A comment on the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival

Part Two

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23 March 2006

*This is the conclusion of a two-part article. The*first part *was posted March 22.*

BIT20 Ensemble, including singer Berit Opheim, were part of a Norwegian feature at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Before their performance, composer Rolf Wallin explained that the first work, *Ning*, was inspired by the fantasy novel *See Under: LOVE* by Israeli novelist, David Grossman. The latter is based on a story about Bruno Schulz, who was forced to become the "house-Jew" of an SS officer in the Drohobycz ghetto and was used by him to draw murals in his house. This officer quarreled with a fellow officer over cards. By chance, the second officer met Schulz on the street and shot him to upset his owner. Afterwards the murderer announced to Schulz's owner: "I killed your Jew." "Fine," the other officer answered, "Soon I'll kill your Jew."

Grossman said that whether the story was true or a legend, he had written *See Under: LOVE* to avenge the murder of Bruno Schulz. "I took action against his death, and also—of course—against the insulting description of his murder, this so-Nazi description: as if human beings are interchangeable one for another. As if they really are gears, part of an apparatus with replaceable parts ...

"And in *See Under: LOVE* I rescued Bruno Schulz from under the noses of the literary critics and the historians, and brought him to the beach in Danzig, where he jumped into the water, and joined a school of salmon." In the novel, Schulz travels across the ocean eating and sleeping with the fish and comes to understand the forces that make this large group of creatures swim almost as one.

Wallin's composition was written as a quartet featuring the oboe. The sensuous notes of the oboe expressed a kind of life force, with the strings providing a structure below. As the music progressed, with its sudden surges, one could imagine the man being curious, questioning, tentative, different from his companions yet striving to be part of the group. After a while, I forgot about the analogy and just enjoyed the music, which was expressive in its own right.

There followed a much larger piece by Lasse Thoresen, entitled *Lop, Lokk og Linjer* (Chases, Cattle Calls and Charts). It was based on Norwegian folk tunes, which the composer had collected over a number of years.

The theme of the piece, which was written in five parts, is the relationship between man and nature. It began slowly with "the vague distant sounds of nature," of the sun rising and the world opening up with insistent notes on the harp and double bass. Suddenly, we noticed the female singer who was sitting amongst the orchestra. Her voice floated above the instruments, like a ghost moving through the forest, and she left us longing for more.

Later, as she stepped forward, we caught the sounds of the nightingale's song, which was followed by the cattle call of the woman boldly demanding that the animals obey her. Her voice, strident and insistent, was at first overwhelmed by the orchestra, but then she soared above it. Her strangely tuned notes, full of what the composer calls "weird intervals," sounded ancient; it seemed to be calling from mountain to mountain, first in song then in speech, and finally in a kind of speech-song. Was she speaking to the geese?

This was followed by a beautiful lament, and the work concluded with a wild dance, with the singer joining in with a kind of "mouth music."

As an encore, Berit Opheim performed a long unaccompanied narrative song. Despite the fact that most of the audience could not understand the words, it was a real *tour de force* both vocally and dramatically.

One of the striking features of the festival is the way in which composers and performers mixed with the audience in a completely unpretentious manner. The "Festival Hub" was a huge marquee in the centre of the town, which provided beer, hot pies and sandwiches at any time of the day or night. The Hub was also the venue for free music performances every morning and pre-concert talks and discussions. It gave young and inexperienced musicians and composers an opportunity to take part in the festival. Some of the concerts were of a high standard and were most enjoyable.

One of these Hub events was a performance by the University of Huddersfield New Music Ensemble, led by Barry Webb, professor of music at the university, who conducted and played solo trombone. They played *Autoplanes and Battleship Row*, an HCMF commission to young composer Tom James, a PhD student from Sheffield University. This was his very first commission, and he was delighted with the opportunity provided by the festival.

Another piece was a witty composition called *Slide Show* by Sorin Lerescu. It began with the trombonist issuing a musical challenge to the rest of the players. At first, they responded by playing like an untrained band, which gathered confidence as it went along. The trombonist was delighted and played an exuberant solo, showing off his full range of notes including some highly unusual ones. The final passage was a beautiful evocation of the sounds of nature. It was a delightful, joyous piece.

In the main festival, the Huddersfield student ensemble performed a programme of works by Giacinto Scelsi and Toru Takemitsu. *Rain Coming*, a beautiful piece by Japanese composer Takemitsu, opens out from an original phrase on the alto flute, with low, low violins flowing delicately and tentatively and splattering high notes on the piano. After a passage of vibrating chords on the piano, the flute returns under softly rushing violins. All the notes and phrases were beautifully placed, even a single note on the piano.

Every year, the festival selects works by three or four very young composers, to be played by professional musicians at a *Young Composers' Work Shop*. For the recent festival, composers between the

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ages of 18 and 30 were invited to submit a 10-minute piece for violin and piano. The workshop was attended by a large number of music students, who had travelled to Huddersfield from schools in Birmingham and other cities.

