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SPNM COMPOSERS' WEEKEND, UNIVERSITY OF YORK
JULY 15-18, 1977

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The SPNM Eleventh Composers' Weekend had as its principal lecturer the American composer Jacob Druckman; Cornelius Cardew and David Blake were guest lecturers. The guest artists included Jane Manning, soprano; Barry Guy, double bass; Ronald Lumsden, piano; Ed Pillinger, clarinet; and the Medici String Quartet. Nicola LeFanu, Richard Orton and Paul Patterson each presented analyses of various works. In co-operation with a new cultural exchange agreement between Holland and Britain, a group of Dutch student composers and performers, organised by the composer Theo Loevendie, was invited for the Weekend.

The Weekend brought together some 70 student, amateur and professional composers along with others interested in contemporary music. The participants came from throughout the British Isles as well as several from the Continent (in addition to the Dutch group). The Weekend consisted of four days of tightly scheduled lectures, seminars, discussions, rehearsals and concerts often running parallel two or three deep. The participants were comfortably housed in the university dormitories. The organisation was excellent, the atmosphere pleasant and the cafeteria food very good.

In dramatic contrast was David Blake's mellifluous apology of his compositional and emotinal struggle in returning to tonality and all those eternal verities of music. His spiel was as slick as a second-hand car dealer's, the anecdotes beautifully timed, and a contagious energy generated. Until, alas, he played the music — Alban Berg, 1936. By the finale of this virtuoso lecture one got the distinct impression that behind all this verbal glitter was a very insecure composer really trying to justify more to himself than to his audience his recent 'grand jeté' backward into the arms of the post-Romantics and Berg. But, nevertheless, it was an entertaining hour and a fine performance. Predictably during the question period the arrows flew, but no one could match his rapier-like wit. I mean, who could possibly continue a serious, effective frontal attack when you thrust, challenging one of his rash statements, with something like, 'Then why not just theorise it instead of bothering to write it down?' And instantly he parries with, 'I'd rather do pornography than think it!'

It is always interesting to meet a well-known composer for the first time. The expectation is generally high and the anticipation of reinforcement usually positive. Getting to know the composer either propagates that interest or diminishes it. Jacob Druckman presented several talks about his music illustrated by both live performances (two works) and four excellent recorded performances of larger works. His music is elegantly crafted, some of the orchestral scoring quite dazzling, and *Animus II* for voice and percussion a gem, but somehow his position as the Weekend's central guru seemed difficult to maintain. During the first couple of days he seemed to answer all the basic questions about his music and philosophy and for the

remaining days prompted very little further interest. Perhaps it was just the wrong context, York instead of New York.

On the Sunday afternoon Cornelius Cardew spelled out his Maoist views on music and the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately I heard only the end of the talk, but from the animated climate and room temperature when I did arrive, it seemed to have been the most heated discussion of the Weekend with secondary shock waves continuing throughout the remaining days. The Weekend could have profited much by that kind of fillip in the other areas as well.

Each of the four evenings had a special concert. The first was Jacob Druckman's lecture-recital which contained live performances of *Animus I* for trombone and electronic tape, not one of his best works, but played very well by Roger Williams, and *Valentine*, a theatrical, virtuoso bass piece played with gusto by Barry Guy. The following evening was the Dutch student composers' concert which included a programme of works by Ton Edel, Kees Schoonenbeek (the only non-student), Guus Janssen, Jos Post, Rob Nasveld, Paul Termos, and Charles V. D. Leeuw, most of them in their early- and middle-twenties. Their works had a kind of youthful directness about them which some members of the audience found more interesting than others, but it was a very long evening. There was also a concert for the group-composition exercises. On the first day Peter Wiegold organised four groups of twelve members each for group-composition. Each group decided whether the group was to have a group leader and if so who and then the groups set about grouping together each day in a solid group effort to produce group-composition. The frustration of trying to make group decisions with everyone in the group asking group permission and group advice drove some of my group and groups from other groups away from the group-composition groups. The Medici String Quartet bore the brunt of this party game and to their great credit entered into the spirit of the farce with a fine attitude and remarkable professionalism. The only interesting group was the one led by Richard Orton which arrived at a soliloquy for clarinet (played by Ed Pillinger) punctuated by a laughing chorus. It was really a very funny theatre piece. The others, however, were as impoverished as one might expect from this kind of music-education project. After all, even Liszt, Chopin, Czerny and friends could not do too much better with their group-composition 140 years ago, but our Composers' Weekend's result seemed to indicate, however, that many heads sometimes produce a Hydra and not even a *Hexameron*.

Saturday evening was a surprise impromptu concert which included Preston Trombly's *Kinetics III* for flute and tape, Peter Wiegold's *Sing Lullaby* (1974) for soprano and double bass, and Barry Guy's *Statements II* for amplified double bass and electronic treatments. *Kinetics III* was given an excellent performance by the American flautist, Nancy Ruffer, with Jacob Druckman controlling the sound projection, but the work, produced in 1971 at Yale University, suffers the lack of real individuality which seems to be the bane of so many solo flute pieces written since Varèse's. *Sing Lullaby* has been performed numerous times by the Jane Manning/Barry Guy duo in the last few years, so it was interesting to see how the duo came to grips with this kind of ensemble piece on short notice. The balances were not always just right and Barry Guy's new foot switches were sometimes quite noisy, but the performance showed that they have obviously worked together a lot over the years. The concert ended with Barry Guy's virtuoso performance of his own work, *Statements I*, a kind of Lisztian blockbuster for amplified bass and his new 'black box' of electronic tricks. The final concert on Monday night included works selected from the numerous scores read and rehearsed during the Weekend. The concert had a distinctly conservative flavour about it reflecting the compositional interests of the majority of the Weekend's participants. The concert was composed of Janet Graham's *The Dream* for soprano and string quartet, Barbara Winrow's *Soliloquy* for solo clarinet, Alex Manassen and Timothy Coleman's nice realization of one of the group-composition scores for soprano and string quartet, Julia Usher's farcical theatre piece *Exits and Entrances* for double bass solo, Andrew Peggie's solo clarinet work performed during the interval down by the lakeside, Michael Maxwell's quodlibet *Metamorphosis a la Recherche du Temps Perdue* for string quartet, Peter Carr's *Strings by the River* for soprano and string quartet, George Nicholson's String Quartet and a work of my own,

Strummin' for the piano harp, electronic tape and light.

The Weekend was rounded off by a surprise beer bash in the Medici's rehearsal studio which, after a couple of hours, spread to the dormitories and on into the wee hours of the morning. It was this kind of social interaction that was perhaps the Weekend's greatest asset. It served as a kind of catalyst by bringing groups of people together with vastly divergent interests and backgrounds and providing an ambiance in which small groups and individuals could exchange ideas. In this aspect the Weekend was nearly totally successful and a worthwhile stimulus for all the participants, but hopefully the 1978 Composers' Weekend will improve upon its current format by inviting an articulate spokesman from the musical 'left' to provide the input, stimulation and controversy that was sadly lacking from this year's.

Due to lack of space we are unfortunately unable to publish more updated comment on the activities of the SPM and in particular a response to this review. We have therefore asked for further comment, including an appraisal of the 1978 Composers' Weekend, for the next issue.

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