



Colin  
Matthews

*Shirley Horn* for clarinet and piano (2005) is a typically accomplished ballad written in tribute to the great American jazz singer-pianist. Gary Carpenter's *Marking Time* for bass clarinet and piano (2008) will be welcomed by executants of this instrument as a short but wide-ranging piece to add to their repertory. Its stark oppositions between stasis and motion and delicacy and brutality were riveting and the players, who were put through their paces, rose to its many challenges.

In the main evening concert, performing honours were shared between the Solem String Quartet and the NAS Duo (David Royo, percussion and Ausiàs Morant, clarinet). Webern's String Quartet of 1936 launched proceedings in a taut but beautifully detailed account. They continued with Gordon Crosse's String Quartet no.5, a substantial 20-minute, single-movement piece dating from 2015. It develops an idea first explored in the composer's *Symphonies for Chamber Orchestra* of 1965 – a falling sequence of thirds derived from Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music*. This is later turned into a melodic shape of a folk-like character and contrasted with a brusque rhythmic gesture. After a developed first section exploiting fully the potential of its principal ideas, there followed an intense *Adagio* and finally a vigorous *Allegro* finale before the opening material returned in a hushed

coda. Crosse composes music of substance and since the tightly knit material in his Fifth Quartet is of a high order the discourse is well worth following. It was rewarded with a responsive and poetic performance.

After the interval came another recent Fifth String Quartet, this time from Colin Matthews. Written in 2015, this piece is restrained and nebulous in character, only opening out into something more hard-edged towards the end of its 11-minute span before falling back into the hesitant questioning with which it began. The Solem Quartet had the measure of its reticent, halting nature and made listeners really concentrate on the remotely unfolding material. There followed Camden Reeves's *Fireworks Physonect Siphonophore* (String Quartet no.1) (2009). The title refers to a species of a beautiful but unusual aquatic organism related to jellyfish whose ability to move and feed as one suggested links with the string quartet as four individuals forming one entity. Consequently the performers sometimes played in solid unison and at other times in smaller units, teeming with activity. Reeves packs a lot into his five-minute score which is much more nourishing than its small dimensions might suggest.

The other featured musicians, the NAS Duo presented a more off-beat group of compositions. Ross Edwards's *Enyato IV*

(1995) is a short three-movement piece in which playful dance movements frame an inward recitative. Robert Nasveld's droll *Preparations for Coma* for bass clarinet and typewriter (1974/rev. 1993) generated much amusement using a typewriter as a percussion instrument set against extreme melodic lines on bass clarinet. The two engaging musicians concluded with a couple of pieces for bass clarinet and marimba. Philip Grange's *Three Pieces after Drawings by M. C. Escher* (1982) featured three compact and dramatic studies inspired by the optical illusions of the celebrated graphic artist. The writing for bass clarinet was as virtuosic and effective as one would expect from a former pupil of Alan Hacker. Franco Donatoni's *BOK* (1990) is in two contrasting sections of which the first is a dialogue that increases in intensity and the second spotlights the bass clarinet with marimba providing counterpoint and harmonic support. The players made light work of the extreme complexities of all their pieces and showed that music-making can be fun for performers and listeners alike.

It is great pity these exceptional concerts were so sparsely attended. Having to face acres of empty seats can have done little to encourage the talented and communicative young players. Their fresh and unhackneyed musicianship given unstintingly at the service of worthwhile and exciting repertoire was genuinely inspiring, offering real hope for the future of classical music.

Paul Conway

### Burgh House, Hampstead: Erika Fox

Born in Vienna of Hungarian/Rumanian parents in 1936, Erika Fox came to England as a refugee with her mother and grandfather three years later. Her musical education was broad, including composition lessons with Bernard Stevens at the Royal College of Music and further studies with Jeremy Dale Roberts at Morley College and briefly with Harrison Birtwistle at Dartington Summer School. She ran workshops for several years at the Junior Department of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and has taught and lectured widely on music at academic institutions in London, York and Sydney.

Traditional Eastern European music and

Jewish liturgical chant have been her most fruitful sources of inspiration. Her style is sufficiently adaptable to suit a wide range of forces from eloquent solo instrumental pieces like *Nick's Lament* (1984) for guitar and *The Moon of Moses* for cello, to powerful orchestral music such as *Cocytus* (1973) and *Osen Shomaat* (1985). She is also instinctively a woman of the stage with an innate sense of theatre: her 1990 puppet music drama *The Bet*, to a libretto by Elaine Feinstein, was staged at the Huddersfield Festival and in London.

