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## FIRST PERFORMANCES

### Munich: Ben-Haim's 'Joram'

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The world première, in Munich on 8 November 2008, of the oratorio *Joram* by Paul Ben-Haim (1897–1984), some 75 years after its composition, was an historic musical occasion as well as a poignant event to commemorate the 70th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. The performance, broadcast on German radio, was warmly received by a large audience at the prestigious Philharmonie Hall, with an excellent cast supported by the Munich Motteten Choir and Munich Symphony Orchestra under Hayko Siemens; it is soon to be released on CD. *Joram* was one of the last works composed by Paul Ben-Haim, then Paul Frankenburger, in his native city Munich. He wrote it between 1931–33, after being dismissed as Director of Augsburg Opera and shortly before emigrating to Palestine, where he became one of Israel's leading composers. In fact, Ben-Haim finished the oratorio on 24 February 1933, three weeks before Hitler's accession to power.

The work's musical language displays the varied influences of German late-Romanticism and Expressionism, of Strauss, Mahler, Orff, and Schoenberg. Yet the admixture is entirely individual and already anticipates, in its softer modal harmony, use of unusual doublings and above all the rhythmic fluidity and translucent textures, some aspects of the distinctive 'Eastern Mediterranean' style of Ben-Haim's later years. Its turbulent yet ultimately optimistic libretto is taken, with slight alterations, from a poetic work by Rudolf Borchardt (1877–1945) which describes in biblical imagery a suffering, Job-like character. First distributed among friends in 1905 as *Geschichte des Heimgekehrten*, it was then published in Leipzig in 1907 as *Das Buch Joram*. Ben-Haim's oratorio was performed in part in 1979 in Tel-Aviv, in Hebrew translation. The Munich version, instigated by the Ben-Haim scholar Jehoash Hirshberg, Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University, was the first performance in its entirety, and with the original German text.

At one level the oratorio is Frankenburger's homage to Bach, notably the Passions: each of the three parts concludes with a large-scale chorus, while the tenor narrator's recitatives, sung beautifully by Carsten Süß, and the main arias are interspersed with powerful choral commentar-

ies. The first part comprises 11 movements, the first an arresting orchestral *Vorspiel* developing a motif based on a modal Psalm chant, which is further extended in the first chorus. The first aria introduces Joram ('son of Pinchas of the tribe of Gad'), sung by the baritone Bernd Valentin, in a piquant neo-Baroque style, with trumpet obbligato redolent of Stravinsky and Copland. Pinchas, Joram's father, was portrayed by the bass Miklós Sebestyén, in a vivid, violent dream-like aria. The narrative depicts how Joram is married against his father Pinchas's will to the childless Jezebel, sung by Carolina Ullrich. Their relationship is depicted in a duet and a chorus of Weill-like directness and vivid orchestral drama, full of ostinatos for basses, low brass and side drum. Joram takes a trip away from his home, and makes Jezebel promise to be faithful. On his trip he is taken captive and sold into slavery in Chaldea. He establishes a warm rapport with his Chaldean master, evoked in a lyrical *Arioso* and duet enhanced by harp accompaniment. The descriptions of his homeland, related by the tenor and by Joram, and the final chorus ('Schlusschor') contain some of the most ravishing music of the oratorio, colourfully scored with soloistic horns, muted brass, strings' melismatic ornamentation and sustained high string pedal points, bright flutes, all of a richness redolent of Schreker or Berg, yet also foreshadowing the luminousness of Frankenburger's later Israeli style.

Part II relates how Joram, returning after five years to his home, is lured to his own house by a seductress, who turns out to be Jezebel. Her descent into promiscuity is depicted in the exotic 'Vorspiel' with its *Salome*-like melodic orientalisms, followed by a wild chorus, and an extended duet between Jezebel and Joram of tremendous operatic intensity and power. The tenor's narration then leads to a wild orchestral eruption ('Zwischenspiel') in Mahler's manner, which transform the oriental theme, and leads to the climax of the Oratorio, a potent choral setting of Borchardt's poem 'Einem Jungeren in der Joram' (from his *Jugendgedichte*, 1912) as a strident chorale accompanied by cataclysmic orchestral textures and more solemn organ. There follows a lyrical operatic dialogue, Wagnerian in richness, between Jezebel and Joram, interspersed with neo-Bachian running basses for the narrator. Finally the concluding chorus ('Schlusschor des II

Teils) brings the neo-Bachian element to a zenith with brilliant contrapuntal fugues, alternating with lyrical, richly harmonized, modal-chromatic settings, its grandeur located somewhere between Elgar, Strauss and Schoenberg. The performance of this chorus was the world première, since it was omitted at the 1979 version performed in Tel-Aviv.

The oratorio's large-scale design and pacing is symphonic in its sweep and impetus, sustaining tension through the philosophic denouement of Part III. Here the musical style is the clearest foreshadowing of the balance of impressionism and neo-classicism of Ben-Haim's later Mediterranean style, evident in its quartal harmonies, and the bright, silvery translucent textures of the angelic responses to Joram's three 'Anklänge', arias in which he protests to God: two are answered by angels, in turn gentle and angry, while in the third the angel is transformed into Jezebel, whom he forgives. The final scene depicts, in an intensely stirring, visionary tableau for the two soloists, choir and orchestra, the couple leaving home for Chaldea, with Jezebel expecting their son. (This constitutes one of the major changes to the Christian symbolism of Borchardt's text, which concludes with the couple consumed by fire, their son symbolizing the Messiah.) Frankenburger eschews such a transfiguration, yet his music here develops a new ethereal and lyrical sound-world, with much woodwind soloistic writing underpinned by atmospheric drone basses. It encourages one to speculate that, even if, in different historical circumstances, Frankenburger had stayed in Germany, he would have developed his idiom and enriched the musical world in radical ways.

As an instance of suppressed music by émigré composers, the première of *Joram* is clearly of historic importance, yet the dramatic and progressive quality of the music adds to its intrinsic significance. It both whets one's appetite for a UK première, and for the appearance of the CD, which promises to add a rich piece to the still incomplete jigsaw of 20th and 21st-century music.

Malcolm Miller

### Los Angeles, Disney Hall: Louis Andriessen's 'The Hague Hacking'

Disney Hall, besides having significant financing ultimately derived from cartoon reels, even looks like a pile of loose film scrap from one. How appropriate that Louis Andriessen's new work *The Hague Hacking* be premièred here, since the Tom and Jerry cartoon *The Cat Concerto* was one

of its prime influences. As incredible as the fact that the American composer John Corigliano had never heard a note of Bob Dylan's music before he decided to set Dylan's words in the song cycle *Mr. Tambourine Man*, Andriessen had never heard a standard rendition of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* prior to composing his latest. Yet something sounded familiar about what he was doing. With some help from a friend, he traced the closely spaced opening notes of it to the opening notes of the Liszt. It then dawned on Andriessen that he had heard the phrase in the Warner Brothers 1946 Hanna Barbera cartoon. In it, Tom is a concert pianist; Jerry, a mouse living in the piano who spoils Tom's recital.

Nothing, however, was spoiled about the fascinating *The Hague Hacking*, brilliantly performed by duo pianists Katia and Marielle Labèque, with Esa-Pekka Salonen leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The title is based on a loose triple pun: (a) hocketing, the predominant technique the composer uses to divide the soloists' melodic line between the pianos, (b) hakkuh, a Dutch style of dance accompanying driving, techno-derived hardcore house music, and (c) the hacking into, or deconstruction, of elements of what Andriessen characterized in his pre-concert talk as a 'vulgar drinking Song', *O O Den Haag* (Oh, Oh, The Hague). Of the three puns, the first was the most interesting, and the most virtuoso-revealing: the Labèques did a heck of a job hocketing. Unfortunately, this feature of the music was unintelligible in the seats reserved for the press at the side of the house in a line parallel with the front of the stage and the pianos. The stereophonic beauty of the work came out at the second performance (18 January), where I sat directly behind the orchestra. Elements of hardcore house music emerged during the last half of the piece, bringing more excitement to the music. The *O O Den Haag* tune's deconstruction was not apprehended by this scoreless listener: I couldn't pick up its beginning two repeated notes followed by two descending half steps. Perhaps frequenting Dutch beer halls is required for full appreciation of this aspect of the music.

*The Hague Hacking* was described as Andriessen's first full-orchestral piece in 40 years. He didn't like the way it turned out as such, in fact. During rehearsal, Andriessen asked that the string forces be reduced to a 8-8-6-5-4 complement. This seemed a wise decision, for the resulting clarity and transparency of the work was outstanding over its 17-minute duration. After the hocketed Liszt opening with pianos, other instruments quietly join in, in pointillistic fashion, until a climax is reached around 12 minutes in. At 15 minutes,

there are disjointed fortissimo orchestral chords of a Messiaenic character, leading to a 'tonic' unison a minute or so before the quiet conclusion.

