
FIRST PERFORMANCES

Brussels, Opera Royal de la Monnaie: ‘Thyeste’

Thyeste (*Thyestes*), the new opera by Belgian composer Jan van Vlijmen based on a 1966 stage drama by his compatriot, the playwright Hugo Claus, clearly bears the imprint of the ancients. Its grisly tale could easily be by Aeschylus: think of the bloody dispatch of Agamemnon in his bath, or the horrific slaughter of their 50 husbands by the dauntless daughters of Danaus.

Yet for sheer brutality, the Thyestes myth (generally accepted as a prime source for Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*) is hard to beat. Claus based his play on Seneca, who was only too happy to let blood flow freely onstage. Happily in the opera, for which Claus has reworked his play as a libretto, we were spared the spectacle of John Daszak’s leering Atreus slitting the throats of his brother’s small sons – whom we had just a moment earlier watched innocently disporting themselves with a bright pink kite and blue and yellow balloons. As in Greek drama, that’s left for a Messenger to describe.

But we do witness the famous banquet, in which Atreus, the father of Agamemnon, in revenge for his younger brother’s cuckolding him and conceiving designs on the throne, serves up to Thyestes (the American baritone Dale Duesing) the boiled human flesh of his sons right there on stage. For sheer ghastliness, child slaying is about as vile as it gets. But this – ‘a penalty beyond the bounds of human hate’ – beats even that. When the boys’ severed heads are kicked around the stage in a rouged sack, this is not one for the squeamish.

The slightly too static staging by Gerardjan Rijnders for Brussels’s Opera Royal de la Monnaie, premièred on 2 October, improved dramatically as the four main acts (or scenes) progressed. Musically, the opera could not have had a better advocate than conductor Stefan Asbury, whose intelligent quick grasp of complex modern scores has rendered him a valuable and enabling figure in the European contemporary music world. Van Vlijmen opted to dispense with the full-sized orchestra of La Monnaie, restricting himself to an expressive ensemble with solo strings. Here, Asbury conducted the capable Asko Ensemble and Cappella Amsterdam.

Nervy brass, eerie percussion and slithering strings soon gave a sense of the atmospheric,

sinewy music van Vlijmen – originally a forthright serialist of the Birtwistle generation – elected to embrace later in his career. But it took a moment or two to adjust to Rien Bekkers’s individual chorus costume designs, which left the initially inert, supine choir looking slightly comic – like an advertisement for flowery pyjamas – amid a potentially forceful opening tableau featuring a vengeful, blood-red Fury (fearsomely intoned by contralto Helena Rasker) and the father of this doomed race, Tantalus (Harry Peeters), emerging from the rear like a ghoulish Caliban.

Neither Daszak nor Duesing seemed very helpfully directed: this endangered the impact of earlier scenes. But the cavern of dripping sound – bells, bowed percussion and harp – that evolved during one early brothers’ encounter; the touching exchange between Thyestes and his young son Tantalus (clear echoes of Debussy’s *Yniold*); and, in particular, the impressive Messenger scene, ominously hammered home by the magnificent Syrian bass Nabil Suliman, picked out in shadow and supported by bowed percussion and overtly grieving brass, came across especially strongly.

Paul Gallis’s simple but effective décor deliberately restricted the stage action to an oval area, aptly recalling the curved ‘orchestra’ space of Epidaurus or Athens’s Theatre of Dionysus. Solos were well taken: a striking passage for double bass as Atreus cynically deceives Thyestes into accepting a share of the crown; another for cor anglais, emerging as a desolate prelude to the final revelations. In yet another sequence Daszak’s Atreus, pitched high in the tenor register, is subtly underscored by dark low strings and bassoon; as Thyestes’ misplaced optimism grows, several bars scored for viola and bassoon seem poignantly to question his doomed false hopes.

Best was the final encounter – a long drawn out exchange between the two brothers during which Claus cleverly permits the full horror (of the boys’ slaughtering, the true nature of the supposed banquet, and the fact that Thyestes, just when supposedly celebrating the two brothers’ reconciliation, is consuming his dead sons’ flesh and quaffing their blood) – to emerge only casually, bit by bit. Slyly, sneeringly, scowlingly, Daszak’s Atreus gradually tightened the screw. But it was Duesing’s harrowing depiction of Thyestes as an increasingly crumpled, scarred and ultimately sui-

cidal victim that finally gave this grim opera its bite. Van Vlijmen saw this last sequence as – paradoxically – a virtual ‘love scene’ between the two brothers. Rijnders’s direction was unexpectedly good here: the effect of this final scene was undeniably searing.

Roderic Dunnett

Cheltenham Festival 2005: John Pickard’s ‘Gaia’ Symphony for brass

The world première of John Pickard’s *Gaia* Symphony for brass band is arguably the most exciting and distinctive piece of programming by Martyn Brabbins in the first Cheltenham Festival under his Artistic Directorship. Both Brabbins and Pickard grew up in the brass band tradition, which the symphony both respects and transcends. The *Gaia* Symphony has had a long gestation period.

The title of this colossal, hour-long work refers to the Greek goddess of the Earth, and reflects the symbolic connexion of each movement to natural phenomena, based on the four elements of Water, Fire, Air and Earth. The symphony consists of four separate tone poems or movements linked together by ‘Windows’ written for six percussionists. These pivotal interludes refine the score’s palette and give the brass players a well-earned rest, as well as adding a fresh perspective on the preceding music and anticipating the ensuing material. Each of the movements was in fact written and performed separately (the earliest, *Wildfire*, as long ago as 1991) and it was only after a span of 13 years composing the four tone poems that the composer decided to unite them into a single entity.

From the introductory bars, it is evident that this is going to be a large-scale, truly symphonic work. Momentous pedal points and ominous ostinati tell the audience they are about to embark on a vast journey. There is a genuine sense of expectation as the odyssey is begun. The opening movement, *Tsunami*, was completed in 2002 and hence has no reference to the tragic events of Boxing Day 2004. It is, rather, a purely musical response to the concept of the momentum built up and ultimately discharged by a large tidal wave. The movement is launched and driven by nervous energy, grippingly held in check during a tense central section that features solos of eerie foreboding.

Wildfire was inspired by a newspaper report of two forest fires that started separately before converging on each other. Again, this movement is not a literal depiction of the fire, but there is a

fierce, blazing quality to this, the scherzo of the design. Phrases flicker, spit and flare up, burning through climaxes of white heat, which extinguish themselves in a remarkable, desiccated fragment of crackling wooden slapsticks. *Aurora*, a tenderly sketched depiction of the Aurora Borealis, offers crucial respite after the fierce energy of the first two movements. Interlacing solos shape the fabric of this serene, contemplative slow movement, weaving a fragile, kaleidoscopic skein of gossamer beauty.

The Finale, *Men of Stone*, is cast in four distinct sections, each picturing an ancient site housing various Neolithic stone circles around the British Isles, captured at specific times of day. ‘Avebury’ is depicted on an autumnal morning, ‘Castlerigg’ in Cumbria in a snowstorm on a winter’s afternoon, ‘Barclodiad-y-Gawres’, on the coast of Anglesey, during a spring sunset and ‘Stonehenge’ during Midsummer’s Eve, as dawn emerges through the stones. Whilst Earth remains the dominating element behind the whole of *Men of Stone*, its four sections also contain the classical elements represented by the four movements of the symphony as a whole: earth for ‘Avebury’, air for the blizzard scene of ‘Castlerigg’, water for the seascape of ‘Barclodiad y Gawres’ and fire for the climactic midsummer scene of ‘Stonehenge’. The four-in-one nature of ‘Men of Stone’ serves as a rigorous review of the entire large-scale structure, in true symphonic fashion. The massively optimistic final major chord, with which this work ends, not only represents harmony between a natural and man-made phenomenon, but also signifies journey’s end for this spectacular aural voyage.

Special mention must be made of the three transitional ‘Windows’, which use a variety of drums, bells and cymbals. They link the four main movements and go a long way towards securing the success of the whole symphony. As well as offering a welcome contrast in timbre from the brass band sonorities, these interludes gather in rhythmic complexity, from the regular pulse of the first via the elaborate counterpoint of the second to the more flexible and irregular aspect of the third. They contribute vital musical and narrative cohesion.

The Buy As You View Band (formerly the Cory Band), under the direction of Robert Childs, gave a virtuoso world première performance, with fine brass sonorities allied to a keen rhythmic sense and peerless technical execution. It is good that they have recorded the work, so their masterly interpretation of this monolithic tour de force can be widely heard (Doyen CD 188).

Pickard’s *Gaia* Symphony is a remarkable achievement, challenging received opinion about

the brass band concert repertoire – habitually a diet of trite marches, prosaic arrangements and mortifyingly stodgy versions of pop tunes. He has succeeded in creating an epic work of genuine symphonic weight as well as dimension, with subtle thematic and structural links between all four movements. A lesser composer might have produced the longest test piece in the history of the brass band movement, but Pickard is a natural symphonist, thinking in long-breathed, sweeping paragraphs of sound and, as in Nicholas Maw's *Odyssey*, the very choice of material determines and sustains an expansive structure. I hope John Pickard will go on to write more symphonies (*Gaia* is his Fourth): on the strength of this example and his bravely compelling Second and Third contributions to the genre, he has the technique and the temperament to emerge as one of the great symphonists of the 21st century.