In the Channel 4 programme 'Secret Chamber: Women in Music' broadcast in 1994, she spoke candidly on the subject of the creative artist's need for live performances: 'Without a public you don't

exist as a composer. Nothing exists on paper ... it's only in sound that anything you do can exist and can speak for you'. These words now sound darkly prophetic. It might be assumed that a composer whose *Litany for Strings* (1981) was commissioned by the Yehudi Menuhin School and premiered at the Cheltenham Festival, whose quartet *Kaleidoscope* (1983) won the 1983 Finzi Award, and whose chamber opera *The Dancer Hotoke* (1991) was nominated for an Olivier Award would have been presented with many subsequent opportunities to build on this distinguished set of achievements. Yet since that television appearance over twenty years ago she has not received her due in terms of adequate representation in concert programmes

and, disgracefully, none of her eloquent and intensely communicative music has ever been recorded. In this inglorious context the concert given by members of the Sounds Positive group which took place at Burgh House, Hampstead on 19 March 2017 to mark the composer's 80th birthday year was especially welcome.

The first item on the programme, *Tuned Spheres* (1995) for clarinets in A and E flat, bass clarinet, trumpet and piano, was commissioned by Sounds Positive for the tercentenary of the death of Henry Purcell. The piece takes the form of a set of concise and fragmentary variations on three separate melodic lines - a tone row based on Purcell's name; on the words 'tuned spheres', and based on a passage from the chorus 'Thou Tun'st ►

### Chamber Music in Oxford

Renowned pianist Momo Kodama was joined by the exceptional soloists of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra - Charlotte Scott (violin), Peter Adams (cello), and David Rix (clarinet) - for a powerfully spiritual and uplifting programme of wartime French music on June 3. The audience filled every bench in Oxford's Holywell Music Room, the oldest purpose-built concert venue in Europe, which seemed the perfect space for an intimate concert of chamber music.

To begin, Kodama, Scott and Adams took the stage for Ravel's Piano Trio. This was an accomplished and synchronised performance of light, flowing lines, characterful dance, and vibrant virtuosity. Scott and Rix excelled in their sonorous octave playing in the first movement, whilst the corporeal physicality in the accented pizzicatos in the playful folk rhythms of the second movement was astonishing to watch. Perhaps taking into account the preponderance of slow music in Messiaen's *Quatour*, the trio take Ravel's 'très large' marking for the third movement with a pinch of salt, creating a flowing sense of boundless lines. In this movement, Ravel exploits the lowest registers of the piano. Adams and Kodama maintained a richness and clarity in their low contrapuntal lines, and there was a sense of relief in the change

of colour when the violin entered and the music expanded into higher registers. Without much of a pause, the players began the final movement with a sudden return to powerful virtuosity, and the trio ended with an impressively vigorous sound.

Messiaen's *Quatour pour la fin du temps* has an intriguing history and represents an evocation of everlasting light and eternal peace emerging from grim and frightening circumstances. Whilst Ravel's 1914 blissful trio was written during the summer before WWI, Messiaen composed the quartet under bleaker conditions, as a prisoner of war in 1940. It is often described as a miraculous work - an uplifting combination of spirituality, birdsong, power, and, of course, timelessness.

The opening movement was played with controlled clarity and nonchalance, as the players slowly paced the emotional intensity of the eight-movement piece. The piano chords and cello glissandi were balanced with the precisely rhythmic clarinet and violin, representing the 'blackbird and nightingale'. In contrast, the fiery colours of the opening of the second movement were brought into vivid relief. In the third, fifth and eighth movements, Rix, Adams and Scott in turn excel in their individual solos. In the third movement, for solo clarinet, Rix displays a smooth tone, virtuosic dexterity, and sensitivity in the soft endings of phrases. The extreme crescendos, marked *ppp* to *fff* on a single

note, were skilfully executed, creating an otherworldly surge from a barely audible whisper to a full sound that vibrates in both ears. Adams' skilful and tender interpretation of the fifth movement was played with much vibrato and glissandi. Here, Kodama created a real sense of shape in her chordal accompaniment, and she brought the entire piece to a shocking climax in the middle of the movement, where she played the chords with the full force of her entire body. The eighth and final movement is for solo violin and piano, and depicts the 'ascent of man towards his God'. Scott plays with a rich and full tone, right up to the high incandescent notes at the end. Whilst Scott's top E harmonic died away to silence, Kodama's piano chords never quite reached *ppp*, but nonetheless added much emotion and shape to the accompaniment.

In this quartet, the musicians demonstrated a poignant ability for both collective and individual expression, which was thrilling and moving to experience. This was a performance that reflected the extremes of the contrasting images that inspired the composer: beginning with the shimmering 'dawn chorus', through the apocalyptic 'flows of blue-orange lava', to the 'infinitely slow' and transcendent ascent to God that truly did suspend time.

**Melissa Morton**

the Spheres' from Purcell's Ode to St Cecilia'. The variants were widely contrasted, ranging from the aggressively virtuosic to the frostily mechanical to the eloquently lyrical. The clarinets, trumpet and piano each had their own distinctive material and rhythm, creating tension and unease. Throughout the course of the work the instruments had momentary rhythmic or melodic unisons and near the end there was a genuine sense of reconciliation of as the original Purcell came to the fore.