The audience reaction, while not raise-the-raffers enthusiastic, was remarkably prolonged and positive. I interviewed many patrons during intermission – all had very positive impressions. Perhaps the Hollywood crowd heard a lot in the music that would make a good movie soundtrack, especially for a slasher film.

Jeff Dunn

### New York City, Miller Theatre: Leon Kirchner 90th Birthday Celebration

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Composer Leon Kirchner spent his formative years in California, studying with Arnold Schoenberg, and much of his academic career as a professor at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts (his students included Yo-Yo Ma and John Adams). But he was born in New York (Brooklyn, to be exact) in 1919, and to New York he returned for a ninetieth birthday party hosted by Columbia University's Miller Theatre. Miller's *Composer Portraits* series has been kind to American elder statesmen in recent years; Carter's opera *What Next?* was performed on his 99th birthday and Milton Babbitt's complete string quartets were heard last fall. The Kirchner event on 24 January included several chamber works and a performance of the 1960 Double Concerto for violin, cello, winds, and percussion.

Kirchner's music is a somewhat gentler version of American Postwar modernism. While often dissonant in terms of pitch vocabulary, there is an abiding Romanticism in its gestural language. Thus, his compositions are evocative at times of Brahms as well as Berg and Schoenberg. He has continued to compose steadily, recently completing *The Forbidden*, an orchestra piece for the Boston Symphony, and a Fourth String Quartet for the Orion Quartet. The most recent piece on the Miller program was a 2006 reworking of the 1973 solo piece *Flutings for Paula*, for a duo comprised of longtime advocate flutist Paula Robison and percussionist Ayano Katoaka. While the percussion occasionally felt like a modular addition, both parts included beautiful textural effects and virtuosic demands.

The young members of the Claremont Trio dazzled in 1954's Trio No. 1. A watershed work, it most openly demonstrates Kirchner's affection for and elaborations of Schoenberg's 12-tone language. Like many of the composer's pieces, it is cast in a two-movement form – Fast-Slow – which

contains a return to more active music in the second movement's coda. True, in lesser hands this layout might be seen as 'stacking the deck,' dramatically speaking; but Kirchner inhabits it convincingly and compellingly. Two more chamber works – both for violin and piano – adopted this setup. Violinist Corey Cerovsek and pianist Jeremy Denk were a well-matched pair, creating passionate performances of both 1952's *Sonata Concertante* and 2001's *Duo No.2*. Fascinating bookends; though both pieces were non-diatonic, they sought rapprochement with triadic writing. The sonata placed reinterpretations of major and minor chords in a decidedly post-tonal context, while the duo played with a murkier palette: rife with octatonicism and altered scales.

Given its similarity to much of the chamber fare on the program (another two-part form), the Double Concerto could easily have seemed redundant. Instead, it ended the evening as a welcome chance to hear this design 'writ large' and a confirmation of Kirchner's consummate craftsmanship. True, the soloists – violinist Daniel Phillips and cellist Timothy Eddy – lacked the fire of Cerovsek and the Claremont players. They instead adopted an elegantly phrased approach to the work, making their duo and ensemble playing in some ways more poignant than the solo turns. Bradley Lubman's leadership of the chamber orchestra behind them was impressively nuanced, achieving elusive balances from the concerto's motley forces in Miller's relatively modest-sized space. In all, a well-performed, cohesively unified evening of music-making that served as a fitting tribute to one of America's important senior composers.

Christian Carey

### Milton Keynes, Theatre: Wood's Violin Concerto No. 2

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Hugh Wood's four solo concerti (one each for cello and piano, now two for violin) have always been written with a specific soloist in mind; each reflect something of the personality of their intended recipients. For Wood's Second Violin Concerto, it was the playing of Alexandra Wood, a former student of the composer's at Cambridge, which served as the motivation. The work was composed between 2002 and 2004; a further five years passed before its first performance by the dedicatee with the Milton Keynes City Orchestra under Sian Edwards' baton. In preparation for the premiere, Wood revised much: the result was well worth the wait.

Comparisons will inevitably be made with the

first Violin Concerto, op.17 (1970–2): it is as well to deal with these sooner rather than later. The Second Concerto follows its predecessor in the use of a large orchestra, including triple wind and an expanded percussion section (without timpani); similar too is the sparing use of the full orchestral tutti. Both concerti are cast in the traditional three movements, though the Second is closer to Wood's Piano Concerto, op. 32 (1989–91) in its use of discrete movements – here an Allegro, Larghetto and a fast rondo-like movement to conclude – than the First Violin Concerto and its formal intricacies. And there, perhaps, the similarities end. Notwithstanding a buoyant *allegro* coda, the First Violin Concerto is predominantly a dark, brooding work, beginning (emotionally at least) where the Cello Concerto, op. 12 (1965–9) left off. The Second Concerto is a far more spirited endeavour, driven by buoyant rhythms and an often joyous lyricism. Although it doesn't reach the levels of passion that one finds in Wood's earlier music, it possesses the quiet intensity that is characteristic of his more recent output.

The first movement perhaps embodies best these qualities. It is characterized by contrasting sections, often expansive, that combine to form a loose arch form, punctuated by two solo cadenzas. The deft juxtapositions of arcing melodies with lithe dancing passages belie the composer's well-known tortuous creative process whilst simultaneously suggesting a confidence that comes from the possession of a hard-won and distinctive compositional voice: to this extent, there are few surprises in the concerto for those familiar with Wood's music. Although one would have wanted Alexandra Wood to have imposed herself more on the unfolding discourse, Sian Edwards kept a tight grip on the proceedings, and the movement impressed with its unflagging momentum.

Wood's preference over the last decade or more has been for slow movements of a lighter character. This is true, to a greater extent, of the Larghetto, in which Wood's more romantic vein comes to the fore. The movement's formal simplicity reflects its directness of communication. After a short introduction, there is a lyrical melody for solo violin, here accompanied by chiming piano and harp; this yields to a second theme supported by rich dominant-type chords. A stormier central section for orchestra, coloured by similar harmonies, leads back to a reprise of both melodies, now in reverse order. A short *fortissimo* outburst between these melodies casts a slight shadow over the otherwise tranquil conclusion.

Whereas the slow movement continues the lyrical vein of the first movement, the finale places the emphasis on rhythm. A Spanish character colours

much of the proceedings, and in particular a secondary waltz-like them: Wood's programme note informs us that "Alexandra is good at Sarasate". The score suggests a rhythmic suppleness that was not always conveyed in performance, despite the always energetic and committed work of both soloist and conductor. A repeat performance is necessary, I feel, to unlock all of the charms of this movement.

One has a real fear, however, that as with so many new works, a repeat performance will not happen for some time. The Milton Keynes City Orchestra are to be commended for introducing the Second Concerto into the repertory, but unless their example is followed, a work that promises to be one of Wood's most significant of the last 15 years will not get the exposure it deserves.

Edward Venn

### Tewkesbury Abbey: Christopher Steel's 'Passion and Resurrection According to St Mark'

The works of Christopher Steel, like those of his contemporaries Nicholas Maw and John McCabe, draw strength from their eclecticism, exploiting a variety of traditions, whilst always retaining their own integrity. Steel, who died in December 1991 at the age of 53 after a long illness, studied at the Royal Academy of Music with John Gardner and later in Munich with Harald Genzmer, a pupil of Hindemith. Both these influences are arguably discernable in Steel's own music: Gardner's in his impeccable craftsmanship, accessibility of expression and gift for word-setting and Genzmer's in his exploration of an extended tonality – including, periodically, serial techniques.

Despite his comparatively short creative life, Steel's catalogue is extensive, containing seven symphonies, concerti (notably a fine example for cello, dating from 1988), choral pieces, chamber scores, dramatic works and church music. His considerable legacy of *Gebrauchsmusik* for amateur and school use, such as the cantata *Gethsemane* (after Pasternak) for semi-chorus and orchestra (1964), *This Earth of Majesty*, for school orchestra (1971) and the children's opera, *The Selfish Giant* (1980), marks him out as a grand-pupil of Hindemith. Steel increasingly wrote for his own pleasure, with no première in view, and this may account for a general dearth of performances of his works during his later years, with the notable exception of Bryden Thomson's advocacy of the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies with the BBC Philharmonic during the 1980s.

