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FIRST PERFORMANCES

Tallinn, Paide, Rakvere: Estonian Dreams

Have you ever entered a totally silent music academy during 'working' hours? Or dreamt of driving around on a dark, stormy night in Tallinn in a bright red mini Mercedes, with Arvo Pärt – of the transcendental *Passio, Stabat Mater* and *Kanon Pokajanen* – at the wheel, wearing a base-ball cap and struggling to find the car's head-lights?

On 11 September, a day full of memories, I was in Helsinki for a return journey to London. 11 September 2005 had another significance: it was the 70th birthday of Arvo Pärt. In London, a couple of weeks before, the crack Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir had come to pay homage to Pärt in a late-night concert at the BBC Promenade concerts. 'Why don't you come over to Estonia for Arvo Pärt's 70th birthday festival? Tallinn is 100 minutes from Helsinki.' Frankly, I had no idea that travel between the two capitals was so close. The opportunity felt unmissable. In the late 1980s, while running the Contemporary Music Network, I had programmed *Passio*, which toured to some of the most beautiful cathedrals in Britain. And just months before the tour, having left the Arts Council for Channel Four Television, I was in a position to commission the filming of the Hilliard Ensemble performing *Passio* from Durham Cathedral. Pärt's jaw dropped at the sight of arguably the greatest cathedral in Europe, a more perfect setting for this austerely contemplative piece hard to imagine.

I caught the night hydro-foil to Tallinn and was met by a perfect English speaker from the Ministry of Culture. Tallinn is a breathtakingly beautiful city, a 'mini-Prague' with its numerous medieval towers surrounding a central area of cobbled streets, churches and finely restored houses from many ages. This is Tallinn's Old Town. Much of it has been lovingly renovated but the ghosts have been left untouched.

Arvo Pärt was born in Paide, a small village south-east of Tallinn, and it was there, on 12 September, at the concert of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir in the parish church, that gave me my first experience of cultural life in Estonia. The modest church was packed (the tickets were free) with every age-group – from those new to life to those on their way out – with concomitant gurgles and shuffles. But nothing could detract from the simple serenity of the surrounding and the serenity of *Passio* itself.

Paul Hillier is now the director of the EPCC, having succeeded Tonu Kaljuste, who founded the choir twenty years before, in 2001. The members of the choir are collectively and individually extraordinary musicians. On enquiring who Aarne Talvik, the exceptional bass singer taking the role of 'Jesus' was, and about whom no information was given in the programme, I was told that he was a member of the choir and so well-known that no notes on him were necessary … The Evangelist quartet was, of course, not the Hilliard Ensemble, and the alto part no longer taken by a counter-tenor. I missed the colour of the great David James in the quartet, but Danish soprano Else Torp, has a warmth, purity of tone and accuracy of pitch to comfort any soul. And Christopher Bowers-Broadbent coped magnificently with the waywardness of the local organ!

The next concert took place in Rakvere where Pärt grew up. Again it's about the same distance from Tallinn as Paide, but due west, half-way to St Petersburg. This is where Pärt, as a child, used to ride round the square on a bicycle listening to music coming out of fixed loud-speakers. A similar church to Paide was the setting for *Stabat Mater* performed by the smaller 'Theatre of Voices' – a quartet of voices and baroque strings with organ. Again, the church was packed, and again, miraculously there was a seat for everyone, despite being ticketless.

This concert was repeated in Tallinn in the huge (and unsightly) new Methodist Church (once destined, I believe, to be a sports hall). Situated on a busy traffic intersection, it was remarkable that horn and siren 'spillage' failed to enter or disrupt the proceedings. With his son and grand-daughter, Pärt was there in person, a baby dangling in his arms. A warming sight. So was Estonian Radio, so modestly broadcasting the concert 'live' with as little equipment as I've ever seen for such tasks.

Estonia is a newcomer to the European Union. The feeling of optimism, the positiveness of the people, is palpable. From Tiia Teder, Head of Classical Music at the Radio, to Margit Peil, Director of Music at the Ministry of Culture, via

Lauri Vainmaa, the pianist and artistic director of the significant festival 'Klavier', and Siiri Siimer – an indefatigable source behind the NYYD Ensemble and Festival, to Tonu Kaljuste himself who just happens to be setting up 'Nargen Opera' (opera in a barn) on an island off the Estonian coast, the pace of musical life is breath-taking. So glad it wasn't a dream.

Annette Morreau

Huddersfield: Contemporary Music Festival, 2005

Under Guest Artistic Director Tom Service, the 28th Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival showed no signs of watering down its renowned challenging, modernist brew. It is the sheer quality of the guest solo artists and ensembles that makes the festival unique. However complex and abstruse the compositions, it is always possible to appreciate the very high levels of musicianship and dedication that the performers, almost invariably specialists in their field, bring to the scores.

Among the highlights in the 2005 festival was a rare opportunity to hear James Dillon's monumental *The Book of the Elements* for solo piano in its 80-minute entirety, played by Noriko Kawai. In her hands, the five volumes sounded fresh and improvisatory as well as profoundly logical. Lacking the sheer transcendental virtuosity that Ian Pace, for example, finds in this music, Kawai emphasized its kaleidoscopic character, so that in the more intimate and lyrical passages, the listener remained gripped and never impatient for the next barnstorming, bravura section. Hearing all five volumes played consecutively made for a fascinating evening's masterclass in the 'Art of touching the keyboard' – and, in Kawai's hands, a satisfyingly cogent trajectory from the eleven Beethovenian Bagatelles which launch the piece to the granite-like one-movement structure with which it concludes.

