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The Joys of Metz

12ème Rencontres Internationales de Musique Contemporaine, Metz, 17-20 November 1983

Metz, the administrative capital of the Lorraine district, is the somewhat unlikely host to an annual festival, exclusively of 'new music'. Unlikely because Metz is an industrial town not far from Strasbourg, old and rather gloomy—at least in November. The changes of nationality that have been forced upon it over the years have left Metz somewhat teutonic in feel, and German remains the second language. The festival is held in high esteem throughout Europe and the directors of other festivals, notably La Rochelle and the Venice Biennale, were clearly in evidence last year.

The artistic director of Metz is Claude Lefebvre, in France a respected composer, whose music was included in the 1983 Huddersfield Festival (which, annoyingly, coincided with Metz, making life difficult for those artists performing at both.) Lefebvre runs the Centre Européen pour la Recherche Musicale at Metz University and he is able to carry the festival's flag all year round. His popularity is undoubted, and the hospitable people of Metz appear to approve of the festival, which was not the case with the ill-fated event at Royan.

Thursday 17 November

Having travelled overland from Calais (via Lille), a long and tiring journey, I was obliged to miss the first concert which presented a new, brief choral work by Ligeti, *Magyar etűdök* on words of Sándor Weöres. Sharing the concert with this miniature was *La métamorphose*, after Kafka, by Paul-Heinz Dittrich, for actor, voices, bass clarinet, violin, and cello. The actor in this work, Enrique Pardo, is a Peruvian who

studied theatre in France and Spain, and in London with Roy Hart (who appears on Stockhausen's *Aus den sieben Tagen* recording). Now based in France, he nevertheless remains with the Roy Hart Theatre, which offers 'new conceptions and new approaches to contemporary opera and works called "music theatre"'. Pardo admits to being more theatrical than musical, but his idea of a 'pantheatre' involving mythological and psychological investigations of cultural traditions is timely, given the stagnation of Western concert music.

The first orchestral concert was held at the Palais des Sports, a sort of scaled-down indoor football pitch, complete with (hard!) terraces, and requiring acoustical screens round the orchestra. Wojtek Michniewski conducted the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, which came over as a well-schooled ensemble. The work that opened the programme, Jean-Claude Wolff's Third Symphony, began with a disarmingly precise reminiscence of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, but fortunately went its own way thence. Given the opening, I had expected a neoromantic essay but Wolff explored clear-cut rhythmic unisons and deep, slushy harmonies in a pleasing atonal style that perhaps originated from Dutilleux but remained acutely personal. This was followed by a new piece by the ubiquitous Wolfgang Rihm, *Monodram* for solo cello and ensemble. A small-scale and intimate work, it was swamped by the vastness of the sports hall and Siegfried Palm appeared to overcompensate, giving a hectic first performance. Little of its quality was projected on this occasion; I am sure that subsequent hearings will make possible a better appreciation of its worth.

The second half of the concert was dedicated entirely to another first performance, this time of a work I was particularly anxious to hear. Alain Bancquart is a composer whom I have long admired for such works as *Jeux pour lumière* (1968). His scrupulous rejection of compromise was as evident in his Third Symphony 'Fragments d'une Apocalypse' as elsewhere in his work, characterised here by a refusal to cosmeticise his musical fabric in any way. His deep preoccupation with quarter-tone harmony, which informs both his earlier symphonies, is replaced in the Third by confrontations between three extremely simple but powerful ideas. The first is an unaccompanied tenor singing a highly decorated cantilena; the second an emotionally cool, homogeneous string texture, not unlike that in Ives's *Central Park in the Dark*; and the third an utterly terrifying iterative stuttering on a monotone by two basses, with a background of very tight percussion music. These three musics are never developed, merely juxtaposed; no relaxation into heterophony ever occurs. The resulting 40-minute span is brought to a close by the string mass, which the composer himself conducted: an ending without hope. The timbral sameness, only slightly relieved by unobtrusive touches of wind and brass, effects a sense of suspended time in keeping with the composer's vision. A harrowing and entirely compelling work.