*Passion and Resurrection according to St. Mark*, op.61 can lay claim to being Steel's *magnum opus*. Scored for mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, organ and orchestra, it was begun in August 1976 and completed in November 1978. At the foot of the last page of the score he wrote 'Deo Gratias', a statement of the source of his inspiration. Lasting around 50 minutes, this substantial and imposing work made a very strong impression at its première at Tewkesbury Abbey on 21 March 2009 by mezzo Catherine Wyn-Rogers, tenor Joshua Ellicott, baritone Robert Rice, the Cheltenham Bach Choir and the Regency Sinfonia conducted by Stephen Jackson. Writing in his journal in November 1977, Steel described the piece as 'without doubt my chief and best work; perhaps the best I am capable of' and it was clear from this ardent first performance that the composer had devoted all his creative energies into the piece, a passionate declaration of his Christian faith.

The eclecticism of the text, which includes passages from the Bible, Holy Sonnets by John Donne and Gerald Manley Hopkins's 'No Worst, There is None', was matched by Steel's stylistic versatility. Indeed, the keynote of the work's success was a remarkably confident and cogent integration of disparate elements. I was reminded of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and Mahler's Fifth Symphony, two other miracles of synthesis which forge a coherent whole from widely disparate material by sheer strength of inspiration. Both chromatic and traditional harmonies were in evidence, the result of Steel's enduring search for a personal idiom fusing serialism and late-Romanticism that is also apparent in, for example, his Fourth Symphony of 1968. In *Passion and Resurrection*, Steel was particularly impressive in his unerring ability to find an apposite treatment for each text, drawing on a succession of diverse genres. These ranged from hymnody (in the evocative settings of 'There is a green hill' and the two verses of 'My song is love unknown') to the jazzy 'Solus ad victinam', a vivid depiction of Christ's *via crucis*, redolent of Poulenc, to the cinematic sweep of the Hopkins setting. In the opening rendering of John Donne's 'Thou hast made me', the unsettling absence of an obvious tonal centre was highly effective, a satisfying antithesis of the work's very moving, steadily climactic conclusion, where the confident reassertion of D major tonality provided a genuinely emotionally uplifting experience.

The intensity of Steel's inspiration was matched by the performers, especially Catherine Wyn-Rogers, who rose to the many challenges of the demanding mezzo-soprano part magnificent-

ly, and the Cheltenham Bach Choir, who sang as if they believed in every note. Conductor Stephen Jackson shaped a compelling and committed performance, the unflagging resourcefulness and invention of Steel's choral writing being particularly well communicated. I hope this major contribution to the English choral tradition will receive further performances and recordings so that its stature may be fully appreciated.

Paul Conway

### London, Barbican: 'Total Immersion' Days (Stockhausen, Murail, Xenakis)

Although many 20th-century composers – from Debussy and Messiaen onwards – have created a great deal of inspirational music for their time, some others have emphatically welded their parallel artistic passions to an idiosyncratic musical language, creating ingenious (and often dynamic) new sound-worlds, which do not just rouse the mind, but are also able to enter the soul of those listening, creating a positive philosophical response. During the first three months of 2009, the Barbican Centre and its associate, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, duly recognized an urgent need to create three 'Total Immersion' days, exploring in detail the ground-breaking creations of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis, alongside the astonishing 'audio-visual world' of one of Messiaen's last students, Tristan Murail, still at the height of his creative powers. Without a doubt, Messiaen did have a strong influence on the life of all three, since they studied with him and – particularly in Xenakis's and Murail's case – seriously impressed him with their inimitable approach to composition.

#### Stockhausen

The first 'Total Immersion' on 17 January was dedicated to Karlheinz Stockhausen, inexorably demonstrating the way in which the alluring character of his early choral music was overwhelmed by bold innovation, after studying with Messiaen, in Paris, in 1952. Having gained his youthful stimulus from radio waves and the recorded sound of space travel, his mind was soon compelled to create an audible version of spatial environments and landscapes, based on what he called 'the rhythm of the universe', completely redefining the inner meaning of music. He then became even more enthused, developing his manic obsession for live and taped electronics into a brand new sound-world, 'setting space to music' – ending with *Licht*,

his transcendental sequence of seven operas, and *Klang*, 24 compositions created for every hour of the day.

While the Total Immersion programme was suitably enhanced with film and relevant discussion, the first concert illustrated Stockhausen's craving to create subterranean resonance from abrupt piano chords, during several of his *Klavierstücke*. The BBC Singers were soon complementing the stylish galleried architecture of Jerwood Hall with his startling fascination for the world of meditation, as they highlighted his sporadic attention to notated scores, presenting the shadowy vocal harmonics of *Choral* and *Chöre für Doris*, more typical of his earlier music. The remarkable *Litanei 97* ended this presentation of what the composer had named 'intuitive music', as a 24-strong choir – all formally draped in full-length dark blue robes and grouped into an elegantly moving circle – constantly chanted his ethereal glissandi, while the conductor struck tuned Japanese gongs.

This first 'Immersion' attracted even more enthusiasm as the BBC Symphony Orchestra set off with a 60-minute *tour de force*, based on Stockhausen's 'formula composition' idea, a generative melodic principle which was intended to unite musical cultures the world over – later being developed more figuratively in *Licht*. Having eloquently introduced *Inori* from the stage – comparing it with Steve Reich's approach to rhythm, pitch, melody and polyphony – the eloquent conductor, David Robertson, instantly launched into Stockhausen's return to what he claimed to be 'the mother of all sound'. As this vast orchestral 'raga' sprung into life, portraying 'prayer, meditation and adoration', two silent mime artists – elevated above the orchestra on an elegant light steel platform – synchronized their gestures with the main elements of an energetic musical plane, awesomely coördinated by conductor and orchestra. Having united oriental and western music with hypnotic enlightenment, *Inori* shuddered to a polyphonic conclusion as the two mime artists descended, then departed through a mist-shrouded doorway.

The day came to a surreal climax with yet another reverberating electronic journey, as *Hymnen* echoed late at night around the darkened Barbican Hall. By assembling a gigantic recorded montage of bizarre waves of sound – including distorted singing, distant crowd noise, thumps, groans, bells and, of course, national anthems – Stockhausen was seeking to create 'a music of the whole world, of all lands and races', perhaps portraying the main elements of a mind which, at the age of 38, seemed to have become completely

detached from every-day sound. *Hymnen* ends with a recording of the composer's own breath. His relentless enthusiasm for amplified electronics dominated the whole auditorium sound-system for two hours. Whilst some of those present ended their day believing that he had fashioned a formidable new art-form integrating technology with sound, the more wide-ranging response seemed to indicate that *Hymnen* had created a flamboyant pastiche, completely divorced from the world of authentic composition – what a challenging finale to the 'Total Stockhausen Immersion'!

### Murail

A few weeks later, on 7 February, the attending the second 'Total Immersion' were instantly encouraged by another distinctive musical world, as they embarked on a highly colourful journey across this hypnotic plane of individual imagination, invention and microtonal harmony.

After completing his Paris studies with Messiaen in 1971, Tristan Murail was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1973 and then, having moved into the Villa Medici, was presented with the golden opportunity of meeting Giacinto Scelsi, the Italian composer who, strongly drawn to Zen Buddhism, had developed a deeply spiritual musical language, based on his radical concept of sound. All this – and a great fascination for the music of Scriabin, Ligeti and John Cage – provided Murail with the desire to focus on the magical properties of sound and texture, ancient legend and electronic techniques. With the late Gerard Grisey and the other three members of the avant-garde Paris group, L'Itinéraire, he created a strong link between music and science, generating a completely new musical direction, the celestial world of '*musique spectrale*'.

Very much like Steve Reich and other advanced minimalists of the current musical climate, Murail then began to develop his enthusiasm for the process of combining electronic 'frequency modulation' with his individual musical ideas, in order to create an individual sound-world, much of which was amply demonstrated throughout the rest of the 'Immersion' day. During his – incredibly agreeable and intriguing – opening discussion with Julian Anderson, he reiterated that his earlier compositions had been influenced by John Cage, Boulez and particularly the adventurous harmonies of Ligeti's *Atmosphères*. But his old master, Messiaen, had encouraged him to go his own way, intuitively – to create what he called 'audio-vision'.

