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Citation

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A Tale Told:
A brief appreciation of the music of Roger Marsh

Roger Marsh occupies a curious position in British musical life. On the one hand, his works are fairly frequently performed (*Dum*, for example, has been done around the world, and *Not A Soul But Ourselves* has received over 100 performances) and yet, on the other hand, they are not 'well-known' in the conventional sense. The general public, if it thinks about him at all, places him in the 'ghastly modern music' category (his orchestral piece *Still* was greeted with characteristic indifference in Liverpool recently by an audience who had come to hear some classical music), yet the 'modern-music' world maintains a somewhat sceptical position about his work too, usually deploying a series of easy put-downs in order effectively to dispense with his music. Small wonder then that, initially at least, Roger Marsh has a tendency to define himself in terms of negative images of the world, in the same way that Wittgenstein pointed to everything *but* an object in order to define that object.

Marsh, then, dislikes modern settings of texts in which the words are inaudible, or set in an unsympathetic way. Particularly high in this category of dislikes is the kind of setting for piano and voice in which the two 'instruments' doggedly follow their own purely musical paths, and both the writing and mode of delivery suggest that the vocal part might as well be set to 'la'. He dislikes the encumbrance of tradition, the detritus of culture which seems to oblige audiences to evaluate theatrical work in terms of Chekhov and Shakespeare and musical work through Monteverdi and Beethoven. He dislikes redundancy of musical and theatrical gesture, preferring every element of a work to be to the fore and meaningful. He prefers not to be seen as a composer seeking an established position or a conventional celebrity. In sum, he is not ambitious, except for the content of the works themselves which, as we shall see, is both condensed and fragile, like poetry.

Many of the arguments used against Marsh are familiar and well-worn simplifications. As a product of the celebrated Wilfred Mellers era at York University (to which he has recently returned as a lecturer), then a student at San Diego and then a lecturer at Keele University, he has acquired the generally derisory label of 'University composer', presumably implying a certain cosiness and academicism. Marsh, however, sees the academic environment as a liberating force, allowing time and resources for composition and buying the freedom to write in a way untrammeled by commercial constraints. That this influence rubs off on his students is something to which I can attest: in 1981 I, along with John Abram (now resident in Canada) was the first student to take an M.A. in Composition at

Keele under Roger Marsh. The fact that my music was, and still is, completely different from his in every respect in no way hampered the progress of this valuable experience.

The label 'the English Berio' which has occasionally been applied to Marsh also reveals a shallow understanding of his work. He has always been keen to acknowledge his sources, where appropriate, and sometimes his work does have strong parallels with Berio, but even in these cases the spirit of the music is very different from Berio's brand of European eclecticism. Marsh has a distinctive personal voice which shows itself through the delicate tracery of the musical materials, frequently more by implication than direct statement.

The most obvious characteristic of this voice, in both musical and mixed-media works, is 'theatricality'. This really takes the form of an intense focus upon gesture heightened by the exclusion of peripheral activity, be it visual or musical. The gesture itself may be more or less decorative, but its crucial function is to be meaningful within the still frame of the work. This idea applies as much to the purely musical works as it does to works of so-called 'music-theatre', a genre in which theatrical presentation serves to emphasize the musical gestures and to maintain the illusion of a single, self-sufficient, non-referential statement. Concomitant with this idea is the abandonment of tradition or, at least, the creation of a new tradition of music-theatre which owes something to Beckett's more visual plays and to Oriental theatre.

An early example of this is the piece *Dum*, composed in 1972 and revised in 1977. This is scored for solo performer and calls for some rudimentary props: a lectern, a saucepan-lid, a small bell concealed inside one of two metal buckets which also contains fistfuls of nuts and bolts, a hammer and a tam-tam. The work's origins lie in an earlier piece, *Dum's Dream*, in which an orchestra surrounds a curious box which is festooned with junk objects. Gradually the box comes to life as the character within – Dum – rattles his cage and rails against his environment. The theme of prisoner is continued in *Dum* itself, where the protagonist is portrayed as a human fly trapped in a web of poetic memory and despair. This effect is achieved through a fragmentation of a number of 'found' texts: *Grace* by Ralph Waldo Emerson; John Donne's sonnet *Batter My Heart*; Christina G. Rossetti's *Despised and Rejected*; a Hymn to the Virgin and Dante's *Purgatorio* Canto XII; *The Hill* by Rupert Brooke and The Lord's Prayer in Greek, Italian and English. The following example gives a good picture of the way in which these texts are treated:

Example 1
Roger Marsh: *Dum*, p. 7.