Paul Conway

Proms 2005 (1): Berkeley, Musgrave, MacMillan, Glanert, Corigliano, Abrahamsen

Michael Berkeley's 24-minute Concerto for Orchestra is the second work to emerge from his appointment as Associate Composer of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales which, under its chief conductor, Richard Hickox, gave it the world premiere on 19 July (the first fruit of the union was *Tristessa* (2003), a concerto for viola and cor anglais). It opens, *Energico*, with a tone of fierce exultation, the material acknowledging the genre as it is passed around the orchestra in urgent discussion, the string-writing animated by Tippett-like rhythms, the textures somehow managing to be both bright and dark at the same time – not least because Berkeley is remembering his bass lines. An oasis of calm in the centre of all this activity is inhabited by pizzicato violins and tuned percussion, who play with a descending motif that runs through the whole work; here it drifts downwards like a fleck of dust on the eye. The brass and heavier percussion, sustained by long string lines, return the temperature to the intensity of the opening, and the movement closes with a decisiveness reminiscent, oddly enough, of Roy Harris.

The title of the slow movement, 'Threnody for a Sad Trumpet', might suggest a Morton Gould miniature; in fact, Berkeley was sitting down to the music when he heard news of the death of Jane Attenborough (daughter of Richard, who was present for what must have been one of the most poignant first performances of his long life) and his grief worked its way into the music. The

movement begins with gossamer string figures dappled with light from tuned percussion, bells, piano, before the trumpet intones its elegiac line, lyrical but immensely sad and essentially alone; a light crash from the percussion silences it, and the strings continue the tissue of mourning before the trumpet elegy resumes over an ominous commentary from bass drum and timpani. The finale erupts *Con fuoco* with an antiphonal crash of cymbals, unleashing melodic shapes that now bustle upwards – the long shadow of Tippett still audible in the strings. Angry gestures from brass and percussion, and a repeated brass chord unleashes a monumental chordal underpinning from the organ; after a sudden silence, the last emphatic rhythms are punched out *tutti*. That unexpected organ irruption underlined my principal misgiving about the work as a whole. Even in a concerto for orchestra, when showing off the myriad varieties of texture available from the modern symphony orchestra, you need to stay your hand: constant variety is no variety at all. That last-minute organ blast shoots the work in the foot: a big gesture to underline the fact that it was the first one we had heard – and that Berkeley achieves his climax through the simple expedient of unleashing violent power rather than generating genuine intensity.

As with Berkeley's Concerto, Thea Musgrave's *Turbulent Landscapes* (2003), given its London première on 20 July by the BBC Scottish SO under its much-missed former chief conductor Osmo Vänskä, showed some remarkably inventive orchestral writing, but it likewise suffered from the lack of a big idea. *Turbulent Landscapes* is a suite premised on six Turner paintings (thoughtfully reproduced in the programme on the evening) but it, too, is a concerto for orchestra: Musgrave paints with sounds as Turner with oils and calls on the constituent instrumental colours even more explicitly. The opening 'Sunrise with Sea-Monsters' gave a fair indication of what was to follow: it's an obvious seascape, with a broad sense of primal movement beneath the subtleties of its surface chiaroscuro. Thus, too, in 'The Shipwreck' – the horns (deliberately?) evoking *Peter Grimes* – the tension mounts to a violent climax as the storm claims its victim. In 'Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps' flutter-tongued flutes hover over the heavy tread of muffled low percussion and pizzicato basses; a solo horn, standing (Musgrave likes these theatrical touches), represents Hannibal urging on his men, and hesitant fanfares indicate distant Italy. The solo trumpet in 'War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet' is Napoleon, unsettled, brittle, bitter, the first notes of the *Marseillaise* recalling his triumphs and

an echo of 'God Save the King' his defeat. More solo lines – bass clarinet, cor anglais and, especially, viola – decorate 'God Save the King' in the horns, but the next player on his feet is the piccolo, joined by the flutes: these flickering improvisatory lines depict the first of the flames that consumed the Houses of Parliament in 1834. Pregnant with latent power, the orchestra at last unleashes woodwind and percussion as the conflagration bursts out, and the heavy brass pitch in to bring the roof down, almost literally – but horns softly intone the national anthem: all will be well again. Finally, in 'Sunrise, with a Boat between Headlands', string clusters paint the fog and muted brass chords suggest 'the huge looming cliffs' (Musgrave's programme note). A solo clarinet calls up three trumpets to evoke the sun; mutes off, the brass powers Turner's boat out towards the open sea and the music sinks into tranquillity. Musgrave's use of orchestral soloists and her deliberate symbolism might seem crude in the necessary summary of a review; experienced as music, *Turbulent Landscapes* is delicate, refined, imaginative – not plumbing the emotional reserves of the last orchestral work of hers presented at the Proms (the soprano song-cycle *Songs for a Winter's Evening* in 1998), but with its own poetic logic.

Strauss used *Ein Heldenleben* to get even with his critics; James MacMillan's organ concerto *A Scotch Bestiary* – given its first London performance on 21 July, with the soloist Wayne Marshall and the composer conducting the BBC Philharmonic – is an elaborate and energetic settling of scores with his own naysayers. Since the work was initially commissioned for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, MacMillan explains, 'I was motivated by the great American cartoon makers who represented human characters in animal form. *A Scotch Bestiary* is inspired by human archetypes and personalities encountered in Scottish life over the years'. The subtitle – 'Enigmatic variations on a zoological carnival at a Caledonian exhibition' – gives the musical game away: MacMillan takes leaves from Elgar's, Saint-Saëns' and Mussorgsky's books. The work falls into two sections, the first a set of character variations, intermittently linked by various treatments of the 'Promenade' from Mussorgsky's *Pictures*, the second a wild and freewheeling fantasy on the material generated in the first.

It's plain MacMillan's gloves are off from the ferocious chordal opening, organ, brass and percussion all piling in like vultures on a kill. His victims aren't always obvious: quite who are the 'Reptiles and Big Fish (in a small pond)' of the second episode isn't revealed explicitly, though the lumbering waltz that emerges suggests we should

not expect much fleetness of thought. The title of the fourth episode, though – 'The red-handed, no-surrender howler monkey' – fingers Scottish anti-Catholic prejudice clearly enough for its manic militarism, expressed in a mad Ivesian scherzo, to turn its target orange with indignation. MacMillan is now on a roll, and the sixth episode aims a slug at the Scottish political establishment when a 'discarded fanfare for the opening of the new Scottish Parliament' is mocked with wow-wow trombone, 'accompanied by bagpipe-like drones and snuffling on the organ'; a powerful organ statement sweeps it all away disdainfully, perhaps discarding the Parliament itself. When the organ bookends 'The Reverend Cuckoo and his Parrotting Chorus' (seventh episode, clarinet stirring the other woodwinds into excitement) with a hymn and the orchestra sings 'Amen', the Prom audience, enjoying the scrap like kids around a playground fight, laughed out loud. The eighth and last episode, 'Jackass Hackass', is a swirling *moto perpetuo*, where MacMillan gets even with us hapless scribes – two orchestral typewriters make it clear whose eye he is jabbing.

But if that first section, 20 minutes in length, is an essay in epic whimsy, MacMillan reveals a more serious purpose in the white-knuckle chase of the fantasy which follows, where material from the first is joined by new 'animals'; the humour and violence coalesce in a riot of colour and energy than is far more than simple snook-cocking. MacMillan occasionally relaxes the throttle, but when the music gathers speed for the frenzied skelter and fierce organ cadenza of the closing pages, the thrill is physical as much as musical. As Composer/Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, MacMillan was as obviously at home with his musicians as he was with his music; and, secure in the knowledge that Wayne Marshall would undertake the first performances, threw a demonic solo part a him; Marshall despatched it with assured confidence.

More animal energy was unleashed on 26 July, in the world première of Detlev Glanert's *Theatrum bestiarum*, a BBC commission conducted by John Storgårds, replacing the indisposed Oliver Knussen in front of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Glanert sees the 20-minute work as 'a dark and wild series of songs and dances for orchestra, [...] an exploration of dangerous dreams and wishes'; its 'uncomfortable undertow' makes it 'a glimpse into the inner soul of a monster – as human beings can become'. Here, too, the organ joins the orchestra in the opening *mêlée*, but the sound evaporates instantly, leaving a lone bass line to splutter out on tuba and organ.

The second-movement 'Pianissimo Scherzo' is all scurry and whisper, the trio bringing the contrast of rhythmic irregularity. Harmonics in the violin are answered with a hint of orientalism in percussion and woodwind. The violin resumes its catch-me-if-you-can with the orchestra, and the music rushes upwards and disappears. The following *Andante flautando* opens with a broad cello melody, to which the soloist appends his own extended, plangent thoughts. The troubled lyricism brings clear echoes of the Samuel Barber Concerto; unlike that work, and despite the beauty of the string-writing, the ideas are not adequately sustained. The rhythmically dislocated finale is another wild hunt, soloist and orchestra barrelling onwards at different tempi, the brass whooping and percussion banging defiance, soloist and orchestral strings pressing crunches out of the instruments. The tension falls and oboe and flute unfold a sad nocturne, encouraging one of the soloist's loveliest melodies so far. The opening chaconne balefully returns, sparking excited commentary from the violin. A percussion-accompanied cadenza stirs up more crunching and, prefaced by percussion thuds, a final whoop from the violin closes the concerto – which is not quite the sum, I fear, of its estimable parts.

