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Musica Nova 1984

Sixth International Festival of Contemporary Music,
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I had already written most of my review of the sixth Musica Nova festival when I read Keith Potter's article 'Huddersfield: a Retrospective' in *Contact 28*,¹ and immediately found many of his thoughts chiming with my own. It was my first Musica Nova, but there, too, were the other regular professional festival attenders, the musical press, the BBC producers, the music publishers' representatives; there, too, one hunted fairly unsuccessfully for some of Glasgow's numerous music students, unless they were to be found behind a ticket desk or selling programmes; there, too, one had the uneasy feeling that the audiences contained rather fewer Glaswegians than one would hope; there, too, one fell to musing as to who the festival was for.

Musica Nova has, of course, some crucial differences from the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. It's not an annual event, but planned to occur every two or three years, and although one director—Professor Hugh Macdonald of the Music Department of the University of Glasgow—is an academic, the other, Fiona Grant, is the administrator of the Scottish

National Orchestra, and the important contribution of that body, together with that of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, gives a special dimension to the festival. And this year collaboration with the Society for the Promotion of New Music brought their annual composers' weekend forum to Glasgow for a worthwhile jaunt north, adding an even more atypical slant. Glaswegians who are avid attenders of Musica Nova may have been dismayed by this influx of southerners, but the organisers were welcoming and disgruntled natives were hard to find; in fact natives of any sort were thin on the ground. SPMN habitués may have been devastated by the loss of their cosy slanging sessions, and even at the loss of their weekend (for the SPMN discussions and workshops ran from Tuesday to Friday), but although there was some underground grumbling, presumably only those who had been attracted to the range of concerts in addition to the forum sessions and who could spare a week had turned up anyway.

I certainly found the event successful and stimulating for myself, but I still wondered who Musica Nova is meant to benefit. The presence of the SPMN delegates disguised the thinness of the rest of the audience for many of the forums and discussions, and some of the concerts, too. I heard it said more than once, rather startlingly, that Musica Nova was for the benefit of the Scottish National Orchestra itself: to give the orchestra work to get their teeth into, to make sure that they had a chance to perform contemporary music. This suggests that the works, even the commissions, rarely enter their repertoire, but are seen merely as some sort of challenge. This will hardly lead to a healthy attitude to contemporary music among either the orchestra's players or Scottish audiences, though it points up the perennial dilemma all orchestras face of how best to programme new music. At least the SNO had already planned to give Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto further airings, and one hopes they plan to use the other works as well.

But all the trappings of *parachutisme* that Keith Potter found at Huddersfield—the arrival of the new music intelligentsia for a few days at an outlying post of civilisation, the sucking of the musical blood, and swift decamping—were in evidence in Glasgow, too, and if the organisers of this unsuccessful week do anything before the next, they must address the problem of getting more locals into more of the events.

The main outlines of the festival, despite the presence of the SPMN, seemed much the same as those of previous ones, in that the organisers featured four visiting composers, three of whom on this occasion received commissions. There is obviously more money around for this than Huddersfield can command, but it means that they look for composers who have some track record of orchestral writing and who can provide chamber works as well. Musica Nova has stuck its neck out in the past, inviting composers such as Morton Feldman (1976), Tona Scherchen-Hsaio and Brian Ferneyhough (1979), and they ran into problems playing Milton Babbitt in 1981. Possibly they played safer this time, but we had four interesting enough choices: Elliott Carter as a very senior American, Per Norgard as a senior European, John Casken as an up-and-coming British composer, and a token Scot, Lyell Cresswell (actually a New Zealander who made his home first in Edinburgh and now in Glasgow as the Cramb-Hinrichsen Fellow in composition at the University of Glasgow). Commissions were awarded by the SNO to Cresswell and Norgard, and via the BBC to Casken. Programmes may have fitted together by happy chance at times,

but the end result suggested some felicitous planning, with a useful retrospective of music by each featured composer. As well as a number of soloists such as Jane Manning, John McCabe, Alexander Baillie, Ursula Oppens, and the Danish percussionist Gert Mortensen, Lontano and the Elsinore Ensemble of Denmark had been engaged both to give concerts and to rehearse the SPMN composers' pieces in workshops. These combined the Musica Nova Chandos Award with the usual activities of the SPMN Weekend, and perhaps led to some misunderstandings, for the rules governing the choice of the works for the concert of submissions were not clear to composers. The Chandos Award itself was given to a tape piece, *Uppvaknande* ('Awakening') by John Michael Clarke.

