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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Shepherd, John. 1976-1977. 'Review of *Warsaw Autumn Festival*'. *Contact*, 15. pp. 41-42.
ISSN 0308-5066.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

WARSAW AUTUMN FESTIVAL
SEPTEMBER 18-26, 1976

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To attempt to attend all the events at a Warsaw Autumn Festival is an exercise in concentration that certainly leaves one satiated, if not a little light-headed. At this year's twentieth Festival there were 22 concerts and eight press conferences, most of the latter lasting in the region of three hours. Add to this the copious programme notes - often written, it would seem, by over-imaginative commentators or composers whose thoughts were more interesting than their music - and the scene was set for an immersion into the world of contemporary music that was nothing if not intensive.

The statistics alone are impressive. In nine days 93 pieces were presented from 20 countries. Of these 32 were by Polish composers, 62 were being given for the first time in Poland and 15 were receiving their world premieres (including, according to the press release, Boguslaw Schaffer's *Missa elettronica*, which was certainly performed at least twice before the Festival). All the concerts were recorded by the Polish State Radio and records of some of the Polish works were issued towards the end of the Festival.

Every festival, it can be supposed, develops its own particular atmosphere. That of this year's Warsaw Autumn can best be described as a discreet yet fervid feverishness. Any piece that was loud (preferably with a dozen or more percussionists) was generally received with enthusiasm. Typical in this respect was a raucous performance of Charles Ives' *Three Places in New England*, which would have been lengthily applauded had it not been for the indecent haste of the encore (Jacek Kasprzyk conducting the Cracow Orchestra). This travesty of an interpretation was awarded the Composers' Union prize for the best Polish conducting performance of the Festival, a decision, one felt, that had more to do with internal musical politics than with isolated artistic judgment.

The nadir of cacophony was reached, however, with a performance of contemporary Yugoslav music given by Anton Nanut and the Slovene Philharmonic from Ljubljana. But while the audience approved of the Ives and tolerated the Yugoslav incident (a case of trial by sonic rape), they were, on another occasion, unable to give a decent hearing to the subdued minimalism of Morton Feldman's *Vertical Thoughts I* for two pianos. It was indeed unfortunate that the fine and sensitive performance of Roger Woodward and Robert Curry should have been spoiled by deliberate audience noise.

Yet on the whole, the somewhat unreal intensity of the Festival gave rise to happy rather than sad occasions, and none more so than the concert given by the King's Singers of works written especially for them (*The House of Sleep* by Richard Rodney Bennett, Berio's *Cries of London*, Penderecki's *Ecloga VIII* and *Time Piece* by Paul Patterson). Both *Cries of London* (1974) and *Ecloga VIII* (1972) are fine pieces that give revealing reign to the King's Singers' considerable abilities. But it was Patterson's *Time Piece* (1973) which made the most impact. *Time Piece* is a half-humorous, half-serious work that takes as its subject matter the effect of mechanical time on the pristine serenity of Paradise. Initially 'the world is created in mysterious tonal substance' which leads to a 'sweet sounding Paradise'. Then Adam tries to interest Eve in the rhythm of time. As a result of this, the original symbolic act, 'time [shows] its horrible face and [ruins] the peace of Paradise'. After an appropriately mechanical fugue God decides he can't stand it any longer and orders all the clocks and watches to cease. Peace returns to Paradise.

The humour in the piece depends on the superbly integrated parody of the music (commercial clichés, blues, negro spirituals and so on) as well as on the dry pithiness of the text: in the beginning Paradise is 'groovy', while at the conclusion we are informed in McLuhanesque fashion that it is 'time, gentlemen, please' and that 'there was no time for a long time'. Through this humour it was possible to discern a paradoxically serious comment on modern man's serious attitude towards his often frenetic activities.

