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**CONTEMPORARY MUSIC FESTIVAL,
HUDDERSFIELD
OCTOBER 25-31, 1979**

HILARY BRACEFIELD

The second Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival was bigger and better than the previous one and provided an exhilarating if exhausting week for those who stayed the course. It also raised a number of thoughts about such enterprises.

In his review of the first Festival¹ John Shepherd made some comment on the rightness of contemporary music in a close-knit semi-industrial community such as

Huddersfield, and certainly it seemed often slightly incongruous to be walking through the uncaring crowds in the new Markets area of the city bound for a recital of music by, say, Stockhausen and Lutoslawski. Given, however, the enthusiasm of the director, Richard Steinitz, and the facilities of the Huddersfield Polytechnic, it is an eminently suitable place for such a festival: more or less in the middle of a sizeable number of the country's population, easy enough to get to, and small enough to provide the right sort of atmosphere for casual and social meetings with other participants. If in future years the Festival can keep up the standard of the 1979 performers and concerts, the music departments of all surrounding universities and colleges should be forced to send droves of their students along.

But because of the sudden unavailability of the Huddersfield Town Hall (due to dry rot...), the 1979 Festival retreated even further inside the boundaries of the Polytechnic, and although music students came in greater numbers, the publicity did not bring in enough outside or even local people. Now this is a well-known problem of all contemporary music, but a festival should be a way of exciting people into going to things they would not normally visit, or bringing the events to places where the people can be found. Two concerts particularly showed up this problem and could give the organisers food for thought.

At the first, a ready-made audience of retired people, ladies in hats and shoppers with carrier bags and so on — a cross-section of the Huddersfield community — filled the Venn Street Arts Centre for a lunchtime recital by Rohan de Saram (cello) and Douglas Young (piano). This was not, alas, because of the reputation of the performers, but because this cheap (10p!) Tuesday programme was also one of a series which has become a staple part of Huddersfield's concert going. Good! For various eccentric-sounding reasons the advertised programme was not played, but Delius, Debussy, Bartók and Young's own *River* provided a mixture of 'easy' and 'difficult' listening and there was no stamping out of the hall when Toshiro Mayuzumi's *Bunraku* was also included.

Conversely, a rather small audience assembled in the Polytechnic Great Hall to hear John Tilbury playing some of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* and Denis Smalley presenting two tape works by Bayle and Parmegiani. Right in the middle of the student campus, where no doubt large numbers fight to get into experimental rock concerts, the occasion was not seized to draw young people in, and the concert itself was not presented to appeal to such an audience.

Now exactly how the staging and publicity of the Festival should be done to create maximum interest and audiences I would hesitate to advise, but in future years I hope it will become more a part of the Huddersfield, the Yorkshire and the northern musical scene than it is yet. Perhaps this will be judged better after the next Festival when the Town Hall can be used again, and the new refurbished church building on the campus will be available. And perhaps the Festival can try getting out on the street among the people.

No doubt festival organisers in general are always hampered by who is available to be booked. I'd like to see Huddersfield keep up the standard of visiting players from Europe, America and further afield. They need to be heard more often outside London. I like the idea of using British performers 'in residence' to work with the entrants in the Yorkshire Arts Association Young Composers Competition, but thought that this year's group — Gemini (directed by Peter Wiegold) — could have been given more opportunity to perform in the Festival proper. An emphasis this time on solo virtuosi made possible extremely interesting comparisons; ensemble programmes were rather lacking, although the Town Hall disaster forced the cancellation of one that was planned. One or two 'themes' are probably needed to give coherence to a festival of 14 or so concerts. This year's two themes — the variety of virtuosi and some emphasis on folk-based music — may have been accidental but they were appreciated. I'd welcome more group performances, visits from other important British performers and some attempt to show the range of work on the experimental side. Some experimental ensembles would be especially suited to going out into the streets, but so would some of the more exuberant music groups working within the Polytechnic itself.

A festival is a good place for world and British premieres. An organiser is hampered if a composer doesn't deliver the goods, but I hope the Festival will continue to offer a good

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number of new pieces. And I hope it keeps the lectures and discussion sessions, which can give interesting insights into the thinking of the featured performers and composers.