Murail's musical world having been brightly illuminated by disturbing film images of

cloud formation, ice, snow and sea-scape, the Guildhall New Music Ensemble, backed-up electronically by Ian Dearden of sound projection experts Sound Intermedia, relayed the first live concert of Murail's audio-visual terrain to an enthusiastic Jerwood Hall audience. The melancholic atmosphere of *Winter Fragments* was immediately followed by *Territoires de l'oubli*, its epic pianistic resonance being linked to moments of melodic introspection, creating an atmospheric background as Rolf Hind demonstrated its 'low register sonorities' and 'complex harmonics' – unmistakably reflecting the distinctive techniques described by Marilyn Nonken in her *Tempo* article of April 2008.<sup>1</sup>

This luminous presentation came to a mesmerizing conclusion as a 19-piece ensemble merged with live electronics to explore sound and time – in *Pour adoucir le cours du temps*. As its central electronic sound-file was 'card-triggered' by Sound Intermedia, the ensemble emerged expressively from a 'spatialized' electronic repetition of orchestral sound and invention, followed by a rather unexpected conclusion, echoing some laid-back 1950's jazzy moments.

Murail's stimulating 'Immersion' came to a dramatic conclusion whilst his total fascination for mythology – and his passion for the fusion of electronics with traditional orchestral instruments – were dynamically illustrated by way of ground-breaking ideas that had been derived from advanced frequency modulation, in 1980. Digital synthesizer and large orchestra immediately became engaged in intense waves of sound and cosmic orchestral glissandi that vividly recalled the chaotic history of *Gondwana*, an ancient Indian legend describing a gigantic, submerged, continent joining South America with Africa and India. The piece had immediately encouraged his old master, Messiaen, to declare that it contained 'a beauty of sound rarely attained in new music'.

Murail's favourite instrument is the Ondes Martenot – he has frequently played it in the *Turangalila Symphonie* (including the performance at the 2008 Proms) – and this drove him to create *Time and Again*, for orchestra and electronics. Two Yamaha DX7 synthesizers combined with orchestra to fashion an entirely novel world of unearthly sound, after which they linked with sophisticated voice, breathing and hissing, as Murail's *amaris et dulcibus aquis* was superbly articulated by the BBC Singers, directed by James Morgan.

Perhaps rather more compelling than the presentation of Stockhausen's *Hymnen* to a darkened Hall in the first 'Immersion', the second 'Immersion' culminated with a performance of one of Murail's latest works, written in his lakeside house near Columbia University, New York, where he currently teaches composition. Introduced by the most electrifying – percussion-dominated – full orchestral moments, the dynamic sounds of *Terre d'Ombre* soon filled the Barbican Hall with dark shadows, impressively echoed by electronic keyboard. Vast electronic variation was then merged with elongated string, brass, percussion and woodwind chords, vibrantly emphasizing the fact that Tristan Murail's version of spectral music is certainly achieving popular appeal with audiences throughout the world and should now – thanks to this 'Total Immersion' – make an even more powerful impression on the United Kingdom.

### Xenakis

Having been forced to flee from Greece due to its occupation by Axis forces – and after being severely wounded by them – Iannis Xenakis's growing fascination for mathematics and architecture was soon to be amplified, upon entering France in 1947. Much akin to the other two strong personalities of the Total Immersion series, he had seriously impressed Olivier Messiaen, particularly during his studies at the Paris Conservatoire from 1949 to 1950 – 'one of the most extraordinary men I know....a hero, unlike any other', as his master said. Already possessing a degree in civil engineering, in 1947 he joined forces with the architectural mastermind of the 20th century, Le Corbusier, and began to expand his intense interest in science, classical Greek architectural orders and mathematics. He soon discovered the fundamentals of contemporary architecture as he assisted with the design of the legendary Couvent Sainte Marie de La Tourette and the gigantic Secretariat and Assembly Building at Chandigarh, in India. His brand new enthusiasm for present-day architecture was suddenly illuminated when he was asked by Le Corbusier to design the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Fair, which he certainly achieved (his design model was constructed from piano wire and cigarette paper). The result inspired him to propel his enthusiasm into an all together different field – that of otherworldly composition. Although he enjoyed the music of Bartók, Messiaen and particularly Edgar Varèse, he rapidly invented his own musical sphere, convincing himself that, although architecture is homogeneous, incorporating line and smooth

<sup>1</sup> "'La Notation ne peut rendre compte du fait": performing Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli*', *Tempo* Vol. 62 No. 244 (April 2008), pp. 2–10.

shape which can merge perfectly, the musical dimensions of pitch and time were only connected by strict 'ordering structure', seriously requiring a fundamental re-think. The hyperbolic parabola of his Philips Pavilion then encouraged him to crystallize an innovative musical inspiration, based largely on the sliding glissando, enabling his music to be expressed radically, 'without breaking its continuity'. Smooth architectural stability – and three-dimensional drama – had unexpectedly been converted into the world of music!

This third 'Immersion' on 7 March was superbly enhanced by a nostalgic retrospective of the legendary architect himself – Le Corbusier – in which both architecture and music were linked together, demonstrating the complex originality of their basic structures and accentuating just how the powerful imaginations of Xenakis and Le Corbusier had merged, evocatively. Simultaneously, the Barbican Gallery showed a film of the Philips Pavilion construction, against a continuous background of Varèse's *Poème électronique* – relayed by 400 speakers during the seven months' life of this 'glissando in space'.

Following a fascinating introductory talk by Ivan Hewitt and two film sessions at the Barbican Conference Centre, the complex rhythmic structures, patterns and textures of Xenakis's music were soon illuminated by the Guildhall Percussion Ensemble, led by the dauntless Richard Benjafield. After *Okho*, for 3 tall African drums, and *Rebonds* – presented by sophisticated percussion soloist, Catherine Ring – six other percussionists then gave a phenomenal performance of his *Persephassa* (first performed at at the Shiraz Festival near the city of Persepolis, in 1969) radiantly transferring to the Barbican Hall Xenakis's profound attachment to the emphatic rhythm and acoustic of the palaces, ruins and hewn rock of this ancient site.

In an enlightening talk Sir Jeremy Dixon, architect of the imaginative extensions to the Royal Opera House and the most recent musical establishment in London, Kings Place, described his enthusiasm for music and architecture. The BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Singers, BBC Symphony Chorus and Rolf Hind then brought the final 'Immersion' to a celestial climax, emphasizing Xenakis's insatiable quest for an unique sound-world. Heralded by the explosive *Tracées*, for large orchestra, in which brass and wind dominated the air with relentless chromatic glissandi, the scene then adopted a more dignified aura as the BBC Singers joined in with a performance of *Anastenaria*, in which the first movement seemed to paraphrase Xenakis's Greek inheritance with inventive chanting of an almost Stravinskian flavour. Although premièred in 1955, the musical

structure that had cradled his overwhelming glissando approach was then expressed in a thrilling cascade of 'architectural' music, as the celebrated *Metastaseis* formed the final movement.

Subsequent to the more ethereal flow of *Sea-Nymphs, Nuits* and the mystical effects and sliding sound effects of *Mists*, eloquently presented by pianist Rolf Hind, this final 'Immersion' concluded with electrifying music – yet not, on this occasion, electronically submerged. The extraordinarily individual Swedish trombonist Christian Lindberg plays and presents in his own unique style – on this occasion appropriately clad in red shirt and tight black trousers! The solo trombone, Xenakis's favourite instrument, merged with the orchestra in a startling demonstration of his rich synthesis of sound, fusing flamboyant glissandi with harsh rhythmic complexity.

The final 'Total Immersion' day was then brought to an incandescent conclusion with one of Xenakis's most rivetting creations, as the BBC Symphony Orchestra transformed the gigantic glissando waves, energy and invention of his 'concrete' ballet music, *Antikhthon*, from all sections of the orchestra, to an overwhelmed audience.

John Wheatley

### Leeds, Grand Theatre: David Sawer's 'Skin Deep'

Opera, with its stylized conventions, is an apt genre in which to parody the current media-fuelled obsession with physical appearance and plastic surgery. Ideal subject-matter, one might think, for first-time librettist Armando Iannucci, given his highly successful, sharply satirical writing for radio and television shows such as *The Day Today*, *I'm Alan Partridge* and *The Thick of It*. Composer David Sawer has produced some notably evocative scores for orchestra and ensemble, such as *Byrnam Wood* (1990), *Tiroirs* (1996) and *The Greatest Happiness Principle* (1997); his previous opera, the expressionist comedy *From Morning to Midnight* (2001), was a powerful, cutting piece of social satire. A project combining all the aforementioned elements, such as the Opera North-commissioned three-act operetta *Skin Deep*, premièred at Leeds' Grand Theatre on Friday 16 January, seemed, on paper at least, destined to succeed.

