

# contact

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REVIEWS

19th March: Barber Institute of Fine Arts (University of Birmingham)  
Contemporary Music Concert of Works by Debussy, Hindemith,  
and Cage given by soloists and the University Motet Choir  
conducted by John Joubert.

The apparent freedom and anarchy implied by the layout of such scores as John Cage's 'Theatre Piece' 1960 is belied by the precision and purposefulness of realisations directed by Cage himself. Without previous experience of the original versions, it is impossible to mount a successful and convincing performance. The score provides instructions with which each performer must prepare his own part to last 30 minutes, without consultation with the others. Cage's complex scheme ensures that the multi-level structure will be entirely random, but once it is assembled the performers must carry it out with precision. Those performances under the direction of Cage himself are characterised by a sense of timeless awe; as if time stood still and one is lulled into a trance-like state which renders the most absurd events acceptable, and the most unpleasant and loud noises sweet and harmonious. Only performers whose dedication to what they are performing is complete and sincere can hope to impart this intangible spirit to their audience. They must be capable of overwhelming, by the sheer weight of their own concentration, any tendency on the part of the audience to break the spell by restlessness, laughter, or relaxation of any kind. In short, the performance must be spell-binding from beginning to end.

The performance of the 'Theatre Piece' on 19th March in the concert hall of the Barber Institute benefitted from the experience of people who had first hand experience of the original version directed by John Cage. Added to this, the group of seven performers, directed by Jocelyn Powell, had an obvious enthusiasm and commitment for the work, and these two features ensured that the performance had the essential qualities at least some of the time.

Of course, the unknown factor in any such performance is the audience, and even the most experienced and expert group will fall short of its mark if the audience is not prepared to meet it half-way and give as much as they are offered in terms of concentration and listening. There was unfortunately a good deal of laughter from the audience, and I found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that some of the performers were making deliberate attempts to make the audience laugh. This kind of self assertion leads to fragmentation and lack of cohesion, and is definitely not in the spirit of John Cage.

Parts had been composed for a keyboard player (piano off-stage and harpsichord on stage), a cellist who included fragments of a Bach 'cello suite' in his version, a percussion player, a singer, a dancer, an actor and a painter who produced an action painting on a mishapen piece of sheet metal at the back of the stage. Full use was made of the auditorium and stage of the concert hall, and advantage was taken of the resonant qualities of the corridors outside.

The performance was well structured and precisely executed (several performers made a deliberate display of consulting their wrist watches) but lacked magic of feeling, except for a few moments near the end. The result was entertaining and enjoyable rather than memorable, but did tend to become tedious in the middle when the initial impact of the succession of extraordinary events had worn off.

This work formed the second half of a complete concert whose first half was devoted to music of a more traditional style. This included performances of three works by Debussy. Ivor Keys and Peter Dickinson played the group of three pieces for two pianos 'En Blanc et Noir'. This was mostly vigorous and exciting, but some of the most dramatically crucial moments were spoilt by what I felt to be a lack of spiritual accord between the two performers. Brian Wicker, accompanied by Mary Joubert, played the Rhapsody for clarinet and piano. The University of Birmingham Motet Choir ended the first half with a performance of the 'Trois Chansons de Charles D'Orleans'. This choir is obviously well drilled by its conductor John Joubert and gave a very sensitive rendering of these three songs, although the effect was spoilt by some weak solo singing. They preceded the Debussy songs by a performance of Hindemith's Six French Chansons. In both works the pronunciation of the French vowels was not accurate, and since this is often crucial to the colour of the music, more care should have been taken.

The first half was entertaining and undemanding, but this led to a feeling that the concert as a whole was badly planned, and perhaps even misled in its intention. If the Musical Society wish to perform music by Cage, I feel they should have courage enough to include it in programmes devoted entirely to works conceived in a similar spirit. I found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that there was an attempt to trick the audience into submitting to an experience which was felt to be good for them by putting sugar on the pill.

JOLYON LAYCOCK

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