STRING ANTHOLOGY

Henri Bergson, philosopher, provocatively described duration as 'the ever-changing multiplicity of interlocking states'. The relationships between duration and experimental time have since become a major talking-point in discussions about twentieth-century music, in particular that of the Webern-Stockhausen line. As we all know from non-musical experience, the number of events and their distribution within a given duration condition our experience of the passing of time. When we are busy time seems to pass quickly; when we have nothing to occupy our faculties time may seem to stand still. So in music, when

a duration consists of very few 'interlocking states' or events, one can reasonably expect (as a listener) to experience boredom. Perhaps John Cage explores one extreme in his 4'33", but, paradoxically, it is equally possible for a work seemingly full of events (witness Terry Riley's In C) to cause a similar boredom in the listener. The extreme similarity of one event to those before and after it, or in Bergson's terms, the extreme similarity between interlocking states, leads to a condition of monotony, or at least near-monotony, and it is with this that we associate boredom.

I have recently received and perused a sixty-eight page 'String Anthology' comprising, in all, nine pieces of recent vintage by eight composers. All these pieces are conventionally notated on five-line staves and could be performed with little technical difficulty. Some of the pieces display a wealth of ideas, others lamentably few. All ideas as such are rigorously controlled by their respective composers, most to the point of staticity, for there is little development or exploitation of the material, except in a repetitious kind of way.

The longest piece, both from an objective (the composer Terry Jennings envisages a total duration of 21'45") and from a subjective point of view, is written economically on only one page with seconds marked to show durations. Piece for Strings is for three violins and three violas playing without vibrato throughout in a dynamic ranging from ppp (with mutes) to p (without mutes). There is a total of 20 events, on average one per minute, although in actual fact they vary in length from 10 to 210 seconds. This total of events consists of eleven single or combined (i.e. chordal) note-beginnings and nine rest-beginnings. The longest non-event (for the purposes of this work to be considered an event) is a tutti rest lasting for 130 seconds. What more can one say?

Another similar piece, by Edward Fulton (Violin Music V) is for violin and piano and it is intended to last for about 12 minutes. It makes extensive use of a well-known Purcell ground bass and also Purcell's harmonic and melodic ideas, thinly disguised by the fact that the composer (Fulton) has decided that all this should be played at about a tenth of Purcell's original speed. This could have led to an interesting parodistic work, but as it stands it seems only to be an immature piece - despite the composer's inventiveness in his violin part which shows at least a textbook knowledge of the different modes of string attack. The other work in this collection to leave a sour taste in the mouth is African Melody by Howard Skempton. Written for cello solo (pizzicato and plectrum) this consists of 16 note-beginnings and precious little else. A desolate offering.

Chris May, in his short Piece for Three Cellos, shows considerably more enterprise. The music for each player is written on two staves and consists of either trilled or untrilled notes. There are occasional bar-lines and always at the beginning of each bar there is a trilled note on one of the two staves and an untrilled note on the other. Mr. May's canon is as follows:

> 'Begin anywhere, playing each note pp in one bow. Leave silences at will. At a dotted line, a choice is made, according to what your "cue" player is playing (1 follows 2, 2 follows 3, 3 follows 1). If he is silent, wait till he plays. If he is trilling, choose the line with a trill after the dotted line. If he is not trilling, choose the line without a trill after the dotted line. Stop when you have played all the notes in your part (you may be prevented from doing so).'

So from his quite simple beginnings there emerges a stimulating interplay of trilled and untrilled sounds with high spots when all three players are performing trills. I assume that when all the players happen to reach a 'dotted' bar-line together the piece is ended.

Richard Reason's two-page String Quartet is notated fairly precisely as regards the relative durations of the notes played by the different parts but unfortunately he only deigns to mark the score at the top with the word 'slowly'. The faint barlines in my copy seem to bear no relation to the music and should be disregarded as meaningless. The sounds in this three-movement work are all in diatonic relation to C (there being no accidentals whatever). Mode of attack and dynamics are unspecified which leads me to assume either that the composer wishes attack and dynamic to remain the same throughout or has given it no thought.

In the same anthology, Christopher Hobbs's Trio is 594 bars long (4/4,crotchet = ca.72) and consists of an interplay of long notes all to be played - again - without vibrato at a minimal dynamic or 'amplitude' as the composer likes to call it.

Of a completely different sort are the two pieces by Greg Bright: Coaxing the chandelier and Salts of Copper, both of which are full of bright jazzy rhythms and good humour. However, he errs on the side of repetitiousness, though not with such tragic results as those achieved by other composers in this anthology. Michael Parsons's

Highland Variations are also spiced with powerful rhythms (Scotch snap) and syncopations but one feels that his slow tenth variation is anticlimactic after the vivacity of the ninth (for solo violin). Again too much repetition and little enough variation to be satisfying.

My overall impression of the contents of this String Anthology is that these composers could all benefit from some vocal composition, since that would help them at least a little with their problem - as I see it - of enormous durations coupled with a sparseness of significant events. The anthology is, for your information, written neatly in one hand: surely a labour of love - or were all the pieces by one composer with seven other pseudonyms?

ALAN MCGEOCH.