
First Performances

London Coliseum: 'Nixon in China'

It is now 13 years since the world première of John Adams's first opera *Nixon in China* took place in Houston. Although it is too soon to see whether it has secured its deserved place in the repertoire, there are hopeful signs: the original recording is still available, there have been a good number of productions since, the orchestral showpiece *The Chairman Dances* (discarded from the opera but representative of it) is often broadcast – and the ENO has just given the London stage première, which opened at the Coliseum on 7 May.

Though a belated production, this is good news nevertheless, partly because of the similarities with the first triumphant staging (Peter Sellars as director, James Maddalena in the title role), partly because the production has few faults; largely because the score sounds as strong as ever.

It is perhaps time, though, to reflect on the opera's weaknesses as well as its strengths and to consider how these are related to Adams's (post-) minimalist language. Like the other minimalist opera triumph of the 1980s, Philip Glass's *Akhmaten* – also given a brilliant UK debut by the ENO – the repetitive approach suits the drama well. Where do we find repetition in our lives? In the phrase-making of politicians (Nixon sings 'We came in peace for all mankind' as he lands to be greeted by Chou En-lai), in obsessive behaviour ('News. News. News. News' is the President's first aria), on formal occasions – such as the banquet scene that concludes Act 1 with all its toasts – and in the stammering uncertainty of individuals as they question their roles, particularly in the slightly over-restrained Act 3.

Adams's distinctive strengths as a writer for orchestra – motoring, brassy figures and sweetly reflective string and woodwind harmonies – are also well suited to an opera that moves between the poles of opulent show (the state banquet, Madame Mao and her acolytes' hymn to her husband's red book) and the near-sentimental reminiscing that characterizes the mood of Act 3 almost entirely.

What is unusual about *Nixon* is its lack of strong dramatic interaction between characters

(strong in the sense that one action modifies another's behaviour). The President and his wife are given to soliloquy and the whole point of the meeting with the Chinese is to emphasize the lack of mutual understanding. Similarly Alice Goodman's couplet-based libretto, praised for its poetry and intelligence, is often concerned with the intangible or the imagined: revolutionary philosophy, musings on history and self-development. One is led to wonder whether there is something in the nature of operatic minimalism – looking at the similarities between *Nixon*, *Akhmaten* and *Satyagraha* – that emphasizes what is static and resistant to change (the opera ends not in triumph or tragedy but irresolution) as if the conflict between ideologies – the theme all three operas share – were minimalism's preferred dramatic issue.

Adams's triumph, on this analysis, consists really in taking a plot chock-full of talk and public gesture, and through musical characterization – the brilliant words are too often inaudible – making a satisfying and engaging piece.

As at the première, James Maddalena as the eponymous hero almost carries the whole effort single-handed. Janis Kelly (Mrs Nixon), Judith Howath (Madame Mao), David Kempster (Chao En-lai) are also excellent, but the odd sluggishness in Paul Daniel's conducting – so that, for example, the opening chorus sounds doom-laden rather than expectant – all adds to the feeling that colour and characterization are the mainstays of any successful *Nixon* production. And the ENO's is definitely one of those.

Robert Stein

San Francisco to Orkney: Some Recent Maxwell Davies Orchestral Works

The prolific recent output of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies has continued to confirm him as one of our most fertile contemporary composers for the orchestra, such works mostly being commissioned by one or other of the many orchestras with which he is associated. The following brief reviews are merely a selection from the purely orchestral pieces to emerge from Sir Peter's tireless pen over the last two years.

A Reel of Seven Fishermen was commissioned

by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, who gave the first performance on 7 May 1998. It is a deeply personal meditation on the awesome power of the sea to snuff out life as portrayed in George Mackay Brown's poem from which the work derives its title and its prime inspiration. The Prologue, entitled 'The Call of the Sea', begins with shimmering waves of brass and is followed by a solo clarinet, a great sea bird swooping up and calling over the wide space between the accompanying double basses. The rest of the Prologue is a series of quick metamorphic transformations of the 'Crux fidelis' plainsong, mirroring the eternally shifting surface of the sea. The central movement, the most substantial of the three, is subtitled 'Reel – the Door of Water'. The composer has described it as a Dance of Death and it is shot through with eerily disjointed Orcadian dance rhythms. Whereas the folktune-flavoured passages in *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* (1985) are disorientated by alcohol, here they seem disrupted by something far more dangerously elemental: the power of the sea to devastate whole communities. The effect is all the more powerful as 'Reel – the Door of Water' also represents the composer's struggle to come to terms with his own narrow escape from a watery grave while collecting driftwood. The Epilogue reflects upon the preceding movements in relative calm and the work is finally sublimated into an artless folk-like melody for clarinet, echoing the Prologue's sea-bird calls. It is the kind of tune the composer hopes might bring some comfort to those bereaved by the sea's destructive power and it makes a poignant conclusion to a profoundly intimate work.