As also we   h__a   WHO IS THIS THAT CALLS ?!
(ff)   f__o Give! Nay__!
(mf)   (f)   (mf)

n__? Give! Nay__! I am deaf as are my walls!   that ss__pa s__tΛ s__
(mf) (f) (ff)   (mf)

-(c)ease crying for I will not h_ear Others?! Others?! What? Indeed! that I, should, m_? hungry?
(f) (very ill tempered)   (calm)   (ill tempered....)

Feed! I will not open!   And r__ing! Trouble me no more! Λ
(yelling)   (mf)   Bell: (f) (f) >
                                      (back into bucket)

Go on! Footsore? No! I WILL NOT RISE AND OPEN!   But   Λ   Give us this
(ff)   (fff)   (mf) (mp) day our...
                                                        (mumbled, fast)

The notation here is familiar to students of contemporary music and even dates the work fairly accurately. Perhaps the only unusual indications are the large dots in bars 3, 4 and 9 of the example. These relate to a theatrical gesture: Dum is seated clutching a metal bucket full of metal objects, to his right on the floor sits another metal bucket. At each dot he hurls a handful of metal objects into the second bucket, producing a loud metallic crash. This passage contains another visual gag (bar 8), namely the little bell, the appearance of which comes as a surprise in the context of a lot of noise and shouting. The texts are jumbled throughout the work and Example 1 shows their occasional dislocation into pure syllabic vocalisations of phonemes (e.g. bars 2 and 4), often moving into phonetic script. Finally, note the brief appearance of a section of the Lord's Prayer at the very end of the

example. This familiar text runs through this section (and, indeed, through the whole work in various languages), fragmented but not distorted, and adds to the fervent character of the performance. In fact, the prayer sticks in Dum's throat – he has particular difficulty with 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them . . .'

The various performances of *Dum* that I have seen tended to emphasize different aspects of the protagonist's character. Alan Belk reminded me irresistibly of that most famous Dum – the one twinned with Dee in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there* – the sudden, irrational, changes of mood and the bumptious delivery suggestive of the refrain:

Nohow!
Contrariwise!

The composer's own interpretation is more tortured, a result as much of his physical appearance as of his awareness of Dum's apparently horrific predicament. But the final impression left by the work (and this is a theme to which I shall return) is of a *poem*. It has its roots in the Dada sound – poems of Schwitters and Ball, with their fragmentation of text into pure vocal sound. It shares their style of presentation: aggressive, hectoring and 'theatrical' in a crude way. It is also shot through with poetry at its very sources and, despite the fragmentation, something of the flavour of each of the 'found' poems comes through. More important than these characteristics, though, is the sensitive way in which Marsh has shaped his material, balancing events by careful notation, providing a sequence of sonic and visual imagery and creating a rhetorical tone which is emphasized by the use of lectern and gavel.

Rhetoric and its antithesis – muttering – form the basis of Marsh's most famous work *Not A Soul But Ourselves*. Marsh has recounted his disappointment when, having tracked down a recording of James Joyce reading the 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' episode of *Finnegans Wake*, he heard the writer employing a standard rhetorical style of reading, intoning or declaiming the text which purports to represent the gossip or chatter of Irish washerwomen on the banks of the Liffey. Originally written for the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble of California, but latterly performed and recorded with some success by Electric Phoenix, Marsh's piece reinstates both the Irish accent and the gossipy style. Here the delivery is more intimate than *Dum* and, despite the precise notation, more casual, even lending itself to a theatrical version made by the group Vocem which sets the work in a pub. However, as with so many of Marsh's works, the success of the piece relies enormously upon the accuracy and sensitivity of the performance. Here, even more than in *Dum*, the music is delicate and fragile, made up of predominantly small vocal sounds, combined in carefully balanced and shifting aggregations of inflection, interspersed with silence. Take, for example, this passage:

Example 2
Roger Marsh: "Not a soul but ourselves . . . " , p. 9.

Here the consonant 't' is used to suggest the ticking of a clock (time-checks are a feature of the piece), and also as a means to mask other entries, each of which is clear in both sound and meaning. This clarity eschews subservient or 'accompanying' material and, once again, Marsh's poetic feel for balance and timing produces a structure in which events are carefully placed in time, like figures etched on glass. In this case the events tend to converge upon an ending which, in Marsh's opinion, accounts for the popularity of the work:

Example 3
Roger Marsh: "Not a soul but ourselves . . . ", p. 19.