Hans Abrahamsen's *Four Pieces for Orchestra* (UK première on 1 August) began life as the first four of his *10 Studies for Piano* in 1983: 'Träumlied', 'Sturm', 'Arabesque' and 'Ende'; even then they were intended to 'recall the German Romantic era full of expression, night, timelessness, dream and the irrational' and he already foresaw them expanded for full orchestra. In the long run (that expansion took place in 2000–3) he requires 107 players, among them two harps, guitar, mandolin, two contrabassoons, bass trumpet, four Wagner tubas, two normal ones and a forest of percussion; between Sibelius's Third Symphony and Brahms's Second Piano Concerto, this was indeed a programming indulgence – especially since, in this concert of Ilan Volkov and the BBC Scottish, the players would have to have been transported down from Glasgow. But Abrahamsen uses his huge resources as sparingly as Mahler – and to tremendous effect: the range of colours was dazzling. The *magister in absentia* is clearly Berg, the figure where once before the heritage of the Romantic ethos fused with atonality. The shifting chords of 'Träumlied', built on a phrase of Webernian brevity and allowed to echo into the distance, are charged with gently suggestive strength. 'Sturm' boils from the start, spluttering angrily and soon whirling into a modernist re-writing of the Storm from *Peter Grimes*: the parallels are striking. The twisting lines of

'Arabesque', brighter than any of the preceding textures, twinkle and flicker in textures of Debussyan lightness. And 'Ende', incorporating silence into the deeper recesses of the orchestra and juxtaposing it with occasional surges of chordal colour, proved a deeply subtle psychological essay. Of all the new music on my watch this year, this was by far the most impressive piece.

The world première of Huw Watkins's *Double Concerto* for the unusual combination of viola and cello occupied the centre-spot of the Prom on 4 August; the violist Philip Dukes and cellist Josephine Knight, both of them first-rate musicians, were joined by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under the alert baton of Jac van Steen. The concerto begins with a brief fusillade of demisemiquavers from the violins, underpinned by the bass drum and capped by flourishes from the soloists. A viola solo (*sola?*), high in the register, brings a hint of Celtic dance; the cello responds less assertively, before the duo and string-dominated orchestra exchange material in a wild *allegro*. Indeed, the repeated bursts of toccata-like writing, occasionally animated by a brittle humour, suggest that the entire movement functions as a preludial toccata of sorts, with a calm and sadly lyrical postlude for the duo. The elegiac tone thus set up continues into the central *Adagio*, the soloists rhapsodizing contrapuntally, braving brisker interjections from trumpets and trombones to suggest a loss felt jointly, the sense of pain maintained into the closing bars, where the phrases run out, unfinished. Bass drum and double bassoon support the beginnings of a dance, which the duo seems to be trying to recover from the depths of memory. Tempo and power gradually increase, establishing a stomping rhythm. But the onward drive drops back for a wistful reverie until the bell-crested orchestra insists again, growing ever more excited under the tumbling, intertwining lines of the soloists. Finally, they too get the idea and wrong-foot it enthusiastically to the sudden conclusion.

Martin Anderson

Proms 2005 (2): Unsuk Chin, Sorensen, Hayes, Salonen

On 10 August Kent Nagano and The Deutsches Symphonie-Orchestra Berlin with Christiane Oelze gave the European première of Unsuk Chin's *snagS and Snarls*, settings of texts by Lewis Carroll with additions by the composer. There are, of course, no moral imperatives about these sorts of things, but it seems that anybody setting Carroll

should tread very carefully, especially if not a native speaker. The word setting in the last movement, 'Speak softly to your little boy,' was supposed to be unnatural and distorted for (presumably comic) effect, but in fact it was no more so than that of the first, a setting of 'A boat beneath a sunny sky,' the dedicatory poem which has Alice Liddell's name embedded in it as the first letter of every line, where the intention was clearly to set the words in an absolutely straightforward manner. The music of 'The Alice acrostic,' as that movement was entitled, was evocative, sweetly 'old-fashioned' and gentle, but the voice-part was likely to sprout melismas at any moment, however inopportune it might be in relationship to the text, to no particularly good end. 'The long and sad tale' of the mouse after the caucus race was set to music which was supposed to mimic the graphic character of the text as Carroll printed it, with phrases that started loud and got softer and also got progressively higher and shorter, but this attribute was not particularly clear aurally. Contractions in Carroll's text were changed back into separate words, which blithe disregard for its scansion. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little bat,' the fourth movement, had lots of additional text by Chin, starting from the well-known nursery rhyme which was Carroll's reference and elaborating on it. It was a frenetically crazy patter song with a refrain of nonsense words supplied by the composer.

All of the music throughout the piece was appealing, but it wasn't ever really funny. A singer who made contact with the audience and really presented the piece might have been able to make it charming and amusing, but Ms. Oelze, as if giving an impression of a singer filling in at the last moment, had to work very hard to keep her head above water, singing directly to her music stand and conducting herself practically the whole time, and didn't help anything. Even though the orchestration was attractive and skillful, particularly in respect to the balance between the voice and the orchestra, it would probably have been more successful had it been for saxophone or flute or clarinet and orchestra.

The concert by the Danish National Orchestra and Thomas Dausgaard on 12 August included the first performance of *The Little Mermaid* by Bent Sorensen. The work is for three girl's choruses (the Danish National Girls Choir), high soprano (Inger Dam-Jensen), and tenor (Gert Henning-Jensen), with orchestra. Hans Christian Andersen wrote his story *The Little Mermaid* soon after the wedding of a friend with whom he had an unreciprocated passionate attachment, and the story's theme of unrequited love and renunciation is thought to reflect his own feelings at the time. In

Sorensen's piece, one of the three strands of the music is the choruses (placed in different parts of the room), presenting the narrative (or at least suggesting it); another is the soprano as the mermaid, telling the story in first person and present tense; and the third is the tenor who sings excerpts from Andersen's diaries, initially only obliquely related to the story. At the climax of the work, the tenor and the soprano sing the same words, joining the mermaid's story with Andersen's. The music is extremely quiet practically all the time, the pitch language fairly simple. The writing for the choruses is intricate, mellifluous, and delicate, accompanied with shimmering music in the orchestra. Around the climactic part the orchestral music gets lower and much more agitated, but hardly louder. The delicacy and quietness of the work as a whole suggests a sort of siren's song. The vocal writing is always extremely effective, both for soloists and choruses. The whole work was understatedly beautiful and moving, and the playing and singing was about as good as anybody could ever imagine or wish.

On the BBC Symphony concert on 25 August, which contained the first performance of the BBC-commissioned *Strip* by Morgan Hayes, Joseph Swensen filled in on very short notice for an indisposed Sir Andrew Davis. The title of Hayes's work is intended to have a number of different implications, including that its material is layered, in strips, and that its music is stripped-down, reduced to its simplest means. The work is in a modernistic, non-tonal style, bristling with complicated rhythms and quarter-tone inflected melody, and is scored for a large orchestra replete with an extensive percussion section plus cimbalom, harmonium, and piano four hands.

Strip began with a repeating grid of non-tuned percussion music, over which is soon suspended dissonant longish chords. The percussion rhythms migrate into cellos and basses, acquiring pitches. Eventually intense and active melodic lines flower, most memorably in a more extended section for two solo violins early on in the piece. Following the unfolding of its initial progress each of the disparate elements of the work expands further in range and instrumentation as the texture is increasingly stratified and simplified. The preparation of the performance had been impeded by Davis's illness, and it was clearly inadequate. Exactly how much it undermined the clarity and strength of the work's arc is a question that the next performance will have to answer. In a better performance, though, *Strip* might have a clearer and more convincing progress to it and might seem less static and inconclusive.

The World Orchestra for Peace can only be

described as an all-star group. Its players are drawn from major orchestras from all over the world; as an example, of the 15 members of the first violin section, 12 are concertmasters of their regular orchestras, including the Vienna Philharmonic, the Israel Philharmonic, the Helsinki Philharmonic, and the orchestra of the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. The group was founded by Sir George Solti, and after his death in 1997, Valery Gergiev became the conductor.

The orchestra's Prom concert on 27 August included the first performance of *Helix*, a work written for them on a BBC commission by Esa-Pekka Salonen. Salonen described *Helix*, which is of about nine minutes duration, as being like a spiral or a cone. The tempo of the piece is always increasing, but the note values of the main parts become correspondingly longer, so that the impression is of an acceleration of speed of figuration, but not of tempo. The mood of the work changes progressively from the hazy, languorous quality of the beginning to the busy, manic, and very loud character of the end. The work was clearly written with the virtuosic abilities of the amazing players of the orchestra in mind. Salonen has worked with many of them for years and knows their playing very well, and he had written that he felt that the project was a more personal undertaking than usual.