Another lesser known figure who produced a memorable work was the Dutch composer Peter Schat. *Canto General* (1974) for mezzo-soprano, violin and piano is a memorial piece for Salvador Allende which uses a text by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The work's form was inspired by the architectural qualities of the

Salginatobel Bridge which, to use the composer's words, is 'slender . . . light, and tensed as a pinion across an unfathomable Swiss mountain chasm'. In similar fashion the musical structure is built up from permutations and reiterations of horizontal melodic-rhythmic elements into a freely atonal vocal-instrumental line that lasts for over half an hour. Consequently, the vertical or harmonic aspect comes across as stretched and suspended. Such a form is difficult to manage. Not only can what the composer called the 'permutations' become boring and lacking in direction, but the harmonic substance can equally well crack and dissipate the delicately maintained tension. On first hearing Schat seemed to have avoided these pitfalls. The drama was genuinely felt, and its intensity lacked the over-statement and banality which can so easily creep into politically motivated works.

There were several pieces of note by more famous contemporary personalities. As well as Feldman's *Vertical Thoughts I*, there was George Crumb's *Makrokosmos I* (1972), Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles aventures* (1965), Stockhausen's *Oben und Unten* (1968) - part of the *Aus den sieben Tagen* cycle, Xenakis' *Eonta* (1964) for piano and five brass instruments, Christou's *Praxis for 12* (1966), and Heinz Holliger's String Quartet (1973) and *Cardiophonie* (1971). Amidst all this American and European self-consciousness it was also refreshing to hear Takemitsu's *Green (November Steps III)* (1968), as well as an entire concert of contemporary Japanese works given by the Tokk Ensemble.

Heinz Holliger's better known role as a virtuoso oboist was given full expression in the Festival through a work written especially for him, Penderecki's *Capriccio* for oboe and 11 strings (1965). Yet Holliger seems equally capable as a composer. Both the String Quartet and *Cardiophonie* (for wind instrument and three tape recorders) are essays in paroxysmal collapse. *Cardiophonie* depends for its effect on the intermodulation of the performer's heartbeat with the sounds made by voice and instrument. Tape delay equipment and the quickening of the heartbeat as the performance progresses results in a growing montage of sound that gradually overwhelms the performer and induces a breakdown. The String Quartet, which uses amplified instruments, follows a similar programme. Nervous stutterings and screeches slowly mount to a moment of tension which snaps, leaving the work to end in a mood of depression and weakness. This mood is underlined not only by the continual, lower retuning of the instruments which takes place throughout as part of the piece, but by a gradual descent to the depths of each instrument's register, the increasingly long bow strokes, and the uncertainty of contact between bow and string. Although similar in overall effect, both pieces are strikingly original in concept and speak of an extremely lively musical mind.

One of the principal purposes of the Festival, of course, is to act as a shop window for contemporary Polish music. In general, the works presented were a little disappointing. Lutoslawski was represented (only at the last minute, it would seem) by a work, *Jeux venitiens* (1961), which has now become a classic. And, aside from the two shorter works written for specific artists, Penderecki was likewise represented only by a work, *De natura sonoris 2* for orchestra (1971), which - flauto a culisse and saw notwithstanding - has its origins in the creative surge of the 1960's. It was left to the least well-known of the mainstream Polish colourists, Kazimierz Serocki, to provide a piece of real interest in this genre. As well as being infused with an engaging vitality, *Phantasmagory* (1971) for piano and percussion (37 instruments - one player) demonstrated a clear handling of ideas and an originality in the mounting of individual sound clusters that did much to explain the respect this composer has earned from those with a thorough familiarity of Polish music.

There were two other Polish composers whose individuality communicated itself during the Festival. *Automatophone* (1974) for twelve plucked instruments and seven mechanical instruments continues Zygmund Krauze's concern both with folk instruments and music, and with techniques involving quotation and collage. The plucked instruments in the piece were guitars and mandolins, while the mechanical instruments, of nineteenth century origin, consisted of steel rods vibrated by means of revolving metal plates. Initial interest in the work was thus created through a subtle contrast of sonorities, the silvery edge of the mandolins and the watery flow of the guitars commenting on the metallic quality of the mechanical instruments. But there, unfortunately the interest stopped. There was little interplay between the two sets of instruments, and a good opportunity for further enticing exploration was missed.

