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Gaudeamus Music Week 1987

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The Gaudeamus Festival exists to bring together young composers from all over the world and to allow them to have music performed. Where and how this is done is continually questioned and changed by the Foundation in an endeavour to serve young composers best. Since I visited the 1982 Festival,¹ the Gaudeamus Foundation has moved its base to Amsterdam from Bilthoven and the monetary first prize has been reinstated, but the event has been curtailed in length and, for the first time, the upper age limit of participant composers reduced from 35 to 30. The reason given for this decision was that too many of the chosen composers in previous years had been over 30, and the Foundation wants 'to give the really young composers a better chance.'

Fifteen younger composers from England to USA, from Sweden to Japan, were given this chance in 1987 and had works for chamber orchestra or smaller combination selected by a jury consisting of Paul-Heinz Dittrich (German Democratic Republic), Michael Finnissy (Great Britain) and Tomas Marco (Spain). The works were sifted into three concerts stretching over a long weekend (Friday evening to Sunday afternoon): the organisers have decided that critics and hangers-on are more likely to attend everything in a short period than if it is spread over a week. The composers remained for a further three days of discussion led by Michael Finnissy and Arne Mellnäs (Sweden), gatherings from which, however, others were not excluded. The Music Week again used the congenial building of the Ijsbreker with its adjacent café-bar as its main venue, and sorties were also made to a city-centre church and the VARA Broadcasting Studio at Hilversum. Prizewinners from the 1987 International Competition for Electroacoustic Music, Bourges, were featured in an extra concert (a worthwhile custom begun in the 1982 festival) and to leaven the lump of young hopefuls, music by three composers who had had past Gaudeamus success, Arne Mellnäs, Enrique Raxach and Tona Scherchen, was given in their presence at two further concerts during the weekend. I find the Gaudeamus Music Week a friendly and relaxing event and the organisers, Chris Walraven and Henk Heuvelmans, more than welcoming. Given the closeness of Amsterdam to Great Britain, it is surprising how few young British composers turn up either as selected composers or onlookers: it is not a daunting festival, and the chance to meet other composers from around the world is not to be sneezed at.

Worthy the Gaudeamus enterprise certainly is, but having a trio of disparate selectors find suitable works for a set number of concerts within a particular financial framework and for a finite number of performers and groups seems inevitably to lead to music of mainstream blandness. Certainly the selectors ensured that nothing incompetent was included, but an over-all greyness was undeniable. One result of the telescoping of the concerts and their separation from the composers' discussions is that one loses the chance of hearing tapes and presentations by

participants. In the past this gave a wider perspective of their music than one piece in a concert can ever do, and in 1982 certainly helped me to gain a much more favourable impression of some participants' music. But the 1982 sessions *were* very long; if they were to be reinstated, it would have to be under firm chairmanship.

Richard Toop, in his review of last year's festival, drew attention to the generally poor standard of performance.² It is still a problem, though this year it affected concerts by the older composers rather than the younger. The balancing act between finding combinations of instruments needed to perform the chosen pieces and getting enough rehearsal time within a manageable schedule, given exigencies of financing, seems very difficult. Might it therefore be better to present the works of the young composers in workshop performances in which they, the visiting judges and discussion leaders and the performers work together on the pieces? A selection could then be performed in a final concert. But as things stand, if no Dutch group has time to prepare a piece adequately, the organisers really have to consider whether visiting groups should be invited.

The eradication of composers over 30 from the competition probably eliminated some good music, but all the prizewinning pieces in the Bourges competition concert were also by composers within the age limit. That well-made, original and interesting works are being produced by the younger age group was readily to be heard in this enjoyable concert, particularly in two pieces for flute and tape: *Sin ti por el alma adentro* by the London-based Julio d'Escrivan (b.Venezuela, 1960), and *Exchange* by Richard Karpen (b.USA, 1957).

The fifteen Gaudeamus pieces were grouped into light-weight (De Ijsbreker), middleweight (Waalse Kerk) and heavyweight (Hilversum) ghettos. Composers' ages ranged from 22 to 30. One trend discernible was a liking for unusual sonorities, ranging from a work for solo piccolo entitled *Furiosamente* by Jay Alan Yim (b.USA, 1958), to one for the unlikely combination of two trombones, two electric guitars and two cellos – *Les Tuchins* by Bent Sørensen (b.Denmark, 1958) – to one for eight double-basses – *Third Quiet Music* by Leonard Payton (b.USA, 1958). On the other hand there were several string quartets and works for other 19th-century chamber combinations, solo string pieces and pieces for typical 20th-century chamber combinations. Only one slight work used vocal resources, *Pietra di Rugiada* for soprano and piano by Fulvio Brambilla (b.Italy, 1958).