Rodney Lister

Proms 2005 (3): Gubaidulina, Adès, Turnage

The Light of the End, Sofia Gubaidulina's 2003 piece for large orchestra, which received its UK première on 20 August from the LPO under the direction of Kurt Masur, is a work that looks like something of a departure for its 73 year-old composer. Denying any religious influences in its origin, Gubaidulina spoke at her pre-Prom interview instead of the 'conflict' between natural and tempered tunings as the source of the piece. Interestingly it is the familiar tempered tuning that the composer, at least here, seems to regard as the dark force. 'Nature is neutralized' through this man-made compromise, as she somewhat eccentrically sees it.

Although the piece begins in familiar Gubaidulina 'colourist' territory, with slow solo flutes and alto flute supported by harp harmonics; violent upsurges from the strings quickly lead the way for the horns, playing loudly and raucously in their natural pitch, to stand in aggressive contrast. Despite Gubaidulina's claim that the title came 'only from the bright sound of the antique cym-

bals that bring the coda of the piece to a close', the customary religious atmosphere of her works is never far away. Immediately after the opening the string surgings, now joined by woodwind, are statically contrasted with a serious, almost chorale-like series of passages in the lower strings. When the *divisi* string sounds stop abruptly after an *fff* chord and trumpet-led brass come in with mighty fanfares, the piece takes on a mystical atmosphere that it never really abandons.

The composer's stated desire to 'mine the dark side' involves, or so it seems, the juxtaposition of heaven (in a rather Messiaen-like halo of trumpets), earth (all the endless, aimless surgings) and the deep (those solid, heavy string passages). Fanciful though this reading of Gubaidulina's theology might be, one can't help noticing how the pervasive atmosphere of the piece – particularly in its early sections – is a ruminative setting of contrasting sounds and textures against one another. Under Masur, the LPO was complicit in this: playing with precision and care, but not, even in the work's more dramatic later sections, giving enough pace to achieve the strength and flow that we get in Gubaidulina's Viola Concerto or Symphony.

It is the middle sections of the piece's 23-minute span that are most successful. In the first Gubaidulina brings her richly-coloured orchestral forces together for the first time, so that a lively dancing string melody is counterpointed by a swirling figure dominated by bar chimes. Brass take up the strings' ever-more urgent rhythm before a sensuous, thrilling full orchestral climax. If some of Gubaidulina's writing for snarling trombones, stratospheric horns and the colours of a large percussion section is occasionally over-indulged, the work's heart – a duet for solo (tempered) cello and (natural) solo horn is effective because of the simplicity of the material given to them. The stripped-down music brings out the horn's free, raw, primitive quality against the cello's passionate but vibrato-heavy and rather sophisticated tones. Not so much darkness against light, more the raw and the cooked.

However the drama of this contrast is lost amidst the sheer welter of colours in Gubaidulina's complex and busy orchestral writing; and so her central argument is dissipated. It is only later, after a few longeurs, that we hear such effective dramatic conflict again. The great coup of the final section is when the brass break out in all directions across the landscape in an unchecked, 'natural' moment, bells pealing behind. So has the 'natural' won? Yes, if we listen to the sweeping glissandos of an ecstatic solo cello and strings disappearing into the ether, harps and

glockenspiels accompanying them to a familiar heaven. Beautiful, visionary and light-filled certainly, yet where is the battle from which this triumph has come?

There is a winning simplicity about Thomas Adès's recently completed first Violin Concerto, given its UK première with the composer himself conducting on 6 September, only two days after its world première in Berlin with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Anthony Marwood as soloist. Adès supplied an unrevealing 76-word programme-note (unlike Gubaidulina, he eschews explanatory words about the motives behind his works) and subtitled the work *Concentric Paths*. Likewise, each of the three movements has a simple if not especially enlightening title ('Rings', 'Paths' and 'Rounds'), but the directness of Adès's style means that any more explanation of the music's designs would be superfluous.

In 'Rings', the opening quick movement, the soloist plays almost without a pause, mostly in a high register, often in rapid similar semiquaver patterns alternating higher and lower notes to create a 'circling' effect. The orchestra joins in this hard-driven near-*perpetuum mobile* movement, continuing the soloist's own patterns and then just as quickly returning to an accompanying role to let the violin's repeated figures come to the fore. The metal percussion, sparingly used trumpets, flutes and piccolos add to the movement's gossamer texture and motoric energy, while metal guiro and small cans drive it breathtakingly to its end.

After the almost Baroque technique of 'Rings', the slow movement 'Paths' shows – appropriately – soloist and orchestra on different tracks. The orchestra opens with stark jumpy chords. The violin, on edge, is forced for the first time into subterranean depths and rhythmically complex figures, leaps and runs as the trombone and tuba pursue it over sullen ground. At figure 18, as if hurt and defiant, the soloist has a passage in its lowest register, *marcato* as the orchestra play *ppp*; the orchestra rejoins, still quieted, the trumpets and horns making a woeful buzzing sound through their Harman mutes. The long rhapsodic solo passage at the centre of this movement and which continues to the double-bass and timpani-accompanied end is distinguished not only by its tenderness but also by how Adès succeeds in writing such compelling music out of repeated 'cyclical' patterns by slowly varying mood and shape, without ever being tempted into becoming tricksy or gratuitous.

The last movement takes us back, with its drums and *flautando* strings, to the Mayan drumming of *America: A Prophecy* (2000) and for a while

Adès seems content to let the violin once more hold high notes while the orchestra provides the main interest. But no – the soloist has other devices: a syncopated line, an angular double- and triple-stopped one and finally a race towards and sudden thump of a surprise ending. The composer describes the atmosphere of this last movement as being 'playful, at ease'. While it is neither (and is the least successful movement), its brevity and the old-fashioned excitement of seeing the soloist negotiate some tricky running passages make the appeal of the work as whole more straightforward than *Asyla* (1997) which has thus far established itself as Adès's most admired orchestral score. Whereas one sometimes wonders what logic governs the sequences in *Asyla's* madhouse, the soloist's prominence and the focus that gives to this new 20-minute piece, the absence of mere show and the work's sheer slickness make it a real 'Concerto Conciso' which will, I am sure, continue to bear aloft the multi-hued torch of Adès's reputation.

Håkan Hardenberger, the pre-eminent trumpeter of our time, has been responsible for inspiring a number of commissions for his instrument (not least from HK Gruber, Harrison Birtwistle and Sally Beamish). On 9 September he appeared as soloist in Mark-Anthony Turnage's new trumpet concerto, another work that had come to the Proms just a few days after its world première by its co-commissioners the Helsinki PO under Esa-Pekka Salonen.

Hardenberger has collaborated with Turnage before. *Dispelling the Fears*, Turnage's 1995 double trumpet concerto, in fact began the process of collaboration that prompted the Swede to request a single-trumpet concerto; this new piece, entitled *From the Wreckage*, is the result. Turnage's style has moved on somewhat in the last 20 years, as he is the first to acknowledge. Although the double concerto is only ten years old, it has less of a range than the new piece. Where the earlier concerto was more aggressive and brass-dominated in texture, with the solo instruments heard mostly in their more vociferous and extravert mode, here the composer attempts to exploit both a wider register and breadth of tone; so much so that the solo part calls additionally or the soloist to play the flugelhorn and piccolo trumpet alongside the usual instrument.

Unlike Adès, Turnage makes no secret of his work's source or references – from a particularly dark time in the composer's life – while the snare-drums (which surround the orchestra at all four compass points) play their cross-stick 'ticking' patterns in all too evident symbolism of time passing. Indeed the 16-minute piece 'darkness to light' pro-

gression can readily be read off the composer's own markings in the score, so that we begin 'veiled and spiky' – with a nervy flugelhorn – but quickly progress to a 'more subdued and desolate' section where Turnage's blues influences – his trumpeter heroes are Miles Davis and other jazz greats – cast a distinctively cool light. Mixing genres, however, has never been easy for any composer: and in drawing on the type of jazz trumpet playing that represents a subdued or uncertain mood, Turnage has written a solo part that often feels rambling and lacking purpose – even when, after only a few minutes, the soloist switches from the mellow flugelhorn to the C trumpet and continues on it until near the end.

Indeed, in the switch of tempo to the crotchet=96 central section, marked 'constant movement', the interest and vigour is largely achieved by Turnage's characteristic energetic writing for timpani and brake drums; the trumpet's high-tessitura quick figurations sound simply shrill in their persistence, and for all Hardenberger's brilliance to make his instrument sound 'flute-like' (at Fig. 17), this is simply impossible. The most impressive and liberating writing occurs in the semi-improvised 19-bar section, and it seems a shame that Turnage's plan for a cadenza was dropped from the earlier version of the score.

When, towards the end of the piece, in the sections marked 'aggressive' and then 'rowdy', the piccolo trumpet is counterpointed by a strong brass and string rhythm in a manner reminiscent of *Dispelling the Fears*, one concludes that Turnage's broader latter-day scope hasn't all been for the best. Yet the ending does leave one satisfied: over soft sustained string chords the piccolo trumpet repeats its plaintive cry while the clock-like percussion cut remorselessly in. We are at least pointing out from the wreckage.

