

contact

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

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

Citation

Hayter, Graham. 1981. 'Review of La Rochelle Festival, June 25-July 11, 1981'. *Contact*, 23. pp. 40-42. ISSN 0308-5066.

LA ROCHELLE FESTIVAL
JUNE 25 – JULY 11, 1981

GRAHAM HAYTER

On arrival at this year's La Rochelle Festival I was immediately struck by the warmth of the welcome and the professionalism of the directorship, both artistic and administrative. I have come to expect this of such events in France, having attended the Metz Festival in 1980, and it compares favourably with the less pleasant atmosphere of far less enterprising festivals in Britain. The differences between La Rochelle and Metz, however, are marked. The latter, a four- to five-day event only, concentrates on large-scale orchestral and music-theatre works and is consequently rather formal. At La Rochelle there was greater opportunity to meet others and exchange ideas; informality is actively encouraged.

The festival has been subject to severe financial restrictions, but the directors are determined not to allow this to compromise the planned four-year period of development (1980-83), and continue to maintain its fundamental characteristics. Local institutions have intensified their financial support; the directors lay great stress upon implanting the festival in the existing cultural context of the town and the surrounding region – involving the regional public as much as possible. Though developing on these lines, local interest in the music programme was, sadly, minimal and audiences were small. Such an idyllic setting seemed at times incompatible with the 'grittiness' of much of the music performed and one became aware of the inevitable distance between the intensity of the musical activity and the stillness of the surroundings.

The music programme this year was divided into two sections – June 25–29 and July 3–6; it included a number of first performances, provided opportunities for young or unknown composers, and enabled one to assimilate specific musical developments of the past decade or more through the 'retrospectives' of composers such as Brian Ferneyhough and Franco Donatoni. The result was a stimulating mix of concerts (from solo works to larger ensemble pieces), public lectures, composer forums, exhibitions, etc.

Six of Brian Ferneyhough's major works had been scheduled in this second of a three-year cycle, but of these, three were cancelled: *Sonatas* for string quartet (1967) and the Second String Quartet (1980) (Irvine Arditti of the Arditti String Quartet was seriously ill), and *Time and Motion Study III* for 16 solo voices, percussion, and electronics (1974) (there was some disagreement with the Schola Cantorum Stuttgart over the preparation of another piece). All his works were therefore given in one concert, beginning with *Epigrams* for piano (1966), performed by Massimiliano Damerini, who then gave a quite remarkable first performance of Ferneyhough's new work for piano entitled *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* (1981).

This title refers to a poetic form, the *emblemata*, cultivated during the first half of the 16th century, most notably by the Italian poet Alciati. This later developed into a tripartite structure composed of a title, an image (verbally described or, in later versions, actually depicted), and a short text in verse or prose which reveals the inner connection between the two preceding components. When translated into musical terms, the degree to which the third part, as a sovereign statement, can imply the initial germinal idea (image) is something Ferneyhough questions: 'The idea of "explication" of musical states via recourse to other musical states is, for its part, probably also an idealistic vision here depicted rather than achieved.' The conflict lies between relatively stable material and more fragmentary surface gesture, the latter constantly trying to assert itself, the former holding the reins. This generates extreme tension, culminating in a forceful declaration of control over events – a very ugly seven-note chord marked *fffff*, *tutta la forza*, at the end of the opening section. The central 'Icon' section is by contrast static; here there is greater concentration on the expressive content of individual pitches and rhythms, the shorter, *staccato* notes having a somewhat subversive, derisory character, a polyphony of them leading into a reconstruction of the main elements ('Epigram'). Ferneyhough set out to write an essentially pianistic work whose gestures are entirely derived from a 19th-century vocabulary; he succeeded to such a degree that one is reminded of certain well-known works of the 19th-century piano repertory, though it would be misleading to suggest any direct connection.

In the absence of the Arditti Quartet, the Second String Quartet was rather unsatisfactorily introduced by means of a



London

Frankfurt

New York

JOHN CAGE

Hymns and Variations (1978)
for 12 amplified voices
P66812

Freeman Etudes I-XVI (1978/79)
for solo violin
P66813a

Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras (1981)
P66879. Performing material on hire
First performance: 22 November 1981, Metz Festival

TADEUSZ BAIRD

Concerto Lugubre (1976)
for viola and orchestra
P8381. Performing material on hire

Variations in Rondo Form (1978)
for string quartet
P8444. Performing material on hire

MAURICIO KAGEL

Variété (1976/77)
Concert-Spectacle for
artists and musicians
P8407. Performing material on hire

Klangwölfe (1978/79)
for violin and piano
P8443.

BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

Second String Quartet (1980)
P7229. Performing material on hire

Lemma-Icon-Epigram (1981)
for solo piano
score in preparation

*Peters Music is available from all good music shops,
including*

Peters Music Shop,
119-125 Wardour Street, London W1V 4DN
Tel: 01 437 1456

Wholesale only:
10-12 Baches Street, London N1 6DN

tape of a BBC studio recording made earlier this year.

With *Time and Motion Studies I* for bass clarinet (1977) and *II* for solo cello and electronics (1976) we returned to the period of Ferneyhough's most intense exploration of performance difficulty and the performer – notation relationship. Bass clarinetist Harry Sparnaay gave once again a breathtaking performance of *Time and Motion Study I*, a work which, because of its innate theatricality, benefits from being seen, as does *Time and Motion Study II*. Of this 'image of man in the grip of a technological nightmare'¹ we were privileged to hear an extraordinarily accurate realisation by Pierre Strauch with the assistance of IRCAM's technical expertise. These performances provided a fitting climax (in view of the considerable interest in Ferneyhough) to the first half of the music programme. Any devotee of his music should obtain a copy of *Cahier musique*, no. 2, a festival publication, which contains Ferneyhough's own introduction to the *Time and Motion Studies*, his own analysis of the Second String Quartet, and a detailed analysis of *Time and Motion Study II* by Claudy Malherbe.² Malherbe also gave a public lecture – demonstration on this work with the assistance of Pierre Strauch. The other composers featured in *Cahier musique*, no. 2 are Pascal Dusapin (b. 1955), Gérard Geay (b. 1945), Emmanuel Nunes (b. 1941), and Franco Donatoni.

