



Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Bracefield, Hilary. 1981. 'Review of Sonorities: Northern Ireland's Festival of 20th-Century Music, Queen's University, Belfast, April 24-27, 1981'. *Contact*, 23. pp. 35-36. ISSN 0308-5066.

The first of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The second of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The third of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The fourth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The fifth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The sixth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The seventh of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The eighth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The ninth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The tenth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The eleventh of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The twelfth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The thirteenth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The fourteenth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

The fifteenth of the three is the 'Sonorities' section, which was the first to be presented in the 1981 festival. It consisted of three days of music, the first of which was the 'Sonorities' section, the second of which was the 'Sonorities' section, and the third of which was the 'Sonorities' section.

SONORITIES: NORTHERN IRELAND'S FESTIVAL OF 20TH-CENTURY MUSIC

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, BELFAST, APRIL 24 - 27, 1981

HILARY BRACEFIELD

20th-century music festivals abound these days, but there's a lot to be said for an attractively packaged, short, concentrated dose of new music, which makes people feel rather adventurous and curious to attend. Last Easter saw the first attempt at such a festival in Belfast. Billed as Sonorities: Northern Ireland's Festival of 20th-Century Music, this four-day venture was devised by a small committee chaired by George Newson, The Queen's University composer-in-residence, and funded jointly by the university's music department and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

Out-of-the-way contemporary music is given an airing only rarely in Northern Ireland – in occasional concerts at Queen's University and the Polytechnic and in the annual Belfast Festival; the odd item crops up elsewhere, but mostly it's shamefully neglected. There is a lot to be done in presenting even major 20th-century works, so a four-day festival is but a drop in the ocean. But the Sonorities Festival was an important first step. It showed that interesting programmes, reputable artists, and the continuity of a weekend event can attract an audience for 20th-century music. It provided an important showcase for a number of composers to present new works. And most important it gave a shock to our somewhat over-insular attitude to music making by the engagement of visiting performers whose attitude to and meticulous preparation and performance of the new music they offered taught us a salutary lesson. The work of Lontano (directed by Odaline de la Martinez), Linda Hirst, and Barry Guy and Paul Rutherford was of great importance, both in concert and in the master-classes given by Linda Hirst and Barry Guy.

Readers have probably forgotten the great snowstorms of last Easter, but they trapped me in Scotland and prevented me from hearing the opening concert of the festival by the Ulster Orchestra conducted by John Carewe; I was not the only person who failed to get there, and the audience was reduced calamitously for what on paper looked an attractive programme including works by Ravel, Stravinsky, and Webern. (In future, though, if the Ulster Orchestra is to be used, the concert will probably have to be incorporated into its subscription series.) I was particularly sorry to miss the premiere of George Newson's *Concertante*, commissioned by the Ulster Orchestra and the major work of his three-year residency at Queen's. People who were at the concert have praised it to me, and I hope that the orchestra will not allow it to disappear from their repertoire.

One fault of the festival, I thought, was the programming of too many completely new works in such a short space of time. (In addition to the Newson, there were six other premieres in three days.) It was certainly a drawback to the concert by George Newson's Belfast Music Assembly, whose attempt to play three premieres as well as Varèse's *Octandre* in one concert was doomed to disaster and obviously suffered from too little rehearsal for such an ambitious programme, not to speak of its demands on the audience.

Eibhlís Farrell's *Quadralogue* for cor anglais, clarinet, bassoon, and trumpet, a festival commission, was a closely-written, composerly work, using some interesting lyrical material punctuated by more chordal textures, and concerned very much to explore the sounds of its four protagonists. It suffered, however, from a blandness of both pitch and rhythm and too slow a working-up to its climax. Both composer and group would have benefited from consultations at the rehearsal stage, when the composer could have helped the performers to reach a fuller understanding of her intentions.

The work by Colin Griffith (b. 1952), *Paternoster* for wind septet, also appeared, from this performance, to need some tightening, but again it may not be fair to judge by the account it had. Its eleven sections have family significance for Griffith and there was some wry humour about it which pleased.

The Persian-American composer Hormoz Farhat has been a visiting fellow at Queen's University of Belfast. His *Partita* for wind quintet, written for the Belfast Music Assembly, displayed in its five movements an assured modified twelve-note technique, with a melodious use of rows and strong movement to cadences. A pleasant piece in lighter vein, it served only as an introduction to Farhat's music, and it seems a pity that more of his work has not been played while he has been in the United Kingdom (though the main reason for his sojourn was his ethnomusicological knowledge).

The three other premieres of the festival were all conducted by Adrian Thomas and performed by Lontano in their two concerts. Two of the new works were for voice (Linda Hirst) and chamber ensemble.

David Byers (b. 1947), in his *Moon Shadows*, a setting of nine poems by the 19th-century Belfast poet Joseph Campbell, was placed at something of a disadvantage by the juxtaposing of his atmospheric music against Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, given in the same programme; an appreciation of his work was further handicapped by the decision not to perform four of the settings. Byers has been inspired by the naive poetry of Campbell to some delightful effects and an interesting variety in his accompaniments. It was unfortunate that the more vocally exciting songs were not heard, for the

cycle sounded more sombre than the poems themselves suggested and the vocal part appeared over-declamatory.

Narcissus by Philip Hammond (b. 1951), a BBC Radio 3 commission, was a powerful and effective setting of three poems by George Baker. The instruments were thought of less individually and were more supportive of the voice than in the Byers. The poems were in any case more closely allied to one another and their intensity was well captured by the composer and by the performers.

The final premiere was of the work, for Lontano, that won the Young Composers' Competition associated with the festival, *Aurora Borealis* by Piers Hellawell (b. 1956). Hellawell was not trapped by the title of his work into mere picturesque writing, for his short three-movement work had a pleasing momentum. Densely written, it was not concerned to allow instruments much individual say, although all made their presences felt. Hellawell has recently been appointed composer-in-residence at Queen's University in succession to George Newson.

The intention of the festival was to juxtapose these seven premieres against music by established composers. The only other theme was the presentation of a number of works by Berio – the trombone, voice, and flute *Sequenze*, and *Gesti* for recorder, all of which, of course, give a very good idea of his experiments with instrumental technique. Lontano's performance of *Pierrot Lunaire* impressed for the rapport of the group, who played from memory, and for the singing of Linda Hirst, lyrical though losing something of the menace of the middle section – she has still to grow further into this work, I suspect. The other piece particularly liked by the audiences was George Crumb's *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* which was impressively played by Lontano and whose unfamiliar sound-world seemed to be enjoyed immediately. The fascinating jazz-improvisation work of Barry Guy and Paul Rutherford, however, was along too advanced a path for local aficionados and mystified them completely. Some introduction to less esoteric trends in the improvisation scene seems called for.

It was good to find, in a concert by students of Queen's University Music Department directed by George Newson, a performance of Webern's Concerto Op. 24 which captured much of its spirit. A sizable audience had gathered to see their performance of Cage's *Theatre Piece* in which two large groups of student instrumentalists took two of the parts and a teenage theatre group the other six. I could not say that the performance was of Cage's score, but I think Cage would have enjoyed the happening that evolved instead.