

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Casken, John. 1973. 'Review of January 1973: Polish Music in London'. *Contact*, 6. pp. 35-37. ISSN 0308-5066.

R E V I E W S .

January 1973: POLISH MUSIC IN LONDON

People who attend concerts of contemporary music are usually divided into two groups: those who are genuinely interested, and those who go purely out of curiosity. For this reason it was so rewarding to be amongst the audience at Witold Lutoslawski's concert in London (QEH, January 20th), where the whole audience greeted the composer and his music with rare warmth and real interest and enthusiasm. In this programme Lutoslawski himself conducted the London Sinfonietta in four of his own works, including the first performance in Great Britain of Preludes and Fugue for thirteen solo strings.

This, his most recent work, was by far the longest in the programme - it lasted about forty minutes. While it is an exacting work to listen to, Preludes and Fugue has a clearly defined structural framework which helps the listener to realise the direction in which the music is travelling. There are seven preludes preceding the fugue, each with its own characteristic textures and ideas. The long fugue is a very substantial movement indeed, containing aleatoric music played 'ad libitum' and music in which the rhythms are strictly notated. Lutoslawski draws a parallel between the aleatoric passages (a static element used for the expositions) and strict rhythmical passages (a moving element used for the episodes) with single-keyed and modulatory passages in classical music.

The use of the word fugue is certainly justified in the use of the six subjects (again, each having its own characteristics) and different episodes. The expositions are not the type normally associated with the baroque fugue. Themes are presented on top of one another, yet each is made up of similar material so that the whole exposition is like a discussion on one specific topic. Consequently one feels that Lutoslawski has taken the traditional, rather hard-edged form of the fugue, and dissolved it into his own mould, the blurred lines coming in and out of focus, yet all containing the same perspective.

Indeed, the perspective of the work is one of the finest Lutoslawski has devised, but, as always, it has the formula of a long build-up of tension to the climax followed by a gradual winding down. The climax in this instance is the true culminating point of the whole work, where all six subjects appear simultaneously, creating a sonority which I found astonishing for thirteen solo strings.

The post-climax phase is extremely well measured, and the music is allowed to unwind completely before a quick outburst brings the work to a dramatic close.

Also heard in this concert were Funeral Music, Jeux Vénitiens and Paroles Tissées. The tenor soloist in this latter work was the excellent Peter Pears, who first commissioned the work, and who, in his interpretation, finely displayed Lutoslawski's intention that the voice should not intrude as a soloist, but should be an integral part of the texture, each strand contributing to the realisation of the dreaming, visionary qualities of Chabrun's poem.

The London Sinfonietta played extremely well throughout and obviously felt at ease under Lutoslawski's baton, and in Preludes and Fugue composer, conductor and orchestra were obviously in total sympathy,

As it was Lutoslawski's sixtieth birthday on 25th January, two other celebratory events were arranged in England. Peter Dickinson gave a well-planned and interesting assessment (BBC Radio 3) of Lutoslawski's development, playing examples of his music and including part of the Requiem of 1937 (played on the piano), illustrating the early influence of French music and particularly of Fauré. Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, on the actual birthday, conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in a concert including Funeral Music and the Concerto for Orchestra as a tribute to Lutoslawski.

The Warsaw Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra has been touring England recently; I chose to hear them in Huddersfield. Their programme included works by Mozart, Purcell and Janiewicz (arranged by Panufnik) as well as Górecki's Three Pieces in the Ancient Style (1963), and this mixture of classical and 'mildly modern' seemed to be representative of their programmes throughout the tour.

Górecki's work was surprisingly different from what I had expected. Certainly it was in this that the excellent string tone of the orchestra was shown at its best, but the piece itself, far from presenting a tough line (which is what we normally associate with Górecki - e.g. Scontri), is a rather tame set of variations on a theme of mediaeval origins. And yet the work strangely anticipates certain of Górecki's later techniques, used in such works as Refrain for Orchestra, in the gradual accumulation of tone-cluster chords. It is quite unlike other works based on mediaeval plainsong that I have heard: Górecki here seems to be determined to avoid

clichés and obvious 'effects', and the consistently low, sonorous string writing might almost be heard as a reaction against other recent developments in string technique.

But I thought it a pity that this orchestra had decided not to bring more exciting and dynamic pieces of Polish contemporary music, especially as it is the provincial cities of England that need to hear such music played by a disciplined and musical orchestra.

JOHN CASKEN