Robert Stein

**London, St. Andrew's Church, Holborn:
Ed Hughes's *The Birds*, Wed 29 June.**

Had Ed Hughes's 'choral' opera *The Birds* not received as wonderfully involving a production as it did on 29 June from The Opera Group and I Fagiolini (as part of the City of London Festival), maybe the music might have appeared less appetizing. Apart from some striking use of a prepared tape, Hughes's intriguing score relies heavily on a solo cello and a chuntering array of bird-like percussion. Yet quite the opposite was true. Directed with energy and imagination by John Fulljames,

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performed with evident aplomb by this superbly tuned vocal ensemble, and prefaced by 'avian' music by Jannequin, Ravenscroft and Per Norgard, *The Birds* proved a gripping piece of theatre. The magic worked.

Aristophanes' play centres on the pithy social banter of two Athenians, Euelpides and Peithetairus, who bid to escape the petty tribulations of urban life and imperial Athenian arrogance. Glyn Maxwell's atmospheric text compressed these into a single human figure, dubbed Pitcher ('a vessel stuck on the earth ... a man tossing out ideas.')

The evening's *tour-de-force* – besides some thrilling lighting by Charles Balfour and intricate designs by Soutra Gilmour – was the magnificent central performance by Glenville Hargreaves. This declaimed role requires an heroic feat of memory and rhythmic ingenuity. Hargreaves towered throughout, gripping the audience from the outset: tetchy, moody, nervous, wheedling, sympathetic, insistent and bossy; but always engaging.

Taped sounds of city traffic and passing sirens are gradually stilled as soft, alluring chords well up in the chorus ('Restless man, awhile be still'). Possibly this is what the piece is about: not just a wheeze of social engineering, but a deeper yearning for a spiritual escape, much as Walter Braunfels conceived it in his sumptuous neo-Romantic German opera *The Birds* a century earlier.

Hughes's (often nine-part) choral writing is by turns blistering and soothing, just as the instrumental underlay is both lulling and frenetic. Pitcher emerges to a patter of twittering cow bells, temple blocks and tom-toms; the wide-intervalled cello line for the Hoopoe (Giles Underwood as the birds' affable leader) supplied an attractive contrast, as did Robert Rice's long-suffering Vulture and a high-tessitura assault by the hostile Crow (the splendid Carys Lane), the ensuing *a cappella* chorus and beguiling patterns for cello and marimba as Pitcher starts wooing the birds.

Maxwell's fourth scene echoes the point in Aristophanes where interlopers from Earth invade the birds' new castle in the sky. Here Hughes's rhythms grow ever more syncopated: in place of jumped-up Athenian officials, the unwelcome intruders are a rock star (mezzo), a PR man, a guru (countertenor) and a clutch of other 'parasites'. This yields to an effective pow-wow for Crow and Owl (Simon Wall), a cello solo, a nifty 'council' scene and a striking slow invocation by the now acquiescent Crow. A rainbow heralds the descent of Iris, heaven's messenger (Julie Cooper), bearing the Gods' order to rip down the wall: her arrival provides another scintillating con-

trast; likewise (in contrast to the dramatic outburst as war bulletins fly in from ever corner) the unexpectedly stilled Scene 10, 'Holy war', sung virtually as an Adagio.

Maxwell's almost pointillistic text – a cheerfully cheeky filleting of Aristophanes' longest play – somehow skirts pretentiousness. When Pitcher demands 'What hides behind a star? Can we trust the galaxies?' or the choir intones 'Ship that can only sail, sun that can only rise, year that can only turn', lured into this extraordinary, fussing aviary by a staging as compelling as this, you accepted its irony on its own terms. Fulljames's staging was mesmerizing, the cast utterly committed, I Fagiolini's singing and intoning first rate, and the music with its myriad swirling patterns beautifully underlined each move. A joyously bizarre piece of theatre – as Aristophanes should be. The audience was besotted. An enchanted evening.

Roderic Dunnett

Manchester, Bridgewater Hall: John Casken's *Rest-Ringing* (and CD releases)

Rest-ringing, John Casken's new work for string quartet and orchestra, was written for, dedicated to, and premièred on 19 May 2005 by the Lindsay Quartet, accompanied by the Hallé orchestra under Mark Elder's baton. The title apparently came to Casken after he mis-read an advert advertising piano restringing; the addition of the hyphen alludes to the legacy of the Lindsay's 'ringing on' after their retirement. Some of this word-play seems to have infused the music too, by virtue of the bell-sounds and similar metallic sounds that occur at key moments.

A case in point is the opening of the work, which Casken describes as 'exotic'. Twittering woodwind and delicate orchestral strings are coloured by metallic percussion, providing a background for delicate arabesques from the solo string quartet. This serves as something of a curtain-raiser for an animated section in which the quartet provide dance-like material in rhythmic unison. The orchestra's role is largely one of accompaniment: the light but often intricate textures and intertwining melodic fragments allude to the chamber music tradition to which the string quartet belongs. Thus although the orchestra provides shifting colours and textures against which to foreground the quartet's material, it never asserts itself as an equal partner in the unfolding dialogue. This does not preclude it being used to provide formal articulation, such as when a short outburst causes the string quartet to divide into canonic pairs.

The idea of a concertante instrument (or group of instruments) progressing through a changing musical terrain is common to a number of Casken's works. Ghosts of formal archetypes often haunt these soundscapes, although their precise identification are often elusive. In the case of *Rest-ringing*, there are hints of an 'all-in-one' symphonic structure, for the dance-like material is followed by a slower section characterized by rhapsodic lines given to the quartet, and a developmental scherzo section. In lieu of a finale/recapitulation, there is a 'still centre', containing one of the most memorable moments of the work: slowly descending and bell-like chords, moving at different speeds in the orchestra and quartet. From here, there is a brief review to the character of the scherzo, and a short coda featuring a cadenza for the leader of the quartet, accompanied by a sustained chord from the back desks of the orchestral strings. A reversal of fortune, representing the continually surprising and affirmative qualities of the Lindsays, results in a sudden re-energizing of the quartet and orchestra for half a minute or so: the music appears, at the end, to be cut-off mid flow.

However, the formal plan outlined above only hints at what happens, for the 'exotic' introduction emerges at two important junctures in the work: just before the first scherzo, and after the 'still centre'. Considered as a ritornello, it strengthens the identification of *Rest-ringing* as a concerto grosso, and indeed, Casken envisages the work being performed by the leaders of the string sections. It is difficult, though, to imagine that the piece could be effectively performed by *ad hoc* quartets of this nature. The Lindsays' performance, aided by the unfailingly sensitive support from the Hallé, carried the conviction of decades of mutual music-making. Indeed, the piece as a whole is chamber music on the grandest scale: one hopes that this does not ultimately deter other ensembles and orchestras taking the music on in future.

Before writing the work, Casken studied a number of pieces for quartet and orchestra, which heightened his awareness of the rarity of the combination, and the problems of balance. The delicacy with which the orchestra was deployed was one way in which Casken addressed this issue; the frequent use of the quartet in unison another. A similar solution can be heard in *Distant Variations* for saxophone quartet and wind orchestra (1996), a recording of which has recently been released as part of 'Night Fire Sun Silence', Metier's 2-CD set of Casken's music (MSV CD92076).

In contrast to the relatively 'abstract' *Rest-ringing*,

most of the works on the release draw on extramusical stimuli. Thus *Distant Variations* combines an underlying formal archetype (the variations of the title) with a shifting musical terrain inspired by sunrise at Grand Canyon to provide the background for the concertante group. Just as the string quartet in *Rest-ringing* evokes the intimacy of chamber music, the use of saxophones in *Distant Variations* gives rise to an urban sound-world in which jazzy elements proliferate. A sharper distinction between musical landscapes can be heard in the wonderful *Infanta Marina*, in which a solo cor anglais is situated musically and physically between a Debussy-like trio of flute, viola and harp on one side, and a more strident trio of clarinet, horn and double bass on the other. The sense of drama – almost theatrical – that pervades Casken's concertante music is heightened here, for the soloist's role is forever changing. At times independent, at others influenced by one group or other, and sometimes mediating between the two trios, the cor anglais represents Marina from Shakespeare's *Pericles*, filtered through a poem by Wallace Stevens. But *Infanta Marina* is not (just) a character study: Casken's fine ear for texture and colour, combined with a compelling musical logic ensures that this is one of the highlights of the disc.

The translation of the extramusical into the musical is no less impressive in *Amarantos*, *Firewhirl* and *Salamandra*, the three oldest pieces represented in the Metier release. Although Casken's musical voice is less distinctive in these early works, and perhaps occasionally over-reliant on textural affects, the intensity of the latter two pieces – perhaps a reflection of the fire imagery central to their conception – is gripping, particularly in the case of *Firewhirl*.

One can detect a different approach in *Après un silence*, the most recent work on the disc, written after 'almost a year of not composing'. Questioning the experience of silence, and how one deals with expression after that silence, gave Casken the framework for the piece: the musical logic is just as concerned with how one develops the opening idea. The craftsman-like working-out reflects the cooler classicism of Casken's more recent music; nevertheless, the alternations of agitated recitative-like sections with calm lyrical sections show that this is not at the expense of immediacy of affect. Both versions of the piece – the original for violin and piano, and the arrangement for violin and chamber orchestra – are contained in the release. Not only does this provide a fascinating contrast in terms of colour and texture, but the readings of the solo violinists offers different interpretative perspectives.

