
FIRST PERFORMANCES

Los Angeles, Walt Disney Concert Hall: John Adams's 'The Gospel According to the Other Mary'

John Adams has never been a composer to shy away from major events or lofty ideals in his stage works and tackling what many would consider to be the most important story in Western civilization is no small feat. As admitted by the composer himself in the pre-concert lecture before the première on 31 May, the historical pressure was palpable as he worked every day for 18 months straight and ended up surpassing the 90-minute original commission with a score of 135 minutes: a full-scale oratorio to a libretto compiled by Peter Sellars. In spite of the enormity of this artistic task, through *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, Mr. Adams has managed to approach an immense subject with poise, humanity, and a surprising degree of contemporary relevance.

While retaining the narrative of the Passion of Jesus, Adams and Sellars dispense with the traditional point of view from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and instead focus their attention on one of the Bible's most contentious subjects. The 'other Mary' refers to Mary Magdalene and she becomes the central figure of the entire work; we see the story squarely from her perspective. While ostensibly recounting the revival of Lazarus and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Sellars frequently juxtaposes the standard Biblical texts with modern poetry from Dorothy Day, Louise Erdrich, Rosario Castellanos, Primo Levi, Hildegard von Bingen, and Rubén Dario. It is this conscious choice among eclectic and combined sources for the libretto, a feature also used in the earlier Adams-Sellars oratorio *El Niño*, that serves as a device for creating a story that takes place in what Sellars termed the 'eternal present'. Throughout the work, we jump back and forth from the old to the new as Mary punctuates and takes on the form of both a feminist and a victim.

Through this unique perspective, Adams and Sellars have created a remarkably contemporary dramatic vision of one of the most archetypal stories in Western civilization that is informed by a decidedly modern sense of social activism. In perhaps one of the most startling openings to an oratorio, Mary Magdalene has been jailed and she sits in her prison cell next to a heroin addict

suffering from withdrawal symptoms: 'In the cell next to mine./ there was a drug addict/ who beat her head against the bars/ or against the metal walls of her cell/ and howled like a wild animal'. The second act begins with a similarly atypical depiction of Jesus as the violent revolutionary that tears himself from the cross, chops it down, and as Sellars vividly describes, '...blazing with the phosphorescent colors of the New World, demolishes all hierarchies'. It is a work clearly designed to challenge our preconceptions.

The music itself shows Adams at his most daring and fascinating, and while many may have attended the world première of *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* expecting a simple rehashing of the tone and perspective set forth in *El Niño*, what they actually heard was something vastly different. While retaining some of his most iconic musical gestures, Adams deftly moves between an earlier voice and newer territories that show a surprising degree of evolution and development from his earliest large-scale works such as *Harmonium* and *Harmonielehre*.

Gone is most of the earlier throbbing and churning of minimalism's influence on Adams; in its place is what could be considered a highly dissonant and complex rhythmic style that feels unhinged from standard metrical restraints. Syncopations on top of syncopations and harmonies on top of harmonies all coalesce into a rich, highly variable, and ultimately dramatic stage work. The orchestra itself remains moderate in size, with a slimmed-down wind section and an expanded percussion palette that seems to provide a never-ending tapestry of colors. The centerpiece of this expanded percussion section undoubtedly lies with the prominent cimbalom part that constantly weaves in and around the orchestra to provide an exotic and decidedly Eastern tinge to the Biblical narrative.

The musical and textual language is complex and, whereas the juxtaposition of the old and the new in *El Niño* was used to create a sort of hyperactive postmodern celebration, the overriding sense given to *The Other Mary* is that of a dark and sobering reality. While this tone is not necessarily something that should be viewed as a negative, it may be the reason why a noticeable portion of the audience was absent after the intermission. Particularly during the pre-concert lecture, both

Adams and Sellars made comparisons between the two works and by constantly linking them together as sibling pieces may have invited unnecessary rushes to judgment from audience members. The work was also not premiered in its finished state. There were moments of highly dramaturgical orchestral writing by Adams that sadly went unnoticed or were hampered by the absence of staging. Thankfully, this was a small issue that will no doubt be rectified in the coming staged performances in 2013.

In spite of the lack of a full staging at the première, the dramatic thrust and subtlety of the score for the soloists was still apparent. Kelley O'Connor breathed life into the restless and sometimes manic character of Mary. Tamara Mumford did an exceptional job portraying the dutiful and more emotionally stable Martha. Russell Thomas was particularly striking as Lazarus for providing an exceptionally wide range of emotional depth, the clearest moment of which was demonstrated by his profoundly moving Passover aria. The three countertenors Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings, and Nathan Medley were the three truly angelic voices that brought both the narrative and the divine character of Jesus to life.

It is a true testament to the abilities of Los Angeles Philharmonic's players that they were able to work through such an incredibly difficult score with such a short amount of time to prepare. With less than a week before the first performance, and coming off of a major production of *Don Giovanni*, the orchestra was understandably taxed. In spite of this, the players pulled off a première performance that was crisp, edgy, and exciting. The Master Chorale also appeared to be both well rehearsed and genuinely excited to be tackling the highly demanding work. Gustavo Dudamel's enthusiasm for the score was apparent throughout the evening, but his principal focus did seem to be more on keeping the orchestra together rather than providing a real interpretation of the work. That will come with time, but the future appears bright for this new Passion-oratorio by Adams, particularly when considering that we have yet to even see the full dramaturgical power unleashed by a full staging.

Michael Palmese

London, Royal Opera House: Judith Weir's 'Miss Fortune'

Judith Weir deconstructed the piano concerto in her diverting work of that name and she has some fun mocking the conventions of grand opera in her

sixth and latest essay in the form, which received its UK première at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on 12 March 2012. *Miss Fortune* takes after Weir's previous operas *The Vanishing Bridegroom* (1990) and *Blond Eckbert* (1993) in using a folk tale as its starting point. There is a further link to *Blond Eckbert* and what remains arguably the composer's greatest work for the stage, *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987) in the idea of life as a journey of discovery; this is a key theme of *Miss Fortune*, which also explores the balance between people's capacity to make choices and the role that simple chance or accident can play in determining our lives.

A co-production by Covent Garden and the Bregenz Festival, where the work was premiered in the summer of 2011, *Miss Fortune* consists of two concise acts lasting around 55 and 35 minutes, respectively, and is based on a Sicilian folk tale. We are introduced to the main protagonist, Tina Fortune (soprano Emma Bell), at the home of her wealthy parents (bass-baritone Alan Ewing and mezzo-soprano Kathryn Harries). They are suddenly reduced to poverty by a financial disaster engineered by an ever-present Fate (counter-tenor Andrew Watts). Forced to earn a living, Tina has an adverse effect upon the luck of people she encounters: her co-factory workers and kebab van owner Hassan (tenor Noah Stuart). At the suggestion of worldly-wise laundrette proprietor Donna (mezzo-soprano Anne Marie Owens), Miss Fortune eventually confronts Fate and assumes control of her own destiny, which afterwards takes a promising turn. After giving away her lottery winnings, Tina embarks on a new life with assured, rich businessman Simon (baritone Jacques Imbrailo). There would appear to be every prospect of a happy future for Miss Fortune as Fate ominously turns his attention to the audience.

