

# contact

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

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

## Citation

Roberts, David. 1976. 'Review of *Twenty British Composers*, Ed. Peter Dickinson and *British Music Now: A Guide to the Work of Younger Composers*, Ed. Lewis Foreman'. **Contact**, 13. pp. 49. ISSN 0308-5066.

TWENTY BRITISH COMPOSERS, edited by Peter Dickinson  
Chester Music, 1975 (£2.95)

BRITISH MUSIC NOW: A GUIDE TO THE WORK OF YOUNGER  
COMPOSERS,  
edited by Lewis Foreman  
Paul Elek, 1975 (£6.50)

#### DAVID ROBERTS

The John Feeney Trust was established by the will of a former editor of the *Birmingham Post* for the purpose of furthering various charities and causes connected with Birmingham. Beginning in 1955, the Trust has commissioned a series of orchestral works from British composers to be given their first performances by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. *Twenty British Composers* is issued in celebration of the first 20 years of the Trust's musical activities. The main part of this short book is taken up by essays on various topics from 13 of the commissioned composers, and transcripts of radio interviews with two others (Bliss and Berkeley). An appendix gives lists of works for most of the composers.

There is nothing here of world-shaking importance, but the rather oddly-assorted collection does make interesting reading. Considered purely on their literary merit, Tippett's personal view of English musical life and Rawsthorne's witty and urbane comments on film music are the most memorable, but most of the pieces shed light upon their authors. Although the younger composers are represented (Bennett, Crosse, Dickinson, McCabe), it is the older and, by and large, more conservative end of the spectrum which predominates. From this direction come various rumblings on the current state of music, Robert Simpson's fulminations being the most violent and embittered. It is disappointing that when composers make attacks upon one another they so often do so without naming names; it would give us a much better insight into their personal blindspots if they did.

*British Music Now* is a title which raises one's hopes for a much-needed comprehensive survey of contemporary British musical life. But the actual concern of the book, as the subtitle discloses, is the very much narrower subject of British composers born since January 1, 1924. The title may well have been chosen for its brevity and memorability, but its implication that composition is the only significant form of musical activity is no less regrettable.

Composers are apportioned space according to the editor's view of their status. A full chapter is devoted to each of ten composers (Bedford, Bennett, Birtwistle, Blake, Davies, Goehr, Maw, Stevenson, Tavener, Wood); six more share chapters in pairs (Hoddinott/Mathias, Leighton/McCabe, Musgrave/Crosse); while a further ten are allocated from one to three pages apiece (Cary, Connolly, David Ellis, Harvey, Headington, Holloway, Milner, Payne, Shaw, Roger Smalley). 67 also-rans are treated to a dictionary-style listing of 'Other Composers' at the end of the book.

No doubt we shall all have our own opinions as to who should be promoted or relegated in this league table. But it is more than a personal predilection which leads me to say that the whole scheme is rendered absurd by the consignment of Cornelius Cardew to the 'Other Composers' section. Grave doubts must be held about an editorial policy which leaves almost entirely out of account one of the most important and influential figures of the past 15 years.

In justifying his omission from the main text of Cardew and all other experimental composers except David Bedford, Foreman advances this argument: "I believe that most of these changing groups [of avantgarde and experimental composers] may be important by their example but their actual music will amount to very little. They will probably be seen historically as more important as pamphleteers than as composers *per se*." Implicit in the argument is a widespread, though usually unspoken doctrine, one which is as dangerous as it is wrongheaded: it is that the importance of a composer or a piece of music resides solely in the value which posterity will eventually place upon him or it. The danger of such a viewpoint is that it leads to a total abnegation of critical responsibility towards contemporary music: since the arbiter of quality is time itself, we need neither listen to nor attempt to evaluate new music — quality will out in the end. The door is also opened to a critical shamanism of the type shown in the quotation — a pretended insight into the mind of the future. Certainly there are powerful arguments to be heard against Cardew et al, but let us hear them; to deny altogether the significance of the experimentalist movement in the contemporary musical scene is to distort the entire picture.

This aversion to the experimentalists leads Foreman to give details of the work of Christopher Hobbs, Michael Parsons, Hugh Shrapnel and Howard Skempton not under their own places in the alphabetic listing of 'Other Composers', but as subsections of the Cardew article. This anomalous treatment is not only misleading but gratuitously insulting, giving these quite individual composers the status of mere hangers-on.

The drawback of the composer-by-composer format is that each is dealt with in almost complete isolation from the others, with the result that no cohesive impression of 'British music now' emerges. We should have had at the very least an extended preface to fuse together the disparate elements. Again, the format lends itself most easily to the chronological survey of a composer's works, a treatment which is adopted with depressing uniformity by the contributors.

The volume is almost entirely devoid of music examples, which is a curious way of discussing unfamiliar music, and this leads to any number of attempts at purely verbal evocations of musical works, which rarely make interesting reading. The only chapter that does include musical illustrations is that on Peter Maxwell Davies, written by Stephen Arnold. This is certainly the most useful item in the book, and it is curious that no-one else was tackled in this way. Various writers do manage to produce readable and worthwhile results within the restrictions—Meirion Bowen, for instance, turns in an imaginatively-written piece on Harrison Birtwistle — but the book as a whole is unlikely to give much impression of the "exciting musical age" of which Foreman speaks in his introduction.

The usefulness of *British Music Now*, even with its severe limitations taken into account, is undeniable. It is a helpful tool to anyone who wishes to explore the subject further; the bibliography is reasonably full, the discography excellent. Though it is disappointing that the thing has not been done better, one should be grateful that it has been done at all.