Swinton Jig, part of the composer's series of works based on his Salford childhood, was premièred by the BBC Philharmonic at the Central Hall, University of York on 27 November 1998. It is a set of variations on an old fiddle tune written by coalminer William Tildsley in 1860; a quirky, asymmetrical theme consisting of three-bar phrases followed by an awkward cadence grafted onto the end of it. The unusual instruments which appear in the score (banjo, concertina and bones) are all associated by Sir Peter with the ad-hoc concerts which neighbours improvised to get through the long nights in the communal air-raid shelter. The work begins with the theme itself, first heard on the fiddle (first violin) and then elaborated upon as it spreads through the whole orchestra. After a vigorous tutti, the banjo and bones provide an eccentric but touching variation, as does the cornet, accompanied by an out-of-tune piano.

The concertina adds a unique nostalgic glow and there is an extended solo for cor anglais. The composer says this represents an Irish lady with an extraordinarily deep bass voice who used to sing for pennies in the street in a distressingly melancholy way. The solo here provides a moment of reflective repose before the irrepressible Tildsley theme takes over the whole orchestra again. The work ends with slackening taps from the bones and what sounds like a final drifting off to sleep of a tired young child. The most personal and affecting of the 'Salford' series of works, *Swinton Jig* may be regarded as a positive image of *St Thomas' Wake* (1969). Both pieces evoke the composer's reminiscences of sheltering from bombing raids during the Second World War and the playing of popular tunes as a means of cheering up the gathered neighbours. However, whereas the earlier work is predominantly serious in tone with something profoundly ironic to say about optimism fuelled by dance band music in the face of Death, *Swinton Jig* is a piece of unashamedly straightforward light music mined from the darkest memories.

Spinning Jenny is another in the 'Salford' series. It was commissioned by the BBC for last year's Proms and received its first performance at the Royal Albert Hall on 21 July 1999. It casts a steely, unsentimental eye on the contraption which revolutionized the Lancashire cotton industry and bludgeoned the senses of generations of women. The composer used to pass open shed doors on his way to school in Leigh and observe rows of women operating these barbarous machines amidst a deafening roar. Battering timpani, dark growls from the brass section and clattering xylophone figures recreate the monstrous devices at the dark heart of the score. The outside world of brass bands, popular music and Evangelical Protestantism occasionally tries to break through the relentless, pumping textures. *Spinning Jenny* is the most serious of all the five Salford-inspired orchestral works, refusing to view the past with rose-tinted spectacles and preferring a painterly accuracy, warts and all, with a stark, Lowry-like grit.

In contrast to these Lancastrian memories, *Roma, Amor, Labyrinthus*, premièred at the Barbican with the BBC Philharmonic on 2 May 2000, is a colossal 30-minute work for large orchestral forces which captures the composer's personal recollection of Rome during his studies there in 1957 and 1958 with Goffredo Petrassi, to whom the work is dedicated. The first movement, 'Flamma fumo proxima', contrasts the beauty of the Holy City with its history

of militarism and violence. At one point, columns of legionnaires stampede ferociously over the aural landscape with timpani thwacks alluding to Mussolini's jackbooted followers as much as their Roman counterparts. The central movement, 'Ploutos Afhans', evokes the buried riches of Rome. A harp suggests an itinerant mandolin player whilst episodes include a passing brass band and a medley of cheap songs. The movement closes with a simple folk-like tune of disarming innocence. The third and last movement, 'Manet in Aevum' begins with a jarring evocation of 20th-century Rome, including a representation of a traffic jam. (Some readers may recall that Malcolm Lipkin's *Sinfonia da Roma* of 1965, also inspired by reminiscences of Rome in the late 1950s, includes a similarly vivid description of Latin gridlock.)* The movement ascends from earthly pleasures (a fiesta-style celebration) via the statues and churches to the real Saint Michael and the Angels. The work ends with a Messaien-like ritual of considerable power as all the church bells ring out over the ancient city. Conceived on a massive scale, *Roma's* spectacular score has many effective touches, not least of which is the cantus firmus-like omnipresence of shimmering strings which sound like the Eternity of Rome itself.