As in so many of her previous stage works, Weir wrote her own libretto, updating the 19th-century tale to the present day. As well as telling the story of Tina, who discovers how difficult life can be without the prop of money, this topical parable also considers the disparity between rich and poor. Another element is that of Fate, a character who turns up in every scene and frequently mirrors Miss Fortune's vocal lines, as if he might actually be her subconscious.

There was plenty to admire in this production. Firstly, the excellent ensemble cast, who delivered their fluently lyrical, though not always sufficiently distinctive, vocal lines admirably. Among them, Emma Bell and Noah Stuart were particularly fine. Andrew Watts deserves praise too for his attempts to flesh out the complex role of Fate. His shadowing of Tina physically and vocally

was effective, notably in their extended duet at the start of Act Two, suggesting that one was a reflection of, or even related to, the other. Weir's conception of the role as a counter-tenor akin to Oberon in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was much more original and striking than casting the part as a thunderous bass in the manner of the Commendatore from *Don Giovanni*. The members of the ROH chorus were also a strong asset, demonstrating great flexibility as they switched from portraying moneyed lounge-lizards to sweatshop workers to victims of a Stock Market crash.

Adroit allusions to staples of the operatic repertoire and some guying of its conventions gave pleasure. For example, the episode in the factory with its multifarious mobile workbenches was strongly reminiscent of the 'Spinning' chorus from the second Act of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and the scene where Hassan sings a poetic aubade perched atop his kebab van briefly achieved that typical Weir quality that combines the gently mocking with the genuinely poignant – in other words, humanity – which tended to get lost amid the more hectic and visually spectacular set pieces.

Among such bizarre stunts as the winching up of Lord and Lady Fortune into an overhead helicopter, when a simple exit stage left would have sufficed, director Chen Shi-Zeng provided some imaginative touches. Of these, the most striking was the inclusion of a couple of energetic routines from breakdancers 'Soul Mavericks', playing the part of Fate's minions. Also, the monolithic, geometrically-configured set designs by Tom Pye were most effectively lit.

However, I found that the real strength, or foundation, of this production lay in the pit. Weir's frequently bewitching orchestral writing made the most of her reduced but carefully selected forces (including three clarinets and bass clarinet but only one oboe, bassoon and contrabassoon, three trombones, modest percussion and piano). It was a fascinating melting pot of dark, Wagnerian Romanticism with some of Bernstein and Gershwin's rhythmic potency thrown in; yet every bar of the score was quintessential Weir, such is the power of her naturally eclectic idiom to absorb and grow from her sources. Credit must go to conductor Paul Daniel, who fastidiously brought out the fantastical elements latent in the score, using its dramatic potency, frequently welling up out of murky depths in low registers, to lend weight and shading to the two-dimen-

sional figures onstage. The Royal Opera House Orchestra captured Weir's highly individual idiom perfectly and, such was the composer's customary transparency of texture and meticulous blending of sonorities, that their contribution was one of the dominant and abiding pleasures of the evening.

Weir's is a subtle sensibility, arriving at sometimes uncomfortable truths through the power of suggestion and a rare gift for comedy. Several of her most effective works are for reduced forces where her razor-sharp vision can really skewer its targets – the *reductio ad absurdum*, literally, of this being her early 'epic' *King Harald's Saga* (1979), where a solo soprano enacts all the characters of the ten-minute, three-act opera, including, memorably, the entire Norwegian army. There were frustratingly few opportunities for the biting wit of that early masterpiece, or the cutting humour of *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, in Weir's latest stage-work. A promising opening exchange between Miss Fortune and her father, where she is avidly reading her horoscope and makes a pronouncement about Taurus the Bull (to which he retorts, 'It's all bull') was not followed up by any real attempt at humour until the final scene, where Simon sings an ardent aria in praise of his well-laundered shirt. This is vintage Weir drollery, but it comes perilously late in the proceedings. And it is typical of the slightly unfocussed nature of the libretto that it presented us with a kebab van, closely followed by a character called Donna: there's a punch-line in there somewhere, but it never materializes.

To sum up, the core of Judith Weir's latest dramatic work resided in the often very beautiful orchestral writing, from which a viable suite could conceivably be derived, since the orchestral passages, which reflect and indeed colour the unfolding events, are spread evenly throughout its seven scenes, a highlight being the piquant tiny prelude to the second Act. Perhaps a plainer staging in a more intimate venue than the Royal Opera House, whose plush opulence seemed frankly at odds with a theme of learning lessons from poverty, would have focussed attention on the music and on the basic simplicity of the underlying narrative. That could better have brought out its inherent dramatic strengths and charged it with the urban grittiness which, very occasionally, appeared to be trying to kick its way through the chic of this incongruously extravagant production.

Paul Conway

London, Coliseum: Detlev Glanert's 'Caligula'

When I reviewed Oehms Classics' 2-disc release taken from the Frankfurt première production of Glanert's *Caligula* (cf *Tempo* 254 for a discussion of the plot and opera in general), I signed off by calling it 'perhaps the finest German opera of the 21st Century [thus far]'. Given its wide critical acclaim and the number of productions it has received in Germany so far its arrival at English National Opera in a translation by Amanda Holden, directed by Benedict Andrews (of *The Wars of the Roses* fame), was bound to be an event. So it turned out on the night. Andrews's modern-day staging is set in a section of a sports stadium, a potent symbol in this Olympic year of the public, theatrical nature of power and the wielding of it. The rows of empty seats were symbolic, too: not least of Caligula's isolation, since they were populated only sporadically, either by the emperor's fawning, gold-flag-waving supporters, by his victims or semi-mythological figures from his fevered dreams.

Most potent of all was the mute figure of Drusilla – an interpolation by Andrews as there is no part for her character indicated in Glanert's score – whose absence haunts the action of the opera: it is her death before the curtain rises (greeted by the raw scream of despair at the outset) that is the catalyst for Caligula's accelerating madness. Her physical presence onstage – more tangible than, say, Banquo's in *Macbeth* – literally in Act 2, as Caligula absent-mindedly caresses her hair (a gesture reciprocated in Act 3) – dominated the background, giving form to the cause of the emperor's increasingly erratic behaviour. This may, perhaps, be more Suetonius than Camus, but the device was effective. (A word of praise here for Zoë Hunn, whose carefully choreographed part required her to be onstage – utterly naked – for almost the entire opera, traversing most of the set with delicately inexorable tread, painted head-to-toe in gold glitter for the whole of Acts 3–4.) In contrast to Drusilla, the fine choral contribution is relatively small and often unseen, yet just as crucial in mirroring the psychological frailty and decomposition of the emperor's mind. The chorus's long, largely unaccompanied passage in Act 4 was polished and in many ways the musical climax on which the opera's action pivots, setting up the final scene.