Three pieces were chosen because of their intrinsic quality and also to demonstrate the problems of composition and performance to the audience of budding musicians. Each one presented very particular problems, and a discussion between the young composer and the two internationally renowned soloists—pianist Rolf Hind and violinist David Alberman—followed each performance. Jo Kondo was also there to give advice. All three professionals were very encouraging, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the works and providing detailed advice.

Alberman explained that, in general, composer and performer have only one means of communication, through what he called "the keyhole of notation." He said that composers have always faced the problem of their interpreters telling them that their music was impossible to play. He was worried that he and other performers might put limits on what composers can do. He said that sometimes composers want to try something new but lose heart or lose courage. "There is no such thing as difficult music, just music that takes more time to learn."

One of the works, *SEAR*, by Oxford University student Tristan Rhys Williams, was very intriguing, even though only a short passage of it was performed. The description in the festival programme of the "explosive, highly charged quality of some of the material" was certainly true. It was intense and exciting, and then, unfortunately, it suddenly stopped.

I asked Williams if he had ever heard *SEAR* performed all the way through, and he ruefully said that he had not. It must be very frustrating for young artists if the only place where they can hear their compositions is in their heads. However, hearing just a fragment made me think that we will very likely be hearing more from this young man.

In 2004, David Flynn, a young Irish composer, had his short piece *String Quartet No 2 "Slip"* played at the workshop. At the time, he explained that it was the first movement of an as-yet-unfinished second string quartet, which had references to Irish, African, Balkan, jazz and rock music.

What struck me about Flynn was his self-confidence and sure-footedness. He had something to say in his music and was damned well going to say it. The audience loved it and so did the players—the Smith Quartet. So much so that the Smiths performed the completed work in their programme at the recent festival—a great start for a young composer.

One concert featured the work of pupils from three local high schools. Led by composer-in-residence Barry Russell, the students were encouraged to respond to texts from Norwegian folk tales, using techniques developed by contemporary composers. The result was atmospheric music of varying quality, but with brief moments that were really magical.

Some of the youngsters took part in the performance. Others were sitting in pride of place at the front of the hall. It must have been a terrific thrill to hear their compositions being performed to an audience of serious music lovers.

In so many different ways, the festival gives young musicians the encouragement, the freedom and the space to create something new.

At the festival, I spoke to a young composer who wished to remain anonymous. In explaining the dilemmas facing young creative artists like herself, she said, "There is a lot of confusion amongst young composers. I suppose you could describe it as a lack of perspective. We just can't see a way forward.

"On the one hand, there is the pursuit of originality just for the sake of it. On the other, there is a kind of hierarchy. You have to relate to what has gone before and been successful, if you want to get commissions. We are trying to create works of art, not commodities, but we feel so restricted."

Almost all the performers at the festival were young, and all had an excellent technique. There was a real sense of seriousness and commitment to the music they performed.

All that is except a group from Russia—the Pokrovky Ensemble choir and Opus Posth string ensemble. According to the programme, the ensemble was established in the 1970s by Vladimir Martynov, to "recreate a sense of spiritual (and cultural) order as an appeal against what he perceives to be a chaotic and over-progressive society."

They performed *Traditional Wedding Songs*, as well as two works by Igor Stravinsky, *Peasant Songs* and *Tableau IV* from the dance cantata *Les Noces*. The programme claimed that the ensemble would provide the authentic sound of Russian folk music. But their efforts struck a false note.

Tableau IV of Stravinsky's *Les Noces* is an early work composed just before the outbreak of the First World War. It is a very austere and ritualistic dance cantata, based on the Russian peasant tradition. It is not simply a "village wedding." With its harsh melodies, loosely based on ancient folk song, Stravinsky's intention was to create characters that are completely depersonalised.

Having denounced Stalinist Socialist Realism in the programme notes as the "cod-authentic folk-inspired music of the nationalist composers which became musical orthodoxy," the Pokrovsky Ensemble staged their performance in front of a huge screen showing images (created by Sergei Starostin) of what looked like the wedding celebrations of prosperous members of a collective farm. It was the kind of footage that might have been produced by the Stalinist bureaucracy, to show how good life was in the countryside, after the forced collectivisation of the 1930s.

Like their counterparts in the West, the group identifies the Russian Revolution with Socialist Realism and Stalinism. They ignore the flowering of artistic creativity that took place in the first years after the revolution.

As for the quality of the group's performance, Chris Fox, a composer who was featured at the festival in celebration of his 50th birthday, described it in a conversation as "folkloristic-nostalgic in not a very good way. Voyeuristically we were being sold a vision of a supposedly idyllic past. Peasant life under Tsarism was nothing like that. They were patronising the audience and trying to appeal to what they see as a market for people who want to go from the problems of life here and now to spend some time in a supposedly simple life of the past." The performance felt quite fraudulent.

There were many other concerts at the festival involving composers and performers from all over the world—eastern and western Europe, Canada and the USA, Japan and Australia. The programmes included works by Iannis Xenakis, Gyorgy Ligeti, Charles Ives, Simon Holt, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono and many, many others.

Ever since its inception, the HCMF has been a centre for experimentation, brimming with wonderful, unexpected musical offerings. Unfortunately, I was unable to see every performance. I am sorry that I did not see more.

Concluded

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