Most of the action takes place in the Alpine clinic of Doctor Needlemeier, who, in Iannucci's memorably malignant phrase, 'puts right what nature got wrong'. He is creating an elixir of youth, made from discarded parts of celebrities,

and having an affair with his receptionist, Donna, whose scarred face he substitutes with that of his wife Larnia, in a present-day twist on the operatic tradition of disguise and swapped identities. Needlemeier's daughter Elsa is engaged to Robert, a local villager who delivers supplies of chemicals to the clinic; as she refuses to marry him until he is perfect, Robert agrees to be operated on by Needlemeier: when he comes round after the operation, Robert falls in love with his own reflection. There is a speaking part, news journalist Susannah Dangerfield, who is reporting back to Global Glamour TV on the curious events at the clinic. Another key role is that of vain Hollywood actor Luke Pollock, who arrives incognito and loses a testicle to the elixir.

*Skin Deep* started promisingly, with an amusing opening scene featuring Needlemeier's secretary juggling conversations on three phones (including the portentously gruesome phrase 'you shouldn't be oozing/what cream are you using?') and the production's uneasy fusion of the risible and the gruesome was at its most persuasive in Needlemeier's big introductory aria, 'For I am Dr. Needlemeier'. Sadly, this level of invention was not sustained. If the name of Pollock and his singular predicament seems more redolent of Talbot Rothwell than W. S. Gilbert, there was, increasingly, a desperate 1970s *Carry On* flavour to the text, but without the films' crude energy to drive events along. Ianucci seemed most at home with the spoken role of the reporter, but his decision to present the libretto in couplets did give rise to the occasional gem, such as rhyming 'supermodel' with 'twaddle'.

By the time of the protracted third and final act, however, the plot was sagging dangerously: it was set in California several years after the previous events, in a ghetto where a zombie-like throng of surgically created lookalikes are slavishly addicted to the elixir. Needlemeier and Donna fall into the massive elixir-making vat and end up a sorry mass of melded flesh, a suitably cold and pitiless payoff for the operetta's nefarious chief protagonist. The moral behind the tale – that we should all learn to love ourselves as nature intended – was clear enough, though whether we required a concluding 'nude' chorus sporting wrinkled penises dangling from nylon flesh suits to drive home the message is debatable. In a sense these grotesque costumes exemplified the operetta's queasily compromised tone. Typically, *Skin Deep* fought shy of presenting the valedictory chorus *au naturel*: which might finally have brought a much-needed personal, human touch coupled with the jolting, subversive edge which the production appeared to crave but never quite delivered.

With his natural sense of theatre, David Sawyer's contribution was predictably fine, even if his rich, imaginatively eclectic score, with telling use of tuned percussion, was arguably too resonant and sophisticated for this project. His spare textures ensured the words were audible, thoroughly vindicating a welcome absence of surtitles. The overture unerringly set the tone with a combination of light, operetta-style parody stained by darker, expressionist traces hinting at the more sinister aspects of the tale about to unfold. Later, there were shades of Bernard Herrmann and James Bernard in the comically grotesque 'operation' scenes. Sawyer's rhythmic vitality frequently carried events forward, compensating for a general lack of mobility on stage. His contribution seemed to grow in stature as the plot unravelled, so that by the third act his inherently dramatic music with its loaded economy of gesture and mordant wit possessed an eloquence and sharpness sorely lacking in the text. The score was expertly realized by the excellent Opera North Orchestra and Chorus, led by Richard Farnes. Among the principals, Geoffrey Dolton was creepily effective as Needlemeier, though Amy Freston as Elsa and Janis Kelly as Larnia, the Doctor's wife, were given all the most memorable and substantial numbers and responded by bringing a genuine pathos to their sketchily-drawn roles.

Perhaps the most satisfactory outcome for *Skin Deep* would be if David Sawyer boiled down the score (in the manner of Needlemeier's elixir) and made a concert piece out of it, as he did in the *Symphonic Suite* (2005) from his previous opera, *From Morning to Midnight*, recorded on NMCD116. Away from the celebrity glare of Ianucci's input, Sawyer's elegantly droll music would be allowed to blossom, its strength and depth unmasked.

Paul Conway

## Opera premières in London

### (1) Royal Opera House / Barbican: Korngold, Smelkov

Fashion is a fickle mistress. Erich Korngold's third opera, *Die tote Stadt*, was such a hot number that opera houses in what Hitler was soon to call *Grossdeutschland* competed to give the première: at one time it seemed that Hamburg, Cologne and Vienna would make history by giving an opera a triple first performance. As it happens, it was the two German cities that claimed the prize, on 4 December 1920, with Vienna catching up the next month. *Die tote Stadt* then went barnstorming

around the world, with productions in 13 more houses in and around Germany. Within a year it had become the first German-language opera to be produced at the Met after the First World War. It had notched up over 25 productions by the time, in 1923, that Korngold walked onstage to take a bow after a performance in Munich and was greeted by boos from Nazis in the audience: that long dark night was already drawing on. But dawn took many decades more to come: a few post-War revivals fizzled out to the kind of critical catcall that now conventionally greeted Korngold's music until, from the 1980s onwards, it began to be taken seriously once more. It was Willy Decker's production for Salzburg in 2004 that finally made it to London for the UK staged première of the work on 27 January 2009. A semi-professional concert performance was given in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1996, as Brendan Carroll's introduction in the Royal Opera House programme – to which my potted history is indebted – pointed out, continuing with the news of further productions in Venice, Paris, Madrid and Moscow; *Die tote Stadt* is back in repertory in Vienna. The slight hint of I-told-you-so in Carroll's essay is entirely justified: he has been standing up for Korngold almost single-handedly for decades, brandishing the torch once waved by Harold Truscott, who had just begun a book on Korngold's music when he died in 1992.<sup>2</sup>

Korngold's libretto, based on Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, documents what is in effect a struggle between life and death: Paul sits at home, fixated on his memories of his dead wife, Marie, and is astonished when he comes across a dancer, Marietta, who bears a striking resemblance to Marie; from then on he is torn between the desire to maintain the sanctity of Marie's memory and his physical desire for Marietta. When Marietta re-appears at the end of Act III dressed as she had been for her entry in Act I, the intervening turmoil is revealed to have been inside Paul's own mind. Decker's production relied too heavily on static images of the dead Marie. If his intent was to show the oppressive quality of memory, he succeeded: dramatically, the staging failed to mirror the astonishing richness of Korngold's scoring and the relentless invention of the music itself. Seriously, if you can't let your imagination rip when it comes to real-

izing the obsessive dream-fantasies of a besotted necrophile (if not quite a necrophiliac), when can you? Other aspects of Decker's view of the piece weakened the dramatic effectiveness, too: why, for example, was Marietta bald? And when she is portrayed as a shameless vamp, rather than a genuine love-object, it reduces Paul's dilemma to a mere struggle between his brain and his balls.

Paul was heroically sung by Stephen Gould, in what must be one of the most demanding roles in all opera; his voice rang over Korngold's rain-forest of a score without difficulty. Nadja Michael, though a born actress, struggled with poor intonation throughout the first-night performance I attended. Gerald Finley (as Paul's friend Frank and the actor Fritz) and Kathleen Wilkinson (playing Paul's housekeeper Brigitta) both brought their supporting roles alive with superior singing and considerable stage presence. Ingo Metzmacher, in the pit, first conducted *Die tote Stadt* in 2005 and presented Korngold's textures in surprising detail, projected with subtlety and sympathy by the Covent Garden orchestra – even so, a little more passion would not have done any harm. If I have a criticism of the music itself, it's the same I made in my review of Vladimir Jurowski's concert performance of Korngold's next opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane*:<sup>3</sup> that it seems to be written for some kind of super-listener who can take in the relentless profusion of ideas – Korngold, of course, was expressing himself entirely naturally, but on occasion we mere mortals require the aural equivalent of the slow-motion camera to perceive everything that's going on in the music. Still, that's the right kind of problem to have.

There were different problems on display in Alexander Smelkov's two-act *The Brothers Karamazov*, given a concert performance in the Barbican on 1 February by the visiting Mariinsky Theatre conducted by Gergiev – problems of the wrong kind. This was its UK première, six months after its first performance in St Petersburg's White Nights festival last July. Gergiev's energy is unquestioned, but if he is prepared to conduct this drivel – and waste God knows how much money on it – then his judgement is suspect. Perhaps he had no choice: it was a Mariinsky commission, the first to a contemporary composer in 30 years, but Gergiev must have had a hand in the choice of composer.

<sup>2</sup> Carroll's biography of Korngold (*The Last Prodigy* [Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997], p. 306) quotes Truscott's memory of going to see *Kings Row* more than 30 times – once sitting through the film with his eyes entirely closed – so that he could memorise the music. A German translation of Carroll's book is scheduled imminently from Böhlau Verlag in Vienna.

