness*. Fans of Larcher's restless genius can sleep easy, however – the excellent recent cello concerto *Ouroboros* (2015) is reason enough.

Robert Stein

doi:10.1017/S0040298217001000

Apartment House: Wolff, Cage, 'Performing Indeterminacy', University of Leeds, 1 July 2017

At the beginning of July, the University of Leeds played host to the 'Performing Indeterminacy' conference: a series of talks, panels and concerts that are part of a research project on John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58), led by Philip Thomas and Martin Iddon. In the middle of all this, Apartment House presented what many consider the pinnacle of Cage's indeterminate work alongside a new commission from Christian Wolff, the last surviving member of the New York School composers. *Resistance* (2016–17), Wolff's new work 'for 10 or more players and a pianist', was written in response to Cage's *Concert*, sharing elements of its instrumentation and schema. In Leeds' Clothworkers Hall, Apartment House – led by Anton Lukoszevieze – premiered the new piece alongside its progenitor, composed some 59 years apart. At the heart of both pieces in this concert is Philip Thomas at the piano. The conscientiousness and exactitude that Thomas brings to the music of both Cage and Wolff (having worked closely with the latter over the past 15 years) make him, perhaps, the ideal soloist for this programme. Quite simply, it is a line-up that could not have come about through chance procedure.

Resistance begins frenetically, as though the whole ensemble is starting midway through the piece. After these scant busy moments, individual players drop out to reveal more fragmented and hesitant gestures. Conducting the ensemble, Jack Sheen mediates the player's roles, intervening intermittently rather than governing or leading them through the piece in a traditional manner. After 30 seconds of conducting Sheen sits down while the ensemble continues, now left to work either autonomously or collaboratively. Without a conductor, subgroups form and shift organically among the ensemble. Thomas' complex piano lines seem to move skittishly between the fleeting trios