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11th November: St. Francis Hall (University of Birmingham)

Lunchtime concert of works by Christian Wolff,
LaMonte Young, David Jones and Keith Potter

Keith Potter's Improvisation Group gave us another concert on 11th November in St. Francis Hall. That location enables the audience to sit on three sides of the performers, thus producing "greater intimacy", although I felt just as remote as at their concert in the Elgar Room last May where, seated on stage, the players were separated from the audience by a moat sometimes called the "orchestra pit".

For their first piece, Christian Wolff's "Stones", each musician, six in all, was in possession of stones, either in polythene bags, being rolled and jostled on the floor, or their resultant sounds being explored through contact with microphones. There was perhaps one moment when the piece gelled and the players began thinking together.

LaMonte Young's "X for Henry Flint" is one of those tedious pieces in which the same chord (in this instance an elbows-cluster on the piano, played by Keith Potter) is repeated in strict tempo as many times as to concern, disturb, amuse, irritate, disgust and finally exasperate any but the most patient or mindless of audiences. Now come on LaMonte! This is what some people would construe as the influence of Satie (in particular, "Vexations") on avant-garde thought - nothing new. There followed an innocuous "Fluctuations" by David Jones, in which all the instruments were connected to amplifiers (including the strings and clarinet).

Keith Potter's own piece - "Piano Music" in première - was played by Hilary Bracefield. It included a narration spoken by the pianist. Mr. Potter quoted freely from Schubert, Mozart and the classical repertoire, Debussy, Ireland etc. in, I presume, an attempt to illuminate the spoken text (of unknown authorship - Hans Keller, perhaps?) which made several bold and semi-serious presumptions of which the most puzzling was "In Mozart's time, everybody was avant-garde and nobody had to say so". It was obviously a healthy state of affairs, as Mozart discovered. I fail to understand what Mr. Potter was attempting. The work itself, consisting exclusively of quotations, was pastiche which drifted nebulously through many semi-descriptive, bodyless pieces, whilst outlining a facetious diatribe only equalled by Ogden Nash's poems for "The Carnival of the Animals" or Milhaud's settings of the agricultural catalogue. As an illustrated lecture I fear that Anthony Hopkins is more lucid. Besides which the old speaker-performer bit went out with Edmundo Ros.

My last point (I did not stay for the second performance of the Christian Wolff) is that Mr. Potter is beset with the problem of a group who cannot play their instruments. I do not object to untrained violinists, clarinetists, or whatever, having a go and being delighted with the effects produced with, or without, microphones. However, for concert purposes, every work demands an element of virtuosity or vivacity which was lacking here. The group accordingly killed "Fluctuations", as did Hilary Bracefield kill the quotations of Keith Potter. Furthermore, this lack of acquaintance with ensemble-work (a problem which the group should have solved for itself by now) kept "Stones" - the non-instrumental piece - well and truly on the ground throughout. Let us hope that the resourcefulness of Mr. Potter will conquer these odds in years to come.

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