No matter for what medium the composer was writing, however, there seemed to be a dislike of any sort of contrast. At one extreme *Trarre* by Ron Ford (b.USA, 1959) for five drummers battered us into submission after pounding for some time at rather simplistic rhythmic patterns; on the other Payton's piece for eight double-basses perversely explored only wispy sounds from his noble band. Sørensen's *Les Tuchins* did more with his sombre colouring, macabre and aggressive by turns, and both the Piano Quartet of Suk Han Lee (b.South Korea, 1965) and the string quintet *Downstream* by James Clarke (b.England, 1957) were aware of possibilities still available from traditional combinations, though Clarke's piece was much more assured.

Perhaps the chamber-orchestra composers got the best deal, with careful attention paid to their works by the Radio Chamber Orchestra conducted by Ernest

Bour. *Anamorphose* by Karen Tanaka (b.Japan, 1961) handled the medium in powerful fashion, and *Kast* by Karen Rehnqvist (b.Sweden, 1957), a work for string orchestra, was not ashamed to use both good old-fashioned counterpoint and 'pictorial' music in an intricately worked-out piece of some daring, and one which the orchestra seemed to enjoy. But after the interval we were treated to a work by the Dutch composer David Coppoolse (b.1960) with the ominous title of *Una Storia della mille e una notte*; one story it may have been, but as the orchestra blew and sawed away and the clock's hands slowly moved over the dial, one wondered if we were getting the other thousand. The work 'could be considered neo-romantic (or post-modern)' wrote the composer. Possibly. It was a long time to wait for the ending 'when everything more or less is merged and only a soft, quietly moving layer remains, as a blanket of sizzling air above a hot desert'.

This was followed by a reception at which the prizewinner was announced. I could not quarrel with the decision, which was to award it to Tanaka for her utterly professional orchestral work. Honourable mentions were made of Clarke, Rehnqvist and Yim, with a nod to youth in a mention for Lee. The prize, incidentally, consists of Hfl.4000 (about £1,300) given as a commission for a future Gaudeamus Music Week. Last year's winner, Uros Rojko (b.Yugoslavia, 1954), also a beneficiary of this pleasant idea, responded with *Tongen II*, an unexceptional work for two double-basses and amplification, heard in the opening concert.

A new idea from Gaudeamus is to have previous successful participants present to hear a retrospective of their music. The first three to be thus honoured were Arne Mellnäs, who remained to help lead the young composers' discussions, the Spanish composer Enrique Raxach, long resident in Holland, and Tona Scherchen, the Chinese-German composer, who is back living in France after some time in the USA. The criteria by which works were selected for the two concerts (presumably mainly financial – it was all intimate music) gave, however, a curious and limited view of their progress since their successes. Mellnäs's choral pieces *L'Infinito* (1982) and *Dream* (1970) received depressingly lacklustre performances from the ASKO choir; his most recent work on show, *Stampede* (1985) for saxophone quartet wasn't quite as exciting as its name suggests, but produced some fashionable Doppler effects. It was instructive to hear Raxach's string quartet *Fases* (1961) from the 1962 festival – a piece very much of its time. Others of his works played were all fairly slight essays for one or two instruments, though *Chimaera* (1974) for bass clarinet and tape was not only played by Harry Sparnaay but given with an additional choreographed part for a dancer, to no great benefit to the work. As perhaps the most fascinating composer at the festival, it was a pity that Tona Scherchen was represented by just three tiny works, but all were instructively clear and intense. *Sin* (1965) for flute showed its era, certainly, but *Yi* (1973) for two players at one marimba was a pleasant set of pieces, and *Radar* (1980) for piano was potentially the hit of the festival. It suffered dreadfully from lack of rehearsal, and a marvellous evocation of New York stride-piano style just didn't swing.

It always seems that one ends up castigating festivals in reviews. The Gaudeamus Music Week needs a bit more zing, but it remains an important part of the international contemporary-music scene. It needs our support and more financial help from within its own country. And given its closeness to our shores and its

benefits to young composers, it should receive far more attention from British hopefuls than it seems to do at present.

The Gaudeamus Music Week is organised by Gaudeamus Foundation, Swammerdamstraat 38, 1091 RV Amsterdam, Netherlands.

¹ See my article in *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp.38-40.

² *Contact* 31 (Autumn 1987), pp.39-40

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