Finally, Maxwell Davies's epic 45-minute Seventh Symphony was premiered at the Orkney Festival on 19 June 2000. He has declared this work to be the last of his symphonic cycle. The most classical of his symphonies, it is an expression of his admiration for Joseph Haydn; the Austrian Master's capacity to surprise and wrong-foot his audience has been taken up by Max with evident glee. The first movement has a proliferation of ideas which grow organically out of one another with a Sibelian logic, although the first and second 'subjects' are clearly delineated. A passage characterized by high-tuned percussion especially catches the ear. The second movement is a mad-cap tribute to Haydn, taking the form of a crazed Minuet and Trio whose centre of gravity is slightly askew. Here, the composer reinterprets the dance form with a mordant wit. The third movement is the most serene and brooding of his symphonic Adagios, the opening string writing intended as a tribute to Haydn in its simple two- and three-part textures. The melody itself, however, sounds more like Mahler or Shostakovich at their most hauntingly intense.

* See Christopher Headington, 'Malcolm Lipkin and his Recent Music', *Tempo* 169 (June 1989), p.29 – Ed.

The climax of the movement evokes Haydn's 'Sturm und Drang' period, but refracted through late 20th-century sensibilities and a considerably wider orchestral palette. The finale begins by pulling all the motivic threads together in a massive development section, but the symphonic structure gradually begins to fracture as the movement nears its conclusion. The last notes have been fashioned so that not only can they lead into the start of this symphony, but also into the opening of Symphony No.1 – thus Sir Peter's series has been rendered a true 'symphonic cycle'. Cogently constructed and imaginatively scored, Symphony No.7 is the most gripping and closely argued of the whole series.

With the Seventh Symphony completed and the *Antarctic Symphony* scheduled for performance early next year, Maxwell Davies is, temporarily at least, turning from orchestral music towards chamber forces. His series of ten 'Naxos' string quartets will make an interesting addition to his oeuvre but he will surely soon return to large-scale orchestral works, the medium in which he has produced so many of his most personal and intimate works in recent years.

Paul Conway

Royal Albert Hall Proms: A Symphonic Century

It was with some reluctance and personal surprise that Robin Holloway recently threw down the inevitable gauntlet to constructivists by submitting a Symphony, premiered on 29 July, in fulfilment of his flexible 2000-Season Proms commission. Such an attempt to contribute to the most hallowed, revered genre of the art-music canon exposes the composer to the ruthless post-Beethovenian scrutiny so crippling to the likes of Brahms. The 'Death of the Symphony' may be a modernist assumption, but Holloway challenges every listener by reasoning that he does not believe anything to be dead that can be shown to have life.

It is from the voluminous life of the 20th century, its vividly colourful époques concentrated into a single kaleidoscopic hour, that Holloway draws the vitality for his own Symphony. The character of each era (also designated with a precise colour) is condensed into a separate movement, punctuated by the World Wars. Life is certainly not lacking, especially in the vibrant second movement, whose simmering, vigorous Scherzos are distilled with teasing bursts of candied bigband Trio, before they eventually boil over into an infernal abyss (the metaphorical onset of World War II). But in order to give

Holloway's Symphony more room to breathe, it is worth considering just what a resuscitated symphony fit for the turn of the millennium might require.

In tackling his brief to 'chart the course of the 20th century', Holloway was anxious not to succumb to a "'post-modernist" collage of quotations, pastiches', or to a temporally immediate, narrative succession of events. Even so, a depiction of the 20th century in sound has to refer, to signify – hence the quotations from the eclectically cosmopolitan pre-First-World-War years (Stravinsky meets Elgar, Debussy tangles with Strauss and Mahler, and so on). At first, one wonders why the advancing chronology of the Symphony was not then echoed by reference to music of later époques, but that would immediately sail dangerously close to the feared pastiche, and risk further insult to pleas for organic symphonism. Content gives way instead to texture and Zeitgeist as a means of historical association. Besides, whereas the rich, late-Romantic music of the early 1900s slides chameleon-like into Holloway's own sound-world, an attempted allusion to the Boulez generation would stick out like a sore thumb. Seasoned Wagnerian Donald Runnicles was superbly chosen to animate Holloway's *fin-de-dix-neuvième-siècle* inspirations from source, which were brought to shimmering life by the acutely responsive BBC Symphony Orchestra.

