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Guest Editorial

UK gold?

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IN RECENT TIMES, I have heard numerous protagonists proclaiming that contemporary British music is the finest in the world (this statement was quite prominent in connection with the 'Endless Parade' concerts presented in London recently). I am quite sure that most of the people who make such statements have a very limited knowledge or understanding of much non-British music, or even of the more distinctive products of their homeland. Their proclamations tell me little about British music, only about their own rather provincial and xenophobic attitudes. Writing first and foremost as a listener rather than as a performer, I wish to offer an alternative view of the British music scene.

Music is poorly funded in Britain, and Tony Blair's government shows no sign of improving the situation (indeed it may become worse, since serious music is seen to have little to do with 'Cool Britannia'). The financial support that a young composer can find is meagre or non-existent; consequently, many are forced into other avenues of employment, and from that point onwards are never likely to be taken seriously in their compositional endeavours. Thus those who survive (excepting those who adopt a cheap commercialism) are usually drawn from narrow social classes, those (usually male) who have independent wealth to fall back upon. Is it any wonder then the work of composers of such marginal social circumstances should often present such a restricted musical world?

Yet there is a whole (diverse) range of substantial composers from Britain, I think, including Richard Barrett, James Clapperton, James Clarke, Chris Dench, James Dillon, Richard Emsley, James Erber, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, Christopher Fox, Morgan Hayes, David Lesser, Chris Newman, Alwynne Pritchard, Paul Rhys, Rebecca Saunders, Howard Skempton, Luke Stoneham, Mark R. Taylor, Ian Willcock, and others. These people have worked on with great commitment against the odds, and none of them receives the recognition they deserve in their home country; indeed, several of them are much more appreciated abroad. There may well be numerous other people creating original and vital music who have slipped through the net.

The empirical or positivistic tradition of British thought pervades all aspects of life. Both the intellect and the emotions (the lifeblood of music) are rejected in favour of passive acceptance of

the found, the already-known, the reactionary pull of 'facts' in a manner that would make Mr Gradgrind proud. This strongly affects our aesthetics of both composition and performance – only those things which can be measured are seen as suitable criteria. Thus a composer who attempts new types of instrumental texture, in which perhaps not every sound can be heard clearly, or who explores intricate aperiodic rhythms whose outcome may be a little unpredictable, or even who specifies six rototoms in a score when actually seven are needed, will be instantly rejected in favour of those who play by the book, whether or not there is any substance to what they create. The only failsafe way for a composer to avoid the dreaded epithet of 'incompetence' is to use only the tried and tested; consequently so much successful music consists of a tissue of derivative material and textbook 'good composition', which also provides solace through appealing to the familiar.

New music should be something for all types of people, yet this is hardly the feeling one gets at the claustrophobic atmosphere of so many concerts. It is difficult to imagine that many of the self-styled aficionados at such occasions really care for or enjoy music; they come to concerts not to participate in a fantastic experience, but rather to tick off compositions and performances against some imaginary checklist, thus demonstrating how much they are 'in the know'.

IT is easy to argue that if only there were more money, then all things would be fine. However, the ways in which music is presented and received, and the subsequent problems therein, are as much the result of performers' attitudes and approaches. I have heard the music of Barraqué, Cage, Kagel, Murail, Nono, Takemitsu, Xenakis (not to mention that of Dillon, Ferneyhough, Finnissy, and others) rendered somewhat impotent and lifeless when fed through the deadening machinery of British performing traditions.

Performers of music old and new (especially the old of the period performers) are taught, or rather cajoled, into a monochromatic approach to their instrument, reducing the sonic range to a minimum in the interests of safety. One can see this clearly when watching many student and professional pianists: fingers always very close to the keys, elbows in, wrist fixed, precluding any

true staccato or legato, let alone any sense of line or depth of sound, and forcing ceilings and floors upon dynamics. Parallel and similarly restricted motions can be found in string and wind players, and in the types of gestures now so fashionable amongst conductors. The results are inoffensive and amenable to the homogenising force of the microphone. This is what is meant by the quaintly British notion of instrumental competence. Many teachers work hard to eliminate all aspects of human personality from their students, to rid them of any urge to hold back or push forward when they might feel that the music warrants it, to turn them into musical automatons capable only of obeying orders. Judged in purely empirical terms (the illusionary notion of just 'playing the notes'), the results are not so obviously faultable, but in subjective, sometimes irrational, musical terms very clearly so.

