

# contact

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

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

## Citation

Cowie, Leroy. 1973-1974. 'Review of October 14th: Young Vic, London'. *Contact*, 7. pp. 42-46. ISSN 0308-5066.

October 14th: Young Vic, London.  
 BERTRAM TURETZKY, with  
 NANCY TURETZKY and BARRY GUY.

A double bass recital in London is still a rare event and often characterised by elements of freakish comedy. The causes for this sad fact are, on the one hand, the inadequate repertoire, and, on the other, the shortage of players willing to undertake the tremendous hard work needed to unlock the subtle and mysterious beauties of the instrument. This was a pioneering event in technical innovation for all string instruments, whether plucked or bowed, for the many composers in the audience (Justin Connolly, Martin Dalby, Bernard Rands, Paul Chihara among others), and above all it was the most futuristic double bass recital ever attempted in London. It was absolutely right that the recital should be preceded by an informal talk in which Turetzky outlined his career and the evolution of his ideas.

The challenge of finding a repertoire and musical language for the instrument was placed in an American context which obviously fascinated the audience. Turetzky's first interest was jazz and his first professional work came in that field. When he later joined a symphony orchestra he refused to be intimidated by the European heritage as understood in the USA. The stiff German attitude that music is good for you, the Italian belief that Verdi is better than Beethoven and the arrogant provincial French belief in their own superiority - all this, according to Turetzky, made little impression on his search.

Casual work in a Greek band fired his imagination to explore the technique of Eastern stringed instruments, especially the up and down bow pizzicato. Another landmark was the suicide of a close friend, a composer who was condemned never to hear his own works played. With his marriage in 1959 to an outstanding flautist who shared his ideals for a new kind of music, the stage was set for the next chapter - the most important in double bass history.

The period of working closely with composers from all over the States began with many letters to them. Some who ridiculed the idea at first later submitted works after hearing a Turetzky recital, others wrote without being asked. The most successful pieces have been those written in close collaboration.

Turetzky's repertoire is dramatically different from anything heard in Europe. Pizzicato passages enjoy equal prominence to arco, and employ bravura, tasto and ponticello, chords and slapped effects. The 'pulled' harmonic can raise the string a semitone and is best achieved by sliding from the fundamental note to the new harmonic. The inspiration for

this came from attending a session of Charlie Mingus, the famous jazz bassist. A most curious effect was achieved by sliding the left hand finger down a string and plucking with two fingers on either side. This results in a high-pitched rising scale as well as the expected descending one: in short, a two-way glissando. Various percussive effects using the bass as a drum and the hands as sound generators, as well as particles of sounds produced col legno on different parts of the string, were demonstrated.

Our attention was drawn to the different effects obtainable by various wooden mutes. A total muted effect was only obtained by a metal one - a phenomenon which indicates that orchestral bass sections should have standard mutes in order to obtain the exact colour in any passage.

Turetzky humorously explained why he preferred to find harmonics near the nut, rather than near the bridge, since 'they sound fine on a clear day'. He played a short, melodic piece called Recitative and Aria by Alan Hoffman with an attractive passage in harmonics occurring twice.

Despite the many areas of discussion, Turetzky said at the start that the lecture form was dead unless given by someone very brilliant, and while talking he held the instrument as if it were part of himself. He prevented his sincerity from being overstated by his laconic wit and by the gentle irony of his many anecdotes from personal experience. But beneath the self mockery and humour the audience could see the patient determination, built up over years of searching: of building pieces out of difficult material, then recitals out of that. His clear statement of ideals revealed the full intensity of a lonely thinker.

The first piece in the recital itself Spectra for double bass and flute alternating with piccolo and alto flute by Robert Felciano. Felciano, a student of Milhaud and Dalla Piccola, wrote this work in 1967. There are five sections, separated by an interlude and double bass cadenza. After dramatic exchanges between the two instruments, an idea with staccato repeated notes occurs twice. A meditative passage using many 'pulled' harmonics, pianissimo ponticello sounds and restrained miniature motives is presented and pleasingly blended with flute glissandi. The mood is interrupted by a fast pizzicato passage and further abrupt exchanges but a subtle sensuous passage on the alto flute restores a meditative atmosphere and the work ends with a cunning pianissimo harmonic effect which challenges the listener to know which of the two instruments is playing.

Dialogue for unaccompanied double bass by Elliot Schwartz is a music-theatre work making much use of the spoken word and lighting effects -

hence Turetzky's joke of calling it his 'psyche-delicatessen piece'. It begins and ends in total darkness with long crescendos on sustained tremolo notes. The piece emerges as a divertimento and the mood is dictated by the vocal, extramusical and visual aspects, the double bass part supplying the punctuation. In fact, the bass pleads, half way through, for a bel canto solution to the conflicts. This is dismissed by a scurry of theatrical and verbal ideas building momentum until the performer shouts his first name. Much fun was had with the lighting in helping to articulate the structure of the piece through colours and shades, and its overall effectiveness indicates that more music of this kind should be written.