Friday 18 November

The London Sinfonietta gave the first of its two concerts with the conductor Diego Masson at the beautiful Théâtre Municipal in the late afternoon, opening with the only work in the festival to receive an ovation, George Benjamin's colourful *At First Light*. This was particularly popular among the schoolchildren who thronged the hall; Benjamin had been teaching locally before the festival and won

many friends. Even the hall's dry acoustic could not suppress the vivid sonorities of the work, inspired by paintings by Turner, and it was a clear success. Franco Donatoni's *Abyss* followed, for low instruments and soprano. Bass flute, bass clarinet, and cor anglais all contributed their pulsing colours to a rather grey piece, which I found, frankly, meaningless. Perhaps with further hearing its monochrome tone might become beguiling; but unfortunately the embarrassing, whimsical poem is a far greater stumbling-block.

The concert continued with Jacques Lenot's immodestly named *Utopia parafraisi*, which was, though attractive in parts, disappointingly amorphous. It culminated in a long series of solos, of which the piano's was, unexpectedly, the poorest, a kind of reminiscence of Skryabin's middle piano style. The score had led me to expect much more. The last work in the concert was Takemitsu's *Rain Coming*, a further work in his recent meditative, neoromantic style. Like the *Quatrains* and *Flock Descending into the Pentagonal Garden*, this piece seemed to me to subsume all inventiveness into a saccharine mannerism, disallowing any spontaneity of gesture.

The concert of that evening was, sadly, embarrassing. In the cavernous Palais des Sports the Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège gave a concert with its regular conductor Pierre Bartholomée (best known for his *Tombeau de Marin Marais* on the old Wergo disc of Pousseur's *Jeu de miroirs de Votre Faust*). They opened with Xenakis's *Shaar*, a work of singular sadness, which had a sobbing quality unlike anything I know. Other works of Xenakis are sad—*Mikka*, for example—but the ritualised, funereal atmosphere of *Shaar* was quite exceptional. The orchestra gave the work as peremptory and disorganised a performance as one could imagine; it is a testimony to the power of Xenakis's vision that against such odds so much sense emerged.

It was no great surprise to find a new work of Pousseur on the programme: we heard the première of *Trajet dans les arpents du ciel* for bass clarinet and orchestra. Apparently the piece boasts a complex compositional methodology; the musical fabric, though, as opposed to the intellectual outfitting, was pretty threadbare. The clarinettist worked very hard but the music remained incoherent.

Next, Maderna's Piano Concerto, one of the 'inside the piano' works of the late fifties. I found no merit in this, and regretted that a pianist of the brilliance of Claude Hélfier should have to spend his time on it. But I was scolded for this view and reminded that after the rigid post-Webernism of the earlier fifties such music as this was liberating.

Finally we heard York Höller's *Traumspiel*. First I should say that I am extremely suspicious of the sensibility of a man who can set in German translation words by Strindberg concerning characters from Indian myth; the result of this cultural random shuffle is not the universality that Höller is, presumably, after. His aloof self-importance and the absurd claims made for him seem to have stunned observers into a complete lack of discernment. Perhaps the very familiarity of the sub-Bergian gestures of the vocal and orchestral writing and the almost clichéd bell sounds on tape ingratiated the piece with the audience: for me Höller remains a man with nothing to say, but very accomplished in his pastichery.

A 'Nocturne' dedicated to the work of François Bayle ended the evening but I was unable to attend.

Saturday 19 November

I was also unable to attend a concert of music by Jacques Calonne, Jean-Yves Bosseur, and Vinko Globokar (whose piece was for perambulating brass—*La tromba e mobile*). Following this the London Sinfonietta gave the second of its pair of concerts with Diego Masson at the Théâtre Municipal. The first piece was my *Énoncé*, gratifyingly performed in the unhelpful acoustic. The concert continued with a real baffler: Michel Decoust's Sinfonietta. Dauntingly unlistenable, it consisted of barely playable but very dull stretches of mostly slow music, with an opening that parodied the pointillistic sound-world (rather as does Schuller's *Little Blue Devil*). The difficulty of the parts, especially those for flute and horn, is of an order verging on the diabolic, though no trace of this was evident to the ear—a case of a composer's spite to his players. At the end Decoust failed to acknowledge his applause, further deepening the mystery—altogether an odd happening. The local paper referred to the piece as 'Kagelian' which is to dignify it.

