

contact

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Reviews and Reports

TREVOR WISHART: SCYLLA AND CHARIBDIS (£1.50)
FIDELIO (£1.50)

Both these scores are published by the composer and may be obtained from Philip Martin Music Books, 22 Huntington Road, York, YO3 7RL.

RICHARD WITTS

I found the following letter inside a copy of the antiscoring of Trevor Wishart's *Journey into Space* in Bury Public Library. It may have been left there either deliberately or accidentally, which says a lot about the sorts of people who read his scores in Bury.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Penetrations Division
STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Subject: WISHART, Trevor
Address: 83 Heslington Road, YORK, England
Phone tap code: 0904 30143
Age: 30
Class Status: C
Possessions: Wife
Occupation: Freelance composer

4.7.77

Dear Milton,

You asked for a situations brief on the above subject. To be frank, Milton, he's a headache. For thirty years Culture Operations has ensured that all potential dissidents in the music sector have been steered by the Stabilization Program. But subject is envired in a new situation, outlined below. The Program must be adjusted to contain him plus the factions he represents. You may not be familiar with its content and purpose, so let me cue you.

The Stabilization Program was straightforward:

1. Access agents operate as journalists in the music press sector. They orchestrate the treatment of composers and their output by:

(a) endorsing subjects who refer to

- (i) The Free Spirit of Man or the Free Development of Mankind;
- (ii) preference for free, democratic societies, e.g. USA, UK;
- (iii) totalitarianism as an evil;
- (iv) personal, subjective, independent activities as an ideal;

(b) turning pro-Soviet propaganda back on itself by accentuating the possible deviationary aspects in Communist music (the model example of the Program's success being Shostakovich);

(c) stressing the 'non-political' nature of music activity, so that the developed pro-capitalist function of music structures are camouflaged yet serve the status quo (this allows too the possibility of a Plausible Denial Strategy, e.g. if this report defected and was openly published, nobody would believe its content).

2. Composers are researchers of future profitable commodities. They are prone to manufacture structures that lie outside, or criticize, the accepted tenets of a Free World philosophy. This is an unfortunate but predictable result of a research mode that requires the Agency's support as an ongoing operation. Any harmful activities may be checked by:

(a) encouraging competition: composers and musicians collaborate only *against* one another;

(b) emphasizing the independence and arbitrariness of their activities;

(c) ensuring that the successful composer is a product of, or attains and remains in, social class B or C. University appointments and composer-in-residence posts with their attendant security have been the effective ploys, and guaranteed an output that reflected this social status;

(d) reinforcing the dissident composer's alienation from the most disruptive elements of the free society to minimize support, e.g. with negative media coverage, emphasizing the exclusivity and abnormality aspects of their work;

(e) direct buying-off through commissions, etc.; composers have insecure funds and are unlikely to refuse gifts.

3. The philosophy/aesthetic of Subversion. Devised by Counter-Intelligence Division. Negative propaganda was generated in music that, bit by bit, 'erodes' accepted attitudes. Composers were encouraged to adopt a degree of clandestinity. A positive social status was endorsed by a revival of the term 'radical'. The Subversion ruse attracted composers with a bent for the dramatic. Historical or mythological subjects were promoted for this

treatment, as though stressing the universal nature of subversion (whether it be Protestant Reform, Cuban slavery, Faust, Christ or Punch and Judy, the more removed from everyday life, the greater the subversive status!). So far this has been the most successful ploy, along with the anti-collective line that was developed.

Well, Milton, the Stabilization Program is burning out. The underlying weakness of Subversion tactics is revealed. A new generation immune to the old anti-Soviet propaganda must be coped with; Red China is their paradigm. New elements affect the Program:

1. post-war education absorbed certain elements of the manual class; composers and musicians are no longer necessarily unified in class orientation;

2. inflation and reduced funding has affected the Program, allowing musicians economic affinities with the bottom-range disruptive elements;

3. composers are seeking a wider market with a more accessible grammar. In itself, this isn't dangerous, but it may abrogate their commodity research function in the service of managerial-class ideology.

Intelligence Directorate's drive for large-scale patriotic affirmation (US 1976, UK 1977) helped to align composers with their true historic function, but piecemeal ideas are no substitute for an overhauled Program.

The following account of subject's recent out-turn may be productive of insights into the new directions that require channeling.

Scylla and Charibdis (1976)

This is a 'music-theater' piece somewhat in the English tradition: hysterical vocals, eccentric humor, grotesque images, a structure divided into static blocks, art-object percussion, costumed performers, etc. But there is a difference: it makes a direct statement.