Gorecki is perhaps the best of the talented group of composers from Katowice, an industrial town in the south of Poland. Gorecki's music has always been marked by a penchant for simplicity and economy of means, as well as by a deep sense of the religious. To these characteristics has recently been added a desire to see traditional harmonies intergrated into his musical language. All three traits were discernable in *Euntes ibant et flebant* (1973) and *Amen* (1975), works for a capella choir performed in the Protestant church. But these pieces also evidenced a strong awareness for the plastic or tangible qualities of sound. Particularly impressive in *Euntes ibant et flebant* was the manner in which a composed, dynamically achieved 'resonance' was extended beyond the natural resonance of the church to produce a quite static ethereality.

Among the more conservative composers, Baird (*Goethe-Briefe*, 1970, for baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, and *Concerto lugubre*, 1975, for viola and orchestra), Luciuk (*Portraits lyriques*, 1974, for soprano, two violins, cello and piano), and Meyer (String Quartet No. 4, 1974) all produced pleasing works. None was more so, however, than Augustyn Bloch's *Wordsworth Songs* (1976) for baritone and chamber orchestra. Bloch's piece was memorable not only because it draws on the two major trends in Polish composition (the colouristic and the romantic), but because this diverse material was skilfully woven into an organic whole which never lost sight of the ultimate dramatic end. Bloch succeeded, in other words, where so many of the cacophonous imitators of colourism expressly failed.

The standard of performance at the Festival was strangely schismatic. With one notable exception, the orchestral concerts were again disappointing. Part of the trouble was a number of practical misfortunes for which the organisers could not be held responsible. But it has also been suggested that the large amount of time spent abroad by Poland's better conductors can hardly help the standard of playing at home.

The chamber concerts, on the other hand, were of a consistently high standard. Jane Manning (soprano), with Howard Shelley (piano), gave a very creditable performance of Messaien's difficult *Harawi*; Vera Beths delicate playing of Cage's *Six Melodies for Violin and Keyboard* was followed by a contrastingly aggressive interpretation of George Antheil's seldom heard futuristic Violin Sonatas; Elizabeth Chojnacka (harpsichord) gave an intense account both of Luc Ferrari's *Musique socialiste?* (1972) and Cristobal Halffter's *Tempo para Espacios* (1974) - the latter an interesting piece whose success was compromised by bad amplification of the harpsichord; the Wilanow Quartet coped manfully with the difficulties of Holliger's Quartet; and Stefania Woytowicz was empathy itself in Luciuk's impressionistic *Portraits lyriques*. Mention must also be made of the Moscow Chamber Opera's first-rate presentation of Shostakovich's *The Nose* (1927-1928), a study in smugness, obsequiousness and bureaucratic folly that was revived in Moscow two years ago.

The one outstanding orchestral concert was given by Jerzy Maksymiuk and the Polish Chamber Orchestra. It was help, of course, that all the pieces performed (Bacewicz's *Concerto for String Orchestra*, Bartok's *Divertimento for String Orchestra*, Bloch's *Wordsworth Songs*, Penderecki's *Capriccio* and Christou's *Praxis*) were consistently strong. But Maksymiuk (b. 1936) had prepared himself well, and is clearly a conductor with a wealth of talent. The Bartok in particular was a very fine reading.

There was plenty of excellence and originality in this Festival to make it a thoroughly worthwhile experience, and if the Polish works in general conveyed a sense of retrenchment, then that is only to be expected after the exciting happenings of the 1960's. Finally, one glorious misprint in the English programme notes tailor-made for latent iconoclasts: Bernd Alois Zimmermann, we were informed, studied at the 'International Summer Courses of New Music in Darmstadt'.