<sup>3</sup> *Tempo*, Vol. 62, No. 244, April 2008, p. 41.

The trouble is that Smelkov (born in 1950) doesn't seem to have an original idea in his head, nor much of a clue as to how to handle other people's, either. *The Brothers Karamazov* is dished up in a glutinous mixture of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and Shostakovich, with the occasional splotch of Brahms and others; it lacks pacing, too, barrelling forward breathlessly. At a pre-concert talk, heroically fronted by Marina Frolova-Walker, Smelkov played the clown, leaping up to play the piano or offer some other exaggerated gesture; suspicion that he had had a beaker or three too many was confirmed afterwards when I heard there had been some doubt as to whether he would make the talk. The trouble is that it sounds as if he composes pissed as well, with his musical and dramatic judgement impaired. I had had enough by the interval and left. The bad news is that he intends *The Brothers Karamazov* to be only the first flap of an operatic triptych. The Mariinsky soloists and orchestra gave this dross a performance many leagues better than it deserved.

Martin Anderson

## (2) Bloomsbury Theatre: Bloch's 'Macbeth'

A remarkable 99 years after its world première at the Opera Comique in Paris, Ernest Bloch's *Macbeth* received a stirring UK stage première on 23 March, performed by the UCL Opera under Charles Peebles to an enthusiastic capacity crowd at the Bloomsbury Theatre. Occasionally described as a 'minor masterpiece' the three-act opera, composed from 1904–9, is remarkably fluent for a composer in his twenties, and represents the climax of Bloch's formative Swiss period, following studies with Ysaÿe and Thuille, amongst others. Its style reflects Bloch's early absorption of influences from Wagner, Debussy and Mussorgsky, and anticipates his later idioms, the exotic modality of his *Jewish Cycle* (1912–1916) and the sumptuous epics of his American periods (1916–1930/1939–1959). The previous UK concert performance in 1975 was abridged and in the original French libretto: it is to the credit of UCL Opera that their première was unabridged, and in the English version made by Alex Cohen which draws more on Shakespeare's original play.

Charles Peebles paced the dramatic score with energy and variety, and despite some weakness in the amateur orchestra, the student choruses came across vividly. If one made allowances also for the thin projection by student singers, the professional cast more than compensated with strident vocal qualities, especially the two main protagon-

nists – Macbeth (baritone George von Bergen) and Lady Macbeth (soprano Katherine Rohrer) – who were superbly captivating throughout. Director John Ramster's choice of a WWI setting was effective, relating to the period of the opera's genesis, even though precise parallels were not entirely clear. The soldiers' uniforms for all the protagonists underlined the militaristic ambience of the play, and the whole was enhanced by the striking costumes, particularly the witches, adorned in red gowns for their Prologue dance, who later became 'Florence Nightingale' nuns in the Macduff murder scene, and were bathed in green in the final tableau. Bridget Kimak's effective set design was a single symbolist horizon with a large sphere on the right used both as entrance and exit, and symbol for sun and moon. Most expressive was Jake Wiltshire's lighting, which bathed the costumes and sets in deep blood reds, blues, greens for the forests and gardens, and brighter colours for daytime, relating to the dramatic action.

The dramatic style was evinced from the very start where Bloch's almost film-music ambience, drone fifths and fanfare leitmotif, set the scene for the red-robed witches' eerie trio (UCL students Mimi Kroll, Ella Jackson, Jessica Blackstone), leading to a highly-charged ensemble with Macbeth and Banquo (tenor Richard Rowe), artfully rounded off with the initial leitmotifs cadencing on a cliff-hanging dissonant ninth. Bloch's orchestration drew the major interest: here striking use of clarinet, horns and cello added to the suspense-filled duet, when Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to murder King Duncan. It is followed by the first of several substantial orchestral entr'actes of almost symphonic density and richness, leading smoothly into the 'Night' scene, where Bloch's suspense-filled chromaticism attained near-Bergian proportions. Macbeth's famous soliloquy 'Is this a dagger I see before me' is flavoured by blends of contrabassoon with cor anglais, and Lady Macbeth's sinewy melody, presaging Macbeth's foul deed.

Amongst the surprising delights was the Act 1 arioso for King Duncan (tenor Ryland Davies), which anticipates the Cantor solos in Bloch's *Sacred Service* (1933), and the Drunkard's song, quite suggestive of Klezmer music in its tripping rhythms and the richly scored refrain 'who's knocking?' spiced by percussion. In Act 2 the festive dinner-jacketed banquet, blackened with Banquo's murder and re-appearance at the feast as a gory ghost, is evoked in the contrast of ceremonial music and intense ariosos for Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, with vivid spectral textures such as brass outbursts, pedal points, semitonal tremolandos, ostinatos, woodwind glissandos and incisive

timpani. The change to chordal calmness in the Garden of Macduff was almost cinematic, the quasi-religious mood of beguiling Janáčekian pastoral simplicity transformed only by the exciting, Weill-like, choral energy that signals the arrival of Macduff (Carl Gombich) to mourn his murdered wife and child.

Two memorable tableaux characterized Act III. First, the witches' cave, where Macbeth witnesses the long line of Kings to be descended from Banquo; here blossoms the most expansive and passionate of the orchestral interludes, developing the main leitmotifs, with bright woodwind and tremolando strings, and an intriguing canon for cor anglais and horn heralding the final scene-change to Macbeth's Castle. If Lady Macbeth's mad scene is slightly underemphasized, the final victory chorus, with Birnam Wood marching on Dunsinane, is potent, the crowning of Malcolm (Hal Brindley) celebrated with a melodic lilt and choral vigour pre-echoing Kurt Weill. All in all the production was a worthy commemoration of Bloch in the fiftieth anniversary year of his death, and a powerfully communicative rendering of a work that surely deserves a full production by a major British opera house.

Malcolm Miller

### London, St John's Smith Square: Will Todd's 'Requiem'

Will Todd, born 1970, is fast establishing himself as one of UK's most versatile, sought-after composers, following success ranging from his prize-winning opera *The Blackened Man*,<sup>4</sup> to the heady progress of his *Mass in Blue*,<sup>5</sup> which has received countless performances at home and abroad to critical acclaim, amidst ongoing live 'revision' by Todd in his composer/jazz pianist role in this ever popular work. However Todd is also noted for his growing discography of short, more traditional-style works suitable for inclusion in liturgical settings<sup>6</sup> as well as oratorios such as his *Saint Cuthbert* (already reviewed by me for *Tempo*), so I was not surprised to be invited along to the London première of his new in-depth Requiem at St John's Smith Square on 21 March.

Largely inspired by memories from his childhood of performances in Durham cathedral, of the Verdi, Fauré and Britten requiems, Todd here shows us his more serious side. To quote from his own programme notes:

This was an attempt to work through my feelings, about death, my own death, as well as those I love. ... Early on I had planned to use other texts in conjunction with the original Latin, but somehow as I got closer to the musical essence of the work, these elements felt no longer necessary, and we are left, in my setting, with an intimate examination of the original (latin) text, ugly at times, like death, beautiful at others – also like death; always I hope yearning and lyrical, searching for answers and peace, confronting the mystery of the unknown.

Commissioned by Cambridge's Fairhaven Singers, with its world première in St John's College Chapel, Cambridge, on 14 March (a week before I caught the London première at St John's Smith Square), the work is scored for solo soprano (gospel singer Bethany Halliday), electric guitar (the versatile Thomas Gray) and Choir (the Fairhaven Singers under conductor Ralph Woodward). Already one can gauge this is a 'Requiem with a difference' – innovative, in true Todd style, but nevertheless in serious, in-depth vein. But it was a great pity that, as Todd had produced, in my opinion, his most impressive, well-structured, 'agonized-over' work to date, it drew seemingly such little attention from the national press when it hit London. (Maybe that's what happens to all potentially 'great' composers somewhere along the line as they mature.)

Anyway I found myself – by all accounts the only music critic there – sitting through a most amazing experience, complete with choral score (as many of the virtuoso electric guitar sequences were largely improvised around themes). As Todd expounded in his pre-concert talk, he felt a great sense of 'challenge, stepping up with the great composers', in attempting to set this ominous Latin text, and after several workshop playthroughs in Cambridge he had 'jettisoned' quite a lot of his original score in favour of what we got on the night. He spoke much of the 'visceral power of the electric guitar', here in his work 'at its most angry, and disturbing and then (by contrast) changing to beautiful and ethereal'.

Speaking with eclectic, electric guitarist Thomas Gray, after the concert, I was interested to explore just how he managed to produce such 'swooshy' effects in the *Dies Irae*, apparently via the 'effects pedal board', which one could see him operating by foot, also enabling organ swell sounds at other points in the work, as he changed the pedal board settings. All sounds were triggered off simultaneously as he pressed on the strings.

