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MARCH ON THE SOUTH BANK

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March was the most healthy month for contemporary music in London since last year's Proms. This desirable state of affairs was most evident on the South Bank where, apart from the continuation of the La Salle Quartet's complete cycle of Second Viennese quartets, there were two important concerts devoted to the works of single composers — Tavener and Messiaen — visits from Elliott Carter and Gyorgy Ligeti for performances of their own works, and the première of a Viola Concerto by the young British composer Simon Bainbridge.

This last concert, given by the London Sinfonietta under Michael Tilson Thomas at the QEH on March 21 was beset by practical problems, yet was in many ways the best of the month. The pitifully small but very enthusiastic audience settled back, or hunched forward over the few vast (in physical size only) scores available for the Concerto, which started only to stop again after an unnervingly late arrival by a member of the orchestra. Thomas made a good decision in restarting the work, ensuring the best possible performance; the tension created by this false start actually seemed to benefit the piece. Certainly the concentration from orchestra, soloist (Walter Trampler) and, not least, the audience was very intense. Bainbridge's musical style still shows the limitations of youth, but he has a quite astonishing ability to draw from a few ideas a dynamic and coherent formal whole. The technique of fanning out from a single note is by now familiar, but his wealth of colourful invention is less common. The soloist is, throughout the work, the main protagonist. In the first movement, however, he never overshadows the forever subtly changing colours in the orchestra. The second movement is in a variation form: a viola melody recurs to different accompaniments, the last a combination of the preceding two. The soloist is contrasted with two offstage violas who play complex melodic ostinati. The accompanying textures show a keen ear for delicate instrumental colour. First low strings with cor anglais, then low winds with brass and an ornate dialogue between solo viola and alto flute. Finally the soloist takes off into a virtuosic cadenza answered by vigorous orchestral flourishes which abruptly end the work. Bainbridge's musical voice is not radical but it is individual and promises good things for the future.

The second half of this concert nearly didn't happen at all due to the dearth of ondes martenot players in this country. John Morton being indisposed, Jeanne Loriot had to be imported to perform the part in Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*, arriving only in the interval. Though perfectly adequate it was perhaps easy to overrate a rather routine performance in the face of such drama.

Messiaen was given a 70th-birthday present of a retrospective concert by the BBC SO under Serge Baudo (RFH, March 29). While he was much moved by the two

ovations given him, he cannot have been so thrilled by the choice of programme. The highlight of the evening was Felicity Palmer's sensuous singing of *Poèmes pour Mi*, though the orchestral playing was nothing special. This was preceded by a rarity: the early *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* (1931). Although the inclusion of what is really a student work in a retrospective concert was perhaps unwarranted, it was interesting to hear many of Messiaen's later characteristics in embryo. The second half of the concert started with *Oiseaux exotiques*; this receives fairly regular performances here, and surely, with another performance to come at the beginning of May, we could have heard something else? The inclusion of the final work was sheer folly. *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* is not designed for, nor does it benefit from, a small concert-hall performance in which there was no attempt at the grandeur and spatial distribution that are essential to this work. There weren't even the stipulated pauses between movements. It was simply a bash through the notes. *Chronochromie*, for example, would have been a much better choice.

On March 1 Elliott Carter visited the RFH for a performance of his dense and uncompromising Piano Concerto. I must admit that I feared the worst after hearing members of the orchestra complaining that there had been too much time wasted on rehearsing one work and that it hadn't had enough rehearsal time for a good performance. In the event they really pulled it off, with Charles Rosen an inspired soloist and Charles Mackerras a perceptive director. Even in such a finely-judged performance as this, the work makes enormous demands on all concerned because of its dense textures and few moments of repose.

The 'pop' work in this concert, Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, slipped through the programming net again on March 31 in a concert of Hungarian music at the RFH, one of two concerts containing music by Gyorgy Ligeti. On March 20 Florian Kitt gave a virtuosic performance of the latter's very limited Cello Concerto. The later concert by the LPO under Elgar Howarth contained the much more rewarding Double Concerto for flute and oboe. The soloists, Martin Parry and Roger Winfield, made much of their rather traditional roles and the orchestra seemed to relish the bright sounds, particularly in the dialogues among the winds. This is players' music of the best kind, good to experience on all levels. When set alongside *San Francisco Polyphony*, as at this concert, it is clear that Ligeti's style is still developing. It is to be hoped that we soon get the chance to hear *Le Grand Macabre*, his new opera, in this country. It will be enlightening to hear how he forms a really large-scale structure.

On March 8 at the QEH the London Sinfonietta celebrated its tenth anniversary by repeating the work first performed at its inaugural concert, Tavener's *The Whale*. This work originally reached a very wide audience after its release by the Beatles' Apple label. Its direct style and mixture of fantasy and religious mysticism were very much things of the 60s, and though it still packs a punch, it has lost the gloss of radical brilliance that it wore then. The essentially confined and static structures are more obvious now. It is still dramatic, even stirring, but Tavener has moved on, or rather back, from the bombast of *The Whale* towards a style that was only hinted at in its more contemplative sections. The title of his new work, *Kyklike kinesis* is Greek for 'circular movement'. More broadly it is the 'circular movement bringing the soul back to God'. Scored for solo soprano and cello (superb performances from Elise Ross and Christopher Van Kampen) with small chorus and an instrumental group of twelve solo players, the work is in four approximately equal sections. An ethereal opening for soprano is followed by a cello section representing, by more agitated movement, the soul setting out on its journey. It is only in this section and the central part of the third section that the otherwise tranquil atmosphere of the work is disturbed. The last section is a cello echo of the opening soprano song over a chordal instrumental canon. There is just too much peace and calm about this piece, unless one can accept at face value the mystical background, in which case I imagine it could be stirring. Now that his musical style and vocabulary have been so far pared down it is hard to predict where Tavener might now be going. Static structures are very limiting, but at least Tavener has cleared the way to develop from them.