Musically, this was a strong production, centred on Peter Coleman-Wright in the demanding title role, vocally rivalling Ashley Holland in the première production. True, both Coleman-Wright and Yvonne Howard as the calculatedly support-

ive empress, Caesonia, are a touch older than the historical figures (Caligula was dead by 30, his wife – it is thought some 3–4 years older – was killed on the same day) but in truth these are ageless roles: in Camus and Glanert, Caligula stands as a model of the modern tyrant, Caesonia that of his unquestioning partner: they could be portrayed equally validly as, say, Hitler and Eva Braun, the Ceausescus or the Assads. Both Coleman-Wright and Howard sang powerfully, neither swamped at all by Glanert's at times full scoring. Counter-tenor Christopher Ainslie (one of several artists making their ENO debut) was excellent as the subtly corrupt, querulous slave Helicon while the conspiratorial quartet of Pavlo Hunka (Cherea; in Suetonius and Graves mocked for his high-pitched voice but here a hefty bass-baritone), Carolyn Dobbin (in the cross-dressing role as Scipio; Dobbin made a fine Hannah in Weinberg's *The Passenger* last year), Brian Galliford (Mucius, taken off to execution in Act 2 for offering his life in exchange for the emperor's) and Eddie Ware (in the double-senatorial role of Mereia in Act 1 – graphically poisoned onstage – and Lepidus in Act 2) quailed and fulminated as Caligula's primary audience. They are all, though, mirrors of the emperor's cruelty, with little substance or purpose beyond their victimization by and abject fear of Caligula himself, none more so than Mucius's sharp-tongued wife Livia (the excellent Julia Sporsén, who will in September take the title role in ENO's *Julietta*), abused onstage and dragged off to be raped by Caligula while her husband raises nothing but a wine goblet. They do not even get to eliminate the emperor: that is eventually done by a rioting mob.

There are some fine set-pieces in the production: the banquet at Mucius's where Mereia is murdered and Livia violated; the bizarre cabaret of Caligula's translation into the goddess Venus; and the second orchestral interlude, *Caligula Dances*, with the whole ensemble dancing a Tiller-Girl-like routine which slowly disintegrates. Yet it is the restraint of the dénouement that is one of the most powerful features: as Caesonia allows herself to be strangled in almost near-silence by her husband as proof of her love for him (vainly, as it turns out, as he insanely views her death as proof rather of her betrayal of him). Despite the murders, blood and violations, there are comic, surreal and satiric touches a-plenty, mostly incidental to be sure but nodding in the direction of some recent studies suggesting that some of Caligula's actions – most notably the promotion of his horse Incitatus to senator and consul (an episode omitted here) – were satirical in themselves of the Roman elite's crassly fawning attitude to

those wearing the purple.¹ Finally, praise must go to Ryan Wigglesworth for his tight direction of the excellent, well-drilled ENO Orchestra, who in my view edge the Frankfurt Opera and Museum Orchestra under Markus Stenz. Would that this might join the series of 'Opera in English' (another contender would be that wonderful production with Thomas Allen and Graham Clark of Busoni's *Doktor Faust* in Anthony Beaumont's completion) – what about it, ENO and Chandos?

Guy Rickards

London, Barbican Theatre: Glass's 'Einstein on the Beach'

Einstein on the Beach was first seen in its entirety at the Avignon Festival in 1976, and its two outings at New York's Metropolitan Opera later that year have become legendary. Yet the London performances that opened on 4 May – part of a world tour of the latest of several revivals during the intervening 36 years – were the first ever in the UK. A scandalous situation, in my view, since this four-hour *tour-de-force* is now claimed by historians and theorists of theatre, performance art and the visual arts, as well as those of music, as a seminal work.

Conceptually and physically challenging to its audiences, as well as stretching its many performers in a variety of ways, *Einstein* has the power to confuse and to compel, often at the same time. The opera's notional subject, Albert Einstein, features prominently; not, though, as a singer but as a violinist, dressed as in a familiar photograph of him (the famous scientist was a keen amateur violin player) and appearing on a raised podium in the pit, never actually on stage. Images that reference Einstein's discovery of relativity and the experiments associated with it are fairly frequent: a train, a staple reference point in accounts of relativity; the representation of a solar eclipse involving a handless clock; and, most obviously, the gantry, exploding with flashing lights, into which the members of the Philip Glass Ensemble finally clamber, that represents a 'Spaceship' involved in an atomic explosion.

The opera's other assorted solo roles on stage are, however, entirely spoken, not sung. These include two judges (one a child) and other personnel of a twice-featured trial in which the defendant is eventually revealed as the 1970s heiress turned

terrorist, Patricia Hearst. Much of what we see both on stage and in the pit involves an ensemble of singers who chant only numbers and *solfege* syllables, and a dance troupe that takes over two complete scenes. Then there are the five so-called 'Knee Plays': the prelude, interludes and postlude around the four acts, played out on a separate small stage placed front right.

Both on stage and in the pit, *Einstein* was uncommonly well served by the performers gathered for this revival. Spoken roles – Helga Davis, Kate Moran and Charles Williams among those most prominent and versatile – were taken with just the right balance between involvement and psychological distance that Wilson demands. Lucinda Childs emerged from retirement especially to recreate her choreography, dating from the 1984 revival, which her own company danced splendidly here.

It was also good to hear Glass's score so magnificently sung and played under Michael Riesman's unflappable direction. Antoine Silverman did sterling work with the exposed demands of his role as Einstein himself; Hai-Ting Chin floated the heart-achingly beautiful vocalise that precedes 'Spaceship' to ravishing effect; and Andrew Sterman's improvised jazz solo on tenor saxophone blew its audiences away.

Some of the critical reception to these London performances of *Einstein* homed in gloomily on how much the opera has supposedly dated. Wilson's stage effects could these days, of course, be reworked to much more slick effect by digital means. But, for me, Glass and Wilson's cunningly contrived extravaganza continues to work its enthralling theatrical magic, not least in creating a vividly shaped and in the end powerfully cumulative experience out of material that has too often been portrayed as merely an undramatic sequence of images.

Einstein on the Beach, then, still proves to be an alluring show: simultaneously spectacular and intricately detailed; sometimes funny, but at least as often actually rather sad, as it transmutes what could be merely sentimental into something altogether more sophisticated; occasionally boring, yes, but, much more often, powerfully engrossing. Many in the capacity audiences at the Barbican – surprisingly few of whom took any break during these long evenings, with the exception of the interval on opening night enforced by technical hitches – seemed to agree.

Keith Potter

¹ See Mary Beard, 'It was satire', reviewing Aloys Winterling's *Caligula: A Biography* (*London Review of Books*, 26 April 2012).

Birmingham, Symphony Hall: Jonathan Harvey's 'Weltethos'

In his autobiography, Michael Tippett described his most ambitious late composition, *The Mask of Time* (1980–82), as 'a summatory piece concerned, on the one hand, with the transcendental and, on the other, with the survival of individuals'. Jonathan Harvey's *Weltethos* invites a similar description: but it is also the result of a commission that excluded the heterogeneous and predominantly secular topics that prepare for Tippett's 'final surge of affirmatory singing'. Harvey's six-movement, 85-minute work for speaker, mixed chorus, children's chorus and orchestra, employs a text assembled by the theologian Hans Küng, and offered by him to the Berlin Philharmonic with the request that they find 'a suitable composer'.

Hans Küng became well-known for his difficult relationship with the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and since 1995 he has led the Stiftung Weltethos or Global Ethical Foundation which, in the interests of world peace, aspires to identify and promote common ground between various philosophies and religions. His 'libretto' therefore amounts to summarizing accounts of, in turn, Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, which are all shown to share the ideal of respecting the humanity of others as one respects it in oneself. As Harvey summarized the challenge before him, 'these extraordinary texts are so different to anything I have set before. Rather than being poetic or mystical they are pragmatic, noble and ethical. The purpose has become social rather than aesthetic'. To this extent, we might expect *Weltethos* to be at the opposite extreme from an electro-acoustically elaborate score like *Speakings* (2007–8), in which the intricate interaction between speech and sound does not involve the kind of spoken statements on which Hans Küng's text depends.

