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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

ROGER SMALLEY: MONODY for piano with live electronic modulation.

Faber Music Ltd., F0503, 1975 (£3.00)

PETER MANNING

*Monody* for piano with live modulation was first performed by Intermodulation in March 1972, publication of the score, however, being delayed until 1975. Stockhausen's *Mantra* for two pianos and ring modulators had appeared two years previously in 1970, but it would be misleading to attach too great a significance to this precedent. Indeed, Smalley himself should be credited with being, perhaps, the first major composer to produce a score for this particular live instrumental/electronic combination: *Transformation I*, first performed in March 1969. This earlier work is characterised by very expansive piano writing, exploring freely contrasted effects of contour and timbre. The introduction of ring modulation at strategic points in the work is not wholly successful, for the additional spectral complexity becomes at times too overpowering. Several effects are nevertheless very striking, particularly at points of transition between passages for piano alone and those for piano plus modulation. Far greater consideration is given to the acoustical properties of this sound processing technique in *Monody*, and in this respect at least some similarities may be found with the structures of *Mantra*.

The piano is ring modulated throughout the piece against a sine wave generator, the pitches of the latter being controlled via a special electronic keyboard positioned near the left hand of the performer. Additionally, in four sections of the work two small percussion groupings, one consisting of conga drums and bongos and the other of triangles, are employed to add an extra degree of articulation to the monody. Detailed instructions are given for setting up the electronics, using an E.M.S. (London) VCS 3 synthesizer and keyboard. It would be perfectly possible, however, to use any ring modulation system, providing an associated sine wave generator could be accurately tuned in performance to the tempered pitches indicated in the score.

The piece develops three interrelated ideas which are used alternately, dividing the monody into 21 sections. One common factor is supplied by the timbral relationships created by ring modulating a limited series of pitches against particular tunings of a sine wave generator. The effect of this electronic process is to produce sum and difference tones, where, if A is the fundamental frequency of

the piano note and B the frequency of the generator, the output from the modulator consists of two tones: one at a frequency of A + B and the other at a frequency of A - B. The frequency spectrum derived from a piano source is, in fact, more complicated, for the harmonics of the notes themselves modulate with the sine wave.

Smalley uses these characteristics structurally by deriving two continuums: one extending from ring modulated products with wide frequency spectrums to products with narrow ones and the other progressing in the reverse direction. The third idea provides a central polarity by creating a texture which, although oscillating and permutating within itself, remains essentially static over the duration of a section. The latter is employed exclusively for the four sections incorporating percussion. In these sections, 13 - note groupings are permutated according to the Fibonacci series. The triangles provide the articulation for the first two sections, complementing the bell-like sounds resulting from ring modulation of higher register piano notes, and the drums provide the articulation for the last two, complementing the deep percussive sounds of ring modulated notes of a lower register.

The other sections are based on the two 'wedge' ideas, an initial dominance of the decreasing spectrum type becoming replaced by an increasing dominance of its counterpart. The cyclical nature of the repeating note sequences, subjected to constant permutations of rhythm and pitch order, creates an absorbing series of changing timbres.

Ring modulated sounds have very distinctive characteristics owing to the general 'non-harmonicity' of the frequencies generated. Smalley's use of limited pitch sets and sine wave generator tunings effectively explores the more subtle qualities of this strange sound world to create a work of a very delicate nature, a quality which is perhaps undervalued in many contemporary works. Even the two sections incorporating percussion. In these sections 13-note by employing widely spaced pitches in a pointillistic fashion, are clearly perceived as expansions of the gently twisting textures encountered in those sections which employ narrower groupings, restricted in some cases to a single octave.

The piece makes a very individual contribution to the contemporary piano repertoire, and it is to be hoped that its publication will lead to wider public appreciation. The electronic requirements are not too daunting, the only equipment required apart from the ring modulator and sine wave generator being a microphone, amplifier and loudspeaker.

# Roger Smalley

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