Carter must indeed be gratified by the exposure he has received of late in the British Isles, and he was graciously in residence for most of Musica Nova. He must know most of what he says in seminars off by heart now, as he travels round the world giving them, but it was still illuminating to hear him declare at the beginning of the week, 'I admire Stravinsky's music uncritically', and then to hear the suite from his unmistakably Stravinskian ballet *The Minotaur* (1946). This was performed in a concert by the BBC SSO under Richard Pittman, and one wonders why such an exciting big mainstream work for orchestra is not performed more often.

By also hearing the Cello Sonata (1948), played by Baillie and McCabe, and four of the *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani* (1950/66), performed by Gert Mortensen, we were led into the next phase of Carter's writing, and his obsessive experiments with time and motion, although the jazz interest is what one notes in the Cello Sonata. The music of the decades which followed the crystallisation of Carter's style were neatly encapsulated by performances of the *Variations for Orchestra* (1956), the *Piano Concerto* (1964/65), *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (1975) for soprano and chamber ensemble, and *Night Fantasies* for piano (1980), involving the SNO conducted by Matthias Bamert, the pianist Ursula Oppens, Lontano and the soprano Jane Manning.

Again, to hear Carter discussing these pieces, even within the well-worn grooves also now documented in David Schiff's book on the composer,² illuminated the performances. Thus Carter's explanation of the political climate in Berlin at the time he wrote the *Piano Concerto* while living there helped one accept its brooding and harsh atmosphere, while his description of counterpoint lessons with Nadia Boulanger, and particularly his assertion that since that time he has always taken pains to make every individual line in a texture melodic, whether the listener notices or not, helped to suggest a way into the complicated world of his late writing. A further aid was the dedicated assurance of Ursula Oppens in the *Piano Concerto* and in *Night Fantasies*. We also heard a tape of the recent virtuoso piece for guitar, *Changes*,³ which suggested that the refining of Carter's idiom, evident in *Night Fantasies*, is continuing. The composer certainly seems to be full of energy and ideas, and his presence at the festival was a tonic.

The presence of the Danish composer, Per Norgard, was also immensely stimulating. Flax-haired, blue-eyed, big and shambling, he loped amiably around the festival venue, always approachable, and combining gentle humour with a keen intellect. He inhabits a vivid sound world which he has tamed by an elaborate private compositional system built both on what he calls the 'infinity series' and on phase patterns which set up tensions in both harmony

and rhythm. The early *Solo intimo* for cello (1953-54) hinted at this sense of structure and direction, while the tape piece *The Enchanted Forest* (1968), though an experiment for him and overlong, showed his ear for subtle infinite variety. The Elsinore Ensemble with Bodil Gumoes (soprano) performed a setting of words from Walt Whitman's poem *Seadrift* written in 1977 in which the wild romanticism of the words well suited the Nordic expressiveness (echoes of Sibelius) which Norgard allows himself on occasion.

The bulk of the music heard, however, was recent, and related both to his latest explorations of phasings and to his keen sense of tone colour. It was all virtuosic too. *Plutonian Ode* (1983), based on a worrying poem by Allen Ginsberg, and performed by Jane Manning (for whom it was written) and Baillie, is a recitative and aria of disquieting intensity. The *I Ching Studies* for percussion solo (1982) include tiny moments of oriental inscrutability and a powerful frenzied finale as Mortensen's exciting performance showed. *Achilles and the Tortoise* for piano solo (1983) is a teasing and witty demonstration of phasing between juxtaposed black and white note patterns. It never quite became minimalist (a movement Norgard appears to disparage), retaining its own originality.