All the same, the music could hardly be completely different from anything Harvey has written before – after all, the stark contrasts between spoken and sung materials are fundamental to the recent opera *Wagner Dream*: and the most striking aspect of *Weltethos*, given its UK première on 21 June, is the energy and forcefulness of its way with ritual, the immediacy and distinctiveness of the utterances given to its human performers. Polite Anglican pieties are not on offer, and the percussion-and-brass-dominated orchestration (including both organ and cimbalom) underpins the widest possible range of generic allusions, from the recurring (though well varied) refrain for the chanting children's choir to textures for the main chorus that move from whispered traces

of sound by way of chorale-like homophony to ecstatic, post-Messiaen arches of melody.

There are no solo singers, but the spoken homilies were delivered with a welcome lack of sententiousness by actor Samuel West. With such a role, there is a clear risk of the work acquiring a sermonizing dimension: but by having the declamation musically accompanied, Harvey ensures that the ethical message is conveyed in a manner which – even if 'social rather than aesthetic' – stops well short of suggesting the finger-wagging lecturing of sinners by a priest. Nevertheless, in the end the aesthetic cannot be entirely denied, and the concluding celebration of human love suggests more of an affinity with the profoundly nostalgic nature mysticism that ends Mahler's *Song of the Earth* than with the hectic ebullience of a Schillerian *Ode to Joy* or a Nietzschean *Mass of Life*.

The moral might seem to be that for 21st-century music to hymn the virtues of partnership, reconciliation, freedom, justice and truth as unambiguously and affirmatively as the *Weltethos* text requires, it must perforce call modernism into question, if not reject it. On the other hand, given Harvey's view of spectralism as 'a great leap forward towards finding a new grammar based on nature' that does not exclude the 'rebirth of the triad', it is possible to envisage an entirely positive relationship between the most radical of his works undertaken at IRCAM since 2000 – not just *Speakings* and *Wagner Dream*, but also the Fourth String Quartet – and the ethical discourses of *Weltethos*.

The piece was first heard in Berlin under Sir Simon Rattle on 13 October 2011, and Simon Halsey, the chorus director for that première, laid the best possible foundations for the Birmingham performance: his committed and expert training paid off in the confident contributions from the CBSO Chorus, Youth Chorus and Children's Choir, the last – and despite some undoubtedly awkward aspects to the English text – most directly representing the human yearning of individuals to survive, with feelings and thoughts that inevitably stand at an acute angle to grander images of transcendence and spiritual uplift. No less arresting – and not least in the way the music's magnificently raw textures were conveyed with maximum weight and colour – was the contribution of the CBSO itself under Edward Gardner, with Michael Seal as second conductor.

It was good to see that, on a night when national media interest was focused on Gustavo Dudamel's contribution to the cultural Olympiad at Stirling Castle, BBC Birmingham's late-night news bulletin showed a fragment from the Harvey per-

formance. Like the Dudamel concert, this was not an occasion for elitist insiders only, and Harvey's skill in ensuring accessibility without indulging in incongruous cross-over effects deserves all praise. This composer has never seemed more challengingly idealistic than in his claim that music can enable us to 'see through the delusions of conventional reality and experience liberation'. In multi-cultural, multi-faith Birmingham, on a June night, there was at least a hint of how such an ideal might be actualized.

Arnold Whittall

Huddersfield Town Hall: Arthur Butterworth's Seventh Symphony

Arthur Butterworth's First Symphony put him on the musical map when Sir John Barbirolli premièred it with the Hallé Orchestra at the 1957 Cheltenham Festival to great critical acclaim. Since then he has returned to the genre at key points throughout his creative life. Written as part of the Sibelius and Nielsen centenary celebrations of 1965, the Second Symphony was premièred by Sir Adrian Boult, whilst the overtly programmatic Third, subtitled *Sinfonia Borealis* (1979) and Fourth (1986) received their concert debuts in the hands of that great champion of British music, Bryden Thomson. The Fifth of 2003 marked something of a new departure for the composer: its notable concision and absorption with formal procedures at the expense of overt extra-musical considerations seemed to denote a 'back to basics' approach to which the austere, pared-back Sixth (2006), premièred in 2009 by the St Petersburg Capella Orchestra under Matthew Taylor, seemed a logical progression.

Continuing this path towards a tauter, more concentrated mode of expression, Butterworth's Seventh Symphony, premièred at Huddersfield Town Hall on 28 April 2012, is his first in the official canon to be conceived as a one-movement structure. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that his *Sinfonietta* of 1949, a work the composer has described as a 'dress rehearsal'² for his Symphony No. 1, is also written without movement breaks and has a serious claim to be regarded as a genuinely symphonic work. The diminutive epithet surely denotes brevity rather than any notion of 'light music': indeed, after one of the work's many broadcasts in the 1960s, the BBC received several

complaints that it was 'too difficult' from listeners evidently expecting something rather more immediately accessible.

The fact that the composer's op.140 turned out to be Symphony No. 7 came as something of a surprise, succeeding as it does a string of occasional and largely small-scale pieces. Begun in April 2010 and completed the following year, it is scored for double woodwind, four horns, three each of trumpets and trombones, timpani and strings. Noticeably absent are two instruments which figured prominently in Butterworth's early orchestral works, namely cor anglais and harp. In recent years, the composer's primary concern for creating logical, organically developing spans when working on a large scale has meant he is no longer interested in orchestral colour for its own sake, being content to rely on modest forces to achieve his objectives.

Symphony No. 7 develops as a gradually unfolding mono-thematic rondo, lasting around 20 minutes. However, the term 'rondo' is not applicable in its strictest formal meaning: although the symphony constantly reiterates its initial thematic motif, it does so in ever-changing, but none the less closely related figurations, in which subsequent statements create new shapes in both rhythmic and melodic outline.

The motif upon which the symphony is founded is a pattern of three notes – G# A# D, spanning the ambivalent tritone. The symphony takes advantage of the rootlessness of this figure by inverting it and making play of all its possibilities. Another particular feature of the symphony's design is that the tempo and its subsequent ebb and flow has something of the nature of the 'golden section', with the natural climax of the piece taking place slightly off-centre.

In many ways, Butterworth's Seventh is a summation of his symphonic achievements. There are echoes of his earlier contributions to the medium with its murmuring string passages in stepwise motion, brass calls and unshakable roots in Sibelius and Vaughan Williams's own symphonic legacy. However, some new elements were also detectable. Butterworth has provided an uncharacteristically high number of solos for various instruments, whilst also maintaining a logically developing design. Of these solos, perhaps the most arresting comes in a slow section near the end of the piece, where a trumpet, followed by horn, sounds distant, muted fanfares – a key episode, being assigned initially to an instrument of great personal significance to the composer (he played second trumpet with the Hallé Orchestra under Barbirolli from 1955 to 1961, among other professional engagements). The positive, *fortis-*

² *The Musical Times*, Vol. 101, No. 1405 (March 1960), p. 150.

simo ending was another surprise; no sense of valediction here, which makes one hope that Butterworth's symphonic journey is to be continued. Its freshness and sense of renewal made the Seventh a succinct reaffirmation of the composer's symphonic creed; thus, despite occupying such a comparatively late position in his oeuvre, it would make an excellent starting point for anyone as yet unfamiliar with his orchestral output.

