



Channel Five

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Malcolm Barry

The two most striking aspects of the development of British 'classical' contemporary music since 1945 have been, first, the increasing role of the state in its patronage (albeit through quangos) and, second, the increasing Europeanisation of its production. Since the first is mostly concerned with dissemination and this is designed to be a review of production it will suffice to say that the importance of the

classical musician of the century, was effectively turned away from Britain by academe, despite being a refugee: there are many examples of promising young British composers of the 1950s being obliged to complete their training abroad to escape the stultifying influence of the British conservatoires.

Today this has largely changed: Britain is a part of Western Europe in respect of

believe that the residual romanticism in Schoenberg's music was a compromise and extended his procedures of pitch to the other areas of music (eg, rhythm), and thus piled artifice on artifice. This total serialism, in which system was all, soon produced its antithesis, symbolised by the work of John Cage, whose compositions after 1945 attempt to 'bypass the Will' by means of notational dances, chance elements and simple abdication of composers' responsibilities.

While both extremes had their followers in Britain and many composers went through phases embracing both attitudes, the most significant thing is the end that this opposition represented to musical development in simple technical terms. For, now, 'anything goes': any technical means, any organisation. There was thus no possibility of a technically based avant-garde or of 'progress' in a field that had always been 'progressive' in terms of its techniques.

British composers from the 1960s on have been as much aware of this 'steady state' as their European or American counterparts and the interest in the field lies in their reactions to it. Peter Maxwell Davies, for example, began writing strictly serial music and then moved towards expressionistic music theatre. Of late and under the influence of his adopted native Orkney, his style has simplified, on the one hand to a sort of 'community-type' music and, on the other, in his concert works to a style in which tonality once again has a role to play.

Harrison Birtwistle has always tended to pursue his own path and often seems to be trying to set aside centuries of European music and start again from first principles. *Verses for Ensembles*, a tough but rewarding piece, provides an excellent introduction to his music. Of the older generation, Michael Tippett and Alan Bush have remained open-eared and open-minded while not embracing the farther reaches of contemporary techniques. Both have evinced serial concerns in their music, a comparative rarity in this field whose practitioners and commentators often pretend that the real world does not exist.

All these composers had come to maturity by the mid-60s: what was striking



Peter Maxwell Davies

score (ie the published piece of music) and, therefore, firms of publishers has declined in favour of commission opportunities and performances and, thus, grant-giving bodies, principally the Arts Council of Great Britain.

Not that this made the production — the actual music — any more intelligible to the lay listener or any more 'democratic' in the widest sense, and this relates to the second factor mentioned above. Immediately prior to and following the Second World War, British music was introverted to the point of provincialism, in the old sense, with little regard for the developments in musical language that had taken place in Europe up to half a century before. The academic climate — the teaching of composers—reflected this dreary reaction. Schoenberg, arguably the most influential

contemporary music and partakes of that music's languages, problems and opportunities. But this development coincides with a crisis in that same contemporary music.

150 year cycles seem to have dominated the history of music and, by 1900, the possibility of meaningful development of tonality — the musical language of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and of 20th century popular music — appeared remote to many composers. Schoenberg introduced an organising system (albeit highly artificial) analogous to this: the twelve-note method, in which all twelve chromatic (semi-tones in the octave) notes were used and in which none of these was repeated before all other eleven had been sounded so that none achieved a hierarchical priority.

After the horrors of the Third Reich, avant-garde European composers came to

at that time was the reaction of slightly younger musicians to the crisis mentioned above. What was then the 'avant-garde' — Cornelius Cardew and David Bedford — realised that contemporary classical music was talking to itself and both drastically simplified their approaches in the quest for communication, Cardew adopting outrightly explicit politics as an impetus for his music, while Bedford pursued a dual career as a rock musician and elements from that world formed an integral part of his compositions.

On the other hand there were those composers who seemed to follow Schoenberg's dictum 'if it is for the masses, it is not art and if it is art it is not for the masses'. Brian Ferneyhough, in particular, writes music of fearful forbidding complexity, often self-defeating in its incomprehensibility but nevertheless possessed of a rhetorical power equalled only by Birtwistle: *Transit*, by Ferneyhough, is a relatively accessible way in to this fevered over-intellectualism.

Of younger composers still Oliver Knussen seems set to become the most prominent of his generation while George Benjamin is also spoken highly of: a



Harrison Birtwistle conducting a new music group at *The Cockpit*.

Scottish composer, Edward McGuire, is also capable of bridging the gap between advanced techniques and a sympathetic audience.

There is a vast amount of production of new music but the most salient feature of it

remains the gap between the composer and his or her audience. This gap, opened by Schoenberg, does not seem to be lessening; perhaps, though, it is comforting for British composers to know that, in being fully part of Europe, they are not alone in sitting in it.

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