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Goldsmiths
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GAVIN BRYARS: THE SINKING OF THE TITANIC; JESUS' BLOOD NEVER FAILED ME YET
Obscure No. 1 (£1.99)
CHRISTOPHER HOBBS; JOHN ADAMS; GAVIN BRYARS: ENSEMBLE PIECES
Obscure No. 2 (£1.99)
BRIAN ENO: DISCREET MUSIC
Obscure No. 3 (£1.99)
DAVID TOOP; MAX EASTLEY: NEW AND REDISCOVERED MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
Obscure No. 4 (£1.99)

DAVID ROBERTS

The first four releases of Brian Eno's Obscure Records (distributed by Island Records) make a promising start for the label. It must be hoped that 'obscure' is an ironic rather than a prophetic epithet, for on the whole the music presented on these discs is attractive and accessible. It deserves a wide audience.

Obscure No. 1 comprises two long pieces by Gavin Bryars, *The Sinking of the Titanic* and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. The former takes as its starting point the report that the ship's band were still playing hymn-tunes as the Titanic went down. Bryars has conducted extensive research into the story in an attempt to unravel the various accounts and theories, and some of the conclusions of his detective work appear on the sleeve together with a number of 'pataphysical' speculations which arise out of them. The 'piece' is an assemblage of musical items associated in one way or another with the disaster; the recorded performance is just one of a number of possible realisations of this material. The most prominent components of the recorded version are hymn-tunes played by a string ensemble and a tape part consisting chiefly of sustained sounds, at times resembling foghorns. Given this emotive story, few composers could have resisted writing a violent and self-indulgent work, yet what Bryars has put together is impressively simple and direct, communicating the quiet dignity that the ship's band managed to retain in the face of imminent catastrophe.

Again, the word that is first brought to mind by *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* is 'dignity'. This remarkable composition springs from a recording of a few lines of evangelical doggerel sung by an unidentified tramp. These few phrases are repeated endlessly by means of a tape loop; with successive repetitions an instrumental accompaniment is gradually built up, texture and

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harmony growing ever richer, until eventually the accompaniment begins to overshadow the voice. With the constant reiteration of the tramp's song, a small piece of magic is worked: the original hoarse voice, uncertain in rhythm and intonation, is transformed by degrees to a point where all the coarseness is forgotten and it is heard as a performance of great artistry, every nuance deliberate and controlled. One is left puzzling whether the repetition has been obscuring or revealing the true quality of the singing. The growth of the accompaniment is skilfully handled, excepting, towards the end, the disturbing off-beat notes of the oboe. A shame too that the track should end with a moment of bathos — a fade from the tutti: it would surely have been better to have returned to the unaccompanied singing. But these are quibbles. This is a very fine and compelling piece, and one I shall want to hear many times more.

Bryars' contribution to *Obscure No. 2, 1, 2, 1-2-3-4*, is also based on borrowed material, though here the listener does not hear it direct, but via the playing of performers who listen to a recording over headphones and attempt to render it simultaneously as best they can on their instruments and voices. The recorded result is mildly interesting, but offers few surprises. Christopher Hobbs is represented by two pieces from the days of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra — *Aran and McCrimmon Will Never Return* — the first of these achieving the not inconsiderable feat of sounding like some kind of Highland gamelan. I should have been glad to have had more of Hobbs's characteristically gritty music in place of the fourth item on the record, John Adams's jejune *American Standard*, a portrait of three musical styles — Sousa marches, hymns, and Ellingtonian jazz. The piece presumably seeks its justification as a commentary upon American society, but even so, as a satire it's blunt-edged.

Brian Eno's *Discreet Music* for synthesizer and tape-delay system, which takes up a side of *Obscure No. 3*, is self-confessed musique d'ameublement. A dangerously simple and quiet piece, it is intended to form 'part of the ambience of the environment', in which modest aim it is very successful: when I first listened to it over headphones in my room at the University, its slowly-changing patterns became so completely fused with the noises of building work in the distance that it was something of a shock to discover later, when I played the track at home, that what I'd remembered as a particularly telling effect wasn't on the record at all, but had been produced by circumambient trucks. The second side of the disc is given over to Eno's *Three Variations on the Canon in D major by Johann Pachelbel*, which are as much variations on a performing style — the grand romantic manner — as on the Pachelbel itself. Quite witty as a skit upon inappropriate performances of Baroque music. The grotesquely reverberant quality of the mix is especially fine.

One of the most interesting developments in the experimental movement in recent years has been an increasing interest in the invention and construction of new instruments. A useful booklet on the subject is *New/Rediscovered Musical Instruments Vol. 1*, edited by David Toop (London: Quartz/Mirliton, 1974 — distributed by the Experimental Music Catalogue, 75p), in which the work of Paul Burwell, Hugh Davies, Max Eastley, Paul Lytton, Evan Parker and David Toop is described and illustrated. Eastley and Toop, represented on *Obscure No. 4*, exemplify two quite different approaches to instrument construction. Eastley begins from the standpoint of a visual artist, building sound-sculptures which, once set up, 'perform' without human intervention, operated by wind, water or electric motors. Four of his instruments are featured on the record: hydrophone, centriphone, metallophone and elastic aerophone. The results are astonishingly complex and inherently interesting, though it sounds as though the recording has been given a certain amount of cosmetic treatment.

David Toop's activities, on the other hand, have inclined towards the 'rediscovered' part of the album title. His instruments and music show the influence of several ethnic musics. The most elaborate of the three tracks by which he is represented is *The Divination of the Bowhead Whale* which employs the following exotic ensemble: prepared electric and bass guitars, bowed chordophone, two-string fiddle (made by Paul Burwell), grill harp (made by Hugh Davies), Japanese bells, bass drums and lorry hub. The rich and intricate sounds hold the attention throughout. It should not be forgotten, of course, that even the oldest instrument becomes new if it is used in an original way. Following this line of reasoning, one of the most original instruments heard on the record is Toop's voice in the songs *Do the Bathosphere* and *The Chairs Story*. His uncanny falsetto is quite unlike anything I've heard before. (It makes my throat ache too.)