There could scarcely be a more appropriate amateur orchestra than the Huddersfield Philharmonic to première a major new work by Arthur Butterworth. From 1964 to 1993 he was their chief conductor and, over the years, they have given many performances of his compositions, including the premières of *From the Four Winds*, for large orchestra and organ, op. 40 (1971), the Organ Concerto, op. 33 (1973) and *Mill Town*, op. 116 (2003). Their current principal conductor, Nicholas Smith, guided his players through an alert and responsive reading which brought the score to life, savouring its opportunities for telling solos, whilst keeping a grip on the overall sweep of the musical argument. Every section played with distinction, but the brass and timpani deserve special mention.

A professional première of this powerfully concentrated and finely wrought piece is awaited with the keenest anticipation. Butterworth's 90th birthday, which falls in 2013, provides an ideal opportunity not only for this event but also for a major retrospective and re-appraisal of an individual composer who has been a single-minded, resourceful and distinctive voice in British music for seven decades.

Paul Conway

Manchester University: John Casken's 'Inevitable Rifts'

In this 11 May concert Quatuor Danel began with the only quartet of the evening, Haydn's op. 50 no. 4 in F sharp. For the remainder of the programme they were joined by cellist Petr Prause (of the Talich Quartet) for Schubert's mighty Quintet in C D. 956 (which concluded the evening) and for John Casken's *Inevitable Rifts*, which concluded the first half. The work was originally commissioned by the Musiktage Mondsee Festival, Austria, for the Rosamunde Quartet and Heinrich Schiff who gave the first performance in 2009; this was the UK première. A useful programme-note by the composer identified that the work's title referred to the fact he had sought to exploit the high sounds available from the violins against the low sounds

available from the viola and cello. Marc Danel wryly commented that this grouping had been highlighted visually by the performers adopting the expedient of being shirted or jacketed!

The polarization of the two groups was easily discernible at the outset, however, purely in aural terms, the violins presenting high 'consonant' music, whilst the three lower instruments presented low 'dissonant' music. Casken stated that as rift can also mean chasm or valley, the separation was 'a deliberate evocation of this kind of landscape'. Overall this opening material was quiet and slow-moving, predominantly led by the melodious high group, with the dark, pulsating low group mainly providing punctuation. A series of repeated chords led to a brief integrated climax rounded off by a short break.

The next section was to some extent a reverse of the first, in that the lower group was the main focus of attention whilst the violins provided the accompaniment; the chief differences were the splitting of the lower group into a duet for cello (featuring some extremely high writing) with a viola countermelody, which framed a more extended climax. The tension abated in a third section, with a rocking figure providing an accompaniment for solos from each cello in turn.

A *tutti pizzicato* heralded a brief section in which a combined violin/viola tune was marked by a disquieting *tremolando sul pont.* from violin II. This formed a transition to a telescoped recapitulation/development in which the high sounds were now joined by viola, and led in turn to a vigorous interaction of all five instruments, the densely-packed invention creating a fraught, if gloomy, tension, which soon dissipated. A brief pause was followed by reflective music, and a brief recap, with the polarization of the start further breaking down into a flurry of individual lines petering out, to form a novel and highly effective conclusion to the work.

Tim Mottershead

Nottingham Playhouse: Stephen Williams's 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning'

Stephen Williams's classical music-theatre piece, which had its première on 8 May, inaugurated a series of events celebrating the work of the late Nottingham-born novelist and poet Alan Sillitoe. Based on Sillitoe's first novel, the piece was staged at the Nottingham Playhouse by Musicworks, a group providing constructive outlets for regional musicians as well as supporting dementia sufferers.

The novel of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was published in 1958 and quickly made into a film starring Albert Finney. That was the era of angry young men and kitchen-sink drama; both rock 'n' roll and the European Community had yet to have an impact in Britain. In adapting Sillitoe's work for the musical stage, a composer could easily content himself with pastiche. Williams – who studied composition at the University of Surrey and singing at the National Opera Studio – set out to write something more ambitious. With librettist Catherine Spoons he transcends the novel by giving powerful expression to three women in Arthur Seaton's world and to thoughts and feelings that the original anti-hero could barely articulate.

As with a canal scene in the first act, the finale to Act 2 of the musical demonstrates that Seaton is not incapable of reflection. In character the score has greater affinities with modern opera than with the London West End. Local colour and humour are constantly present, and the tunes surely owe something to vernacular speech-melody. That indigenous linguistic roots have been eroded down the years is suggested by the production's recourse to dialect coaching. Several scenes take place in a Nottingham pub. Three are set in the bicycle factory where Arthur works. The first of those scenes has him singing Sillitoe's motto-theme 'Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down' with a fellow-rebel. The last features an entertaining number for Seaton *père* with a parody quartet. In Williams's treatment the quartet is one of the musical's most fruitful devices. Three female singers and one male, representing Brenda, Winnie, Doreen and Arthur, supply linking narrative and comment on the action. Here the music does recall popular songs of the period, one of them in the style of a blues.

The adaptation is divided into the two acts that the title virtually dictates. Dramatically, the score derives much of its impetus from harmonic tension, coupled with frequent changes of pulse. With five factory hands carrying out different tasks, the activity on the Raleigh shop floor offers a *tour de force* of rhythmic complexity. In the shorter second act Arthur experiences a kind of epiphany as he recovers from a thrashing at the city's Goose Fair. In 'Falling', the last of a sequence of solo songs for Arthur, the orchestra gives vent to what Williams calls (a little grandly) a Mahlerian dread.

The composer conducted the seven performances. Whereas not a few famous musicals have been orchestrated by hired hands, the accompaniments in *Saturday Night* were conceived instrumentally from the outset. The ensemble of 11 players comprises reeds including saxophones, trumpet, French horn, drums, percussion includ-

ing vibraphone, keyboards, guitar and a string quartet. Now and then on the first night the players sounded over-exuberant at the singers' expense. But minor miscalculations can be rectified. A chamber-music-like underlay prevails; the penultimate number is headed 'slow and magical', and pellucid scoring renders it just that. 'Born in a World o' Sin' allows the orchestra a swing movement to themselves, twice reprised.

Abbi Snape's evocative single set on split levels – designed and built as a Nottingham Trent University project – assisted rapid changes of scene. Between booze and cigarettes, the Arthur Seaton of professional actor Tom Keeling cut a debonair swathe through the lives of female admirers. Among the ladies, the married Brenda had a mature interpreter in Kate Williams. Nicola Bilton (Winnie) showed manifest promise as a singing actress, as did teenager Amanda Bruce in the role of Doreen. Their Act 1 trio 'Best Silk Stockings' turned into a languorous show-stopper. Vocally, Stephen Godward, Simon Theobald and Mark Pollard (the parody Artie) also stood out. The large cast was enterprisingly marshalled by Sarah Warnsby, a stage director with equal regard for the words and the notes.

This version of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* frees Sillitoe's name from a literary cliché of gritty realism which never entirely befitted him. The novel's abortion scene was portrayed in a video projection, the Goose Fair violence in a similar manner. As a transforming influence, the worldly wisdom of Aunt Ada has been superseded by Doreen's naive compassion. Seaton the anarchist perceives life's potential ('A timeless space to make plans, to dream ...'). In its variety and richness the music that opens up such horizons demands wider exposure.