Also included on the disc is Casken's virtuosic and highly-charged Piano Quartet, which in part relates to his first opera *Golem*. The Virgin Classics recording of the latter has recently been re-released on the NMC Ancora label (NMC D113), and a welcome return it is too. The elemental power of the *Golem*, fashioned from earth, and the relationship between the creator and created, is an intensification of the themes apparent in the works on 'Night Fire Sun Silence' as well. The music is as intricately crafted as one might expect from Casken, who demonstrates unflinching capacity to draw fascinating and arresting colours and textures from an 11-strong ensemble. A restrained use of an electronic tape part further enriches the soundworld. As with the other works considered above, an underlying formal scheme (a prelude followed by a fugue) is used to structure the musical events. The immediate model for this is *Billy Budd*, rather than *Wozzeck*, although the theme of an outcast ultimately driven to murder, along with the general Expressionistic manner of presentation, is obviously similar to Berg's opera. The intensity of the performance, by the original cast and conductor, is compelling, leaving me to reflect that *Golem* must count as one of the most vital British operas of the 1980s.

Edward Venn

Presteigne Festival 2005: Cecilia McDowall and John McCabe

The Presteigne Festival of Music and the Arts continues to enchant and enrich. Events in August 2005 embraced a broad survey of English music, including centenary tributes to Tippett and Rawsthorne, as well as world premières by John McCabe, Cecilia McDowall, David Matthews and composer-in residence Ian Wilson. Informal talks were particularly compelling, including a symposium consisting of Sally Groves, David Matthews and Geraint Lewis offering affectionate and insightful reminiscences of Michael Tippett and a detailed and uniquely authoritative appraisal of the music of Alan Rawsthorne by his biographer, John McCabe.

Among the many admirable qualities of this annual feast is its fearlessness in programming non-mainstream late 20th- and early 21st-century works, none of them world premières, thus taking audiences into unfamiliar territory without the critic-luring prestige of a first performance. Thanks to the unfailingly acute ear of Artistic Director George Vass for pieces uniting impeccable quality with engaging accessibility, the results

are always magical. Special mention must be made of an evening concert by the excellent Presteigne Festival Orchestra and Canterbury Cathedral Choir under Vass featuring impressively cogent performances of Tippett's *Little Music* for strings, Alan Rawsthorne's alluringly Arcadian *Concertante Pastorale* and culminating in a performance of Cecilia McDowall's graceful *Magnificat*. This reflective work, adorned with deft, Baroque flourishes, has already been recorded by the choir, soloists and conductor (Dutton CDLX7146)¹ and their assured singing radiated with the confidence of a team with this elegant choral piece in their blood.

Another treat featured John McCabe with the Dante Quartet in Elgar's Piano Quintet and Krysia Osostowicz in Rawsthorne's expertly crafted and bafflingly overlooked Violin Sonata. The other items in the programme, David Matthews's delicately scored *Little Serenade*, op.16 and Robin Holloway's ripely Romantic *Lento* for string quartet, were classic examples of the refreshingly approachable, but skilfully fashioned works this festival features so strongly.

The highlight was a song recital presenting two world premières with a local resonance commissioned by the Presteigne Festival. Both pieces germinated from 'A Garland for Presteigne' (2003), where ten composers associated with the festival each wrote one short song celebrating the Welsh border country. John McCabe and Cecilia McDowall have developed their contributions into substantial song-cycles, with words by celebrated local poets Jo Shapcott and Simon Mundy.

John McCabe's settings of *Gladestry Quatrains* were as pithy and epigrammatic as Jo Shapcott's 12 short poems, which charted local and human landscapes with great wit and poignancy. These wryly observed verses were pointed up by occasionally soaring vocal lines, whilst the piano accompaniments, sensitively moulded by Paul Plummer, were sharply-etched. Ethereal, sustained chords conjured up distant tolling church bells in 'Dolyhir', whilst thunderous, dark chords etched 'serious black clouds' surrounding Burl Hill and Newchurch. Elsewhere, the style ranged from crisp, toccata-like figurations introducing 'Hergest', to a delightful chant-like mini-processional in 'Song in the Shed' where 'every day is Sunday'.

The resulting 20-minute work offered strongly characterized and fastidiously fashioned settings, matching the range and depth of the poems, from the intimacy of a shared joke to the touching

¹ Reviewed in *Tempo* Vol.59 No.232 (April 2005), p.85 – Ed.

acceptance of the transience of all things. McCabe enhanced his texts with a limpet-like fidelity to the tone of the words whilst capturing and sketching the moods they provoked with a painterly sensibility.

Cecilia McDowall's *Radnor Songs* set six poems by Simon Mundy. The composer's genuine gift for illuminating and embellishing texts was instantly in evidence. 'The Buzzard', which opened the cycle, used liberating, outspread intervals to illustrate the awesome, swooping bird. The brooklet in 'Summergeil', which 'ingratiates the birds', was laced with filigree ornithological ornamentation, whilst the final, spacious setting of 'Radnor (Old), Church and Harp' created a movingly nostalgic, but valiantly unsentimental evocation of the area's lost glories. Unostentatious and refined, McDowall's vocal lines and accompaniments were alert to the meaning and nuance of the poems, so that musical ideas grew naturally from them. 'Radnor Songs' was a model of how to give insight into words through music, as opposed to paraphrasing or merely adorning them.

In a very welcome touch, the poems were read by their respective authors as an introduction to the settings; soprano Rachel Nicholls, despite a virus affliction, gave persuasive, authentic and commanding performances of both song-cycles. These two new Presteigne Festival commissions complemented each other well, making a significant addition to the repertoire. Though they have much to offer anyone who has yet to set foot in the Welsh border country, for those who know the area, its mysteriously melancholic atmosphere and blood-soaked history are triumphantly captured. More courageously, the settings do not shirk from laying bare the challenges of present-day life in a scene 'ravaged by tranquillity' as Simon Mundy so memorably puts it in the final, fading moments of *Radnor Songs*.

Paul Conway

Birmingham: John Joubert's 'Jane Eyre'

Jane Eyre is by no means John Joubert's first foray into opera. Both *Silas Marner* (1961) and *Under Western Eyes* (1968) are forceful, impressive three-act stage works which underline Joubert's gift for working on a large canvas; the prelude to those was *In the Drought*, a substantial one-acter dating from the mid-1950s, which reveals a comparable power. One regrets that Joubert, being South African-born, has not been able to turn his hand to the opera based on Alan Paton which remains a project close to his heart.

In the meantime we have *Jane Eyre*, composed some years ago, largely in the 1990s, although not to commission. Hence it has had to wait for a première, and one can only be grateful that Opera Mint, a company mixing professionals and amateurs, had the nerve to take the bull by the horns and volunteer a staging at the CBSO Centre in Birmingham (23 and 25 September).

Some caveats are necessary. This was a modest, even embryonic staging, although not without ideas, including some effective use of back-projections by designer Saranjit Birdi and a striking use of dance and coloured light effects, notably for the fire which, at the close of Act I, serves as a warning of worse to come. Moves were clearish; otherwise stage direction seemed slightly sporadic. Most importantly, the orchestra – Joubert stipulates single wind and brass – effectively disappeared. This was done in a version for string quartet and piano.

In the circumstances, it was remarkable how well the opera fared. The skill of librettist Kenneth Birkin in paring down Charlotte Brontë's novel (which has also been turned into an opera by Michael Berkeley, staged by Music Theatre Wales) emerged clearly. Act II encompasses perhaps the two most important scenes – the burgeoning of love between Jane and Mr. Rochester and the disastrous wedding – while Act I (the departure from Lowood and arrival at Thornfield Hall) serves as a tension-filled prelude and the final Act (including Jane's welcoming into the home of the would-be missionary St. John Rivers and her flight from him back to the blinded Rochester) functions as an effective epilogue.

Joubert fills his first Act with nervy, jagged rhythms and stabbing patterns which evoke, and with varying success maintain, a laden atmosphere not unlike that of *The Turn of the Screw* – Britten, from *Peter Grimes* onwards, remains one of Joubert's most recurrent influences; indeed, he was perhaps one of the earliest composers to soak in and capitalize upon Britten's example. More than once one sensed Miles, the Governess and even Quint (notably the eerie passage when Mrs. Grose describes his icy demise) hovering in the wings.

The four young string players made a magnificent job of the score, with Dane Preece's piano filling in quite graphic independent parts and the pace – essential here – ably maintained by conductor Emyr Roberts. Most of the vocal lines, even the duets, are written in a form of *arioso*. The voices did not all beguile: had Jane (Zoë Challenor) delivered her words as spiritedly as she negotiated the not always easy intervals, we would have been spared a few *longueurs*. Rochester (John Lofthouse) was capably sung – if a bit feck-

less; three children were feebly employed. The best singing came during the later Acts, when Nick Drew's Mason and Andrew Matthews's Rivers stood out. Sara Clethero (Mrs. Fairfax) coordinated, and we owe it to her enterprise that this – to a degree – worthwhile venture was mounted at all.