It was also poignant to hear the continued legacy of chosen pivotal pre-First-World-War works, lending their hue to later generations of sound. Whether or not the development of quoted cells then deems the adjective 'symphonic' is, I fear, too involved a question for a first hearing, when the listener is, as David Fanning puts it, 'distracted by the thought that one might be missing other ingenuities or simply failing to take them all in one's stride.' Holloway himself explains the continued use of original motives throughout the Symphony by equating the self-perpetuating chain of 20th-century warfare with music's ability to carry recognizable absolutes in a vast array of varied, evolving tropes. His 'rewriting' of earlier music is not without cause, whilst the sound-world of the Symphony is acutely idiomatic, not least in the sinister tangle of the climaxing second movement, and in the purposefully barren wasteland of the third. The question of how this then differs so fundamentally from Holloway's previous, successfully innovative Concertos for Orchestra is, however, a delicate one.

When it comes to symphonic form, the tripartite division designated by the World Wars

provides a convenient tally of three movements, even allowing for a middle Scherzo, whilst the Andante/Adagio/lyric third movement, derived from the frozen stalemate of the Cold War, excuses Holloway from the 'finale problem'. Perhaps more problematic to the unfamiliar ear were the lyric episodes that provided moments of contemplation exterior to the work's representative chronology. These episodes deserve a second hearing, since their elegiac tenderness and rare unisons formed some of the most intriguing music of the Symphony. Where their weighty contrast to the greater *machine infernale* might provoke a charge of discontinuity, Holloway's inspiration for such juxtaposition of contained lyricism and dramatic colossus should be recognized in Mahler, a composer largely misunderstood by the turn of his own century, and appreciated anew by more recent decades. Perhaps it is fitting that Holloway's Symphony should draw closely on Mahler's brand of symphonism. Our film-score-adjusted ears are in a better position to assess Mahlerian fracture and juxtaposition, which suggests a weightier cultural relevance for Holloway's idiomatic interpretation of symphony.

Annalise Plummer

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden: Prokofiev's 'Semyon Kotko' and 'War and Peace'

At least three-fifths of Prokofiev's opera *Semyon Kotko* is a masterpiece: judged by every applicable criterion – the quality of the music itself, dramatic effectiveness, melodic inventiveness, psychological subtlety, orchestral resourcefulness, you name it – the first three acts are as good as anything else he composed, perhaps even better. The last two acts initially appear to owe their presence to the necessity of pleasing the *apparatchiki* – but closer attention reveals that, here too, something is busy under the surface.

Semyon Kotko, composed in 1938–39, has long had a reputation as one of the uglier ducklings in Prokofiev's operatic brood: paucity of performances has allowed the work to accrue an apologetic penumbra as a sort of moral sop, a sell-out to undoubted political pressure. From the outside, indeed, one might just be able to push the argument through: local lad comes back to his village now that the victorious Red Army is driving away the German foe; the estate of the district land-owner is divided up among the deserving peasants; a turn-coat betrays the village Bolsheviks to the Germans, who hang them before setting the village ablaze; local lad

renounces the opportunity of rescuing his sweetheart in favour of the discipline of life with the Communist partisans; an order comes to attack the village and, with the arrival of the Red Army, all hymn the struggle for freedom.

Classic Soviet socialist-realist pap, you might think – until you know the music, heard at last in Britain during the June–July visit of the Kirov Opera to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and released almost simultaneously on a two-disc set (Philips 464 605-2) recorded during a Kirov run last year in Vienna; the conductor for both presentations was, of course, Valery Gergiev. The prevailing characteristic of *Semyon Kotko* – apart from the cornucopian richness of the score – is its emotional ambiguity and the rapidity with which it can shoot from one extreme to another. The opera begins as if it is going to be a typical village comedy: chattering women, grumpy old men, their narrow view of the world sent up with gentle humour – no glorification of the people, this. Act II then satirizes, rather more darkly, the tensions of local politics. And Act III, which begins with a huge-hearted evocation of the summer nights that Prokofiev had known in his childhood on the Ukrainian steppe, rapidly ratchets up the tension. Within minutes the mood is one of blackest tragedy, as a motif sung by one of the female characters – driven mad by the hanging of her fiancé – is repeated with savage insistence, climbing up through the keys. The ostensible object of such outrage is the invading German army and their reactionary local helpers – but for those with ears attuned to hear the different layers of meaning in such music it seems clear Prokofiev's true target was the politicized violence that was a permanently invasive element in the life of every Soviet citizen.