Peter Palmer

CBSO Centre, Birmingham: Tansy Davies, Sean Shepherd and Magnus Lindberg

'I'm getting old', Oliver Knussen muttered waggishly to the audience as he returned to the stage, having had to retrieve his glasses during his 60th birthday celebration concert at the CBSO Centre, Birmingham. He was directing members of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, of which he is currently Artistic Director, in a typically generous and wide-ranging programme that featured one first performance and two UK premières, as well as several examples of his own impeccable compositions.

Receiving its world première, Tansy Davies's

Nature was an alternately quirky and poetic single-movement concerto for piano solo and a small but tellingly utilized ensemble of ten players. A modest array of percussion, consisting of marimba, side drum, pedal bass drum, temple blocks, tom toms and tam-tam, was deployed with restraint by a single player, whilst the harpist was given striking prominence both in the score and on stage, positioned directly to the left of the soloist. Funky rhythmic figures, characteristically askew, drove frenetically ecstatic sections, whilst an unsettling, nervous tension permeated the quieter, more measured passages deftly woven into the texture.

Much of the piece is derived from a two-part invention, still audible in the right hand of the solo part at the start of the work. Davies chops and layers her material with precision and imagination. Rhythmically demanding and sumptuously scored, notably for marimba and flutter-tongued horn as well as harp, *Nature* is a technically accomplished and satisfying piece. Davies succeeded in attuning the venerable form of the piano concerto entirely to her own enjoyably idiosyncratic voice, with magical and delightfully unpredictable results.

Soloist Huw Watkins, whose skilful pianism inspired much of the fiendishly complex piano writing in the piece, rose to the occasion with precise and thoughtful playing. He was ably and responsively supported by Knussen and members of the BCMG. Tansy Davis's enchanting new concerto received a fastidiously executed, fiercely exciting launch.

The two works receiving their UK premières were both originally written for the New York Philharmonic's new music series. *These Particular Circumstances* by the young American composer Sean Shepherd was a punchy and invigorating concerto for chamber orchestra in seven inter-related sections, whose descriptive titles of 'Floating', 'Circling', 'Spinning', 'Grinding', 'Sinking', 'Teetering' and 'Soaring', chart the piece's 'up-down-up' progression. Unashamedly eclectic, to the extent of incorporating actual quotes from Holst and Ravel, Shepherd has created a hyperactively virtuosic piece for players and conductor alike. This fresh, bold series of vividly-etched character studies was thrillingly interpreted by Knussen and his forces, apparently relishing its many challenges.

The first UK performance of Magnus Lindberg's *Souvenir (in memoriam Gérard Grisey)* was a more thought-provoking experience, as

befitting a memorial work. Lindberg has stated that 'the orchestra is my favourite instrument', and his delight in writing for large ensembles clearly also applies to smaller groups. The brilliant sonorities on display in this dazzling triptych of movements denoted a composer with an acute ear for novel and resourceful combinations of instruments. Matching Lindberg's conception, Oliver Knussen delivered a reading that was immaculately shaped and articulated and at the same time freshly spontaneous. Though its surfaces were beguilingly glittering, the underlying gravitas of the piece – personified by a recurring pounding, piano-led idea reminiscent of the opening of Michael Tippett's Second Symphony – ensured its status as a major Chamber Symphony for the 21st century rather than a mere showpiece for ensemble.

Excellent performances of three of Knussen's own chamber works filled out a generous programme. He directed the BCMG in *Ophelia Dances, Book 1*, and this sharply defined and exquisitely detailed miniature, inspired by Shakespeare's description of Ophelia's madness, was a welcome reminder that even as far back as the mid-1970s, his pieces engaged in meaningful dialogues with composers he most admired, notably Ravel, whilst preserving his own very personal voice. Violinist Alexandra Wood joined Hugh Watkins in an intensely beautiful rendering of *Autumnal*, written in 1977 and dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Britten. These performers caught the wistful poetry of its two movements, named after Britten's two song-cycles *Nocturne* and *Serenade*. The most recent Knussen item, *Ophelia's Last Dance (Ophelia's Dances, Book 2)*, for piano solo, was completed in 2010. Poised and introspective, Huw Watkins conveyed the piece's wistfully nostalgic character with the utmost refinement and delicacy. This triptych of Knussen's works all showed his uncanny ability to create an entire world, teeming with incident and filled with poetic imagination, in a matter of minutes.

To sum up, the BCMG's Oliver Knussen 60th anniversary concert was a fitting tribute to a man who has done so much to promote the music of others and who remains a key figure in contemporary British musical life. His own body of work, though frustratingly small – *Ophelia's Last Dance* is his op.32 – is made up of painstakingly crafted gems and the three examples on display that evening shone very brightly indeed. This was music-making of the highest order.

Paul Conway

**Manchester University: Psappha, 4 premieres:
Friar, Garbett, McPherson, and Reich**

This well-attended 27 January concert, which featured English or world premières of four works written for sextet (flute and clarinet, violin and cello, piano and percussion), began with a short work by Sean Friar (b. 1985) entitled *Scale 9*. This referred not to some musical impetus but to the scale used by psychologists to measure mania, although a note that the piece was written in the euphoria of being relieved from exam pressures seemed more relevant. At the start, short flurries of notes were juxtaposed with silences; the flurries gradually being extended and the silences gradually replaced by sustained sounds. The immediate impression of a 'minimalist flavour' was reinforced as the piece developed, in that melodies tended to be repeated immediately. A brusquely curtailed rising flurry provided the amusing conclusion.

Next came '...on perceiving the enigma of perspective...' by Andrew Garbett (b.1980). A note revealed that the inspiration for the piece was the way in which visual artists (such as Escher and Hockney) toy with perspective. This visual experimentation was approximated in sound by the use of amplification (allowing for the emancipation of the inaudible) and the juxtaposition both of sound (using both 'experimental' and traditional playing techniques) and silence, activity and repose. All this made for a wide range of textures and sonorities from pleasant to nightmarish, yet the piece seemed too long at 16 minutes.

Gordon McPherson's piece, entitled *Stunt Doubles*, took the interesting idea of a stuntman doubling for leading Hollywood actor as an analogy for a live sextet doubling a recording of itself and vice versa. With MIDI trickery equating to trick cinematography, this held untold possibilities – including, as Paul Griffiths noted, that of hearing instruments 'doing things that are wildly unfeasible ... that may appear to be coming from the live players', or to put it more simply to create the impression where, in the words of Eric Morecambe, 'you can't see the join'. The first movement took the image of Yakima Canutt (doubling for John Wayne in his breakthrough role) leaping between horses in the 1939 film *Stagecoach*. The piece began with a series of joyous flourishes, perhaps a little Messiaen-like, building up an extremely busy texture, although I was somewhat sceptical of the claim that '...the galloping music seems to jump the gap between the real and virtual instruments, and jump back again'. However, whilst this effect was difficult to discern initially, by about 5–6 minutes in this seemed to be

exactly what was happening as a series of 'loops' and 'ostinati' appeared to ricochet off each other.

The second movement was based on the 'publicity stunt' of the 1972 *Cosmopolitan* photograph of Burt Reynolds 'in the buff ... with a decorously placed arm'. The over-arching style of this dance-like *intermezzo* seemed to be 'lounge jazz'. The finale took as its starting-point the motorbike vaulting the barbed-wire fence in the 1963 film *The Great Escape*. The piece began in martial fashion, with the snare drum doubling itself, to which a piccolo tattoo was first added, together with odd snatches of Elmer Bernstein's famous theme tune. As the theme is commonly played and sung at every Glasgow Rangers' match at Ibrox Stadium, and as McPherson is head of composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in the city, could this really have been a coincidence? The coda section of the piece featured the earlier melodic and rhythmic fragments following each other with extreme rapidity – almost like a chase – with the final recap-as-close 'disappearing act' represented by recorded music only. Perhaps this was intended to symbolize that the motorbike jump wasn't actually executed by film star Steve McQueen but by his stunt double Bud Ekins?

