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MUSICA NOVA
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Such has been the success of Musica Nova in recent years that this previously triennial festival of contemporary music, jointly organised by the Scottish National Orchestra and the University of Glasgow, now takes place every two years. In 1981 it was 'under new management', as David Richardson (formerly General Administrator of the SNO) had left for the USA and Professor Frederick Rimmer of Glasgow University had retired since the last festival; their positions as joint directors with Sir Alexander Gibson have been taken over by their respective successors, Fiona Grant and Professor Hugh Macdonald.

Musica Nova is unique among British music festivals for, if nothing else, the far-sightedness with which it was conceived. Musica Nova '81, billed as Glasgow's 'Fifth International Festival of Contemporary Music', lived up to its name and to the festival's past record, with world premières of three commissioned orchestral works, four British premières of works by Lutosławski and Babbitt, and performances of a number of works by the five resident composers (several of which have rarely been heard in this country). Indeed, the main criticism must be that there were too many new works — particularly from the orchestral players' point of view — and too little time in which to rehearse them.

Unlike the last Musica Nova in 1979, when those attending opted for one composer's and/or performer's seminar groups to the exclusion of the others, this time there was one session with each composer and workshops with resident performers which everybody could attend. In fact no events coincided, though with the exception of three open rehearsals that were timetabled in the week's programme, orchestral rehearsals ran concurrently with other activities. This more straightforward arrangement (no doubt the result of comments made about the 1979 Musica Nova) was, in my opinion, a good thing, given the diversity of musical styles and personalities of the five composers. The two from abroad, for example, could hardly have been more different: the controlled aleatoricism of the music of Lutosławski, who appeared somewhat reserved in the seminar room, contrasted strongly with Babbitt's total serialism, and his controversial, witty — at times hilarious — remarks in seminars and in conversation. Sadly there was also a marked contrast in the standard of performance of the orchestral works by these two composers.

Lutoslawski was represented by four orchestral works: *Muzyka żałobna* (Funeral music; 1958); the Cello Concerto (1970), with Roman Jablonski as soloist; and British premières of *Five Songs after Poems by Kazimiera Iłłakowicz* (an early piece dating from 1956-7), and his latest work, *Novelette* (1979), in which Lutosławski appears to be moving in a new direction, though I found its sound-world not as 'novel' as one might be led to expect from the title. *Muzyka żałobna* was performed by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Wilfried Boettcher, and the other three works by the SNO with the composer as conductor. The relative simplicity of Lutosławski's music (compared with Babbitt's, for example), the clarity of his notation, and the economy and precision of his conducting secured good performances.

Babbitt, however, did not fare so well. His *Relata I* (dating from 1965) and *Ars combinatoria* (1981) were both receiving their British premières, the former given by the SNO under its principal conductor, Sir Alexander Gibson, and the latter by the BBC SSO conducted by Nicholas Cleobury. I attended rehearsals as well as performances of both these works, from which it was abundantly clear that Nicholas Cleobury was much more at home with a Babbitt score than was Alexander Gibson. Although neither orchestra was familiar with Babbitt's music, Cleobury did manage to achieve a reasonably accurate performance, given the rehearsal time available, whereas *Relata I* under Gibson was at best unsatisfactory, at worst chaotic! One cannot blame Gibson entirely for this: in an article on *Relata I,* Babbitt recommends an absolute minimum of 40 hours of rehearsal time,[1] which is obviously financially impractical in this country at present, but the work should have been allocated many more hours of rehearsal than it was. *Ars combinatoria* was written for and first performed by the University of Indiana School of Music Festival Orchestra, who were able to devote the necessary time to it; from Cleobury and the BBC SSO we got at least a fair impression of this multi-textured and highly exciting new work.

The music of the three British composers, who each received a commission to write an orchestral work for the SNO, presented the same contrasts — and posed the same problems. Here it was Jonathan Harvey's complex new work, *Whom Ye Adore* (1981), that suffered from inadequate preparation. This is the first piece in which Harvey has worked on a large scale with the concept of symmetrical pitch organisation about a central axis. The axis moves from low to high pitches in what the composer describes as 'a series of ten upliftings' (programme note). This technique, dispensing with the notion of a bass at the bottom of the texture, gives the music a floating quality which, along with great subtlety in the use of instrumental colour and quarter-tone tunings, makes for a work of extraordinary beauty. Unfortunately the SNO's performance under Gibson did it no justice and I hope we shall have an opportunity to hear it again soon — after sufficient rehearsal!

