

contact

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February 28 and March 1 : Barber Institute, Birmingham

THE MATRIX

The Matrix plays music of our time. That needs qualifying; in these two concerts they played music spanning 2,000 years - the Matrix made it the music of our time. They have a remarkable way with old music. They have no interest in being the curators of museum pieces, but select that which suits their purposes and make it new again. Undoubtedly there is a negative side to this - as well as gaining in immediacy, subtlety is lost. The characteristic sound is hard, brilliant, even noisy, and rhythms are spiky and exaggerated. The Matrix make no pretence at "authenticity" - a Gabrieli canzone played on saxophones is more than slightly anachronistic. Yet it's a fine sound, right for the music - chunky and coarse or oily and smooth for contracted sections. The version of the Perotin Alleluia, raucous and extrovert, was probably completely unlike what the 13th century would have made of it, but it did present a miniature of the Middle Ages. Alan Hacker's rendering of the First Delphic Hymn on the first night took music about which we have only tentative knowledge and made something far from tentative - a hooting and shrilling clarinet solo.

Jazz, of course, with its improvisational format is also concerned with making old material new. The Matrix has the fine jazz player Tony Coe as a member. An original means of showing his talents was devised by playing two Gershwin Preludes "straight" on the piano (Ronald Lamsden) which sandwiched an unaccompanied sax solo by Coe. His soprano solo on the second night was superior to his alto on the first, but in both were the same breathy cascades of notes of amazing agility.

The pieces written for the group were Birtwistle's The Death of Orpheus and Elizabeth Lutyens's Vision of Youth. The Birtwistle is striking in its restrained use of the resources - pulsating held chords for three bar clarinets and simple patterns for piano (often plucked strings) and crotales formed the typical background to Jane Manning's vocal line which shifted rapidly between the various gradations between speech and song. The disturbing text by Peter Zinovieff is fully mirrored by the music - nothing much remained of Orpheus, just his skull, the music too is skeletal. A fine work.

The Lutyens work had its moments, particularly in the effective motto of 3 ascending, then descending triads which occurs throughout the first part and the gorgeous effect of the vocalise. But the second half, an evocation of the East, used a large battery of percussion and destroyed all that the beginning had built up with cheap chinoiserie.

Both the Birtwistle and Lutyens pieces used the three clarinets as equals. I wonder if this is a full exploitation of the Matrix's capabilities; the three clarinetists are, after all, very different in style - Francis Cristou has a conventional sound, Alan Hacker his own hard, bright sound with tremendous dynamic range, and Tony Coe a soft, deliberately breathy, jazz tone. I should like to see a work written for them which fully used these characteristics.

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