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RHYTHMIC ANTHOLOGY: SCRATCH ANTHOLOGY OF COMPOSITIONS

The publication of music in anthologies has a great number of advantages to both composers and customers alike. In certain cases, however, the material contained in a collection such as the Rhythmic Anthology will be severely limited. This is not inevitable, of course, as is shown by Gavin Bryars' The Squirrel and the Ricketty-Racketty Bridge, for two guitars (one performer). Although spoilt somewhat by the excessively long and complex instructions, and in spite of the difficulty of 'hearing' the notation, which is in number groups, indicating strings and frets, it appears to be the most musical piece in the collection. The technique required to play two guitars simultaneously is not too considerable: all one needs is a sure finger technique with both hands.

The attraction of the other pieces in the anthology is beginning to lose its novelty. They are really only variations on a theme and one feels that an audience would not benefit from more than a single hearing of each, after which the repetitive processes involved become somewhat uninteresting. Variety from piece to piece is, somewhat inevitably, minimal (mainly one of instrumentation), and the detailed exploration of unending combinations of similar rhythmic materials by measured intervals remains the same.

Hugh Shrapnel's Bella utilises a space-time notation and a limited gamut of "pitched metal percussion instruments capable of playing the scale of C major (in any octave)". The effect of the piece relies heavily on the sonorous nature of the percussion instruments, and the mesmeric (or boring?) effect is aided by the restriction that each instrument plays one eight-note figure over and over throughout the performance. In Raindrops (from the Scratch Anthology) Shrapnel presents the same five notes - A, B, D, E, G - 535 times in different combinations (it is not necessary to play all the groups!).

Michael Parsons' Rhythm Studies for Two Pianos and Rhythm Studies for Four Drummers explore gradually changing textures over extended periods of time. In the Scratch Anthology, Phil Gebbett's Piece for Pianos, Howard Skempton's May Pole for orchestra and Alvin Curran's Processional are similar in content.

Exercise for Percussionists by Christopher Hobbs is well-engineered, and should work well in performance, provided that the lengths of each section (there are three) can be kept short. The effect of the score is cumulative, gradually adding more percussion from the beginning of each section. The number of players (and therefore much of the effect of the piece) is variable. Parts

are provided for subsidiary players.

The Scratch Anthology contains one piece by Howard Skempton which crystalises much of the content of the Rhythmic Anthology, Drum No. 1:

Any number of drums

Introduction of pulse

Continuation of pulse

Deviation through emphasis, decoration, contradiction.

The content of many of the Scratch pieces lives up to the humorous reputation which they have attained. Jokes and games in musical, and often non-musical, form are frequent: The Balkan Sobranie Smoking Mixture (Greg Bright), Drinking and Hooting Machine (John White), Purposeless Work 1 (Philip Dadson). The individualistic bias of much Scratch music - as Cardew mentions in the book called Scratch Music (London 1972) - "Doing your own thing in a public entertainment context, and the resulting alienation" - defines it as a personal reaction to one's own environment; it cannot become a collective audience experience because of the essential privacy of the content of so many of the pieces. Consider Howard Skempton's For Strings:

Waves

Shingle

Seagulls

or Chris Robbins' Pocket Music II:

Empty the contents of your pockets onto a drum. Rearrange these contents into various shapes and patterns. Replace objects in pockets.

Aptly enough, grouped together at the end of the anthology are Michael von Biel's World 2, Rzewski's Les Moutons de Panurge and Cardew's Schooltime Special, the last of which I would chose as the best piece in the collection. These three pieces reflect their composers' interest in working with untrained musicians and also a kind of 'conditional' music-making; the performer must overcome one hurdle before proceeding to the next. Schooltime Special is the most thought-provoking: it has four sections, each of which consists of a number of questions and possible answers. Cardew clearly and logically induces all but the most stubborn of performers to make a sound (section A), to alter that sound in response to itself (section B), to relate the sound to his physical and emotional self (section C) and finally, having become one with the sound, to integrate with the social environment which the piece has created. In short, a lesson in how to get on with other people.

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