In the light of Norgard's exposition of his methods and ideas and as a result of hearing such a variety of his music (though I was sorry to miss the performance of Symphony no.4), it was rather a pity that his commissioned work, *Illumination*, was heard so early in the festival before his idiom had become familiar. The immediate impression was of a tone poem, a virtuoso mood piece for full orchestra, or at times for sections of the orchestra, which built up impressively to several successive climaxes, but with a surface simplicity which belied the extent of the organisation underneath. Indeed, the composer has recognised that the title was leading listeners to make wrong connections about the work. He has retitled it *Burn*, making a pun of the two meanings of the word, the sense of 'being on fire' and of a 'stream' (of water). He hopes by this change to direct our thoughts to 'the two characters which pervade the 12-minute long work: circling, eddying and heavily-falling streams',⁴ rather than to thoughts of festive illumination, as at Christmas, which he thinks the previous title and his programme note suggested.

There is no doubt that John Casken is finding an idiom more assured and suave with every piece. *la Orana, Gauguin* (1978) and *Firewhirl* (1979-80), given by Jane Manning, with John McCabe and Lontano respectively, both have an obvious dramatic element, but if *la Orana, Gauguin* is rather self-conscious in its homage to Debussy and the evocation of its atmosphere, *Firewhirl* has a single-minded intensity in its frightening march to its very Freudian climax in which both soloist and ensemble can revel. I particularly enjoyed the instrumental piece *Masque* (1982) for oboe and chamber ensemble (performed by Douglas Boyd and members of the BBC SSO), which had a depth of conception and structure which will reward many hearings. Two new pieces by the composer were presented. *Piper's Linn* (1984) was an enchanting piece for the Northumbrian small-pipes and electronic tape, written for and performed by Richard Butler, in which the simple resource of a two-octave chanter and drone is extended magically by the tape accompaniment, also derived from sounds of the pipes.

Orion over Farne (1984), commissioned by the SNO, immediately grips the imagination with bold writing for the full orchestra, not so much as an entity but in juxtaposed and opposed sectional writing, brass, percussion and divided strings being particu-

larly prominent. But there is space within the four sections of the work for haunting solo passages for the wind as the extra-musical idea which inspired the piece develops: a portrait of Orion the hunter, his journeyings, and his happy fate, immortality as a star in the heavens. Casken should not be ashamed of having written a symphonic poem, for it seems to have allowed him to unleash more fully the emotional and expressive side of his writing which is often held in check.

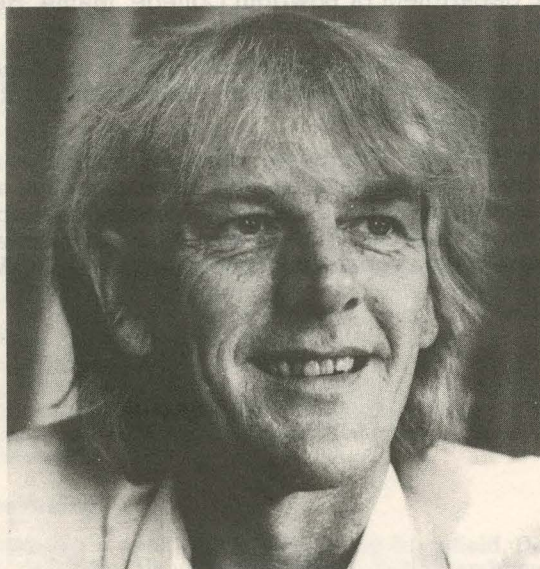
Lyell Creswell's idiom strikes one as coming from a refreshingly individual voice. It was obvious in *The Silver Pipes of Ur* (1982), an absolutely idiosyncratic wind quintet written for Lontano, which to me convincingly demonstrated a marvellously different way to write for a familiar combination by exploiting similarities rather than differences, and by daring to take his ideas further than many of the audience wanted to go. It could be heard, too, in *Prayer for the cure of a sprained back* (1979), sung by Jane Manning, in which little quirks of Maori chant gently informed the beautiful solo line. It is there in the music of the films he works on with Lesley Keen. But in both the big works heard in the festival, *O!* for orchestra, receiving its British première, and the new Cello Concerto, despite carefully worked out thematic and melodic material, there was a worrying obsession with tension-building rather than rhythmic movement which weakened the effect of individual movements, reducing each to a staticity that seemed to be limiting the composer's imagination. Nevertheless the Cello Concerto boasted a particularly beautiful slow movement in which the cello's cantilena was accompanied in unison by a succession of orchestral instruments in a simplicity which was compelling.

