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Citation

October 13th: Barber Institute, University of Birmingham

Jane Manning, soprano
Peter Lawson, pianc

With the coming of magnetic tape, electronic music happened more or less overnight, but after its initial novelty a big drawback soon became apparent. What do you look at during a performance of electronic music? Somehow tapespools turning just aren't very stimulating and loudspeaker cabinets hardly compare with an orchestra for visual interest.

But before the arrival of live electronics - ring modulators, VCS3s etc. - brought the musician-cum-technician onto the stage to twiddle the knobs, the "classical" phase of electronic music had discovered a simple solution to the problem of the missing visual and "human" elements and the sense of "performance" - combination of tape with live conventional performers.

A combination which stimulated several composers' imagination was that of voice and tape. Stockhausen's "Gesang der Jünglinge", Berio's "Visage" and Milton Babbitt's "Philomel" are all written for this medium and are works of major stature.

This concert gave us the rare opportunity of hearing the Babbitt. I was pleasantly surprised - having formed the impression from radio performances that it was a dry, cerebral work - to find that performed live it had great warmth. To be sure, the classically inspired text (based on Ovid's story of Philomel's change into a nightingale) though rich in word-play and puns, renders it less purely emotional than

"Visage", but by compensation it is a far more controlled piece. One could imagine that every sound was probably serialized according to half a dozen parameters. Jane Manning's performance, as might have been expected, was first class but the sound reproduction of the tape was disappointing in quality.

The other piece in the programme for the same combination - "There the true silence is" by Philip Lane - obviously showed the composer finding his feet in the electronic medium, but I liked it and thought it had good points. Like "Philomel" the tape held a tight rein upon its resources, and range of tone colour and kept mostly to discreet pitches. Unlike Babbitt, Philip Lane did not have the benefit of the immensely sophisticated RCA synthesiser: the absence of any stereophonic effect showed it had been produced with limited resources. In contrast to Babbitt's precisely notated vocal score - demonstrated by the high degree of synchronisation between soloist and tape - Lane's piece had a freer justaposition of the two - the more usual procedure. The text by Thomas Hood was imaginatively set.

In more conventional vein, for voice and piano, were Peter Lawson's songs from his cycle "Sitting in Farmyard Mud" which I found an unsympathetic setting of MacNeice's verse. Though there were some nice things in the piano writing, it too was unsatisfactory in its rather embarrassing pictorialism. As a whole it seemed uncertain of its idiom. However, the cycle received a Royal Philharmonic Society prize so there must be those who disagree with me.

By contrast the three sets of Webern songs (Ops. 12, 23 and 25) interspersed in the programme were superb models of how to write for voice and piano - just enough notes and no more to evoke each song's fleeting mood. A high quality performance brought over the marvellous music behind the awesome printed page.

DAVID Ll. ROBERTS.