The concert ended with an unexceptionable performance of Boulez' *Le marteau sans maître*, Sarah Walker taking the solo part, as she had in the Donatoni *Abyss*.

Later that evening Philip Glass gave a concert, which I lacked the stamina to attend.

Sunday 20 November

On this final day only one concert took place, besides an airing of music by local young composer Philippe Boivin, who is now one of the few composers who can claim to have had a piece played in a railway station! We heard the Orchestre Philharmonique de Lorraine under Luca Pfaff playing two works: *Drumphony* by Thomas Kessler and the First Symphony of Carlos Roqué Alsina. The Kessler work continued his exploration of technology-assisted natural sounds and rhythms. The percussionist Jean-Pierre Drouet played with two beaters on the sides of a cylindrical woodblock, flexatone style, while pressing the end of the block down into a tenor-drum head, thus producing both resonance and pitch fluctuation. The resulting sounds were then processed and variously transformed with a Fairlight computer, which Drouet himself controlled. This rattling continuum was enriched by orchestral music reminiscent of the string writing in early Xenakis, much rhythmic detail but little bloom. The woodblock was eventually replaced by a small domed gong, which was similarly treated by rotating it on its dome on the drum while still using the calipered beaters: this small colouristic change did awaken the sound-world of the piece. Kessler clearly has no doubt about his aims and no problems in achieving them: I wish I could be more sensitive to the end product. Nevertheless, the initial thrust of the piece is engaging, and some of the immense problems entailed in writing for percussion and orchestra are here tackled ambitiously and imaginatively. Had Kessler omitted the computer the piece would be as successful and no less interesting. The orchestra played with gratifying clarity, and energy appropriate to the piece.

The Alsina Symphony was characterised by a problematic toing and froing between idioms. At times it inhabited a late-fifties 'avante-garde', expressionist world, at others it indulged in a self-consciously ersatz South-Americanism. There were three soloists: Pierre-Yves Artaud on flutes, Pierre Strauch, the india-rubber cellist, and a delightful singer called Elizabeth Nouaille-Degorce. This trio,

however, was conspicuously under-utilised. There was a certain awkward beauty in the grandness of the work, but as a whole the impression was curiously gauche. Pfaff conducted these two fairly demanding works with an imposing hauteur.

To end the festival Jean-Pierre Drouet gave the première of *Radiomanie* by Guy Reibel. This piece had the percussionist responding with varying degrees of freedom to a prepared tape, which initially purported to be a radio news broadcast, and then slowly became transformed. I understand that the transformations, which were primarily syllabic, involved quite sophisticated—and funny—French word-play, and I cannot pretend to have followed it all. The percussion part was anything but sophisticated: Drouet was, I suppose, meant to be practising, so routine were his gestures: unfortunately as the tape part became increasingly animated there was no corresponding crescendo in the percussion playing, which remained uninteresting to the last. The piece was fun for 5 minutes, dreary for 15, and exasperating for 32. 'I am destroyed' said someone. The audience applauded long after I left the hall.

The Metz programme shows the risks of constructing a season almost entirely out of commissions. Many of the pieces were hastily made (I suspect) and many showed common manifestations of corner-cutting. But some good pieces stood out, the Bancquart Symphony, Xenakis's *Shaar*, and, arguably the exploratory *Drumphony* by Kessler, which was certainly the first percussion-and-orchestra piece I have ever heard that is authentically thought-through and musical. Also, it was said that the British contingent made a good showing. Metz is a considerable event and should be taken as seriously by the musical world as it is by its organisers and the town itself. Evidence of the importance the directors attach to the festival's role emerges from their decision to hold the 1984 event a month earlier than usual, in October, so as to accommodate the world première of the complete *Repons* of Boulez.