The association of the YAA Young Composers Competition with the Festival is a useful one, as is the presentation of several of the finalists' pieces in discussion workshops. Of the several works chosen for Gemini to play in the workshop, Julian Dale's *Comme s'en vont les écrivisses*, using texts by Apollinaire, was a good choice for the concert: bold, assured and written well for both the voice (Margaret Field) and the instrumental combination. The winning percussion work, by John Weeks (played by James Wood), was too long for its limited effects. One of last year's winners, Michael Parkin, has subsequently had his work performed by the Northern New Music Players (conductor Barrie Webb) who on this occasion gave the première of his *Reflections from a Slow Country*. This work, for chamber orchestra, showed the composer exploring a sound world which bewitched him into some excesses and formal clumsiness but from which promising and interesting textures emerged. Young composers need second performances and the chance of further commissions: one hopes that the New Music Players will also serve the most recent prizewinners.

The two 'themes' I noticed in the Festival — of solo virtuosity and of folk-inspired music — to some extent overlapped. In the virtuoso category we had recitals from Vinko Globokar (trombone), Harry Sparnaay (bass clarinet), Frederic Rzewski (piano) and James Wood (percussion) to compare, and a fascinating comparison it was.

Globokar in his talk showed that finding new techniques for instrumental music is important and that virtuosity helps towards this aim. His recital showed how much he has to drive himself, stimulate himself, by improvisatory techniques which continually extend the range of what can be done. The alternative — 'One could write notes, I suppose', as he said whimsically — is not for him. His own pieces *Échanges* and *Res/As/Ex/Ins-pirer* both showed the virtuoso player pushing himself to the limits, but the works themselves impressed more as just technical exercises. Globokar's theatrical piece *Toucher* for percussionist (performed by James Wood) had virtuosity, a text and a theatricality harnessed to make, enjoyably, a philosophical point about the artist, the innovator and the world: the finding of truth and its reception — a point central to Globokar's own philosophy of music-making. Globokar himself showed in his performance of Kagel's *Atem* the deep thought he gives to the works of other composers.

Harry Sparnaay perhaps still revels in the challenges of new techniques for their own sakes. Rzewski, in fact, perceptively remarked that all the works Sparnaay played interposed an element between the player and his instrument and the audience — a huge score, electronic equipment, theatricality — as if he prefers a challenge from the difficulties themselves rather than the interpretation of the work to the audience. Certainly Sparnaay's performance of *Atem* was less subtle than that of Globokar (but how fascinating to hear both within a couple of days). He revelled, however, in the almost insurmountable technical difficulty of Brian Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study I*, and in the pieces with tape, which included the world première of Lyell Cresswell's *Hocket*, an enjoyable work using tape delay with some obvious humour in its opening moments, but some more thoughtful music in its inner sections.

James Wood's recital included no music by himself and nor was any played by other performers (a chance missed?), but in the concert which ended with *Toucher* he gave Stockhausen's *Zyklus* and *A First Show*, a newish work by Dominic Muldowney: a live performance with tape allowing 'group' performance on vibraphone and marimba (the performer records the accompanying tapes himself) and a piece which grew upon one as it proceeded.

Frederic Rzewski's performance of his own *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* was the highlight of the Festival. The astonishing variety and virtuosity of these 36 variations on the Chilean song make them virtually an encyclopedia of Western Music to date. Virtuosity combined with compositional acuity made this the most satisfying musical statement of the week. Interestingly, but perhaps indicative of current trends, this was the only overtly political piece in the whole Festival. Attempts to make the performers talk about music in political terms in discussion periods failed.

It was also interesting to hear, in Rzewski's well-argued lecture, an insistence on the rediscovery of folk music and on a return to such musical roots in modern composition. Certainly his own music showed this, not only in the variations but in the *Four Pieces* which he also played, although their greatest interest was in the exploration of the sound of the piano itself. The Festival mirrored the folk-music trend in several of the concerts. The only visiting group, Acezantez from Yugoslavia, attempt in some of their work to unite older Yugoslavian music with modern techniques, including elements of theatre. On their showing at Huddersfield, however, their whole approach for a semi-improvisatory group is not really rigorous enough. Lutosławski's folk-inspired *Dance Preludes* were vigorously played by Colin Lawson (clarinet) and Peter Hill (piano); Margaret Field presented a whole evening of songs of the jazz era, accompanied by Douglas Young; and the Festival ended with a recital of music based on folk music of several countries by Young and Rohan de Saram. It even included a demonstration of Singhalese drumming by de Saram. The final item, rather curiously for a contemporary music festival, was the *Suite populaire espagnole* by Falla, played with great panache at 11.30 pm to an exhausted but appreciative and still sizeable audience. This must have been manna to the soul of the indefatigable Richard Steinitz.

NOTE:

¹In *Contact 20* (Autumn 1979), pp. 46-50.