In other aspects of British life, many inherited traditions are beginning to be questioned and put into perspective. As far as music is concerned,

this trend is in its infancy, though there are composers and performers who can see the limitations and particularities of the musical world they inhabit. All creativity involves a critique of the pre-existent, and a readiness to stray beyond the boundaries of any tradition is surely a strength. In composition and performance, the expression of strong, powerful, often volatile emotions, an openness to the conceptual dimension of music, a willingness to investigate, learn from, and engage critically with, the multifarious range of contemporary music from continental Europe and elsewhere, a real understanding (though not slavish) of the achievements and limitations of modernist music, of which many British composers show little real comprehension, and proper appreciation of the true radicals of period performance such as Harnoncourt or Koopman, who understand the difference between re-creation and re-generation, should all be encouraged if music in Britain is to develop and progress.

Ian Pace

Guest Editorial

In recent years Ian Pace has given many acclaimed piano recitals highlighting the work of hitherto less visible yet significant European composers. He is co-editor of an important symposium on the work of Michael Finnissy (published by Ashgate in 1998), whose music he has also recorded.

LETTERS

More on Haydn

May I add two observations to Katalin Komlós's beautiful article on Haydn's canzonetta 'She never told her love' (Autumn MT)?

The dialogue in Shakespeare's *Twelfth night* builds up to Viola's reply to Duke Orsino: 'My father had a daughter...' – 'And what's her history?' – 'A blank, my lord: she never told her love...' The primary answer to the duke's question, the structural downbeat, is 'A blank, my lord'; 'she never told her love' is already part of the explanatory filling-out. Haydn's song, on the other hand, places the latter phrase at the head of the text as the primary statement: these words now bear the weight of the whole story.

The vocal entry in Haydn's setting expresses the finality of the perfect tense in which these words are couched in the most remarkable way. For three whole

slow bars in the piano, a cadential six-four builds up tension, and the voice enters at the end merely to discharge the tension and complete the perfect cadence. It is an ending, and it is only the fact that this is the first vocal phrase we have heard that persuades us that the song will go on.

But the dotted rhythm in long durations articulated by the three bars of $V^{\frac{1}{4}}$ and one of $V^{\frac{1}{2}}$, resolving finally on I, also initiates an extraordinarily dense piling-up of eight statements of this rhythmic motif at five different speeds – broadly-speaking, accelerating – and this helps (together with the text-repetition) to raise these opening words to significance. The eight statements are indicated, in order of decreasing note-values, by a, b, c, d and e in the following skeleton score (in which, for clarity, the notes belonging to the piano's right

hand – sometimes shared with the voice – are shown an octave lower on the lower stave).

Michael Graubart
London SW12

Fatal abscess

Twenty-three years ago, on 30 August 1976, Helene Nahowski-Berg died at the age of ninety-one. She was the wife of Alban Berg, and was married to him for almost twenty-five years.

As is well known, Berg was frequently ill, and it was from a spinal abscess that his fatal blood poisoning in December 1935 seems to have sprung. Always poor except for rare interludes of prosperity, especially after 1933 when Universal Edition cut his monthly stipend, the Bergs in 1935 were in dire financial straits. It was ostensibly to save doctor's fees that Frau Berg lanced her husband's final abscess herself, an act which is said to have hastened or even caused his death. In Soma Morgenstern's book *Alban Berg und seine Idole Erinnerungen und Briefe*, there is a long account of the events leading up to the composer's final hospitalisation, and the implication of incorrect handling of Berg's life-threatening situation by his wife. Like any wife, Frau Berg would have felt that had she

The image shows a musical score for the canzonetta 'She never told her love' by Haydn. It consists of two staves: Voice and Piano. The piano part is in the lower register, with notes labeled 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', and 'e' indicating different durations of a dotted rhythm motif. The voice part enters at the end of the piano's first phrase. The score is divided into bars 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18. The piano part is marked '8va' and 'Piano'.