The UK première of Dillon's recent Fourth String Quartet was the main feature of an early afternoon concert given by Quatuor Diotima. Sudden remote, restrained *pianissimo* passages, reminiscent of the terse, teeming *sul ponticello* fragments in the late Beethoven quartets, left the deepest impression in this work, rather than its many technical complexities such as ferocious glissandi, obscure harmonics and fiendish trills – though all these difficulties were fully absorbed by the players. Quatuor Diotima gave the work its première at the Helsinki Festival in March 2005, and had audibly already made this Dillons quartet their own. Their reading was the thrilling result of having lived with a piece and reached an understanding of it, whilst at the same time wanting to take risks and test its limits.

My own favourite among the many events was the Ives Ensemble's 50th birthday celebration for Christopher Fox in the form of a mini-retrospective of his works. *Etwas lebhaft* (1983), one of the composer's earliest acknowledged compositions, is dedicated to the memory of Webern and adopts the instrumentation of the latter's Concerto op. 24: three woodwind, three brass, piano, violin and viola. Its concentrated microtonalism seemed uncharacteristically sober, though Fox's musical language is deftly elusive, as likely to transform from work to work as that of Stravinsky or Denis ApIvor. The title, 'rather lively', smacks of English reserve and understatement; and the rest of the programme gradually established the essential underlying character of Fox's music as one of wit and quirkiness. *A slice through translucence* (2005), written especially for the Ives Ensemble, and receiving its world première performance, nodded in the direction of American minimalism, yet there was much more incident in terms of instrumental colouring and rhythmic variety packed into its finely-chiselled, serenely entrancing eight minutes than in most minimalist works several times that duration.

The second half of the concert was given over to the UK première of *Everything You Need to Know* (1999). The wildly idiosyncratic but instantly communicative material is made up of a number of sections, played by forces of varying size and utilizing the full space of the venue – in this case, St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield. Soprano Lore Lixenberg's declamations through a megaphone summoned echoes of Walton's *Façade* and created anticipations of further eccentricities. After a series of intricately-crafted solos and passages for various ensembles, Lixenberg began marching up and down, fanatically stamping out the beat to a wind band that processed in and out of the Hall. Like the goose-stepping that habitually accompanies such military marches, the effect was simultaneously comical and terrifying and it was with this unsettling off-stage marching band that the piece ended, or at least became inaudible to the audience. As the title suggests, *Everything You Need to Know* may be regarded as a compendium or summing-up of Fox's talents. Memorable and layered, it may prove pivotal in the context of his output so far.

In contrast, the festival Finale consisted of a birthday tribute to the uncompromisingly modernist Helmut Lachenmann. On the occasion

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of his 70th birthday, Germany's premier chamber group, Ensemble Modern, conducted by Brad Lubman, performed *Mouvement (- vor der Erstarrung)* (1984) and the UK première of *Concertini* (2005). Initially, it is hard to concentrate on the matter of Lachenmann's music, when the manner of it keeps confounding expectations. Here as so often the composer was more concerned with the very boundaries of sound production rather than any kind of homogenous blend: wind players were frequently required to blow down their instruments without producing a note, or elicited the kind of squeaks normally produced by first-time players trying to produce a sound.

In *Concertini*, technical equipment and clumps of players dominated a large portion of the balcony of the Town Hall and contributed some disorientating, antiphonal effects. Meanwhile, down on the stage, the trombone player directed most of his pronouncements into the depths of the grand piano, while the pianist always seemed to be doing everything to his instrument but depressing the keys. Exciting and frequently exhilarating, the speed of events made the work hard to grasp, due to the unfeasibly swift transitions of material and instrumentation. The players' resolutely unconventional means of producing their notes ensured that the evening was at least as memorable visually as aurally. The cumulative effect of all this humming, scraping, scratching, wheezing and tapping was unexpectedly cogent – Lachenmann's painstaking approach to getting the precise effects he desires conferred on his pieces a miraculous sense of inevitability, enhanced by the breathtaking technical skill of Ensemble Modern. This rare opportunity to hear some of Lachenmann's most substantial large-scale works in the hands of expert specialists made a fitting climax to a festival of bold and admirably uncompromising vision.

Paul Conway

Keele and London: Miles Davis in new clothes

The jazz trumpeter Miles Davis was a great experimenter, especially in the early 1970s in works such as *Bitches Brew*: his forays into live electronic improvisation have led the way for later composers in both serious and jazz styles, as shown by two recent events. Certainly one of the challenges of electro-acoustics is that clear boundaries between performer and composer are blurred as more and more sophisticated means are used to create 'intelligent' systems to respond to and interact with live performers. It was this

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aspect that clearly inspired Bob Gluck, Director of the Electronic Studio at SUNY, at Albany, in his works for piano, shofar and electronics (including a version of Davis's *Bitches Brew*), presented at Keele University on 23 November. Gluck uses an 'eShofar', an electronically expanded version of the ancient ram's horn, itself a thought-provokingly paradoxical clash of ancient and avant-garde; yet the exciting part is the system that allows various degrees of control in sound-settings and random processes, with stirring semi-improvisational results.