The interaction between 'live' and MIDI in this work was obviously of more than merely momentary interest or novelty value. (This was 'proven' in part by the composer holding the audience's attention for some 23 minutes.) Perhaps in future works McPherson will develop these techniques in conjunction with some form of visual presentation, which might allow the effects described to be more easily apprehended and consequently widen their appeal?

The final work of the concert featured the same ensemble (with percussionist Tim Williams now focussed exclusively on vibraphone) also playing against a recording of themselves in Steve Reich's *Double Sextet*. The opening quick movement began by, in Reich's phrase, 'interlocking' like pairs of instruments – ie. strings, winds, piano/vibes (and against their recorded counterparts). The comparisons with, and extensions of Reich's well-known 'phasing' techniques were obvious, and require no further comment. The overall effect was pleasant and seemed suggestive of either 'sunlight' and/or high speed travel (though with occasional slower passages). Nevertheless at more than eight minutes (and despite numerous comments in the programme alluding to Reich's 'greatness') this did seem much of a muchness. The slow second movement seemed in essence a wind/string 'chorale' supported by piano/vibes, while the final movement marked a return to the busy/fast world of the first, with the piano/vibes driving forward

the slower-moving music from the others. The periodic halts in the proceedings almost seemed like 'time checks', until eventually the ensemble as a whole finally succumbed to the momentum. The final section was busy, repetitive, and with energetic syncopated rhythms, ending suddenly, perhaps as there was nowhere else for it to go?

Tim Mottershead

London, Purcell Room: Reeves, Frances-Hoad, Powers

Two first performances and one London première were the focus of an enterprising and thoughtfully planned Purcell Room recital on 11 April by the Lawson Trio, consisting of pianist Annabelle Lawson, violist Fenella Humphreys and cellist Rebecca Knight. Each of the new works had been written especially for these accomplished young players.

Camden Reeves's first piano trio *Starlight Squid*³ has long been part of the Lawson Trio's core repertoire and the composer wished to write another for them. The result, entitled *The Dead Broke Blues Break (Piano Trio No.2)* is a tribute to Reeves's love of jazz and blues. Though every bar is original and there are no direct quotations from other sources, the spirits of musicians Thelonious Monk, Chick Corea, Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans are evoked. The enigmatic title derives from a conceit derived from retro technology: the players must create the impression that a stylus has been applied to twisted grooves in a warped and scratched jazz record; the needle starts to jump about, fragmenting the music as tunes are distorted and rhythms made erratic. About three-quarters of the way through the piece, as the needle reaches the strongest part of the vinyl, the music settles down in the form of an organic, uninterrupted wild cello solo, signifying the 'blues break' of the title. This extended cadenza-like episode with striking, bass-like *pizzicato* was negotiated with great skill by Rebecca Knight in its première performance and formed the highlight of an immensely challenging but thoroughly engaging and deeply personal take on an established genre which one hopes will join its predecessor as a staple of the Lawson Trio's repertoire.

They were joined by three members of the Junior Royal Academy of Music for the London première of Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *Five Rackets for*

Trio Relay for double piano trio. This was originally written in response to an Olympic commission and relates to the events of 2012 with considerable wit and imagination. There are five movements, each pitched at a different standard, and based on five or more different sports. Hence, the first movement evokes archery with quivering and plucked bows and swishing arrows, with a hint of curling in a brief central episode. Ping pong lies behind the second movement, whose amateur string parts are suitable for pre-Grade 1 standard executants: hence the string players only use open strings or randomly-placed notes, whilst the amateur piano part remains within a five-finger compass. To add to the fun, the two piano players move round the keyboard, swapping sides, as it were: much physical dexterity is required and Annabelle Lawson gamely removed her shoes before the start of this lively movement, the swifter to accomplish its proscribed shifts of position. In the final bars, three ping pong balls were let loose on the piano strings, a simple but ear-catching concluding gesture. Aimed at players of Grade 2–3 standard, the central movement, entitled 'Sailing', provided a moment of relaxation as it evoked glittering water in the wake of the boats; it was a clever example of Debussy pastiche, beautifully written for each player. After this calming interlude, we were pitched into the boxing ring, with the pianist simulating the bell going off to signal the various rounds with right and left hooks being landed. In the finale, the marathon, relay, sprint and walk all appear, initiated by a starting pistol followed by a false start and containing much heel-toe-heel-toe motion with several feats of baton-passing between the amateur and professional players. This last activity is a metaphor for the principle of passing on experience and knowledge which lies behind the score, inspired as it was by Frances-Hoad's formative experiences at the Menuhin School playing chamber music with visiting professional players.

Hitting all its diverse targets, *Five Rackets for Trio Relay* managed to be tremendous fun for players (both professional and amateur) and audience alike. Sounding newly minted in its fresh, diverting approach, it deserved, and duly received, a rousing reception.

Anthony Powers's oeuvre contains notable examples of such received forms as the symphony, concerto and string quartet; hence, it came as no surprise that his contribution to the evening, receiving its world première, was simply entitled 'Piano Trio'. However, there was an overtly programmatic element to its three inner movements, based as they were on three dark and disturbing folksongs. Powers's Piano Trio began

³ Recorded by the Chagall Trio in 2004 for a Campion Cameo release (2053).

life as a short piece, written in 2009 for young players at the request of the Lawson Trio, called 'Ghost', that in a case of intelligent programming, formed part of a richly diverse Chamber Music 2000 Showcase pre-concert event, played by students from Junior Guildhall. Powers realized that due to its brevity and introspection, 'Ghost' was unlikely to have a long life of its own (as an encore, for example), so he decided to slightly refashion it, adding further movements and making it part of a larger structure. Thus, two other folksong-inspired movements – 'Ratcliffe Highway' and 'The Trees they Grow so High' – joined 'Ghost', now retitled 'The Lover's Ghost', whilst the outer movements develop elements of their material. The folksong tunes themselves, taken from versions published by Vaughan Williams and A. L. Lloyd, are treated in an abstract way, providing fuel for the entire composition, not least in terms of their sombre and tragic character. A boisterous and dashing central scherzo contrasted with its predominantly lyrical neighbouring movements, while the outer sections contain the most abstract and closely-argued manifestations of the folk-inspired material.

A pensive and doleful utterance, Anthony Powers's Piano Trio offered penetrating musical challenges to the Lawson Trio, both in terms of structure and interpretation. The players reciprocated with a deeply-felt response, unfolding the score to full advantage. This triptych of premières constituted extremely worthwhile additions to the repertoire and they could hardly have been accorded more sensitive or polished treatment. But you don't have to take my word for this; the evening of the Lawson Trio's recital also saw the launch of a desirable new CD on the Prima Facie label featuring these players in all three works (PFCF 012).