Yet a vein of irony runs through the music, even in the bitterest moments of Act III, undermining the sentiments engendered in the foreground. Acts IV and V might initially appear a kind of addendum to the main action, a postlude like the Third Act of Pfitzner's *Palestrina*. Closer inspection, and the familiarity that the new recording allows, suggest that – just when Prokofiev and Valentin Katayev, his librettist, appear to be settling into the political correctness required of such an opera – Prokofiev was further bending the work to his satirical purpose: indeed, that irony is the principal unifying element of the entire opera. In Act IV's opening bars, for example, a cuckoo-call pushes incongruously through the orchestral texture; it is explained later as a partisan signal, but the satirical damage has been done and the serious

mien of the music undermined.

Throughout these two acts, there are similar secret signals to those among Prokofiev's listeners who would have understood his true intentions, as when Semyon and a helper set off to the rescue of the village to music – half Kije's troika, half the jolly gallop following the 'Battle on the Ice' in *Alexander Nevsky* – that hardly dignifies their purpose. It is a further irony that it was the politics of Prokofiev's libretto that stymied any chances of production when the opera was complete: real-life politics, in the form of the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, made the anti-German thread of *Semyon Kotko* unacceptable.

The title of Andrew Huth's essay with the Philips set, partially reproduced in the Kirov programme – 'Prokofiev's Soviet Opera' – makes his sympathies clear; he goes on to claim that 'there is no point in looking for double meaning or hidden coded messages, as we do with Shostakovich. Each note or phrase of Prokofiev's music means just what it says, and this is as true of *Semyon Kotko* as it is of all his music'. Huth can't see the trees for the wood. *Semyon Kotko* was originally intended for production by Vsevolod Meyerhold, scourge of socialist realism, who was arrested (on 29 June 1939) only a week before Prokofiev finished the piano score. It is protest music as consistent as are, for example, his 'War Sonatas', Nos. 6, 7 and 8. Yuri Alexandrov's production for the Kirov made the anti-Soviet satire a bit too obvious – after all, had Prokofiev overplayed his hand to the same extent, he would certainly have been shipped off to the Gulag, if he had been spared summary execution.

The satirical intent of *Semyon Kotko* becomes the clearer when set alongside *War and Peace*, likewise a part of the Kirov Covent Garden season; Gergiev's recording was released by Philips as long ago as 1993 (434 097-2), and now Chandos joins the party with a live recording from last year's Spoleto Festival in a performance conducted by Richard Hickox (CHAN 9855(4)). Hickox's four-disc set has clear advantages over Gergiev's three-disc box, and equal disadvantages. With such a huge cast (over 60 singing roles) the vocal honours are more or less even, the Kirov soloists marginally in front, and certainly more idiomatic than Hickox's mixed Russian and non-Russian cast; the playing of the Kirov Orchestra is more polished, too, than the results Hickox obtains from his Italian pick-up band. In keeping with Hickox's faster tempi, the recorded sound of the Chandos set is far brighter than the Philips; the downside of clarity is that all the pattering galumphing of the stage

action in Spoleto is plainly audible. Both conductors use the full, 13-scene version of the score.

For those who insist on having a Soviet opera from Prokofiev, here it is: my feeling is that *War and Peace* is instead a Russian opera, an expression of the same love of country that brought the politically maladroit composer back from exile, overestimating his status in the eyes of the regime – ‘like a chicken to the soup’, in Shostakovich’s memorable expression. Tolstoy’s novel offered Prokofiev two bites at the cherry: a kind of epic comedy of manners in the first half, a genuine epic in the second. But here, too, the *apparatchiki* were busy, insisting on rousing choruses that emphasize the folk-heroic element and thus accentuate the gear-shift from individual to national, and raising the profile of Kutuzov so as to drive home the parallel with Stalin – saviour of the Soviet Union, of course. There’s dramatic irony in *War and Peace*, but no suggestion that the composer is threading subtexts through his music: Prokofiev’s patriotism, his relief at Hitler’s defeat, may well have sought sincere expression in this score. It can be argued that Prokofiev saw the action of the novel as a mirror for Soviet society – after all, the fate of the individual characters in *War and Peace* is to be dragged into the maw of political machination (since war is simply politics at its most naked). I don’t think the music justifies such an interpretation; by contrast, *Semyon Kotko* cries out for interpretation as Aesopian double-speak that allowed dissidence to evade the censors. To date, and particularly since the publication of *Testimony* in 1979, it is Shostakovich who has been awarded the laurels as the composer who quietly but systematically rebelled against Stalinism in his music; Prokofiev is generally regarded as having made his accommodation with the state. Yet his mocking protest in *Semyon Kotko* is plain for those with ears to hear.