In *Ssshofar*, a sensor glove controls an 11-track layering of real-time recorded shofar sounds and pre-recorded samples. The piece itself develops from the transformed properties and controlling effects of long notes (Tekiah) and short staccato patterns (Teruah), enmeshed with ever-changing colours of bubbly metallic electronic sounds. Gluck's eShofar II system offered a more sophisticated interactive relationship in *Bitches Brew (1969)/Shofarrr (2005),* a fizzing arrangement of this classic of Davis's 'electric' period. Here the timbral nuances of the shofar are picked up and transformed in semi-predictable ways by digital filters, harmonizers and multi-tape delays, with a resulting high level of spontaneity and surprise within an overall controlled shape. For the listener, recognisable jazz harmonies and bass patterns were subsumed into a feverish fabric of wildly evolving electronic sonorities with exhilarating effect. An accomplished pianist, Gluck also framed the concert with two piano works: *Akeda*, a lyrical, atonal fantasy movement by the Israeli-American Ofer Ben-Amots, and Tzvi Avni's Second Sonata, *Epitaph*, a dramatic virtuoso work which intermingles lyrical elements based on cantillation within an angular, atonal, Boulezian texture, with echoes of electronic sounds.

The concert formed part of a European tour which also included a major event at the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, and coincidentally Gluck's environmental collage *One Prague Minute* was premièred at Goldsmith's College, London, on 16 November as part of the '60×60 2005' project[1] presented by Vox Novus. An environmental soundscape eloquently paced with samples of cobbled streets, pacing through buildings and open air, a Czech conversation, it gave a strong sense of 'being there'.

Bitches Brew was also one of the two inventive Miles Davis arrangements premièred just a few days later in 'Hot – An Infernal Cabaret', given by *notes inégales* under the direction of their founder Peter Wiegold in the Studio Theatre Union Chapel, Islington, North London on 29 November. This fringe fusion of progressive jazz improvisation and contemporary avant-garde recalled some of the best experimental events of the 1970s and 80s, with a line-up of first-class musicians from around the country performing a music-theatrical programme introduced by, and in combination with, the performance poet Murray Lachlan Young. The evening took its title from two works, Rameau's 'Infernal Airs', in a contemporary arrangement by the noted composer Martin Butler, who is pianist of the ensemble, and Franco Donatoni's fiendishly difficult *Hot*. Fire and brimstone imagery abounded, set by Young into a witty contemporary voice.

The prologue and epilogue was Peter Wiegold's *Drive your cart and plough over the bones of the dead*, inspired by Blake's poetry, with its ritornello-like jazz-harmony fanfare motifs and pulsating textures. It formed an atmospheric frame for the main fare, notably the two Miles Davis arrangements with stunning solos by Swedish trumpeter Torbjorn Hultmark. In *Spanish Key*, Martin Butler reinterpreted Davis's oriental melismatic melody over an ostinato bass, with colourful pointillism in the woodwind, a beguiling clarinet solo and then muted trumpets, sax and oboe (Christian Forshaw and Melinda Maxwell), leading to a hushed, cool conclusion. Wiegold's own version of *Bitches Brew* was more extended, with prominent solos for trumpet, double bass (Corin Long) and vibraphone (Sam Walton); the big band homogeneity was superb, its syncopated smoothness suspended over urgent percussion patterns, a dreamy blend appropriate to Miles Davis's groundbreaking 70s jazz fusion classic. The original slinky harmonies, coloured by soupy low tuba (Peter Smith) and trombone (David Purser) at one point give way to wailing from all the instruments, typical of the varied moods of this artfully-shaped piece of jazz improvisation.

The concert continued with Murray Lachlan Young and bassist Corin Long's poetic dialogue *What is Hell?,* devilish imagery from biblical text to contemporary stripograms, poetic rhythms projected with punchy panache against low bass

[1] *60×60*, a project organized by Vox Novus and its Artistic Director, the American composer Robert Voisey, is currently in its third year. Voisey invites composers (sixty of them) to submit minute-long pieces in digital format with the prospect of being included in hour-long presentations at a variety of international venues (including to date the USA, UK, Romania, and Turkey), as well as video installations and finally to be featured in a DVD. A minute can be ample time to express a whole gamut of imaginative sounds, or it can be a constraint which forces an artist to isolate what is the most important element of a work. The point of the project is that it enables an audience to take in and enjoy a cross section of different approaches to new music within a reasonable duration. A musical equivalent of speed-dating, perhaps.

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rumblings and higher harmonics. Rameau's baroque 'Infernal Airs', two dance movements from the opera *Hippolyte et Aricie*, delighted the ear in Butler's new post-modern instrumental garb, followed by the most substantial, witty work of the evening, Young's and Wiegold's *Listen to the fools reproach!, it is a kingly title*. This contra-orthodox word-setting evoked echoes of the music-theatre/cabaret of Walton's *Façade*, half Gilbert and Sullivan and half rap. Its Betjeman-like freshness and verbal virtuosity, laced with tongue-twisting patter phrases, popular metaphors and tension-building repeated refrains ('Am I getting warmer?', 'No win no fee') was matched by Bernstein/Reich-like pulsating patterns of syncopation and silence, with glittering keyboard effects and witty echoes of the verse repetitions.

The climax of the evening was a virtuoso performance of Donatoni's *Hot*, which, though precisely notated, was the closest to progressive jazz that I have experienced in classical avant-garde music, and entirely at home in this programme. There were many superb solos and a concerto-like solo sax boldly played by Christian Forshaw. After an improvised interlude and with the recapitulatory epilogue, one could appreciate the true professionalism and spontaneous inventiveness of the whole ensemble, under Peter Weigold's ever-cool command. One hopes *notes inègales* will appear often in concert. While their 'infernal cabaret' was one hell of a performance, waiting for their first CD may prove pure purgatory … but heaven when it appears.