Paul Conway

London, King's Place: Exaudi and New Zealand String Quartet

In presenting Exaudi's eclectic mix of new repertoire on 12 March at Kings Place, their versatile Director James Weeks proclaimed: 'I throw anything at them, strange repertoire. Composers write more and more impossible things for us'. Composer Christopher Fox added at the pre-concert talk: 'Exaudi tend to have more right notes than any other (contemporary ensemble)'. He went on to describe how on hearing a rather doubtful diminished 4th in rehearsal, on examining the score he found it was marked 'quarter-tone

down', thus proving it to be a precise rendering after all.

I must say after years of reviewing avant-garde premières I find this standard of precision amazing. All too often, as reviewer, one is left to give the performers the benefit of the doubt in the absence of comment from the composer at complex junctures in the score. (I recall arriving one evening in late the 1990s to review for the *St Albans Observer* a première newly commissioned by one of our local amateur choirs, to be told the composer had refused to attend as at the afternoon rehearsal the performance had borne insufficient resemblance to the score. In my review I diplomatically described the piece's character as 'atmospheric'. Of course, reviewing for *Tempo*, one gets used to the full-blown accuracy of the professional London-based ensemble, *de rigueur*, but it was nice to get it confirmed so forthrightly in this instance.

Moving on to the actual works performed on 12 March, well, some of them were predictably completely mad, off the wall, cranky, 'something else, man' – especially Christopher Fox's *four piece*, which was receiving its 'deuxième' UK première by Exaudi, having been commissioned by the Guildhall School of Music for their 'Extraordinary Voices' Festival; and extraordinary they indeed were. Scored for four singers having an argument, the piece is based on an exchange of text messages about vocal repertoire, with the soprano Juliet Fraser whose strong articulate voice led the way on stage. Strategically seated near the front in the audience were a couple of highly attentive young men of indeterminate age, with learning disabilities, who lapped it all up with such rapt interaction, almost acting as a barometer as to whether it was 'awol' enough (shrieks and all coming from the onstage singers) – thus illustrating James Weeks's introductory comment: 'We explore parts no other ensemble is trying to reach'.

Robert Fokkens's unusually quirky, graphic piece *Flytrap* (a world première) was actually a continuation of his work for the Vocal Trio 'Juice'. As he himself describes it, 'This new piece is unique in the project in that its main textual feature is the extraction and creation of actual words from the individual sounds and syllables of "Flytrap"'. Put more simply this gives us intermittently the vocalizing by tenor of 'fly, fly', then soprano 'fly, fly', etc with the sudden emphatic interjection of the word 'Trap' (that wasn't), so they start flying again. When the fly is finally caught –SILENCE (clever, I thought).

We were also treated to the world première of Joanna Bailie's *Harmonizing (Artificial Environment no. 7)* – an Exaudi commission. Joanna explains in

her programme notes that the piece explores 'the notion that an almost uncut field recording might provide the basis for a compositional dramaturgy [which] lies at the heart of my aesthetic thinking'. She used field recordings from 1) Birdland, 2) a merry-go-round at London Zoo, 3) Three aeroplanes (Brussels), skilfully blended with a minimalist-style harmonized score to imaginative effect. I particularly enjoyed the whirring sound of aeroplane propellers and airport sirens matched, by rising imitative Exaudi voices.

Later in the month, 30 March, I attended the 'Death and the Maiden' concert of the New Zealand String Quartet week, featuring new works by New Zealand composers centred on the Schubertian theme of Death and the Afterlife. And my how these Kiwis can play! For a start they played standing up, moving with the themes and rhythms. 'The men have also dropped tuxedos', commented a man in the audience in front of me who had come mostly for the Schubert. 'I don't go much for the modern works. It all sounds more like film scores', he added.

We had Michael Norris's *Exitus* for String Quartet (2009). Described on the web as expounding 'post tonal chromatic theories', his style lends itself well to aspects of the Afterlife: 1) The Land of the Moon, 2) The Place of Fear (The Mayan Underworld), 3) The House of Mists and 4) Black Water River – from the afterworld myths of the Native American Choctaw tribe, with those who

have sinned falling into the great gushing waterfall below. I enjoyed the Aboriginal sounds of the Land of the Moon. Here a special technique using the harmonics of upper strings creates an eerie whistling sound with sudden accents, with plucked cello accompaniment underneath. In the Norse 'House of Mists', icy atmospherics pervade, complete with glistening glissandi.

In the UK première of Ross Harris's *The Abiding Tides* for string quartet and soprano, New Zealand-born Madeleine Pierard delivered in expressive and where required dramatic tones the poems of Vincent O'Sullivan on which the work is based. Much was made of this year being the 100th Anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*, with the relationship we have with the sea given full impact. Impressive crescendos by the soprano matched by expressive string accompaniment like choppy waves of the sea, came to a climax on the words 'chandeliers of the sky!' Perhaps the man in the audience in front of me was right, it was quite like a film score. In the tragic ending as 'salt walks on my lips, talks its fatal talk', so reminiscent of the fate of so many in the lifeboats cut adrift from the *Titanic*, tumultuous strings continue to tell their tale.

However as Schubert reminded us, after the interval in the *Death and the Maiden* Quartet which harks back to his earlier song of the same name: 'You shall sleep gently in my arms', says Death to the maiden.

Jill Barlow



barbican



SO BBC
Symphony
Orchestra

SATURDAY 3 - SUNDAY 4 NOVEMBER

Total Immersion: Oliver Knussen at 60

The BBC SO and the Barbican celebrate one of the UK's most original and imaginative composers with two days of music, film and more.

SATURDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2PM & 7PM

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Oliver Knussen

Where the Wild Things Are
Higglety Pigglety Pop!

Libretti and original drawings by
Maurice Sendak

Britten Sinfonia

Ryan Wigglesworth *conductor*
Netia Jones *director/designer*

Cast includes: Susanna Anderson, Susan Bickley, Claire Booth, Graeme Broadbent, Graeme Danby, Jonathan Gunthorpe, Christopher Lemmings and Lucy Schauffer

Maurice Sendak's much-loved books for children are brought to life in these wildly imaginative family operas. Live digital projections of rolling-eyed monsters and talking cats and dogs interact with singers and orchestra to create an unforgettable spectacle.

A co-production between the Aldeburgh Festival, Barbican and Los Angeles Philharmonic Association in association with Lightmap. This production was conceived by Transition. Age guidance 7+

Tickets £15 under 16s/£25 adults

SUNDAY 4 NOVEMBER PM & EVE

Join the BBC Symphony Orchestra and guests on a journey through the life and music of Oliver Knussen in his 60th birthday year. Events include Barrie Gavin's fascinating film portrait of Knussen, *Music from the Big White House*, and chamber and orchestral concerts including the Guildhall Music Ensemble and Oliver Knussen conducting an evening concert featuring the Violin and Horn Concertos and Whitman Settings.

8.00pm Barbican Hall

Oliver Knussen

Choral
Whitman Settings
Violin Concerto
Symphony No. 3
Horn Concerto
Requiem - Songs for Sue

BBC Symphony Orchestra

Oliver Knussen *conductor*
Claire Booth *soprano*
Leila Josefowicz *violin*
Martin Owen *horn*

Presented by the BBC Symphony Orchestra
Visit bbc.co.uk/symphoniyorchestra for
details of all events

Tickets £24 £20 £16 £12 £8

Day passes available for events on
4 November. Call the box office for details.

BOOK NOW
barbican.org.uk or 020 7638 8891

(booking fees apply)

BBC
RADIO



90 - 93FM