<sup>4</sup> see my review of Royal Opera House première in *Tempo* Vol. 57 no. 223 (January 2003).

<sup>5</sup> see my review of the Signum recording in *Tempo* Vol. 61 no. 240 (April 2007).

<sup>6</sup> see [www.tyalgumpress.com](http://www.tyalgumpress.com)

He also ‘hammered’ the strings with his fingers at times. This may remind readers of Gray’s earlier collaborations with Todd, as for instance for *Whirlwind*, commissioned by Streetwise Opera several years ago (at The Sage, Gateshead).

The *Requiem* encompassed a wide range of moods and styles, from emotive highpoints from gospel singer Bethany Halliday, virtuoso improvisation from the guitar, grabbing audience attention and affording Gray a standing ovation from the front rows, and stalwart choir who managed to switch from tonal to chromatic harmony, as the complex score demanded. And truly complex this score is, and well worth many more performances from ambitious, enterprising choirs who happen to have a virtuoso electric guitarist on hand and a stunningly adaptable solo soprano too. Basically the work represents one’s struggle against the ugliness of the approach of death; the *Agnus Dei* commencing with low plucked notes on guitar, and later sobbing sounds from solo soprano – well-managed, but as death occurs hope breaks through all forces combining to soar to new life beyond.

As for the moving ending – I cannot do better than quote from Todd’s own programme notes:

‘The Mysterious’ has become stronger as the work progressed, so that whereas in the original draft the final cadence was on a strong and unequivocal E minor (E is the first note of the 12 note row upon which much of the music is structured), in the finished version the performers move off into a chromatically dense and unresolved texture, an attempt to portray the limits of our understanding – the point at which life turns into actual death, and we are no more back to creation, back to stardust ...

This is ‘a different place from *Mass in Blue*’, he reminds us.

Well, to see what you think, look out for the CD of the work due to be released on the Tyalgum label in Summer 2009. This is, in my opinion, Will Todd impressively at his most mature to date.

Jill Barlow

### London, South Bank Centre:

#### (1) Priti Paintal’s ‘Secret Chants’

A long-standing advocate of musical diversity, Priti Paintal’s most notable successes have been in the field of music theatre, including the mini-opera *Survival Song* (1989) for the Royal Opera House, which led to the full-length opera *Biko* (1992), the ROH’s first commission from an Asian and a woman composer. She has also written chamber music, such as *Silk Rhythms*, for string sextet

(1988) and *Bound by Strings of Rhythm*, for string quartet (1990). Paintal founded ShivaNova in 1988 and has regularly composed for and recorded with this group ever since, creating a substantial body of work in a straight-forward, accessible style rooted in rhythmic vitality and expressive melodies, which combines diverse sound worlds and instrumental timbres.

Commissioned by the Arts Council and premièred at the Royal Festival Hall, *Secret Chants* was inspired by the composer’s travels in North Delhi and the Himalayas, and Tibetan Buddhist monks’ chants, which make use of sonorous bass notes rich in high overtones. It involved players from the Philharmonia, including an ‘improvisatory group’, consisting of violin, cello, clarinet, bass trombone and percussion, in a semi-improvised performance alongside the Indian and jazz musicians of ShivaNova – Manickam ‘Yoga’ Yogeswaran (voice); Alexander Teymour Housego (bansuri/Indian and Western flutes); R.N. Prakash (Indian percussion) – directed from the piano by the composer. David Simonetti provided visual projections: with these images, Paintal sought to transport to the RFH a world of mountainous landscapes, waterfalls, dancing and rituals. A pre-recorded soundtrack, re-mixing chants by the Gyuto monks of Tibet, also ran through part of the performance.

The improvisational elements added flexibility and an interpretative freedom nearer to a classical Indian aesthetic than some of Paintal’s previous works involving orchestral forces, such as *Scarlet Mountain Dances: Music for Guilty Lovers* (1990). In *Secret Chants*, the musical flow absorbed fixed compositions in notated form, in the manner of a raga elaboration. The raw elements were very simple, consisting of three basic harmonies throughout the work and three main blocks of material: choral chords, the Tibetan chant, and a broken-chord pattern introduced by the violin later in the piece. From these elements grew the harmonic and melodic lines that the improvisers created and developed. The original material was restated and combined in a hypnotically-evolving structure.

Predominantly contemplative in mood, *Secret Chants* assembled an engaging and evocative 20-minute soundscape, which achieved both coherence and spontaneity. It provided an effective vehicle for the instrumental virtuosity of its two contrasting instrumental groups, and its emotional impact was greatly enhanced by the euphoric vocals of Manickam ‘Yoga’ Yogeswaran. The première took place as part of the Philharmonia’s free ‘Music of Today’ pre-concert series, a terrific bargain for those lucky enough to

attend. I hope that, on the strength of this artistically successful and well-received collaboration, Priti Paintal will be invited to write a piece for the full orchestra, bringing her distinctive and eloquent voice to the Philharmonia's main evening events at the RFH.

Paul Conway

## (2) John Woolrich's 'From The Hammer to the Anvil'

Oliver Knussen has, throughout the last 30 years, synchronized his conducting career with an intense desire to generate his own brand of music. Having composed symphonies, concertos and operas, he has, since the 1970s, not only established a major reputation as a conductor – achieving the honour of being appointed Conductor Laureate of the London Sinfonietta, in 2002 – but also rapidly consolidating his reputation as the creator of a unique musical soundscape.

Such mastery became rapidly apparent at the South Bank Centre as he co-ordinated the sound worlds of two of major composers of modern times – Elliott Carter and John Woolrich – during a concert given by the London Sinfonietta, now in its fortieth year. The minimalist – yet highly sophisticated – style of his musical direction was eloquently demonstrated as he launched into an ambitious programme, starting with Carter's *ASKO Concerto* for 15-piece ensemble – named after the ASKO Ensemble from Holland, who originally commissioned it. This distinguished American centenarian was born just as Schoenberg was originating his first atonal composition – in 1908 – and has now outlived Stravinsky, Varèse, Cage, Stockhausen and, of course, Messiaen. *ASKO Concerto* displays remarkable imagination allied to supreme orchestral discipline as powerful, brass-dominated chords are gradually transformed into occasionally more light-hearted conversational strands.

Although preoccupied with classical composition and literature, John Woolrich seems to have developed a fascination for machinery and mechanical processes. Following on from *The Ghost in the Machine* – a stark portrayal of 'order descending into chaos' – his *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*, commissioned by the London Sinfonietta, was here given its world première. Written for a 17-piece ensemble, alternating fragile toccatas, orchestral chorales and many darkly menacing orchestral moments, its distinctive 'carnavalesque' character was emphasized by Knussen's firm direction, linking woodwind with brass, popular rhythmic percussion and keyboard

in his typically exact manner, calmly encouraging all groups to express themselves individually.

Elliott Carter's recent burst of creative energy – in his ninth decade – was again emphasized as three more of his recent works were eloquently transmitted to the Queen Elizabeth Hall. *Au Quai* brought two of the Sinfonietta's top principals – Paul Silverthorne (viola) and John Orford (bassoon) – to the front of the platform to present a moving (50th birthday) tribute to Oliver Knussen, to be followed by *Réflexions*, created as a celebration of Pierre Boulez's 80th birthday, echoing the more orthodox use of serialism, as demonstrated in his *Marteau sans Maître*.

Finally, pianist Nicholas Hodges joined a larger ensemble in *Dialogues*, a lively conversation between piano and orchestra, frequently employing ethereal harmonies and dynamic rhythm, but ending with several groups of poignant piano moments, still under the firm command of Oliver Knussen.

John Wheatley

## London, Wigmore Hall: 'Nash Inventions'

This year's collection of new British music commissioned and performed by the Nash Ensemble included no less than four world premières, all written by composers associated with the group. Entitled 'Nash Inventions', the showcase concert at the Wigmore Hall reaffirmed the status of these players as pre-eminent interpreters of challenging contemporary scores.

Michael Berkeley's one-movement Piano Quintet (2009) belied its austere, abstract title. It takes its inspiration from examples in the genre by Fauré and Schumann and, more radically, from the late paintings of Mark Rothko. An explosive, rhythmically-charged central section was contrasted with serene, sustained material, consisting of a line stated at the opening – a very high D starting in unison and then gradually pulled one way and another in microtones. Playing at just under 15 minutes, Berkeley's new piece was gripping and superbly crafted with deeply affecting *espressivo* writing acting as an effective foil to propulsive, genuinely fast sections. There was a sense in which the composer, now in his sixties, was beginning to push the boundaries of his hard-won art: the results were wonderfully refreshing and invigorating.