Malcolm Miller

Barcelona: Gerard Schurmann's 'Gaudiana'

The first performance of Gerard Schurmann's new orchestral work, *Gaudiana: Symphonic Studies*, took place on 2 December (with repeat performances on the two following days) at the recently-built concert venue, L'Auditori, designed by Rafael Moneo for the city's symphony orchestra (OBC). Before considering the Schurmann première, several things call for comment. The first concerns the venue. The entire interior of the performing space is constructed from maple, which no doubt contributed to the lustrous sound the orchestra produced. The space also somehow seemed intimate, despite having a seating capacity for some two and a half thousand. The second concerns the programming. The programme, conducted by Rumon Gamba, consisted of four works all written within the last 80 or so years, with two works being from living composers. The thought of such a programme being given within a regular symphonic concert series in the British Isles is well nigh impossible to imagine: if a première is risked at all, it will almost certainly be embedded (hidden?) amongst the warhorses of the repertoire. Yet with near-capacity audiences envisaged for all three nights, Catalonians were obviously undeterred. True, the concert ended with Ravel's *Bolero*, but all the works were well received (the others were Adams's *The Chairman Dances* and Kurt Weill's Violin Concerto, quite a rarity in itself and more than ably played by the orchestra's leader Angel Jesus Garcia). Presumably a willingness and appetite to hear fresh music lies behind this, but one could not help thinking what a good and beneficial idea it was to vary the start times of the concerts: Friday at 21:00, Saturday at 19:00, Sunday at 11:00. Hats off to Barcelona!

Schurmann's *Gaudiana* is dedicated to his wife Carolyn and reveals his admiration for the Catalonian architect Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926), whose work abounds in the city, and in particular for the unfinished cathedral La Sagrada Familia[2] – indeed the composer has stated that on a recent visit he was unexpectedly moved by the building's innate sadness and prescient drama, the interior of which he has likened to an enormous empty carcass. This is not to imply Schurmann's music is programmatic or that one need be familiar with the architecture which inspired it, for this piece weaves a powerful symphonic argument, being a 25-minute set of symphonic studies, falling into six movements. However, the long slow opening chorale scored for strings alone, with its impassioned, almost elegiac, theme announced by cellos near the outset, seemed to form a telling musical invocation of the atmosphere the composer describes.[3]

Xylophone heralded the start of the next movement and the entrance of the rest of the orchestra with music of a more forceful nature, which at times featured the rhetoric and volatility associated with the composer in works such as the early orchestral piece *Six Studies of Francis Bacon*, although in more refined vein. Yet another movement featured very elegant string writing, imbued with delicate patterning in the other sections of the orchestra which betrayed the influence of gamelan music which Schurmann

[2] For another recent musical approach to Gaudí, also premièred in Barcelona, see Benjamin K. Davies, 'Fracture and Form, Architecture and Music: Guinjoan's *Gaudí*', *Tempo* Vol. 59 No.232, pp. 14–22 – Ed.

[3] For the composer's comments on *Gaudiana*, with a quotation from this opening movement, see Earl Tomson, 'Gerard Schurmann in Interview', *Tempo* Vol. 59 No.231, p. 27 – Ed.

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imbibed in his Indonesian childhood. By contrast a discernible influence with a more local flavour was music suggestive of the Sardana, the Catalonian round dance. The final movement was marked by energetic music which lead to series of climaxes, before returning to the dramatic yet quiet string music of the opening (underscored by timpani), to end ominously on a fading string chord.

The work was conducted with the infectious energy and aplomb so typical of Rumon Gamba and was greeted most enthusiastically by the audience: the composer being visibly moved to be twice called to platform and so warmly received by Gaudí's compatriots.

Tim Mottershead

London: Two Russian premières

As a post-graduate student of the Royal Academy of Music, Artem Vassiliev – born in Kazakhstan in 1974 and Moscow-raised – is a much more familiar figure in British musical life than Ephrem Podgaits, born in 1949 in the Ukraine and likewise brought up in Moscow. Two first performances last summer showed some points of contact despite the huge stylistic divergence between them.

Vassiliev's mildly modernist *Duo Concertante* was given its première by the violist Maxim Rysanov and cellist Kristine Blaumane (two-thirds of the ASCH String Trio), with the strings of the Britten Sinfonia under Paul Watkins, on 17 June in a programme of Britten, Pärt and Tippett in the Spitalfields Festival. The work begins with a call-to-arms from the viola, quickly joined by the cello in little Brittenesque figures which soon descend into the strings (the violins are placed either side of the ensemble). The soloists discuss snippets of thematic material, in antiphony, harmony, counterpoint, the fragments gradually expanding into longer, more lyrical lines, matching the mood already established in the strings, before the more brittle material returns. The combination of deliberate banality in some of the rhythms with clusters in the ensemble suggests the influence of Schnittke. Through the work, the viola dominates: the cello is often confined to shadowing the viola part, and the scoring generally restricts it to a *concertante* role in the body of strings rather than allow it to shine in its own right. In any event, too much of the intensity is derived from having both instruments saw away repetitively; their material is not allowed to expand and evolve. The closing section opens as if to initiate a string toccata but the promise is unfulfilled, and more Schnittke-like banality takes its place (the descending magpie call from Rossini's *Gazza ladra* is surely merely coincidence); the toccata figurations make another attempt at animating the ensemble, but the soloists resist, tapping out insistent repeated notes, until eventually the motoric rhythms slow into silence and a single chord brings the piece to a close. Rysanov and Blaumane played with obvious passion – and Paul Watkins is proving himself as fine a conductor as he is a cellist – but their commitment could not convert the work's initial promise into hard achievement.