Synopsis: Two countries/multi-national corporations compete against one another for aural supremacy. They each have a champion at either side of the stage, Hell's Angel bikers who produce the full range of vocal sounds through their separate microphones. They throw objects at each other (luxury consumer goods such as TV sets, ornaments, furniture). Behind each protagonist is a metal screen which, when struck by an opponent's missile, emits portions of texts from either the Communist Manifesto or the US Bill of Rights. The two bikers each have a manager (agent-provocateur) who moves around the audience to gain support by asking the public to shout political obscenities into a microphone. The obscenities are selected from two lists, the first of adjectives, e.g. Communist, Conservative, jack-booted, hippie; the second of nouns, e.g. eunuch, running-dog, Democrat, Stalinist. Only the loudest shouter is heard through the sound system. This section is very noisy, and, given the limited sonority, static.

A tranquil section ensues as the protagonists make up. Bird calls, taped 'mood music for young lovers' and manipulated cheering replace the violent vocals and percussion. But the actors slowly reveal the hypocrisy beneath the detente and the violent section returns, stopped suddenly when the entire sound and light systems fail. The audience is ejected. Only when they have all left is the system switched on again to show them that the whole event was a set-up governed throughout by the two powers in league to control and occupy the minds of the public. The overall shape is thus: A DUEL, very loud, vocal sounds/percussion (7 main aural components), B DETENTE, quiet, bird calls/muzak/cheers (3 aural components), A DENOUMENT, as in the Duel, CUT OFF. The piece equates an elaborate sound system with a world power structure, through which all contributational elements are controlled unaccountable operations. It is marked out from the usual run of music-theater works by its clarity of design (hardly subversive), the unity of aural and visual gesture, and the potential variety of action. The system acts as a flexible frame rather than as a rigid process that has to be strictly adhered to.

There are also simple, subtle touches: a battery-operated cassette recorder is inconspicuously located; if you discover it and press your ear close to its tiny speaker, you hear a description of the problems of the Third World. In this manner, subject makes a clear theatrical statement about imperialism. There are, however, weaknesses:

1. It's usually difficult to encourage audiences to participate. At its premiere in Australia (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Sept. 1976) it was apparently impossible to find many willing shouters. At Ghent, Belgium (Nor.media Band, 24.2.77) the audience was strongly divided by those willing and unwilling rather than between one country or another. Audiences, too, are rarely duped by staged power failures.

2. The piece is difficult to stage. The score requires at least 4 microphones, 2 contact mikes, 2 or 3 tape machines, 3 ring modulators (2 with sine-wave oscillators), 2 triggered envelope shapers, stereo amplifier and speakers, and a comparator (a specially constructed device that passes only the louder of two signals). Most of this may be covered by two VCS3 synthesizers, which restricts production to a university or college music department. The Ghent report reveals that it can be effected via manual operations of amplifier and mixer volume levels, rendering *Scylla and Charibdis* open to wider exposure.

Many props are required (subject stipulates two enormous piles of *luxury* goods) that create procurement and storage problems. In fact, most of subject's theater work uses much electronic or mechanical gear, props, costumes and general hardware, discouraging performances outside of his direct participation.

3. The work may be interpreted in another light. The two bikers represent the unkempt, degenerate elements of our free society. They are inarticulate, appear grotesque and mindlessly destroy good-quality produce. The slogans may be comprehended in several ways (even made pointless, e.g. 'You Trotskyite Trotskyite'), losing any functional reference whatsoever in the general uproar — that's the beauty of anarchism. The agent-provocateurs are too shady or caricatured to represent a real power. They are false, and clearly collaborators of the socially disruptive characters on stage. Thus, when the power system disintegrates at the end the moral is: revolution is destruction. The work is defused by its connection with one British tradition: the music-hall and the circus. However, this work is subject's most powerful and all-embracing statement to date.

Fidelio (1977)

Outline from the score: 'A solitary flautist (or clarinetist) begins to play. After some time a stranger enters carrying a [small] suitcase, from which the same [type of] music emanates. The stranger leaves the suitcase on stage and departs, and the flautist responds by playing a different, more complex music, treating the music from the suitcase as an accompaniment. This process is repeated another four times, until there are five [progressively larger] suitcases on the stage, ALL playing flute music (clarinet music). By this stage the flautist (clarinetist), having adopted more and more elaborate styles of playing, each style being copied by the succeeding suitcase, finds he/she has exhausted all the possibilities. Furthermore he/she is virtually obscured from view by the pile of suitcases. After vainly trying to play something else new, whilst leaping into the air in order to be seen, he/she rushes out to the front of the stage and cries out. The suitcases change from instrumental sounds to aggressive shouts. He/she falls to the ground. The stranger now enters with a large trunk, and piles the body of the player into it and wheels it off stage, returning after a few moments with the trunk, and places the trunk on the top of the pile of suitcases, at which point they all begin to play the music as before. The trunk, however, contains the cry of the flautist which repeats at regular intervals.'