This unification of the voices and the presence of simple but delightful harmony seems to reassure the listener not expecting such obvious 'tonal' material in a work of extended vocal techniques. That Marsh is still unsure about this ending is an interesting comment upon his attitude to his own work. His usual approach to a new composition is to consider the performers and then to deliver the sort of material which takes them outside their normal style or repertoire. This practice can backfire, as Marsh himself admits (it produced a certain amount of open hostility from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, for example), but is done in the sincere belief that worthwhile musical activity is only possible through the creation of something new, extraordinary; something perilous for the performer, composer and audience. Marsh has a fondness for stark, sometimes unpalatable, material which, whilst it may not exactly confront the listener, nonetheless leaves him or her feeling somewhat uneasy.

Since 1976, Marsh has been working on a large-scale piece of music-theatre which, despite his efforts, has so far failed to attract either funding or offers of performance. Entitled *The Big Bang*, it is a loose collection of pieces on mythical themes, in particular the Old Testament myth. Early pieces such as *Three Hale Mairies, A Psalm and a Silly Lovesong*, and even *Not A Soul But Ourselves* originate in this larger work. This is an important notion, since it points to the stylistic unity of much of Marsh's music. Like Beckett, many of the works minutely examine a limited amount of material and, viewed collectively, the works may be seen as varied elaborations of a central theme or idea. Initially, this was a kind of female personification of Love. All three of the pieces mentioned contain 'love choruses', sung by women, characterised by the rapidly repeated phrase 'luvaluvaluva . . .' or sometimes 'livaluvaliva . . .'. In a more recent work, *Delilah*, the character of Samson is portrayed through Delilah's own account. Gradually, though, these female statements have disappeared to be replaced by a more muscular, 'male' delivery.

The central focus of *The Big Bang* as it stands today is the character and life of King David. In Marsh's reading of the Old Testament, the political implications of the story of David are explored in the manner of a thriller. The closest model is Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, and there are some astonishing parallels between the two stories. It is important to note, however, that although there are many tales within *The Big Bang*, there is no overall narrative.

Marsh deals with the Biblical concept of ideal love, to which we all, supposedly, aspire, and the paradox of the low, even crooked, means we employ in its pursuit. The image of a congregation dutifully, and apparently sincerely, singing the words of Psalm 137 has always amused Marsh:

Blessed shall he be who takes thy little ones and dashes them against the rock!

He is also struck by the limitations to the knowledge of the David story shown by most churchgoers. It is rare to hear a sermon about the story of David and Bathsheba, for example, and virtually impossible to hear one in which the full facts are spelt out. Yet the Old Testament states them clearly enough.

The Song of Abigail (1986), which was first performed by Lontano with Frances Lynch as soloist, illustrates this neatly. After an introduction played by a solo violin, Abigail introduces herself and the story that is to follow thus:

Perhaps I should explain. The tale you are about to hear is a true story, and you can read it for yourselves in the first book of Samuel, chapter 25. It concerns a protection racket, and the manner in which David – shepherd, harpist, giant-killer and eventually King of Israel and Judah –, came to acquire the land and possessions of the wealthy Nabal. Chief among the chattels which David won for himself was Nabal's wife, the beautiful and intelligent Abigail – that's me. O.K?

When Nabal, who is mean, refuses to pay protection money to David, he sends messengers to demand payment. Nabal refuses and Abigail, seeing an opportunity to better her position, meets David 'accidentally' and offers him both gifts and herself, at the same time inviting his wrath upon Nabal. David accepts everything. When Abigail tells Nabal, the shock kills him, and so Abigail enters into a polygamous marriage with the King.

Marsh instructs Abigail to be played in a 'relaxed, friendly, confidential' way, with a 'natural, everyday, accent'. The work is subtitled 'a melodrama' and, for much of the time, the vocal writing is very close to speech. The ensemble of: flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, tuba, piano, percussion, violin, viola and cello, is lightly scored, with Marsh's usual concern for subtle instrumental sonority, minimal material and perpetual variation. Like many of the more recent works, *The Song of Abigail* contains much humour, in particular a witty section of cod Anglican-chant. This occurs at a crucial moment in the story, when Abigail pleads with David on her knees. The audience is aware, of course, that this pleading is something of a sham; we have formed a clear enough opinion of Abigail's character to recognise that she is attempting to ingratiate herself with a view to matrimony.

Example 4

Roger Marsh: *The Song of Abigail*, p. 41.

Notice the coy little unpitched interjections 'please Sir!' and 'Oh!' which break up the chant. Dramatically this passage is full of irony, on several levels, an irony achieved by a careful exposition of the characters' motives and a playful manipulation of the audience's expectations and knowledge. In fact, the lightness of treatment of such a violent story is in itself a dramatic irony. In many ways the subject of *The Big Bang* is chauvinism: Abigail's 'music-hall'-style delivery diminishes the significance of David's actions, accommodates them to the Sunday School, renders them tolerable as unfortunate means to a desirable end.