Martin Anderson

London University: ‘Thwarted Voices: the composition class of Franz Schreker, Berlin 1920-1933’

With the works of Franz Schreker currently enjoying something of a popular and critical renaissance, the two-day *Thwarted Voices* conference, presented on 2-3 July under the auspices of the Jewish Music Festival, was both timely and welcome. The brainchild of Decca’s ‘Entartete Musik’ producer Michael Haas, this was, as far as I am aware, the first such conference in the UK. The interest it generated was obvious

in the number of delegates it attracted and the distinguished experts who came and gave papers: complimentary lectures on Schreker were given by Christopher Hailey and Peter Franklin, while the other main contributors were Martin Schüssler (Rathaus), Thomas Gayda (Krenek, Brand, Grosz and the *Zeitoper*) and David Matthews (Goldschmidt). It was not all-inclusive: there was nothing on Alois Hába, for example, or on the two women, Zdenka Ticharich and Grete von Zieritz, but Schreker’s class was diverse and multifarious and too all-embracing an approach would almost certainly have diluted the sense of focus that was this conference’s main strength.

But what of the students as a whole? Can one define a ‘Schreker school’? Were they ‘an adventurous avant-garde who nonetheless adhered to tonality’, as ran the press release? And why, with one or two exceptions, did they fall into almost total neglect? Cultural displacement and enforced exile undoubtedly played their part, but is that the whole story? What about the equally ‘degenerate’ Mahler, or Schoenberg, Hindemith or Weill, whose music managed to put down roots and flourish? Schreker’s students were renowned for their technical prowess, a nuts-and-bolts grounding that was as every bit as rigorous as Schoenberg’s. What they lack is a common stylistic denominator, which makes them difficult to integrate into the perceived current of 20th-century music. But music speaks through individuals, not via an ‘historically inevitable’ pattern of successive trends and -isms; throughout the two days, there was ample opportunity to assess the considerable achievements of these composers, most importantly through generous performances of the works themselves, most of which were revelatory and, without exception, performed to an impeccably high standard. Particular highlights were Sibylle Ehlert’s radiant performance of Schreker’s Whitman settings, Kolja Lessing’s virtuoso reading of Rathaus’s astonishing First Piano Sonata (a work, fortunately, that he is booked to record), and the inspired playing of the Andrusier Ensemble in Goldschmidt’s *Retrospectrum*, Krenek’s *Serenade* and Schreker’s *Der Wind*.

All in all, this was an enterprising, rewarding and highly stimulating two days, with a real and tangible sense of discovery in the air. If it leads to a higher profile and increased awareness of this often fascinating group of composers than hitherto, then it will have been well worth the effort.

Lloyd Moore

London, RAM: 'Pärt in Profile'

'Pärt in Profile', a festival anchored on the music of (obviously enough) Arvo Pärt, was the fourteenth of the RAM's Spring mini-festivals focused on the work of a contemporary composer. With four days packed solid with music – lunchtime and evening concerts, and other events jammed into all available gaps – the *oeuvre* of the composer thus honoured has to sustain such close attention; and the listener should emerge from the experience with a firmer understanding of the processes that drive the music. I confess I wondered whether Pärt's music would last the course: it has, after all, a deliberately restricted frame of reference and a very precise spiritual focus – would we be spending the week examining a single diamond from countless angles? I was wrong: I for one spent most of those four days much moved, my respect for Pärt deepened by the experience – though it was also stretched by one or two of his more hair-shirted scores.

The most austere of them all is *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old* (1976, rev. 1990) for soprano, two tenors, organ and percussion, almost half-an-hour of the sparest, baldest gestures, a static ritual as little concerned with retaining the sympathy of outside listeners as are the private ceremonials of Galina Ustvolskaya (the primary focus of last year's RAM festival, as it happens). But *Sarah* seems to have been the rite of passage that Pärt needed: he had turned his back on his early modernist period, and shearing his style back to the bone in this arid exercise in self-denial helped uncover the way to the 'tintinnabular' approach that he has since made very much his own. Though the festival took a keek at old-style Pärt, in the dense Second Symphony of 1964, it was the stream of lucid, crystalline minimalist post-*Sarah* works – chamber, instrumental and choral – that exercised the RAM students, in performances generally of a very high standard.

And after each piece Pärt would come forward to extend a beatifying hand to the players, his beaming approval like a kiss from God. It was Pärt's humility, unarguably sincere, that became the unifying element of the entire festival; observing the effacement it generated was quietly exhilarating. I've heard of only two men – George Enescu and Ilya Musin – who left an aura of love behind them, and this was the first time I've seen it done: when Pärt left the RAM, he was loved.