Ephrem Podgaits' output is substantial: some 200 works, his vocal scores embracing opera, oratorio and cantata and his orchestral works including a generous number of concertos (among them the first Russian harpsichord concerto, the *Lambada Concerto* for oboe and a Triple Concerto for piano trio) – and yet two choral CDs on the Opus 111 label, featuring his *Missa veris* and *Vox spiritualis*, have been virtually the only recordings to take his music to an international audience. Mstislav Rostropovich's commission for Podgaits' Second Symphony, which he premièred with the London Symphony Orchestra in the Barbican on 6 July, was a long overdue step in introducing his music to a major London venue.

Podgaits is an unashamedly tonal composer who writes that 'even in the 21st century the composer has the right to feel deeply about the world around him (the sun, the grass, sunset, love, joy, sorrow…) in the same way as, in their times, did Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Britten…'. His ambitious Second Symphony is an imposing edifice: its three movements last 45 minutes. In each Podgaits builds his structure as a chain of contrasting episodes, later recalling material from them to bestow symphonic cohesion; his orchestration heightens the effect by treating the instruments in choirs – with the two harps, piano, celesta and tuned percussion almost becoming a primary colour in their own right, a structural *leitmotif*.

The work begins, *Allegro moderato*, by establishing some of the blocks of colour to be used: strings, woodwind and brass posit contrasting material, building swiftly (with some very Russian bell sonorities) to a climax which is suddenly cut short (a favourite tactic, it was to transpire). The instrumental groupings try again to recast some of the thematic shapes already heard, playing them off against new material and new timbres, the changes of tempo and texture bringing constant variety – soupy Hollywood

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harmonies here, a hint of tango there, a dance over an oompah rhythm, reminiscences of Schnittke and Shostakovich – and leading to an outbreak of rather folky fugal writing An extended passage for percussion, with touches of Jewish melisma, supported by piano, over chorale-like material in the strings, rises to a substantial climax, and the chorale now passes to the brass, answered by tolling harps and tubular bells. The music swells to a further climax, articulated in blocks of rhythm, the heavy scoring reminiscent of Boris Tishchenko's maximalism, before finally dying away in a long tremolando in the violas.

The second movement, marked *Adagio*, begins with rippling triplet patterns in the celesta and piano, over which an alto saxophone launches into a lyrical solo, the two harps thickening the texture below. Another chorale emerges low in the strings and swells into a gloriously rich passage of immediate emotional appeal. All the while, the tempo is gradually accelerating, the constant rhythmic pulse of the harps producing a tension resolved when the head of energy can no longer be restrained and the music surges forth. But once again Podgaits immediately slams on the brakes, and another chorale emanates from the lower strings under angular solo lines from clarinet and bass clarinet, joined by the triplet figurations of the harps and piano. The clarinet solos take on a warmer, almost jocular tone, and the strings unveil a gorgeous, folk-flavoured extended melody, sung to sleep by those triplets, now in the celesta.

The third movement, marked *Allegro molto ben ritmico*, sets out with a marimba solo in dialogue with other instruments, the sound – and the sparse textures – suggesting an affinity with the later symphonic manner of Malcolm Arnold. The opening material returns regularly, almost as a rondo, each time with increasing, *Rite*-like, rhythmic complexity, and another climax builds up under swirling woodwinds – and it, too, is swiftly silenced at its peak. The strings resume with pizzicato violins recalling a theme from the first movement, rather *à la* Shostakovich, an association reinforced by the subsequent solo for contrabassoon, which is then taken up elsewhere in the orchestra. The opening *Allegro molto ben ritmico* then recurs, introducing a fugal passage in the strings. The celesta adopts and adapts some of the marimba figuration, and the orchestral sound gradually swells in volume, combining a number of now-familiar themes, as the work romps home to a joyous and extravert conclusion.

Podgaits' music might seem to invite a number of labels (post-modernist, neo-tonal) but doesn't brook such easy pigeon-holing. He is obviously happy to swim downstream from Shostakovich, taking what he wants also from earlier and later composers. His confident, even luxuriant, orchestral writing – with its structural use of instrumental colour and innovative sonorities – sets up expectations which he then subtly contradicts, maintaining interest without sacrificing familiarity. Similarly, the danger of monumentalism invited by such an expansive canvas is undermined by a ready sense of humour, with no loss of dignity. Listeners plainly respond to his music: the Barbican audience – undoubtedly there to hear Vengerov in the Beethoven Concerto in the first half – cheered him with unfettered enthusiasm. And with good reason.

Martin Anderson

MIT: Free Speech Zone/National Insecurity

In 2004, following in the footsteps of the legendary Composers' Collective of the 1930s, Judd Greenstein, David T. Little, and Missy Mazzoli – three of the best known American composers in their twenties – organized Free-Speech Zone, a performance project aiming to be both musically serious and a serious political expression. The name comes from the term given to the area, often times far away and out of sight, to which protesters at appearances of George W. Bush are forcibly stationed. The second annual tour of the undertaking aligned itself with National Insecurity, a similar Boston-based project of Curtis K. Hughes, in a concert at Killian Hall at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts on 13 November.

The event was really more like a mini-festival consisting of three fairly short concerts compressed into one rather mammoth occasion, which went on for more than three hours. The first set was by Non Zero, a saxophone and percussion duo consisting of the very excellent Brian Scawa and Timothy Feeney. They played *Two-Faced* by Hughes, *Still Life with Karl: An American Psalm* by Sophocles Papavasilopoulos, *Patriot Act* (for saxophone alone) by Dennis DeSantis, *Red Scare Sketchbook* by David T. Little, and *Corporeal* by Vinko Globokar, in which Feeney was both the performer and the instrument; it was probably more theater than music, but the performance was harrowing in its intensity.