The two orchestras rightly used up their time in

playing music by the featured composers, and both conductors, Richard Pittman and Matthias Bamert, showed enthusiasm for the music tempered with the correct amount of meticulousness. The orchestral concerts in the SNO Centre (not the most suitable place) should be milestones in Glasgow's musical life.

While the solo and chamber concerts also offered music by the featured composers, they were spiced with a variety of other music. Many of the works in two electro-acoustic concerts, one directed by Stephen Montague, the other by Stephen Arnold, have been toting around the circuit for a fair while, but drew good and sympathetic audiences. Alexander Baillie (in a ridiculously long programme), Jane Manning and Lontano presented recent music by British composers, but so much of it was in a 'mainstream avant-garde', even sub-Webernian, idiom, that one worrying dimension of the festival was an undercurrent of amusement or scoffing at any whiff of minimalism, neo-romanticism or what Norgard termed several times the 'new simplicity'. There was little enough to be heard, but Ursula Oppens's performances of an overtly political piece, *Kwanju* (1980) by Yuji Takahashi, and the revised version of Alvin Curran's moving elegy to Cornelius Cardew, *For Cornelius*, were received by most of the audience with amused incomprehension.

In this context, the performances of the Danish Elsinore Ensemble, directed by Karl Aage Rasmussen, assumed great importance. I wish I knew what was in their minds, for their programmes seemed designed to pander to the worst forebodings of a hostile audience. The first programme was a late night one, and I assumed that a light and humorous programme had been deliberately chosen, to be



PER NØRGÅRD

The music of this leading Danish composer is published by Edition Wilhelm Hansen, Copenhagen.

Among his works on sale are:

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Material available on hire includes:

SYMPHONY NO 3 (1972-75)
SYMPHONY NO 4 'Indischer Roosengaarten und Chinesischer Hexensee' (1981)
BURN (1984)

For further details of the music of Per Nørgård, and other leading Danish composers, including Hans Abrahamsen, Bent Lorentzen and Poul Ruders contact our Scandinavian Promotion Dept.



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balanced by more substantial works in the second concert. Here again, however, the music by Poul Ruders, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, Ole Buck, and Ib Norholm was so artless as to miss being artful, showing an obsession with repetition and variation of simple diatonic material and of quotation and conversion of music of composers like Bach and Beethoven, but without either enough muscle to hold the attention, or enough audacity to shock. Perhaps it was all a plot by Rasmussen, for the most substantial pieces played (except for Norgard's *Seadrift*) were his.

But the Danes' music at least stimulated genuine reactions—in fact, it was a pity that the concerts were scheduled at the very end of the week, for the rest of the festival could have been livened by real controversy. Nonetheless the sixth Musica Nova gave a splendid opportunity for a thorough immersion in the music of four fascinating composers, and a worthwhile week of music overall. But is it really being put on just for the good of the SNO? As an 'international' festival, it obviously sets out to bring music from round the world to Scotland, but this particular week presented very little music from Scotland to the world. At a time when the Scottish Arts Council is contemplating axing its grant to the Scottish Music Archive, a witless decision, it would be a pity if there wasn't some place for local composers in each festival. After all, the *parachutistes* will always be there.

¹ *Contact 28* (Autumn 1984), pp.41-46.

² David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (London: Eulenberg Books, 1983), reviewed by Roger Heaton in *Contact 28* (Autumn 1984), pp.33-34.

³ Now recorded on Bridge Records BDG 2004, and available in the United Kingdom through the Society for the Promotion of New Music, 10 Stratford Place, London W1N 9AE.

⁴ Composer's note attached to the score which is published by Chester Music, Eagle Court, London EC1M 5QD.

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