Well Milton, you see the problem? There's no obscurity, no élitist tradecraft trickery, and it has a kind of humour. I've listed the negative and positive points below. First negative:

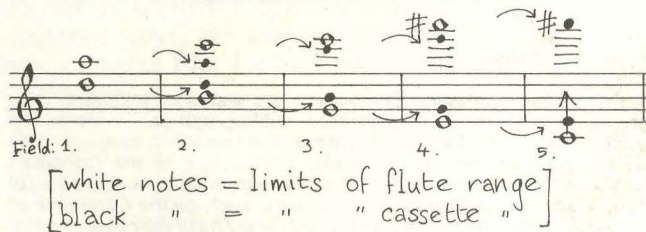
1. It's clearly expressed, with an overall simple shape. There are seven stages, progressively shorter in time and more complex in aural content. The start of each new stage (2-6) is indicated by the exit of the stranger.
2. It's aurally more seductive than *Scylla and Charibdis*. There is an organic process marked by the widening of pitch areas. The opening plays on a quotation from a Beethoven aria:



transformed in the following manner:



The pitch range is gradually widened by the flutist, always wider than the range heard on the tapes (white notes indicate limits of flute range, black those of cassette):



3. It contains an appealing but not taxing virtuoso element and easy theatricals for the flutist. Wide performance possible if subject achieves adequate score distribution (he publishes privately at his own expense and sells from his address).

And the positive points:

1. The title is obscure. The basic pitch material derives from an arioso by Don Fernando (the visiting minister who allowed Florestan's freedom) in the Act II finale of *Fidelio*. The full text is:

No cruel tyrant is your King,
To him his subjects are his brothers,
To all he loves his help to bring.

Sure, the text isn't relayed, and it may be said that the piece doesn't rely on the audience's awareness of the entrant quote. (So why *Fidelio*? She isn't even a part of it.) This British tradition of obscure references and in-games is of immense assistance to the Program.

2. This is a negative *Fidelio*. It's light turning to the black, sinister and pessimistic. When the dissidents start creating positive music, that's when we really need to worry.

3. Equipment problems. The performer needs to construct five differently-sized wooden suitcases, and obtain a large but light trunk large enough to lie in. Six battery-operated cassette machines are required. They must have the same volume levels, all loud enough to penetrate the acoustics of the hall from inside the cases. The cassettes are tricky to coordinate; a small timing error sabotages the entire piece.

4. Cassettes generally give inferior reproduction. So the player would hardly feel either emancipated or intimidated by the second-rate recorded sounds. The work then becomes an exercise in timbral contrast.

5. There is an interpretation problem for the flutist. The cassette tapes have to be recorded prior to rehearsals. The player must establish a clear relationship between tape and live music during the performance, while attempting to play in an improvisatory manner. This balance problem is compounded as the piece progresses.

6. Our agent at the York University premiere (1.6.77) noted a weak theatrical point, not eliminated in the score. When the stranger carries the flutist off-stage in a trunk, nothing happens for a while and no point is made. Why off-stage only to return? (Technically the purpose is to permit the flutist's release, and this could be heard from the auditorium). Actually, I'd be tempted to have a power saw or chopping sounds when the trunk is off-stage, as though the stranger were extracting the eyes (the trunk's emblem).

So, Milton, here's an art-music that alludes critically to monopoly capitalism without the old-style ambiguity of image. This music is potentially damaging through its structural clarity, thought-out scenario, sense of humor and a stronger (more practical) alliance between theater and music performance.

Until Directorate devise a new strategy, there are three lines of penetration that are available:

1. Neutralization. Emphasis upon the anarchic and abnormal aspects of subject's work should minimize its audience potential and economically cripple the performers. At present the Agency's media agents are generating adverse publicity for subject's latest job as a Community Composer in Lancashire, England.

2. Coercion. Subject is in a weak situation as he's a truly freelance composer. UK avant-classical music is at a low grade presently and he's one of the brightest young minds on the market. He might be purchased: UK contacts (ACGB/SPNM) may insulate him eventually.

3. Termination.

Sincerely,
Dean