The new works by Alexander Goehr and Judith Weir presented the players with comparatively straightforward parts and consequently were given better performances. Weir's *Ballad* for baritone (Stephen Varcoe) and orchestra (1981) takes its text from Senta's ballad in *The Flying Dutchman* (in English translation). But the view of the legend taken by Miss Weir is essentially different from Wagner's, the implication in *Ballad* being that the Dutchman has not found (and possibly cannot find) redemption. In presentation this work is part of a centuries-old tradition of music serving to support and heighten narrative.

If there are reverberations of the music of Wagner in Weir's *Ballad,* then it is Bruckner who lurks between the staves of Goehr's *Deux études* (1981), in which the late Romantic pathos and lyricism of the first movement offsets the following Scherzo, with its frenzied central march. Earlier in the week we had heard his *Little Symphony* (dating from 1963) and, if anything, the new work represents an even greater awareness of late Romantic ideals. It went down well with both orchestra and audience and we shall no doubt be hearing it again before long.

Apart from the seminars and orchestral concerts, Musica Nova offers a number of other concerts, as well as workshops and forums. Robert Taub was present to give a piano workshop one afternoon and a recital the next evening, which included Babbitt's *Three Compositions* (1947), and *Reflections* (1974) for piano and synthesized tape. Babbitt's music was also heard in a concert of electronic music when his *Vision and Prayer* (1961) for soprano and tape was very well performed by Lynn Anderson. In this concert Harvey's *Mortuos plango, vivos voco* (1980), produced in the studios of

IRCAM in Paris, met with technical problems and had to be played through fewer than the intended eight speakers, though there was an opportunity for those who wished to hear the piece in its full glory to do so the following day when the fault had been rectified.

Another artist who made a significant contribution to the festival was Elise Ross. She was the soloist in Lutosławski's *Five Songs* and on the same evening sang Berg's *Three Fragments from Wozzeck;* she also gave a late-night concert of cabaret songs with David Parry (piano), and a workshop with the New Music Group of Scotland on Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire.* In addition to this workshop, the New Music Group of Scotland, under its director Edward Harper, gave the opening concert of works by Goehr, Schoenberg, and Weir, and a 'workshop concert' of the four pieces selected for the Chandos Award for Composition. Introduced at the 1979 Musica Nova, this award is offered to young composers for a short work using a prescribed combination of instruments. From among the pieces selected for presentation in the 'workshop concert', a jury selects the winning composition for the £200 prize. On this occasion the award was shared by Stephen Pratt and Steven Martland.

The week was completed by three forums; two of these (referred to as 'Journal I' and 'Journal II') were intended to generate discussion which could be used as a basis for launching a new publication. Journal I, entitled 'How do we evaluate the music of the 50s and 60s?', resulted in a great deal of circumlocutory debate which got nowhere—possibly because nobody knew quite where we were supposed to be going. Journal II, 'The development of the contemporary orchestra', did produce a few positive suggestions about the performance—or, more importantly, the rehearsal—of contemporary orchestral music. The third forum (designated a 'Publishers' Forum') degenerated into a session in which representatives of certain publishing houses discouraged aspiring composers, in spite of the efforts of the chairman (Oliver Knussen), other publishers' representatives, and a few members of the audience to inspire more constructive discussion.

The range of contemporary music played and discussed at Musica Nova and, of course, the debate and argument generated by the seminars and concerts make this festival a very significant contribution to the contemporary music scene in this country; who knows, if its success continues it may even become an annual event.

NOTE:

[1] R.S. Hines, ed., *The Orchestral Composer's Point of View* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p.37; Babbitt's article is reprinted as *'Relata I', Perspectives of New Music,* 9/1 (Fall – Winter 1970), pp.1-22.