The second show was by Newspeak (Daisy Press, soprano, Eileen Mack, clarinets, Jordan

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Shapiro, electric guitar, Rebecca Cherry, violin, Mike Block, cello, James Johnson, piano, Yuri Yamashita, percussion, and Eric Poland, drumset – David T. Little, director). It consisted of *Electric Proletariat* by David T. Little, the first performance *of In Spite of All This* by Missy Mazzoli, and a song by Black Sabbath. The third part was by the NOW Ensemble (Patrick Burke, Mark Dancigers, Judd Greenstein, Michael Mizrahi, Sara Phillips, Peter Rosenfeld, Alexandra Sopp, and guest Bo Cheng). They presented the first performance of *Apology to Younger Americans* by John Halle and *Free Speech* Zone by Judd Greenstein. Musical politics also intruded into the proceedings when John Halle, introducing his work, excoriated the baby-boom generation as much for Charles Wourinen as for Dick Cheney. There was a final segment, consisting of *Coming Together* by Frederick Rzewski, performed by Newspeak joining with NOW.

Of all that music, it was the Hughes, Little's *Red Scare Sketchbook*, the DeSantis, and the Mazzoli that made the strongest impression on this listener, but all of it was serious, full of substance, and powerfully realized as composition. *Electric Proletariat*, although full of wonderful bits of music, seemed a little on the shapeless side as a piece, and the Greenstein was undetermined rather than enhanced by a video by Alice Lovejoy and Jeff Reichert which was full of words (a story about a man who was arrested for trying to go to a Bush appearance carrying a critical sign, and a Bush speech) which distracted from the music, reducing it to ambient stuff going on simultaneously with the reading.

It was a good sign about all the music that even given the length of the event one did not feel tired or oppressed under the weight of all the listening involved. To say that all the performances were completely masterly (and, in some cases masterful) technically, and wonderfully powerful and expressive would be to slander them by using faint praise. It was the kind of playing which was so concentrated and focused that it could melt through steel.

Rodney Lister

London, Purcell Room: PLG Jubilee Concert by the Verdehr Trio

The first concert in the PLG's characteristically adventurous Jubilee Anniversary Series, at the Purcell Room on 28 October, was an exciting tribute to their role in promoting new talent both

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in composition and performance (their 50th season features an amazing 32 composers). The programme, given by Verdehr Trio, was entirely comprised of UK premières: all the works bar one had been composed within the last five years, and two of them had received world premières only weeks earlier. These were works from a blend of leading European and American composers, including two prominent women composers, as well as the Chinese-American Bright Sheng. Inspired by Bartók's *Contrasts*, the Verdehr Trio, during a 30-year international career, have commissioned some 200 works for their medium of clarinet, violin and piano and thus created a major repertoire, which Walter Verdehr compared, in the pre-concert conversation chaired by Peter Dickinson, to the string quartet in Haydn's day, adding that the Michigan State University, where they are based, was their 'Esterhazy'.

A sparkling miniature – *Dash* (2002) by the New York-based composer Jennifer Higdon – launched the evening, a symbol of 21st-century speed, propelled at a frenetic pace, with repeated-note ostinati overlaid by instrumental dialogues, stark fourths and fifths in the piano mingling with rising and falling chromatic passagework, and a climactic final flourish. It formed a pithy overture to one of the four substantial works of the evening, Jonathan Harvey's *Clarinet Trio* (2005). Within its tripartite structure this work explored instrumental relationships in three layers of texture – inspired, as the composer observed in the pre-concert conversation, by Stockhausen's *Gruppen,* with pitches and tempi of each stratum organized according to a serial nine-note pattern: a favourite Milton Babbitt technique, yet enmeshed with, even undermined by, a pentatonic harmony projected in grace notes, for Harvey a symbol of the universal. John Cage was the influence in a quest to find a delicate pianistic sonority, that of finger-tapping on the keyboard lid (a technique also used by others, such as Arie Shapira's *Off Piano*), which provided a percussive accompaniment to the delightful dancing duet for violin and clarinet. The outer sections were coloured by a distinctively acerbic and chilled harmonic idiom, contrasted by the intriguing synthesis of serialism and modality in the expressive central section, where bright, brittle sonorities, coolly sustained violin lines and clarinet multiphonics evoked faded memories, framed by frenetic filigree in the piano's highest registers.

Peter Dickinson's *Lullaby* (2004) acted as a warm contrast, recalling some of the distinctively transatlantic influences of his earlier work, such as the stylistically eclectic *American Trio* (1985), his first commission for the Verdehr. In *Lullaby* there are strong echoes of Barber and Copland in the deep piano harmonies over which the violin presents a poignant melody with clarinet counterpoint, the melody then shared by the two players and finally doubled in an evocative two-octave span over a slow waltz accompaniment. The work is in fact an arrangement of a song from the cycle *The Unicorns*, to a libretto by John Heath-Stubbs. A beautiful recording of this cycle, sung by Elisabeth Söderström, features in the latest CD of Dickinson's music, 'Pianos Voices and Brass', released to mark his 70th birthday last year (Albany Records, TROY760). The CD also features recent performances by Dickinson of his collections of piano pieces (published by Bosworth) including the most recent, witty *Bach in Blue* (2004), and Eric Parkin's brilliant account of *Sonatas for Piano with Tape Playback* (1987), offering a stimulating contemporary soundscape.