Fox's handling of her forces in *Tuned Spheres* was abundantly inventive, from the piano's bell-like ostinato in the opening section to the extravagant trills and vibratos of the clarinet and the rapid, fanfare-like figurations and deft use of mutes in the writing for trumpet. It seemed scarcely credible that such a rich array of timbres could be produced by only three players. Clarinettist Linda Merrick, trumpeter Chris Snead and pianist Sally Mays ensured that the more intimate subtleties as well as the bravura aspects of Fox's instrumentation made their mark. David Sutton-Anderson's direction aided the reading's formal clarity.

The tripartite *Davidsbündlerlieder* (1999) for flute and piano was composed in three stages. The substantial central section was a birthday present for a pianist-composer friend David Carhart. The title refers to the Davidsbund, a kind of musico-literary society, part real and part imagined, founded by the composer Robert Schumann. The work was conceived for flautist Carola Nielinger and the first section of the piece is called 'Für Carola'. It begins with a lengthy, study-like flute solo consisting of quasi-mechanical phrases of varying lengths. There are no dynamic markings, this element being entrusted to the players' instinct. The piano only enters with resonant chords near the end. For both instruments the second section is virtuosic in character, exploring extreme registers, divergent at first and coming closer together by degrees, though retaining rhythmic independence throughout. The more introspective third, and shortest, section is dominated by the piano. Entitled 'Für Nuriá', it was written for the birth of

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Carola's daughter. Dedicated to the memory of Carola Nielinger (1966-2016), the performance was distinguished by its passionate commitment and refined interpretative intelligence. Flautist Simon Desorgher and pianist Anthony Gray wove the three disparate sections of the piece into a coherent and convincing whole, whilst also exploiting the expressive potential of their variegated material.

The changing relationships between the two protagonists generated a gripping narrative of altering perspectives.

There followed a pair of laconic musical birthday offerings. The first was a world premiere. *Simon's Sketch* (1992) for solo piano, was written for an eponymous friend. Anthony Gray captured the emotional diversity of the piece, contrasting the more heartfelt passages with those requiring no expression and treating the wispy, cadenza-like central episode with the utmost delicacy.

The second birthday offering, *Remembering the Tango* (1999) for flute and piano, was composed for New Zealand composer John Rimmer, at whose instigation Fox was briefly composer/teacher-in-residence at the University of Auckland. A longstanding love of the tango was communicated in this delightful miniature and, although the harmonic language is not that of the traditional sensuous paired dance, there are rhythmic allusions to it. Simon Desorgher and Sally Mays brought a dance-like fluidity and flexibility to this piquant score. A couple of episodes in which the piano imitates a guitar were satisfyingly exotic and the deft use of pauses captured the essence of the sensual South American dance.

The concert concluded with *Hungarian Rhapsody* (1989) for flute/alto flute, oboe/cor anglais, E flat clarinet/bass clarinet, trumpet/flugelhorn and piano. Inspired by Liszt's examples with their juxtaposition of brilliant writing with more meditative episodes, this three-movement piece took fragments of Hungarian Gypsy melodies and spun variations around them, exploring extreme contrasts in register, speed and mood. Gestural in character, the opening 'Ballet' was the

most substantial movement. The central 'Invocation and Lament' was a short slow movement in two sections: a 'hidden' folk-like melody, repetitive in nature, followed by a chorale-like episode with low chords. The doleful timbres of alto flute, cor anglais, bass clarinet and flugelhorn were especially haunting here. The closing 'Rhapsody', celebrated some of the ideas presented in the first movement. This brilliant finale was crackling with primal energy, the piano's hammering, cymbal-like gestures providing an authentically Magyar flavour.

The broad spectrum of colours Erika Fox employed in *Hungarian Rhapsody* from a carefully chosen doubling of instruments created the illusion of a much larger ensemble than just five players. Conductor David Sutton-Anderson ensured the piece unfolded within a clear and flexible trajectory and allowed the performers sufficient interpretative freedom to respond vigorously and with passion to their material.

This superb showcase for Erika Fox's resourceful approach to chamber music whets the appetite for an exploration of her large-scale works. Her writing's inherently songlike nature suggests a natural composer for the voice; its rhythmic heterogeneity indicates an ideal composer for ballet, and the imaginative treatment of the various featured instruments makes one want to hear her orchestral pieces. The originality and strength of her musical language is so striking that its general lack of promotion and exposure is baffling. Here is an authentic composer of absolute integrity whose music demands to be heard.

Paul Conway

### Chamber Music at Wigmore Hall: 'At Lunch Three'

A stunning world premiere of a new Oboe Quintet by the British composer Brian Elias, given by the outstanding oboist Nicholas Daniel and members of the Britten Sinfonia, formed the centrepiece of a highly enjoyable Wigmore Hall's lunchtime concert on April 19. Launching a world premiere tour, 'At Lunch Three', that included concerts and talks in Norwich and Cambridge, the programme framed Elias's new work with Gerald Finzi's *Interlude* for oboe and string quartet and a fascinating new version of

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