The high point of the week, for me, came in Westminster Cathedral, with the spacious, concentrated performance of *Passio*, Pärt's ritualized retelling of the *St John Passion*; six excellent

student soloists and a superb chorus were conducted by James O'Donnell. When *Passio* was performed at the Almeida Festival in 1988, it was my first encounter with a Pärt score of any length: like almost everyone else, I then knew only the *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten*, which hardly prepared me for the 80 minutes of harmonic stasis to follow; I spent them mistakenly waiting for something to happen. This time I was forewarned – and the work had a different kind of surprise in store: although two-thirds of the way through *Passio* your attention beings to wander, the bench reveals its hard-edged contempt for your bum, and you become aware that your body has not moved for an hour, such mere physical distractions are forgotten as *Passio* moves into its final stretch and delivers its terrific emotional punch – the gestures as understated here as before, but the very abnegation endowing Pärt's micro-movements with a power scarcely less moving than that of op.131 or *Parsifal*.

Among the associate pleasures of these festivals are the presence of satellite composers, falling on this occasion into two groups: other Estonians and, as usual, RAM students. Among the Balts we heard two tone poems – *Dawn* (1918) and *Twilight* (1917) – by Pärt's teacher, the outstanding Heino Eller (1887–1970); *Dawn* in particular is ravishingly beautiful and deserves a firm place in the mainstream repertoire. Lepo Sumera's (piano) *Piece from the Year 1981* was soon to form the basis of his First Symphony; we could not have guessed that Sumera would be slain by a heart-attack at the beginning of June this year, at only 50 years of age. Two pieces of music by Veljo Tormis (b.1930)¹ hinted at the excitements to be discovered in his vast but still next-to-unknown choral output. And the symphonic minimalism of *Insula deserta* (1989) by Erkki-Sven Tüür (b.1959) left no doubt that the future of Estonian music is in inventive hands.

To the extent that there was a common element linking the student compositions on the programmes it was humour, often expressing itself in truculently dislocated rhythms. The skinhead jollity of Damian Rees's *Hoquets and Toccatas* for saxophone and piano would have brought an understanding grin to Conlon Nancarrow's face; and the absurdist pomposities of Jeremy Woodruff's dramatically alert *Delusions of Grandeur*, scored for the deliberately ridiculous combination of two piccolos, two tubas and accordion, suggest that he may one day deliver himself of a subversively comic

¹ My interview with Tormis can be found in *Tempo* No.211 (January 2000), pp.24–27.

opera. And one 'student' work revealed a fully mature mind at work: Des Oliver's *Canon* for strings, composed especially for the festival. It is a slow, stark, dignified ceremonial, its sober intensity only occasionally ruffled by movement. I found it utterly compelling. Oliver is plainly a man to watch.

Martin Anderson

Barbican: Maazel as Composer

A couple of years ago Lorin Maazel surprised the musical world by revealing that he, too, was one of the once-common breed of conductor-composers, like Weingartner, Fried and Furtwängler of yore and Klemperer and Kubelik more recently (composer-conductors like Mahler and Zemlinsky, are a different matter). A CD released by RCA in 1998 (09026 68789 2) introduced his *Music for Violoncello and Orchestra*, op.10, *Music for Flute and Orchestra*, op.11, and *Music for Violin and Orchestra*, op.12, all works written in the mid-1990s and proving that, whatever imagination he might deploy in his music, he didn't waste any on its titles.

Maazel is a master-technician among conductors; one would expect his handling of the orchestra on paper to reflect this assurance, and so it proves. But for all his absolute technical

control on the podium. I have yet to hear an interpretation of his which has even a hint of a parallel emotional insight – and so, too, with his music. Two Barbican concerts with the LSO, on 16 and 17 February, stood Maazel the composer and conductor side by side and confirmed that they were indeed the same man.

The first featured Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist in the UK première of *Music for Violoncello and Orchestra*, a 35-minute continuous structure in eight sections, freely tonal, alternating islands of lyricism and passages of grinding dissonance. Maazel uses orchestral colour relatively conventionally; harmonically, too, his score is anodyne – most of it could serve as factory-made film music, barely interfering with some foreground action. Among the many passing influences discernible in the (largely American) 20th-century *koine* that passes as Maazel's style, one particularly potent impress on the cushion, particularly in the faster music, is that of Bartók. So it was singularly ill-formed programme-planning that closed this concert with the suite from *The Miraculous Mandarin*, driving home the sheer anonymity of Maazel's own work. His programme note suggested that this *Music* 'might very well have been subtitled "Dreamscapes"' – fair comment, since it was about as consequential, and non-sequential, as your average night's idle dreaming.

