

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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One of Nicholas Maw's most remarkable achievements in his opera *One Man Show* (discussed in detail by Anthony Payne in the following pages) is to overcome the instinctive resistance probably felt by most listeners interested in contemporary music to the anti-modern-art joke which is the basis of the work.

Basically, no doubt, the choice of subject betrays the same uncertainty about the function of the arts (in spite of the assurance of the music) as produces the kind of art, and art critic, lampooned in the opera. Although the artistic nihilism that some artists (including musicians) have been brought to by this uncertainty may not bring much satisfaction to our mind or feelings, it is undeniably the product of genuine thinking and feeling about the essence of art, and if it serves no other purpose it turns our own thoughts seriously to the same subject. And if sometimes it is impossible not to laugh, that is sometimes surely the artist's intention—as when Rauschenberg puts a motor-car tyre round a stuffed goat. Going back a little, surely much of Klee, Kandinsky, Miro and others is meant to cheer us up with comedy that is also art.

Where does the laugh that is part of an artistic enjoyment turn to the laugh of derision—whether directed at the artist, or at the dealers, critics and connoisseurs that he hoaxes, or at the public that they hoax? At Rauschenberg, at Jackson Pollock, at Mondrian, at Braque, or at Cezanne's ill-drawn picture of a lot of fat washerwomen (according to protesting letters in the press) recently acquired at a high price for the British public? Turning to our own sphere, where does music end and the leg-pull, solemn or otherwise, begin? At Bussotti, Cage, Maw, Boulez, Webern, Schoenberg, or Debussy? For that matter there are still millions to whom Bach is a big joke, and to whom the thousands who profess to like 'classical' music are mad or phoney.

All art is an acquired taste, and artistic experience as much a matter of faith, and as little of reason, as religious experience (for which indeed it is today a substitute for many people). Nothing about it is provable, or disprovable, and even less can any 'eternal values' be defined. Undoubtedly this renders it peculiarly vulnerable to charlatanism. But when Maw and Jacobs proclaim that "art is short, but life is long", and mock their various art-lovers' rhapsodies over Leonardo or 'pure form', they come perilously near those to whom all art is humbug or self-deception, or superfluous. Perhaps it is. But if so, it is better to be too easily deceived than too hard. Maw's music proves, to those capable of recognizing it, that he is on the right side, and is only aiming, like Schoenberg in his operatic satire on modernity, *Von Heute auf Morgen*, at fashionable and pretentious affectation. But Schoenberg, though intolerant of much in modern art (including music) gave art a wide berth in his satire, contenting himself with a caricature only of the 'artistic' (i.e. Bohemian) type, in the slightly ridiculous person of the 'famous tenor'. However unconvinced we may be by some of our colleagues, it is dangerous policy to provide the enemy with ammunition.