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3rd March : Barber Institute of Fine Arts.
(University of Birmingham).

Concert of Works by Bach, Foure, Schubert and the first performance of John Casken's 'Improvisations on a theme by Piet Mondrian", given by the University Chamber Orchestra.

John Casken's work was written for the orchestra last year between October and December. The "theme" of the improvisations, a painting entitled "Red, Yellow and Blue" by the modern Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, provides, according to the composer, little more than a spring-board for the composer's imagination and musical "improvisations". Indeed, Mr. Casken asserts that any coherent parallels between the elements of the piece and the three colours suggested by the Mondrian painting are to be understood as merely superficial relationships between the improvisations and the precise colouristic elements of the "theme".

The performance was fluent and convincing, on the whole, with pleasing interpretations of the beautiful solo writing for flute and oboe, and sensitive string, piano, harp and percussion playing. The work itself seemed sombre for the most part, and cold and sinister for the rest. If I may, in spite of the composer's notes, be allowed the comparison with colours, the pervading feeling was of steel blue (especially suggestive in the chords at the beginning for piano and lower strings) with occasional tints of pale yellow in the "sinister" and rather weird sections e.g. the oboe solos towards the middle of the work. Although the "Improvisations" were framed in one continuous movement, there was a fairly clear division of the work into two parts, whilst a restatement of the opening material formed a fitting and pleasing coda.

While I must admit that I was not greatly moved by the work as a whole (although I cannot claim to be in a position to make a complete assessment of its content after only one hearing) there were elements and whole sections which I found evocative and gripping. I admired the appropriate, if unusual, orchestration, as well as the use of certain effects (such as the fairly frequent use of "Col legno" in the lower strings and the parallel trilling and isolated passages on piano and celesta). A second hearing would certainly be appreciated.

J. CHRISTOPHER GATISS

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