The Ensemble InterContemporain under the direction of Sylvain Cambreling gave two concerts; works by Hugues Dufourt (b. 1943), Anton Ruppert (b. 1936), and Nunes in the first, Busoni, Tod Machover (b. 1953), and György Kurtág (b. 1926) in the second. The memorable performances were of Dufourt's *Mura della città di Dite* for 17 instruments (1969) (my first encounter with his music) and Kurtág's *Messages de feu demoiselle R. V. Troussova* for soprano and chamber orchestra (1976-80). Dufourt's work has well stood the test of time. It sets in opposition wavering blocks of material in which the instruments are used in groups, and more static murmurings in which the instruments are treated individually. The aggressive, arresting opening subsides into a smoother texture within which there is much intricate exploration of the cross-fertilisation of instrumental timbres. Kurtág's *Messages* is a setting of 21 poems by the Russian poet Rimma Dalos – a sort of 'Frauenliebe und -leben'. What I was unable to understand from the French translations was more directly conveyed by the music, through its vitality and a sensuousness verging on eroticism.

Less impressive was Machover's *Soft Morning, City!*, a setting of the final monologue from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* for soprano, double bass, and tape. In this performance the soloists were Jane Manning and Frederic Stochl. The rich polyphonic text (music enough perhaps) is here paralleled by the assemblage of vast and complex sounds, through which the double bassist's contribution was rarely perceptible.

The music of Emmanuel Nunes was also new to me. *Nachtmusik I* (1977-78), perhaps not the best introduction, is one of a family of works entitled *The Creation*, which to date also includes *Einspielungen I, II, and III* for solo violin, cello, and viola respectively, all of which were performed at La Rochelle. *Nachtmusik I* is scored for an unusual combination of viola, cello, cor anglais, trombone, bass clarinet, tape, and three synthesizers. We heard a second version without the synthesizers. The whole work is based on only eight notes which strictly determine all intervals, rhythmic patterns, tempo relationships, etc.; the result is a monotonous texture of obstinately sustained or repeated pitches and a variety only of dynamics and articulation.

Objective judgment of Nunes's music is inhibited by one's reaction to his extreme physical disability. He was at each performance very well received. Particularly moving was his brave delivery of a public lecture on the three *Einspielungen*. These interrelated solo works are, like *Nachtmusik*, obsessive in their pitch centrality, but a strong rhythmic drive and a sense of growth make them wholly more absorbing. Nunes's treatment of the instruments is traditional, except that the complexity of the rhythmic development produces some impossible counterpoint.

There were also several concerts featuring smaller solo works, in which Italian composers were well represented: Niccolò Castiglioni (b. 1932), Salvatore Sciarrino (b. 1947), Camillo Togni (b. 1922), Aldo Clementi, Bruno Canino (b. 1936), Sylvano Bussotti (b. 1931), and Donatoni. The Italian connection was strengthened by the participation of Roberto Fabbriciani (flute), Damerini, and the Bruno Canino – Antonio Ballista piano duo.

Canino and Ballista gave the opening concert, which

began with the juxtaposition of Donatoni's *Black and White No. 2* (1968) and Canino's *Black and White No. 2 di Donatoni* (1972). Donatoni's work comprises a succession of 120 ten-finger exercises for any number of performers, beginning on any page of the score, and of indefinite duration. The execution must be spontaneous and in no way predetermined. Only the fingerings, the colours of the keys (black or white), and two extremes of dynamic (*fff* or *ppp*) are indicated. Canino believes that the delegation of such responsibility to the performer can often result in a subtle sado-masochistic relationship with the composer. The performer, tired of the constraints made by the concept and the material, may take vengeance and begin to impose his own particular interpretation. Such an infringement of the dogma of absolute spontaneity led Canino in his work (version) to add a structure, in the form of themes, development, and reprise, that produced quite different music!

The new work in this programme was Castiglioni's *Hommage à Edouard Grieg* (1981), an example of the current neo-romantic trend in contemporary Italian music. Grieg, 'one of the most formidable poets of all piano literature' and 'master of fantasy' is here evoked by means of light, ethereal sonorities, mainly in the upper register of the piano. The music is precisely matched by the sentimentality of the composer's programme note: 'Ce monde rêveur et doux, délicat et fait de fine poussière . . .'. The concluding 'retour à la nature' is a quotation from a popular song, the spring song of a cuckoo. The concert ended with a brisk, businesslike performance of the piano-duet version of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

The least enjoyable of the concerts I heard were of music for solo flute and solo bass clarinet, despite the virtuosity and interpretative geniuses of Roberto Fabbriciani and Harry Sparnaay. Sadly I was unable to attend the second phase of the music programme, featuring music by Michel Redolfi and Kund Viktor (b. 1924) (performed by the États Généraux du Bruit and including a 'Concert subaquatique!'), Claude Foray, Dusapin, Geay, and Donatoni, not to mention the dance, theatre, and cinema programmes, but my short visit was well rewarded. I would highly recommend this festival to laymen and professionals alike.

NOTES:

¹ Stephen Walsh reporting on the La Rochelle Festival in the *Observer Review* (July 5, 1981), p. 30.

² *Cahier musique*, no. 2, is available from Festival de La Rochelle, 4 rue de la Paix, 75002 Paris, price 15 francs.