A more extended highlight of the Verdehr's concert was the finely crafted, contemporary and accessible *Rainwaves* by Joan Tower, currently based at Bard College, who has composed for other leading groups including the Tokyo and Emmerson Quartets. Despite a certain predictability to the first section, with its suggestive contrasts of staccato, syncopated themes and swirling scales (the 'rainwaves' of the title), the slow duet for violin and clarinet in the third section was most beguiling, leading through a sinewy chromatic idiom to a virtuoso finale. Also impressive was the longest work of the programme, *Gesangstück* (2003) by Wolfgang Rihm (commissioned as far back as 1988). Rihm has been described as inventing a new style for every work; and indeed this piece, which aims, in the composer's words, to 'harmonize' the three contrasting instruments, is far more neo-Romantic and tonally referential than usual, with obscure and not-so-obscure allusions to Romanticism (the Brahms Clarinet Trio, Mahler and Strauss came to mind). Certainly the emphasis on timbral blend is evident in some enthralling dovetailing, creating a sense of rippling beauty to the surface. Yet overall the work felt constrained, almost a confrontation with Rihm's own more avant-garde musical background, so full is it of self-conscious, sometimes witty evasions of gestural implications. While it is confined mainly to quiet levels, there are some exciting, even disruptive climaxes; most of the seven sections are slow, yet the calm pace is offset by a few faster interludes; familiar motifs over chordal patterns are set off-kilter by clusters, dissonances and extreme leaps.

The final work, *Tibetan Dance* by Bright Sheng, was in some ways the most persuasively involving and apt for the medium, in its finely-judged symbiosis of Eastern and Western aesthetics. An internationally recognized Chinese-American composer, Sheng is currently on the faculty at Michigan State University following an education both in China (and Tibet during the Cultural Revolution) and in the USA where his teachers included Bernstein, George Perle, Hugo Weisgall and Chou Wen-chung. With poetic beauty and originality each of the three movements explored textural contrasts and unusual sonorities; in the first, eerie doublings of violin and clarinet within a modal melody, contrasted by incisive pizzicati and piano staccato. A sense of distant echo, in the second movement's two-octave doubling of violin and clarinet, led to the dance itself, a *tour de force* of swirling energy, with off-beat outbursts, percussive tapping of the violin belly and piano lid, unexpected metric shifts, and scurrying scales in the exuberant final flourish. Throughout the concert the Verdehr were in tip-top shape, the pianist Silvia Roeder's precision and colour keenly blending and interacting with the always alert attack of the violinist Walter Verdehr and the phenomenal dexterity and tonal beauty of Elsa Ludewig-Verdehr's clarinet, whose virtuosity was further displayed in the delightful encore, a jazz standard from Gershwin's *Shall We Dance*.

Malcolm Miller

London, The Warehouse: BMIC 'Cutting Edge' concerts

Acclaimed in The Independent as 'the best thing to happen to the new music scene in ages', the BMIC's 'Cutting Edge' avant-garde concert series returned to The Warehouse for its seventh successive year in Autumn 2005.

Although familiar with the invaluable work of the BMIC in promoting new music, when I trekked through the sidestreets beyond Blackfriar's Bridge to the Warehouse for their Cutting Edge concert on 3 November this was a totally new experience. Even the simple cloth awning blowing in the wind to mark the converted building's entrance conveys its experimental, radical character even before one enters the surprisingly warm and welcoming interior .

Trio Fibonacci's playing of the opening of Michael Finnissy's *Independence Quadrilles* hit the space with tumultuous impact, something of a cold shower cultural shock with each player (to quote the composer's notes) 'liberated from vertical co-ordination' both melodically and rhythmically. However this was deftly followed by a whimsical cello solo, then strange sounds of a 'duet' for violin and cello, a fourth section for the whole trio, with an impressionistic piano solo finale, enhanced with finely managed pedal effects that left soothing sounds wafting enigmatically on the air and hovering in the ear, long after the last notes were depressed by pianist Andre Ristic. Finnissy confirmed after the concert that the lyrical cello solo was based on Celtic folksong, but specially invented for the piece, and that the same material, but 'layered', was used for the piano finale. He agreed with me that although 'liberated from vertical co-ordination' the players interacted as well, particularly rhythmically – 'This is because they listened to each other', said Finnissy. The work is an interesting example of the dance form of the Quadrille, traditionally in five sections using airs based on folk tunes or other popular material but here given a totally modern treatment.[4]

Having had my appetite for truly 'cutting edge' ideas duly whetted, I thought I was all the more ready to face the brutal onslaught of Laurie Radford's world première of *Pourriez- vous etre le couteau dans ma vie?* As the composer writes: 'The rapiers of bow and string shred one reality and offer us another, plead and demand, heal and destroy, with both sound and silence'. Well all this happened rather too incisively for me, so I'll move on.

Yes, in an experimental space like the Warehouse not everything will instantly appeal but returning on 10 November I found it all definitely did. In terms of sheer topicality and relevance to the all too often artificial world of the performer I cannot praise too highly Ian Pace's revised version (billed by BMIC as a 'world première') of his satirical … *quasi una fantasmagoria Op 120 no 2*… which uses words in a double narrative, satirically, against a background of distant and distorted fragments of Brahms's E flat Clarinet Sonata (played on stage by the composer's colleague – clarinettist Carl Rosman, with pianist Mark Knoop). This works! Useless directives by domineering teachers and coaches to our solo performing clarinettist, such as 'eyes closed together, nose held high, show them I'm a man!', must strike a chord with teachers and performers alike. The other underlying, suitably melodramatic narrative,ending in implied suicide in prison for the hero, also has much resonance in this must-hear piece.

