

excitement in shaping and manipulating language, labyrinthine but highly specific attempts at demarcation of semantic space, which contrast strongly with the pomposity, sanctimony and self-righteousness that characterize so much writing on music. There is a gaming aspect to what Ferneyhough does, a fascination with abstract things outside of any purpose they might serve. This is a deeply Anglo-Saxon trait (albeit a non-conformist one), and one should question whether Ferneyhough really is 'dead centre in the European tradition'.

This volume should be made compulsory reading for all young students of composition (and quite a few older ones as well). Even if they finally found a cause to reject most of what Ferneyhough has to say, it would bring intellectual upheaval in composers' understanding and vision, far more important than any amount of rote-like studies of prescribed forms of harmony, counterpoint or orchestration.

- Ian Pace

Obituary

Robert Simpson (1921-1997) – a Tribute

With the death of Robert Simpson on 21 November 1997, Britain has lost one of its leading composers and most forceful personalities. Central to his output are the cycles of 11 symphonies and 15 string quartets whose mastery of organic growth and grandeur of design are easily worthy of comparison with Shostakovich. Simpson was blessed with the rare ability to re-define symphonic thinking from a completely modern perspective, proving that the form is just as durable, vital and crucial to our culture (such as it is) as it was in the era of Haydn or Beethoven.

His piano music, though less wide-ranging in expression, reveals a craggy, uncompromisingly individual keyboard style stemming ultimately from the great contrapuntists: Bach (Bach-Busoni even), the Beethoven of the *Hammerklavier*, later Nielsen and Reger. The works for brass band comprise such an impressive corpus that Simpson easily surpasses all his contemporaries in this field. His three concerti, for Piano (1966), Flute (1989) and Cello (1991) reveal a vivid identification with the human qualities of the solo instrument concerned, combined with an advanced degree of structural innovation.

There are still lamentably few opportunities to experience live performances of Simpson's music. The physical excitement engendered by such moments as the fiercely joyous closing pages of the Fourth Symphony or the driving momentum in the finale of the Sixth make a shattering impact in the concert hall. The Kensington Symphony Orchestra conducted by Russell Keable proved this in the QEH performances in recent years. Let us hope that the impressive array of Hyperion

recordings of the major works will stimulate great interest in Simpson's music, both in this country and abroad.

His finest works have a timeless quality and monumental stature, placing him in a unique, unchallenged position in terms of late 20th-century music. The Ninth Symphony, for instance, radically reassesses the concept of modern symphonism. In a single tripartite movement, lasting nearly 50 minutes, it has one basic pulse which remains consistent throughout. Within this vast span, Simpson demonstrates the sheer versatility of his mature language, from an austere Brucknerian nobility in the first section, through a central scherzo of titanic energy to a final set of variations of epic proportions. The calm coda which constitutes the last four minutes of the symphony has perhaps only been surpassed in symphonic terms by the closing pages of Sibelius's Sixth Symphony.

Variation form fascinated Simpson throughout his life. The Ninth Quartet is a set of 32 variations plus fugue on a palindromic minuet by Haydn. The majesty, spaciousness and profoundly human qualities in this work naturally bring three other great variation-sets to mind as parallels: Bach's 'Goldberg', Beethoven's 'Diabelli' and Brahms's 'Handel'.

Once, when discussing the genius of J.S. Bach over a bottle of fine Irish whisky, Bob Simpson maintained to me that it was the 'magical combination of energy and serenity' that made Bach's work so compelling. These are also the qualities that I most greatly cherish in the music of Robert Simpson.

Matthew Taylor



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The Seven Last Words
Catalan Tales

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Kammerspiel
Kammerspiel*

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...and flowers fall...
...So Softly
Timelessly This
Leaves and Navels

*cl, bn, hn, pf, vn, va, vc
saxophone quartet
clarinet and piano trio
flute, guitar, viola, cello*

Instrumental

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From the Book of Longing
Bane
BIG
For Eileen, after rain
A Haunted Heart

*cello and piano
violin and piano
violin with digital delay
piano solo
piano solo
piano solo*

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