Within the kaleidoscope of tales which make up the whole cycle, numerous examples of such inversions appear: shorn Samson lies to a chorus of stamping women, a coquettish Delilah recounts her conquest and, most recently, in a move away from the Biblical context, a frustrated Alcestis is disappointed to be rescued by Hercules from the lure of Charon.

As the title suggests, *The Big Bang* begins with an explosion and expands through the various tales. Then, like *Finnegans Wake*, it cyclically contracts to the point from which it started. Most of the individual works, or tales, within it stand on their own, and some

important parts – in particular *Three Biblical Songs*, scored for baritone, soprano, female chorus and large ensemble – remain unperformed to date.

The presence of a piano in the *Song of Abigail* and the later *Music for Piano and Wind Instruments* comes as something of a surprise to those people familiar with Marsh's output. His penchant for delicate timbral combination and, one suspects, his dislike of the tradition associated with piano repertoire, usually leads him to write for harp if an instrument of that type is required at all. However, in response to a self-criticism that his music lacks harmonic richness and a 'layered' texture, he has gradually increased his use of the piano. This has culminated recently in his first work for solo piano: *Easy Steps* (1987), written for Anthony Williams. Despite its construction from a kind of note-row, and despite the painstaking way in which Marsh built up some of the more vigorous passages, the work is surprisingly pianistic, unintentionally seeming to evoke Scriabin in its harmony and Liszt, or even – in a small way – Sorabji, in some of its textures.

The first page of the score contains the bulk of the material to be examined later in the work:

Example 5   Roger Marsh: *Easy Steps*, p. 1.

The thick, immovable chords of the last three bars contain some of the notes of the sixteen-note row (which divides into three unequal parts of eight, three and five notes) within which the interval of a minor

third predominates. This interval also features in the main melodic motif which opens the work.

An example from later in the piece will show how this material is presented:

Example 6   Roger Marsh: *Easy Steps*, p. 6.

The addition of a Scriabinesque left-hand motif to the thick chords and the transformation of the rapid, arpeggiated figures into a flourish at the end of each two-bar phrase both thickens and 'beefs up' the texture. Marsh's characteristic technique of near repetition of such short blocks of material contains enough variation to maintain interest, whilst the prevailing non-functional dominant, or rather extended-dominant, harmony, does not propel the piece forward in a conventional sense, but seems to hold the gestures in a state of suspended animation, active yet unresolved, muscular without being really menacing. Marsh is keen to emphasize that he sees this and other recent works as representing a real progression from earlier material. As I have already mentioned, he is aware of the fact that many of his works, being 'single-image' pieces, rely upon extreme accuracy of performance and are vulnerable to the slightest insensitivity on the part of the performer. He is also aware that, in a number of cases, fairly straightforward musical devices (e.g. accompaniments, drones, etc.) could be employed to bind and support the central idea. His decision not to employ these means is indicative of his thinking about the essence of that idea. In *Easy Steps* and other recent works, however, he has set out to create a more robust structure which nonetheless does not include redundant or meaningless gesture. Rather, the gestures are 'layered' carefully to create a kind of gestural polyphony.

With characteristic frankness, Marsh confesses that he feels 'something is missing' from his work. One senses this missing 'something' is what leads him on to the next composition. In my discussions with him, he has always been at pains to point out the unwillingness of his music to fit into conventional categories. *Dum*, for example, he refuses to see as music at all, arguing hotly that it is theatre, in the same way that Beckett is theatre, apart from the Shakespearean tradition, sufficient unto itself.

Yet, to my mind, the question of categories – music, theatre, music-theatre and so on – is ultimately of secondary importance to the nature of the works themselves. After one has absorbed the visual impact of the disembodied, luminous mouth in Beckett's *Not I*, for example, the greatest interest remains *what* the mouth says, *how* it says what it says and *when* it says what it says. One is left with an impression of words, a stream of words, punctuated with silence, mouth open, mouth shut.

Roger Marsh is a composer with an acute sense of balance, a feeling for proportion, an ear for sonority and, above all, an accuracy and exquisiteness of *timing*. If his work must be squeezed into an existing category, I would consider it closer to poetry than anything else. Indeed, Marsh shares many of the attributes of a poet: he is something of an outsider, his language is condensed, heightened and loaded with meaning; the delivery is frequently rhetorical or, at least, there is always a 'tone of voice'. Poetry is not as common as might be expected in contemporary music, but its authenticity may be tested by its tendency to linger in the brain long after the actual performance is ended.