

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Friend, Howard C. 1972. 'January 17th: The Roundhouse, London'. *Contact*, 4. pp. 25-27.
ISSN 0308-5066.

January 17th: The Roundhouse, London

BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pierre Boulez.

Boulez began a season of lecture-concerts on January 17th for the BBC - a venture clearly intended to "educate" people to contemporary works, where they would, otherwise, listen perhaps incomprehendingly, applying their various preconceptions concerning Music and Art etc. etc. Before each piece, Boulez, like a didactic big-Daddy, informed the audience of the scoring, what method of conducting was required, and gave a sample of background, in a manner which everyone must have found eminently unsatisfactory - to Boulez's obvious credit. I feel that Covent Garden deserves a similar lesson on how to listen to "Pelleas" or

January 17th: The Roundhouse, London

BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pierre Boulez.

Boulez began a season of lecture-concerts on January 17th for the BBC - a venture clearly intended to "educate" people to contemporary works, where they would, otherwise, listen perhaps incomprehendingly, applying their various preconceptions concerning Music and Art etc. etc. Before each piece, Boulez, like a didactic big-Daddy, informed the audience of the scoring, what method of conducting was required, and gave a sample of background, in a manner which everyone must have found eminently unsatisfactory - to Boulez's obvious credit. I feel that Covent Garden deserves a similar lesson on how to listen to "Pelleas" or

"Parsifal". But whatever one's misgivings about the necessity of the Artist to explain his creation, the concert was advertised as being accompanied by discussion, so the audience was, obviously, going to be receptive to such treatment, and was even supplied with a sheet of paper on which to write questions for Daddy to answer after the concert.

The works handled and discussed were all British premieres, commencing with Bruno Maderna's "Juilliard Serenade", then Justin Connolly's "Tetramorph" for 20 strings and recorded pyrotechnics, whilst the showpiece was Stockhausen's "Mixtur". Maderna, (an associate of Stockhausen some years ago) confounded us shaggy, barbaric Britons with a sophisticated, complex, gimmick-less instrumental piece written (and consequently conducted) in three different ways: in conventional notation, improvisatory parts around supplied material, and the handling, by instrumentalists, of certain parts intended for other players - the last two procedures intended to demonstrate characteristic and uncharacteristic sounds from each instrument. There was much internal repetition, as one would expect from variational writing, but, on first hearing, as even Daddy conceded, the work would not bring great rewards.

The main feature of "Tetramorph" (and we have the conductor's word for it) was the increasing homogeneity in the string writing, together with growing heterogeneity in the simultaneous scoring for electronically produced sounds. The work explained itself well, in contrast to the Maderna, although its substance was questionable. The amplified sounds were not interesting on their own, and coupled with the almost consistently rhythmic string-scoring, they prompted the remark, from a member of the audience during the discussion, that the piece "sounded like listening to Tippett in a thunderstorm". Much to the undoubted chagrin of that outspoken wag, Mr. Connolly (who was present) was immensely flattered. True enough, the two media did not blend successfully, but with the benediction of Boulez we may hear more of this promising composer.

If the performance (by recruited members of the BBCSO) was less than immaculate in the first half, "Mixtur" definitely suffered from flabby playing. Several Stockhausen-fingerprints were either ignored or bungled by lateness or lack of enthusiasm. Boulez's problem was that of holding together four separated orchestras - groups of vastly contrasting timbres - woodwind against brass and two string sections employing different techniques. The use of a ring modulator, whatever it did to enhance the existing sounds, ultimately made the result muddy, especially in the ensemble passages which dominate the work.

The final discussion - Boulez (now like Little Malcolm fighting the intellectual Eunuchs) requested questions specific to the given works. These questions were bound to be peripheral, as were the answers,

particularly when Daddy, when asked to discuss the serialism of the Maderna piece, replied "I don't know. I haven't analysed the piece to that extent".

Shut up, you ignoramuses! Go to college and learn the stuff for yourself instead of bothering me.

HOWARD C. FRIEND.