Julian Anderson's *Prayer* for solo viola (2009) was a short work which effectively exploited the richly varied timbres of the instrument. A long upwardly aspiring melodic line, by turns reflective

and lyrical, was punctuated by various contrasting sonorities and episodes. The composer wanted to show that prayer wasn't always tranquil and untroubled, and his piece often sounded like a desperate, impassioned entreaty. Anderson skilfully made use of the range of viola sounds so that, far from being restricted by the solo line, he was able to make the soloist's different registers interact with each other. In this endeavour he was lucky to have as the work's first interpreter the Nash Ensemble violist Lawrence Power, whose totally dedicated, vivid playing made this very physical virtuoso viola piece come alive. Demanding great technical prowess to realize the complexity behind the simplest of devotional acts, Anderson's *Prayer* is an important addition to the repertoire and a pleasing consequence of this composer's uncommonly wide-ranging inspirations and preoccupations.

Operating on a less exalted level, Huw Watkins's Trio for horn, violin and piano (2009) was cast in a single movement alternating two different types of music, one fast-moving and the other much slower, initially a lyrical duet for horn and violin accompanied by gentle piano writing. Inspired by the examples for the medium by Brahms and Ligeti, Watkins's piece began with obsessively repeated music in  $\frac{3}{4}$ ; indeed a rhythmic cell was overused to the point of banality. This was a curiously old-fashioned-sounding work, shrivelled in the blaze of the more adventurous items on the programme. A pity, for in the last few minutes, Watkins seemed to find an eloquence and fluency which eluded him in the earlier, drably iterative passages. The Nash players seemed to realize they were absurdly overqualified for this material and their response sounded dutiful rather than committed.

The last première on the programme was Mark-Anthony Turnage's *A Constant Obsession* (2007), a gently reflective song cycle for tenor and eight instruments: flute (doubling alto flute), oboe (doubling cor anglais), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), horn, harp, violin, viola and cello. The 'constant obsession' of the title is love in all its many forms, as announced in the prologue: 'Love expected; Love begun; The pains of love; Love continued; Love in death'. After this come five songs based on poems by English writers of different periods: Keats, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves and Tennyson. These settings were a world away from the gritty, urban domain usually associated with Turnage's music, although paradoxically the most successful examples were those closest to his usual sound world, namely the settings of Edward Thomas's 'No one so much as you' and Tennyson's 'Come not, when I am

dead', with their threnodic, bluesy woodwind writing. The use of horn along with the tenor voice in the setting of Robert Graves's 'Counting the Beats' seemed to invite (inevitably unflattering) comparison with Britten, but the smooth instrumental interlude was typically elegant. *A Constant Obsession* made a satisfying conclusion to the concert, yet one couldn't escape a feeling that the piece was slightly under-characterized, as if the great poems had daunted rather than inspired the composer, usually one of the most instantly recognizable of contemporary voices. Tenor Mark Padmore brought fine interpretative shading and invention to the text and the pleasingly indefatigable Martyn Brabbins directed the ensemble with his customary empathy with both score and performers.

One closing plea: that next year, the Nash Ensemble reviews the length of its annual survey of contemporary British music. In addition to the first performances discussed above, the concert also featured Julian Anderson's substantial *Poetry Nearing Silence*, a witty divertimento consisting of eight distinctive vignettes for ensemble dating from 1997, superbly performed by the Nash players under Martyn Brabbins; the London première of George Benjamin's cheerfully eclectic *Piano Figures* (2004), ten short pieces for piano fabulously realized by Ian Brown, and Colin Matthews's *The Island in the North Sea* (2007), three unconscionably stodgy Rilke settings for soprano and ensemble, sung without much apparent relish by Loré Lixenberg, stepping in for an indisposed Claire Booth. This added up to a concert of over two and half hours (including interval) and was at least two pieces too long, proving that you really can have too much of a good thing.

Paul Conway

### St. Alban's Cathedral: Tarik O'Regan's 'Martyr'

St Alban, Britain's first Christian martyr, was executed by the Romans on a hilltop just outside Verulamium, Roman Britain's second city, in the first half of the 3rd century, the date being variously estimated as AD 209, or 250. A Romano-British citizen (probably of Celtic-Roman parentage), Alban reputedly already had leanings towards the outlawed Christian religion when he harboured a Christian priest and nobly switched clothes with him, taking the place of the fugitive, when Roman soldiers arrived, allowing the priest to slip away unnoticed. As a Roman citizen and local man of some status, Alban was given a quick execution

by beheading, rather than suffer one of the more gruesome lingering deaths customarily meted out to Christians caught at that time. By 325AD Christianity had become the official religion here in Britain and a shrine to St Alban became a popular place of pilgrimage. He was officially canonized by the Pope in the late 8th century, giving his name to our city of St Albans and its cathedral, which now houses a richly decorated and much venerated shrine dating back to 1308. It was to commemorate Alban's martyrdom that St Albans Chamber Choir commissioned the young vibrant award-winning composer Tarik O'Regan to write a new work in his honour entitled *Martyr*, suggesting various texts for use rather than giving him a free hand regarding the libretto.

Since coming to live here in 1980 to teach, and subsequently review concerts, many centred on the cathedral, I have come to absorb along with other local people the all-pervading influence and example of our local namesake stemming from Verulamium times. So I must admit it came as something of a cultural shock to find literary texts used as a basis for this work, rather than having it based more on a re-enactment of the historical events, ie a chronological retelling of the tale. By contrast, for instance, currently St Albans Cathedral Music Trust have commissioned a two-act community opera based on the life of St Alban, 'to draw together singers, actors and musicians mainly from parish and school choirs across the diocese ...' with a local professional librettist of note. Maybe I have too much of a 'mind-set' in this respect, so tried to understand O'Regan's alternative and equally valid approach.

Before the première performance on 24 January, in his preconcert talk in conversation with St Albans Chamber Choir's new musical director John Gibbons, who took over after the details of the commission had already been arranged with the composer, Tarik O'Regan referred to rising readily to the challenge posed by the 'restrictions' of the commission in these 'credit crunch' times. He mentioned having been given texts, and also that he was restricted to using the same forces as those to be employed in Haydn's *Nelson Mass*, which was performed by the choir later in the evening. (As John Gibbons explained, this was to facilitate further performances of 'Martyr').

Using as its central text Wordsworth's Ecclesiastical Sonnet VI, citing St Alban's sacrifice in the second verse, the work has an intervening

*a cappella* section between verse 1 and 2, using a Latin text carefully researched by O'Regan in Corpus Christi College library, Cambridge. (This central *a cappella* section can be 'performed as a stand-alone piece entitled *Martyr Dei*', to quote from the notes in the beautifully presented Novello score.)

I much admire Tarik O'Regan's wide-ranging style and youthful enterprise (see my *Tempo* review of his CD *Voices* of BBC fame), while his award-winning prowess as he commutes between Cambridge and New York impresses, so I was not surprised at his dashing, angular, flurry of trumpets, as none other than the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra opened the world première of *Martyr* to a packed cathedral. The St Albans Chamber Choir rose well to the occasion, their 50th Anniversary. First, four professional soloists proclaimed in concert: 'For you are the ark of your holiness ...', the choir then entering ominously with 'Alban, sacrifice to our Gods', taken from an early Latin text, translated by Bob Niblett, himself also a choir member. There was also good use of tuned timpani here. O'Regan had described in his pre-concert talk how it was being a percussionist in his school production of Bernstein's *West Side Story* which initially drew him to making music – particularly the 'hit everything in sight' directive in Bernstein's score. (However, for his *Martyr* première the Haydn Mass 'forces' didn't allow much extra to hit, and only one RPO timpanist.) Credit crunch times indeed, but the whole evening was a great celebration both for the local choir, St Alban, the cathedral and its ever-loyal, enthusiastic, near-full house audience.

Highlights included the superb quick-fire repetitive running semiquavers delivered with such real panache by the violins of the RPO, what the conductor described as 'discordant' touches at times to denote the pain of sacrifice of our martyr, huge crescendos from the choir rising to 'Gods' and other dramatic climaxes, and the impressive 'Martyr Dei' which could indeed be used as a short work separately. There were also rich, soft passages for the organ, which score-wise is 'optional', in line with these recessionary times. Well, it goes without saying we definitely 'do organ' here in St Albans cathedral – in fact we're rather good at it!

Long may O'Regan continue to produce works 'to order' but also perhaps more free-ranging and innovative ones too, given a more flexible mandate.

Jill Barlow

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