[4] See the performance of this piece on the newly released CD 'Trio Fibonacci' (NMC D107). Website www.nmcrec.co.uk.

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Michael Finnissy's *Recent Britain*, written in 1997, at the outset of the Blairite regime, though not consciously necessarily directly interconnected in the composer's mind 'at the outset', when performed in its revised version has acquired special topical relevance today, at least in the mind of the listener. What the composer's pianist, Ian Pace, describes in the programme notes as 'some type of lost English lyrical idiom gradually disintegrating through desynchronization, introduction of microtones, increasing amounts of spoken text – on tape as well as live' was all well realised by piano, with speaking pianist, clarinet and tape in a truly horrifically chilling cacophony of sound, punctuated with chillingly mundane meaningless politico–speak. This was appropriately billed as one of Finnissy's 'bleakest pieces yet'.

Jill Barlow

Wigmore Hall: William L. Reed's Piano Trio

William Leonard Reed (1910–2002) was barely a name to me before I saw the announcement of this Wigmore Hall concert, billed as 'A Celebration' of his life and music, on 27 November 2005. So Stephen Lloyd's introductory lecture on Reed was especially helpful, and I'll summarize its main points briefly.

Born in South London, Reed attended Dulwich College and then Jesus College, Oxford, where in his last term he entered a violin sonata in a composing competition; to his surprise he won it and decided to follow Hugh Allen's advice to go to the Royal College. There he spent 'two wonderful years' sitting at the feet of Herbert Howells; Constant Lambert gave him conducting lessons. Reed's compositional output began in earnest in the mid-1930s, with an *Homage to Delius* (1934) for string sextet; two Cobbett-inspired *Fantasy-Quartets*, one for piano quartet, the other for string quartet, soon followed. His orchestral works, generally on the lighter side, began with a *Recitative and Dance* (1932), which was conducted by Malcolm Sargent, and a Scherzo (1938) which enjoyed an outing at the Proms; a *Mountain House Suite* (1949) was aired on the Suisse Romande radio. A fine pianist himself, Reed wrote a number of works for his instrument, including a *Concert Suite* and *Concert Waltz* (1947); Lloyd played an extract from a recording of the *Three Surrey Impressions* for piano duo (1935), rich with autumnal atmosphere. An early member of the Oxford Group (which became Moral Re-

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Armament), Lloyd spent much of his later career writing for its musicals, including *The Good Road* (1947), *The Crowning Experience* (1957), *Annie* (1967), *High Diplomacy* (1969) and *The Vanishing Island* (1978). One of his numerous anthologies, *National Anthems of the World*, keeps his name in print.

The centre-point of this concert, nestled in a well-chosen mix of works by Rachmaninov, Elgar, Delius, Grainger and Mendelssohn, was the first public performance of Reed's Piano Trio in A minor, op. 27, composed in 1941–43, when Reed was working as a fire-fighter (notice that we aren't allowed to say 'fireman' any more these days) in the London Auxiliary Fire Service. The Delian tribute and Cobbett entries in Reed's worklist suggested an affinity with the worlds of Delius and Ireland before I had heard a note of the Trio, which is cast in a single, 21-minute span in three sections, linked also motivically; the music itself made the stylistic obligations instantly explicit. The work opens, *Allegro moderato*, with cello and violin recitatives over swirling piano figurations, very much in the idiom of the broodier Ireland and the ecstatic Bridge; the influence of his teacher, Howells, is also readily heard. Hints of darkness in the harmony are countered by a folky, hesitantly buoyant second subject. Passionate and rhapsodical, the music rises to its first climax after some five minutes and then subsides for a reflexive piano interlude, introducing the *Adagio non troppo* central section.

Here the cello takes up the melody, confessing an achingly English nostalgia *à la* Delius which is developed into an extended lyrical discussion and it, too, swells to a climax, less emphatic this time, where it broadens – a point at which Reed seemed to share not just a sound-world with Delius but also a tendency to dwell too long on the material to hand. This second panel ends in rapt contemplation. The closing *Animato* is tougher in language, the material harder-driven, the higher temperature making explicit what had been less obvious earlier on: the absolute fluency of Reed's instrumental writing and his excellent judgement of balance. Rhythmic repetition builds up a powerful head of steam, its onward rush cut off when the lyrical earlier material returns. Suddenly the mood turns to happy-go-lucky jollity – but the piano starts up a tramping rhythm to keep the music moving forward: it is slightly too early to relax. A Celtic spring then enters the rhythms, setting the Trio barnstorming to its passionate conclusion.

Although Reed's Piano Trio is unarguably derivative, there's enough substance to the music – never mind the sheer professionalism of the writing – for it to be astonishing that it should get its first performance only in a 1990 broadcast and its first concert outing only now. Reed's 1951 *Rhapsody on Christmas Carols*, op. 45, confirmed the expertise of his writing; in an encore, an arrangement of 'Mending Things', from *Annie*, Dvořák met Noel Coward.

The pianist, Penelope Thwaites, has a reputation as a specialist in Grainger, about whom she learned, it turns out, from William Reed; her committed playing signalled the size of the debt she was discharging. Dima Tkachenko (violin) and Marie Macleod (cello) were equally ardent partners.

A small voice, perhaps, but one which has things to say nonetheless and which deserves to be heard.

Martin Anderson

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