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29th October: Barber Institute of Fine Arts (University of Birmingham)

Lunchtime concert of works by Elgar, Tippett and Maxwell Davies, given by students from Birmingham University conducted by Keith Potter

Elgar's Serenade for Strings is one of those works which, for a successful performance, requires the production of that smooth string tone only produced when all the instruments are playing exactly together. Although the orchestra was able to produce this sort of tone for much of the work, its disintegration in certain exposed passages did spoil the performance a little. Nevertheless, it was generally solid and quite enjoyable.

The success in performance of the two Tippett madrigals lay in direct proportion to the musical strength of the two compositions themselves. "The Windhover", full of rather excessive fuzzy counterpoint with too much attention paid to word-painting and insufficient regard for achieving a sturdy overall structure, was not as well performed as "The Source", a far more direct and forceful work.

Judging from its position on the programme, the work by Peter Maxwell Davies was, I presume, meant to be regarded as the principal work of the concert. If this was so, then Davies' Seven In Nomine proved to be a miserable anti-climax. Davies' basic problem, like that of many other contemporary composers, is his misunderstanding of the function of counterpoint. Counterpoint is meaningless unless it is the means of providing comprehensibility to the harmony. If the harmonies of a work are deliberately controlled there is no structural need for a contrapuntally controlled texture. In this context counterpoint becomes irrelevant and artificial. Davies proves to be a sheep in wolf's clothing, a conservative masquerading as a radical. His counterpoint obscures the simple, quite unexceptional tonal and modally influenced harmony, rather than give comprehensibility to a complex harmonic structure.

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