Roderic Dunnett

St Albans: International Organ Festival 2005

The St Albans International Organ Festival was founded in 1963 by Dr Peter Hurford to celebrate the traditional pipe organ in general and specifically the installation of the new 'Harrison and Harrison' organ in St Albans Cathedral, co-designed by himself as Master of Music there. In recent years this biennial July festival has showcased major contemporary composers, for instance commissioning in 1997 Giles Swayne's *Chinese Whispers* which the composer himself described in his pre-concert talk as an argument between organ and orchestra driven to a climax where the organist (Kevin Bowyer) was required 'to run amok' – which he duly did, being required at one point, I seem to remember, to almost throw himself bodily onto the keyboard in a dramatic gesture. As I described in my review for the *St Albans Observer* 'we got a first movement which sounded like measured spurts of mathematically structured chaos'. On the final festive concert of IOF 2001, we were treated to the UK première of Piet Kee's *The World* with the BBC Singers under Nicholas Cleobury.

The 2005 Festival had no new specifically IOF commission, but the traditional Three Choirs Concert on 11 July saw Winchester Cathedral Choristers give a most invigorating performance of their new commission from James MacMillan, *Laudi alla beata vergine*, which they had premiered to mark Advent 2004, at Winchester Cathedral. Based on the poem by Dante Alighieri, this is a powerful piece. Its rousing opening is followed by alternating strong outbursts and quiet interludes, and one can discern possible shades of Eastern influence in the harmonies later on, with use of background humming, 'slides' and delicate glissandi to atmospheric effect.

However most innovative of all at this year's Three Choirs Concert was the performance by St Albans Cathedral's Assistant Master of Music, Simon Johnson, of Jonathan Harvey's *Toccata for Organ and Tape* (1980) – apparently the composer's only work for organ. 'I wanted to play

something exciting as an organ solo and this was so "different"', said Simon when I asked him about this intriguing piece after the concert. In the programme notes he described this very unusual score, where usual metre is abandoned in favour of strict timings in seconds, as a piece 'driven by perpetual motion in both organ and tape parts'. It dates from early 1980s, which Johnson describes as a very productive time for Harvey, when he was invited by Pierre Boulez to work at IRCAM in Paris. (He also produced his well-known tape piece *Mortuos plango vivos voco*, influenced by the sounds of 'Musique concrete', in the same year.) As rendered by Johnson at IOF, Harvey's *Toccata* for organ and tape came across as a stunningly intrepid perpetual motion piece, strictly metronomic, with the organist performing the marathon task of fitting in his intricate organ part against the unforgiving relentless 'plopping' of the electronic tape that he has to respond to and synchronize with. The ongoing tape, relayed through a PA system in the organ loft, 'takes no prisoners' in its wake. Johnson rose to the challenge with amazing skill and energy, amidst the final build-up with its *accelerando*, full organ outbursts, shuddering sound effects, and glissandi.

Jill Barlow

Shrewsbury, Maidment Hall: Hugh Wood's Overture op. 48.

Although the Lindsay Quartet retired in July 2005, their former leader Peter Cropper shows little sign of slowing down. To his many ongoing activities, we must now add the piano trio he has formed with long-time associates Martin Roscoe and Moray Welsh. To mark the first performance of this ensemble, Cropper commissioned a short overture from Hugh Wood, which was premiered on 29 September alongside trios by Beethoven and Schubert.

As its no-nonsense title suggests, Wood's response to the commission was to provide a straightforward concert opener: its cheerful verve reminiscent of Classical overtures. It opens with a series of fanfare-like gestures in the strings, punctuated by sonorous chords and driving semiquaver figuration from the piano. This swiftly gives way to a lyrical duet between violin and cello, the piano now supplying the accompaniment. An extended middle section begins with just violin and cello, and ends with piano alone. The fanfares return twice more, at first spectrally, to announce the start of an altered recapitulation, and then again at the outset of a vigorous coda.

The juxtaposition of fanfares and lyricism forms a characteristic means of generating contrast in Wood's music, and is handled in the overture with typical regard for dramatic pacing. Familiar, too, is the use of three tetrachords that, in various combinations, permutations and vertical arrangements, underpin much of the musical development. Two of these tetrachords are formed from segments of the whole-tone scales starting respectively on G and B \flat ; the third is their complement. The emphasis on whole tones colours the harmonic and melodic content of the overture, even in the more overtly chromatic passages. This in turn contributes to the general atmosphere of the work, which must count amongst Wood's most light-hearted pieces.

Both Peter Cropper and Moray Welsh are experienced interpreters of Wood's music: the Lindsay Quartet premièred Wood's Third and Fifth quartets, and Welsh's wonderful 1978 recording of Wood's Cello Concerto has been re-issued recently by NMC. The resulting familiarity with Wood's style undoubtedly informed the excellent performance of the overture, which began with a riskily fast but exhilarating tempo, and rarely let up after that. The only drawback was that the piano accompaniment to the lyrical passages was not given enough time to resonate, sounding

rather heavy against the soaring strings; indeed, in the resonant Maidment Hall, the piano too often obscured the other instruments. However, the nine further scheduled performances of the work, as part of the Music in the Round 'Around the Country' tour, should see such problems of balance ironed out. Given the distinguished performances of the Beethoven and Schubert that followed Wood's overture, one cannot imagine that it would be otherwise.

Edward Venn

London, Royal Albert Hall – Wynton Marsalis's 'All Rise'

The idea of a synthesis of classical music and jazz is nearly as old as jazz itself – from the era of Gershwin and Stravinsky through Bernstein, Brubeck or Jacques Loussier. But Wynton Marsalis, the outstanding New York-based trumpeter and bandleader, educator and composer from New Orleans, has a special approach. For the perennial problem of how to allow the improvisational freedom of jazz within a classical frame is resolved by a coolly-crafted combination of jazz band – his own Lincoln Centre Jazz Orchestra –

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with symphony orchestra and Gospel choir in a true spirit of partnership. The eclectic mix of different styles and genres is centred on the Blues. Originally commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in 1999 and recorded by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2002, the work was performed here on 2 October by the Lincoln Centre Jazz Orchestra with the London Philharmonic and the London Adventist Chorale under the command of Kurt Masur, at a capacity-filled Albert Hall, the third leg in a five-concert UK premiere tour (following performances in Birmingham and Cardiff).

The piece, according to the composer, 'celebrates togetherness and ascendance in the context of the blues' and twelve movements (based on the idea of a 12-bar Blues) show how the freedom of jazz can be combined with the traditions of concert music, sectioned into three contrasting groups in a traditional fast-slow-fast arrangement. The final choral movement, entitled 'All Rise', sums up the theme of the entire piece, which addresses the 'global community' through the Blues which Marsalis sees as containing elements of folk music from all over the world and expressing the philosophy of 'acceptance of life'. This is perhaps questionable, since one might want to consider the Blues as an expression of a state of affairs inviting one to rise up against injustice and oppression. Yet the simple three-part form allowed us to focus on the really innovative aspect of the work, the inspired mixture of popular idioms, eastern scales and classical elements, embodying the idea of 'togetherness', a combination of disparate styles and peoples, not, as Marsalis says 'in a world-music type of melange' but keeping them distinct, and yet emphasizing, through a myriad variations of Blues, traces of their commonality.

At a formal level the work displays some of the features of the Baroque era, combining elements of the oratorio, orchestral suite and, most strikingly, the concerto grosso, in which the virtuoso concertino – the LCJO – is pitted in dialogue and combination with the larger symphony orchestra, with ingenious dovetailings of brass or woodwind. It is a very American work, one in which the joyful brilliance of the LCJO's many jazz idioms interacts with the orchestra, both as a classical and jazz medium. For example in the initial four-movement section, the thrusting, driving patterns of the music were infused with great energy and rich harmony, as in the overture 'Jubal Step'. One movement begins with Mahlerian waltz, while 'Wild Strumming of Fiddle' is a Coplandesque 'hoe-down' leading to a fizzing fugato reminiscent of Ned Rorem. Many of the textures recall Leonard Bernstein's swinging syntheses and big

bands of the 1940s and 50s; the orchestra often comments on and dovetails into the jazz soloists who then go off on their own; at one point the orchestra is also a brilliant big band in itself.

There were many highlights to this exuberant performance, in which the always lucid Masur seemed to be gradually skipping more and more to the LCJO's beat and riff, and the audience's response to each new jazz solo sandwiched between orchestral textures increased in warmth. Most impressive was Marsalis's own solo, in 'Save Us', sharing his inimitable trumpet playing. He makes the instrument sound almost vocal, high in its register, swoops and glissandos and pure-toned high notes, shaped into a dreamy world of its own; and his always audible interjections into the lively tutti-choral movements added vital spice. There were several other notable solos, one for trombone ending on an incredibly pure high note, various sax solos and a witty duet for principal orchestral violin and principal cellist, accompanied by piano and bass. The piano solo was a fantastic display of musicianship, sophisticated and subtle in its blues harmony and extended phrases, while final limelight was reserved for the superb drummer: throughout, he was a fine partner to the team of percussionists of the London Philharmonic who visibly enjoyed their syncopated colours on various instruments including guiro, slapsticks and cymbals.