McPherson's Rant (1971), a duet for flutes and bass by Martin Dalby, was prompted by an Arts Council commission for Rodney Slatford, and was one of a series of commissions for solo ensemble instruments involving the double bass. Rodney Slatford, himself an outstanding soloist, publishes - through his own Yorke Edition - double bass music of the past as well as the many works written for him. Martin Dalby, Head of Music for BBC Scotland, has composed a great deal of music in a short space of time, and this extrovert piece demonstrated great individuality. The inspiration is an anonymous folk-tune which the cattle thief McPherson is said to have improvised before he was hanged on the gallows. Also well hidden in the piece are McKenzie's Reel and Feargan's Strathspey. Although indebted to Scots fiddle tradition, it is a virtuoso piece with subtle humour, exciting rhythms and interesting dialogues and counterpoints between the instruments. Nancy Turetzky, playing three flutes alternately tackled a ferociously difficult part with ease. Neither the many flutter tongue passages, harmonics, nor the sudden shifts from ff to pp seemed to cause her the least difficulty. A separate recital from Turetzky's distinguished partner would be very welcome. From the pieces by Dalby and Felciano it is clear that the musical possibilities of combining double bass and flute are rewarding and need further exploration.

Logs by Paul Chihara, the American-Japanese composer, was played by Turetzky with a four-track prerecorded tape of himself. This haunting work is part of a series of pieces inspired by wood and evokes an eerie world. The barely audible 'circular bowing' (the wood of the bow skimming the surface of the string, sounding like an ocean faintly lapping far away, or a human sigh) evokes an oriental sense of timelessness. The delicacy and miniaturism all contribute to the sense of repose - the sweet decay of logs rotting over the centuries in a forest where no-one has ever walked - and the long silence at the end of the work sustained the mood.

Kenneth Gaburo's Inside (1969) for solo double bass is an example of composer/performer collaboration. It is a quartet in the sense that

the piece is realised on four different levels - singing, playing, speech sounds and visual effects. The letters of the word Inside are taken separately and sung or spoken with the double bass. Despite the virtuosic demands of the singing part, this was a very tranquil work. Gaburo has also studied linguistics, and the composer's knowledge of phonetics showed an unusual ability to blend speech sounds with a virtuosic bass part. Despite its gentleness, it was clear that the work was the end-product of a long period of experimentation and refinement and its sense of repose came out of its completeness and perfection. It ended with an interrogative on the letter N.

Response with Memo 1 for two amplified basses by Bernard Rands provided the loudest event of the evening. Rands, a composer at York University, wrote Memo 1 for Barry Guy, who is also a composer. It has already received performances and broadcasts in this country, and the addition of Response, to be played in counterpoint with Memo 1 is a structural extension of the composer's original conception. Turetzky's expressive, rather than technical, approach to Memo 1 complemented Guy's complete freedom of sonic vocabulary. As volume was controlled by foot pedals the many bassists in the audience had to check carefully that what they heard matched what they saw. I felt that Rands had been provoked rather than inspired to write Response, as each entry Guy made intensified the conflict and, as the impetus of high speed pizzicato drove the piece on, one forgot the expressive qualities of the instrument. Had Liszt or Paganini been bass players, they might have sounded like Guy. The last climax, of symphonic proportions, was extraordinarily violent in character, with wood knocks and vocal shouts adding to the impression of two steam rollers, which had been out of control for some time, finally smashing spectacularly together in the best James Bond manner. It was a unique work and yet another area of pioneer research in which sonic material was used with great freedom and a good sense of proportion well understood by the performers. I cannot speculate where Guy's 'Fauviste' playing can lead to. But, by contrast, Turetzky's romantic approach to charting new lands in his voyage of discovery leads me to believe that he is best understood as a Renaissance man.

The last work, Ricercar a Trois by Robert Erickson, was played with two parts on tape and one part live. Although Erickson was a student of Krenek he is not a serial composer. His main interest has been in controlled improvisation and more especially in timbre, which is the subject of his book to be published shortly. It was clear from the opening pizzicato tremolando that this work could not have been written had Turetzky not existed. The abundance of pizzicatos used in every way made this Turetzky's Kreutzer Sonata. The bow made a spectacular showing in a passage of angry trills lurching over and under each other before

the final percussive passage. Drumming round the sides and shoulder of the bass brought the piece to an end. This was the best piece in the recital and moved freely in the oriental world of plucked instruments. This complex and mature work symbolises the new role of leadership that the double bass has taken from other instruments.

No bassist who has met Turetzky or one of his disciples has not been affected by this visionary idealism in some way. Now that his first visit to Europe is over, bass playing on this side of the Atlantic can never be the same again.

LEROY COWIE

(The next issue of CONTACT will contain an interview with Bertram Turetzky).

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