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VOCAL ANTHOLOGY (£1)Bryn Harris, ANTHOLOGY-72 (£1.25)NATURE STUDY NOTES (£1.)

The EMC has changed quite a bit in appearance since its first edition - the original loose duplicated sheets have been replaced by a neat, printed booklet. Improved presentation for the scores too - those I am reviewing are attractively printed on good quality paper. Prices, inevitably, have risen - some have doubled since 1969. But as compensation, many of the pieces published by EMC have been collected into anthologies. A good idea all round - good for the customer, who gets more for his money and is almost certainly introduced to pieces of which he hadn't previously known - good for the composer, especially the less well-known, whose music gets a wider distribution.

One of the difficulties of reviewing typical EMC material is that traditional criteria are not relevant. It's no longer a simple case of asking, "Will this sound good in performance?" Better would be, "Does this material fire my imagination to produce interesting sounds?" Or even, "Will this be interesting for the performers? (We'll ignore the audience,)" Because there is a greater emphasis in this music on the making of sounds and a lesser upon the result. There is an implied political thinking behind it, but there's often plenty of muddled thinking too. The performer/audience barrier is being broken down, the performer removed from his pedestal and the audience shaken out of its traditional passive role. Well, that's the idea anyway - the muddle arises in carrying the idea into force - too often the effect is that an audience is left on the sidelines observing a ritual giving rise to rather dull sounds.

This problem is highlighted in the Bryn Harris collection of 17 pieces; the concept of several of these pieces is interesting, but none conjures up for me anything exciting as a performance. To illustrate what I have said about the ritual aspect with the emphasis upon the making, I'll take The Interpretation of Ordnance Survey Maps WITH ANSWERS which is a set of instructions for translating an imaginary journey plotted on any Ordnance Survey map into sounds. Now, putting this into action could well be fun for the performers, but it seems to me that there are heavy odds against a performance whose aural (I daren't say musical) ends justify the means. I concede that once in a while a performance might jell and produce something, but I'm not sure that this would justify the other, dull, performances. Most of the items in this anthology similarly use a non-musical idea to attain a musical end product, and I think that no matter how ingenious (e.g. Crosspiece, a musical crossword) or amusing (e.g. The Quick Brown Fox for 5 or more typists), these means to ends might be, their validity is bound to be dubious.

One recent attempt at removing the performer/audience distinction, which has met with encouraging results, makes use of the happy fact that most people can sing to a reasonable extent. Cornelius Cardew in particular has made use of untrained singers. One of his pieces appears in the Verbal Anthology, and it's one of the most exciting things I've seen in some time. Its full title is How should we interpret the word 'soon' in the statement 'there will soon be a high tide of revolution'? For unison choir with unspecified chorded accompaniment (chord symbols given), to words of Mao Tse Tung. It is firmly tonal, though some of the rhythms are a little tricky; there is an instruction permitting the omission of certain bars in community singing. It's so simple that I wonder at myself for being excited by it. Perhaps it's because of its complete success as a revolutionary worker's song. I can hear a lusty voice and giant, rolling chords.....

The two pieces in the Anthology by Michael Parsons, Mindfulness of Breathing and Mindfulness Occupied with the Body, both on texts from the Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa, are also designed to take in non-music-readers. Both employ simple musical means to build up a cumulative, hypnotic effect. The former requires about 10 bass voices with a range of low F to C; the latter, more complex, at least 40 singers plus 5 to 10 drums.

Bryn Harris appears again in this Anthology and is represented by two pieces. One, Mass Medium, in which the words of the Ordinary of the Mass are used as source material to be fragmented in different ways in each movement, is a verbal score. The other, Those Dancing Days are Gone (words by Yeats), is written in staff notation and has a difficult solo vocal part ranging over three octaves with piano and percussion accompanying.

The rest of the Vocal Anthology is taken up with 3 items by Christopher Hobbs and 2 by Hugh Shrapnel. Of these, Shrapnel's Sing is the only one for which I have a good word to say - it's so simple that it should come off. The others I pass over.

Finally, Nature Study Notes - not so much music, more a way of life. A collection of 152 'rites' compiled by members of the Scratch Orchestra. A rite is any activity invented with the intention of fostering corporate spirit among its participants and may or may not involve musical sounds. An audience in this context is particularly irrelevant, unless it observes the participants as a certain type of anthropological phenomenon. The rites are consistently ingenious, witty, and shrewd, and make delightful reading. As a sample I give you BHBR140 (by Bryn Harris), "Have a battle. (Try to avoid fatalities.)"

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