The singing of the London Adventist Chorale was rivetting, gradually increasing in presence from a short introductory movement to the solemn movements of the second main group. In 'Save us', a *Sprechgesang* alto soloist shouts 'Comfort me' against a wall of groaning, slithering chromatically in dizzy curves, creating haunting colours enhanced by Marsalis's solo; it is followed by the fiercer 'Cried Shouted Then Sung', with screaming trumpet solos. Here Marsalis's use of the 'New Orleans Funeral Cadence' (an almost prophetic choice in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina) added to the 'affect' of the music, which was also punctuated by unusual tuba solos, while the choir shone in the final brilliant pair of movements to close this section: 'Look Beyond', with its upbeat Hosannas and a spiritual, 'Come back home', in which five soloists of the choir displayed wonderful zest and style, the last an unbelievably high soprano solo (Jennifer Phillips). The inner intensity of this movement drew to a conclusion with spiritual passion and eloquence that affirmed the work's underlying seriousness of purpose. Indeed the whole work, with its unpredictable phrase-lengths and effects, rich and unusual harmonies, nuances of orchestration and dynamics, seemed to channel

the qualities of light musicality into a most engaging and profound artistic confluence of serious and popular idioms.

The third and final section (which followed after an interval) featured dance movements, including a slinky slow 'Saturday Night Slow Drag' and faster dances like the bossa nova, before the thrilling final tutti chorus 'All Rise'. This movement begins with a soloist repeating 'all rise'; the ensuing lively choral textures lead to an uplifting gospel song, 'Listen up and hear my song', to which the jazz orchestra adds a final coda in Dixieland swing – a section that was repeated as encore after enthusiastic applause from the audience. As an additional treat Kurt Masur remained on stage for a beautiful jazz number by the LCJO, led by a beguiling Marsalis solo. Evocatively silhouetted in profile, as artist and instrument seemed for an extended moment to fuse into a single entity, he coaxed some husky, blues-inflected tunings at *pianissimo* levels.

Malcolm Miller

London, Royal College of Music: Adès and Hesketh London premières

To go by the relative public profiles of Thomas Adès's Violin Concerto and *Court Studies*, given their London premières within a fortnight of one another, then the latter must count as a minor work within his output. If this is true, then what better sign of Adès's international standing can there be for a 'minor' work to receive three performances by different ensembles within the space of just over three months? Following the first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival on 16 June by the Composers Ensemble, the US première was given at the Charlottesville Chamber Music Festival on 15 September. Four days later, the Contemporary Consort became the third group to take the work into their repertory, in the piece's first London performance.

Written for clarinet, violin, cello and piano *Court Studies* is the first of two works to be based on Adès's 2004 opera *The Tempest*;² it also happens to use the same forces as his *Catch*, op. 4 of 1991.³ (The second work, *Scenes from The Tempest*, is to be given its première by the Los Angeles PO in 2006.) The *Court Studies* belong to the tradition of Adès's earlier arrangements for the Composers Ensemble, *Les baricades Mistérieuses* and *Cardiac Arrest*: they are not, therefore, commentaries or

re-workings of themes from the opera. All four instruments are asked to play more or less continuously; nevertheless, they frequently find themselves contributing only a fragment of a line before leaping to complete another figure initiated in a different instrument. In particular, the vocal lines are cleverly dissolved into the texture to the extent that their presence can be distantly felt, ghost-like, only occasionally coming to the surface.

As its title suggests, *Court Studies* consists of a series of character sketches of members of the Neapolitan court from the opera. These sketches are largely drawn from Act 2 Scene 1, in which the various characters are introduced in turn; there are also sections drawn from Act 2 Scene 2, and Act 3 Scene 4. I was unconvinced of the merits of all the selected material: for example, against the captivating final section, 'The King's Grief', the preceding 'The Counsellor' seemed merely prosaic. A persistent melodic motif notwithstanding, it was hard on one hearing to make sense of how the brief and contrasting character pieces combined to make a satisfactory whole; however, there was plenty in this performance to suggest that repeated hearings would be worthwhile.

The concert opened with world premières of works by two of the RCM's current students. The first, *Far Secco Qualcuno* by Jonathan Herbert, explored the increasing interaction between contrasting ideas: one sustained, fluid, and delicate, and the other percussive, brittle, and loud. The sharply defined character of the material at the outset occasionally gave way to more neutral material in the latter stages; nevertheless Herbert demonstrated a keen aural imagination and sensitive feel for pacing. Dominic Sewell's *Esoteria* for string trio and clarinet was less ambitious in its aims, and more focussed as a result. Conceived as a 'tonally based response to a 12-note row of pitches', the work consists of an extended commentary on a theme first announced by the clarinet, interspersed with cadenzas for each instrument. To say that the harmonic language and manner of thematic development was traditional is no bad thing; this was well-composed and sincere music.

The technical wing of the Contemporary Consort is entrusted to Michael Oliva, who diffused the electronic part of his restrained *Apparition and Release* for quarter tone alto flute and electronics. The latter provided a generally understated background to the meditative lyricism of the flute, often taking the form of pulsed, hypnotic chords; only occasionally did it threaten to overwhelm the solo line in the more energetic climaxes.

The final work of the concert was Kenneth Hesketh's *Threats and Declamations*, another London première. The title refers to the novel for-

² *The Tempest* was reviewed in *Tempo* 59 (229), pp. 72–3.

³ In its US première, *Court Studies* was programmed alongside *Catch*.

mal and narrative structures employed in the music, which are guided by the old English expressions *Commination* and *Patrimet* (or *joc-partit*). The first of these expressions means 'threat' (it is also a church service held during Lent); the second is a poetic form of the Provençal troubadours, in which two verbal antagonists trade themes. This exchange happens three times before an arbiter declares a winner. Within *Threats and Declamations*, the structure of the *joc-partit* is most clearly audible in the second half of the work; two contrasting ideas (one improvisatory, one regular) alternate three times, the first functioning rondo-like, the second varied on each appearance. At the climax of the work, the two occur simultaneously, before a theme from the first section returns to close the piece. Hesketh draws a wide variety of textures from the ensemble (clarinet, horn, viola, cello and piano); nevertheless, the overwhelming impression is one of unbuttoned raucousness, generating considerable momentum in the process.

A somewhat nervous performance of *Far Secco Qualcuno* aside, the Contemporary Consort played with conviction, sensitivity, and authority: a considerable achievement, given the large number of premières in the programme.

Edward Venn

A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square: Sadie Harrison's 'an angel reads my open book'

I am entitling this review 'A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square', to mark the première there on Thursday 30 June 2005, in Bluthner's Piano Centre, of Sadie Harrison's *an angel reads my open book* ... Exactly one week later, on Thursday 7 July, I could not help but look back at our idyllic late June concert experience with enhanced nostalgia, as most London concert halls were closed due to the 7/7 shutdown of the city's public transport network and London's equally famous Tavistock Square being so tragically rocked by a terrorist bomb. Life hangs but by a thread, and indeed coincidentally Sadie Harrison's première, well realized by the FinchTrio with soprano Alison Smart, Susan Collier (violin) and Sarah Down (piano), is based on the composer's ongoing exploration of the sorrows and joys of Lithuania. It includes one section of the work entitled 'The collective request of the dead country children of the Pateru village' which she encountered on one of her visits to the country, reflecting its war-torn past.

I first came across Sadie Harrison's extraordinarily emotive and compelling approach to composition when reviewing her *issu stellaire* at the



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Purcell Room in July 2004 (see my review of 'New French Song', published in *Tempo* January 2005). She stood out a mile as one of the most innovative of the 20 UK composers of the project, and was once more well projected by stalwart soprano Alison Smart for the 30 June in Berkeley Square. I had caught up with Sadie just before she flew off to Lithuania (winter 2004–5) to make some recordings. As Sadie Harrison says, she has 'been travelling to Lithuania since 2003, working with the fabulous violinist Rusne Mataityte, the Kaskados Trio, and the St Christopher Orchestra of Vilnius – the finest technicians and interpreters I have ever worked with'. The recordings include *an angel reads my open book ...* which is 'after the poetry of Sigitis Geda and the bells of Vladimir Taraso', which feature in the work. It is due to appear on the Metier label during 2006,⁴ as will her Lithuanian-based string quartet *Geda's Weavings*, all much influenced by the violinist Rusne Mataityte.

But what of Sadie Harrison's compositional approach stylistically? Strangely enough I found her 'Taking Flight' (the Metier CD of that title, MSV CD92053, released in 2000) particularly strong in impact, revealing distinct shades of a 'Birtwistle trying to get out'. When I asked Sadie

about this she replied: 'well, one can't be a composer in isolation, one is influenced by other composers, and Harrison Birtwistle consented to be patron of our local Semle Festival which I direct. I love his work, then there's the affinity of the *name* as I'm also a "Harrison" though no relation!'

However in 30 June's first live performance of *an angel reads my open book ...* I felt distinctly that here we heard a far more 'accessible' Sadie Harrison, with more of an impressionistic, Debussyesque flavour, perhaps so as to better engage a wider audience? Indeed I can't help but feel perhaps critic Andy Hamilton (*The Wire*) best sums up her style when he puts her as a composer in the 'category of what could be described as "domesticated modernism" – tonal composers who are aware of modernist gestures while (also) aware of the danger of audience alienation'. She has also aptly been described as particularly infused by Bartók's 'soundworld'. Personally I would say I find Sadie Harrison's works abrasively compelling, imbued with sheer emotional energy and impact. So if there is a 'Birtwistle' (and certainly a 'Harrison') trying to take full flight, by throwing caution to the wind, this composer could have a truly radical future ahead.

Jill Barlow

⁴ see < www.metierrecords.co.uk >.