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**MUSICIANS
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KAPRÁLOVÁ: *Military Sinfonietta*, op.11¹; String Quartet, op.8²; *April Preludes*, op.13³; *Ritornell*, op.25⁴; Partita, op.20¹⁶; *Waving Farewell*, op.14¹⁷. MARTINŮ & KAPRÁLOVÁ: *Love Carol* (1938)⁸⁵. ¹Czech SO of Brno c. František Jílek, ²Janáček Quartet, ³Jaroslav Smýkal (pno), ⁴Ivan Měrka (vlc), ⁵Jitka Drobílková (pno), ⁶Jiří Skovajsa (pno), ⁷Vilém Příbyl (ten), ⁸Lenka Škorníčková (sop). Matous MK 0049-2 011.

This is essentially a compilation from performances recorded between 1974 and 1998, to varying degrees of excellence and in different acoustics. Nevertheless it furnishes ample evidence that Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940) was at least as good a composer as claimed in the article by Karla Hartl and Eugene Gates that appeared in July's *Tempo*: indeed, a remarkably gifted artist, all of whose music sounds fresh, bold and sure of its aim.

It's probably important not to see her in isolation, but as perhaps the youngest of that talented post-Janáčekian generation of Czech musicians whose memory was virtually obliterated during World War II and whose achievements are only now infiltrating our awareness. Unlike Hans Krása or Pavel Haas, Kaprálová did not perish in the concentration camps but succumbed apparently to tuberculosis in Montpellier (just after marrying Alphonse Mucha's son). But she belongs partly in their creative company, and her music is no less valuable than theirs. This is already clear in the earliest work here, the String Quartet (1936-7), a passionate and confidently handled score of distinct individuality that blends something of the spirit of Janáček's *Intimate Letters* with a free chromaticism reminiscent of Berg's op.3. This slightly

'Expressionistic' strain is continued in *Waving Farewell* (1937), a deeply-felt (and prophetic) elegy for tenor and orchestra.

Exactly contemporary with these works, the three-movements-in-one *Military Sinfonietta*, Kaprálová's great 'hit' of the 1939 ISCM Festival in London, is more forthright and modal in its material. In a time of international crisis, it's a clear declaration of national identity ('Militant', perhaps, rather than 'Military'), looking back to Janáček's *Sinfonietta* – and forward, one may think, to Panufnik's *Sinfonia Sacra*. But its concision and economy compel admiration; it makes an effective concert opener, rousing to thought as well as action. The *April Preludes* for piano display a more delicate, lyrical and indeed humorous side to Kaprálová's muse, normally so tough in fibre.

The Partita for piano and string orchestra (1938-9), chief fruit of her Paris studies with Martinů, is perhaps the least personal utterance here: parallels with her mentor's works of the late 1930s abound, not least a 'neo-classical' impulse not otherwise much detectable in Kaprálová's output. Yet, once again, the medium is consummately handled – this isn't a student work (nothing on the CD could be so described) but a minor classic worthy any crack chamber orchestra's attention. *Love Carol*, two brief settings of the same text by Martinů and Kaprálová, is a touching memorial of their clandestine affair. But the *Ritornell* for cello and piano, her last work, is a powerful, concentrated expression of tragic eloquence – moving testimony to a substantial creative personality who had already hit her stride before her career was so cruelly cut short.

Calum MacDonald

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The following evening saw a world première: *The Empty Pot*, an 18-minute Chinese-fable cantata for treble, narrator, children's chorus and orchestra begun last year and finished shortly before this performance. Here Maazel continued his policy of self-destructive programming: the concert opened with Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*, once more underlining his debts of honour. The Chinese character is of the instant-noodle variety, Maazel cheerfully confessing that the took his lead from Mahler (*Das Lied von der Erde*), Ravel (*Mother Goose*) and Puccini (*Turandot*) –

in short, pentatony and glittering percussion. The "exotic" timbres' (his phrase) find room for a Bartókian march and a Bernstein-inspired jazzy interlude, but Maazel's po-faced whimsy fails to engage any basic human instinct – the fey humour of the text hasn't infected the music, so that the entire piece eventually comes across as shallow and insincere, like a joke told by someone who isn't listening to his own words. Empty pot indeed.

Martin Anderson
