

The London Sinfonietta and Warp Record raise

A QUESTION OF CONTEXT

Alwynne Pritchard, *New Routes 4*, 2004

On the whole I think it's fair to say that contemporary classical music from Schoenberg to Ferneyhough is considered – when it's given any thought at all – an elitist corner of the musical world that does everything it possibly can to exclude all but the most intrepid musical explorers. But it's with this repertoire that the London Sinfonietta's made its name over the past thirty-six years, and with which it's since been associated as one of Europe's leading contemporary music ensembles. The Sinfonietta's audiences have tended to be professionals of at least middle age, or younger musicians or music students. Certainly, a huge proportion of the people attending are traditionally musical cognoscenti or people professionally involved in the contemporary music world in some form or other. I've been at many of these concerts myself and have sometimes been secretly dismayed at the boundary within which this music so adamantly contains itself, and which seemed to be ever-diminishing in the face of a global musical world that's expanding and interbreeding at a sometimes alarming rate. And there's always one question to which my doubts and concerns keep returning.

What precisely *is* music? In the past fifty years or so Western music's undergone a profound change at the hands of composers like John Cage and Steve Reich and as a direct result of prodigious developments in electronics, producing music that's progressed in leaps and bounds from the first tentative experiments with cutting and splicing tape, through the characteristically cheesy synthesized sounds of 1980s pop music, to the liberation of today's lap-top technology. Music's expanded to include silence itself (in John Cage's infamous 4'33") and musical forms and timbres have been redefined as a direct result of technologies made available by the computer. Our experience of music always hovers somewhere between encoded thought, an intellectual stimulus, or a purely physical thing. The result is a staggering multiplicity of musical aesthetics that can, at the most extreme ends of the spectrum, seem to have little in common with one another but sound itself.

So what does listening to music involve? Without a doubt, we can't experience anything without filtering it through some kind of expectation and music's no exception to this rule. Each musical genre has evolved its own set of expectations that determine how we listen to it and how we experience exciting and innovative developments that fuel its inevitable progress. The world of electronic music has opened up music-making to people from all kinds of backgrounds and can reach audiences of all types and sizes, rapidly creating new approaches to composition, new means of transmission and ever evolving audience expectations. One record label that's done a lot to promote the 'left-field' electronic pop

known as electronica or Intelligent Dance Music (IDM) is Warp records, which has gone from strength to strength since its early days... to boast a stable of musicians as ubiquitously influential as.... At first glance it seems obvious that no two institutions could be more diametrically opposed than Warp records and the London Sinfonietta, so it's with considerable bravery and a true pioneering spirit that they have in fact joined forces, taking up the challenge of redefining our musical expectations with their Ether Festival concerts at London's Royal Festival Hall.

The first event took place in 2003, and saw the likes of contemporary music gurus György Ligeti, Conlon Nancarrow, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Charles Ives sharing a program with arrangements of music by IDM icons Boards of Canada, Aphex Twin and Squarepusher. In 2004 the envelope was pushed still further, as Tom Jenkinson (aka Squarepusher) and Jamie Lidell appeared in person to give first hand renditions of their own music in a concert that also included pieces by Aphex Twin, Georges Antheil, John Cage, Steve Reich and Edgar Varèse. So it was that on the evening of March the 12th 2004 I entered the Royal Festival Hall intrigued and excited by the evening ahead. The first thing that struck me was the audience, which was unlike anything I'd ever seen before at a London Sinfonietta event. Three thousand people, mostly under the age of thirty, who looked ready to have a thoroughly good time. How, I wondered, would they react to the contemporary classical pieces in the program? Many of them, I suspected, would never have heard the likes of Nancarrow or Cage before. Although they occupy superficially different genres, it seems to me that many musics share fundamentally common ground and, in this case, I was expecting the evening to be bound together by a common sense of adventure that would, I hoped, excite the audience both physically and intellectually.

In the event, the evening turned out to be far stranger and more provocative than I could have predicted. I'd heard most of the music before, and in my mind's ear I'd imagined how the pieces would sit alongside one another; the minimalism of Reich tapping into the strong repetitive elements essential to all the Warp artists; Stockhausen's zany musical imagination throwing light on their dislocated structures; and the urban futurism of Antheil and Varèse coming to fruition with their new technology. But in performance all the music, without exception, sounded disconcertingly unfamiliar; my expectations were repeatedly frustrated and I began to feel really quite disturbed by the experience. But it was a fascinating one, too, and it occurred to me then, more than it ever has before, that all art is to some extent defined by its frame, by the context in which we experience it. Perhaps this is most vividly demonstrated by conceptual visual art, which, without the 'frame' of the art gallery is sometimes difficult, if not impossible to distinguish as art at all. Generally, at a London Sinfonietta concert I sit as one of a respectfully quiet audience and listen through the filter of my music college and university background. When I listen to Squarepusher I yield myself to the exuberance of the music in the knowledge that my physical responses are to some extent

stimulated by the Tom Jenkinson's creative imagination. The music is poised somewhere between reassuringly familiar drum and bass beats, vivid and sexy, and surreal collages of material that can be rapidly inter-spliced to disturbing effect. But music of this kind doesn't always have to be imaginative or even good (as defined by my musical education!) for me to enjoy it. Sometimes the sheer physicality of the music can just knock me off my feet. Without a single frame of reference for this concert, though, I found myself having to undergo constant readjustments and I was bewildered to find that my expectations were so rigidly defined. That said, there was undoubtedly an underlying connection between the performances in the program. As Ivan Hewitt put it in his *Daily Telegraph* review, 'though it was more formalised and less noisy [the music provided by the London Sinfonietta] was also about making a bid for ecstasy. They reminded us that concentration can be as thrilling as abandon.' And although I found it quite dizzying to be adjusting my focus from the background of one to the foreground of the other, it was incredible to experience such a depth of field in a single evening's concert. And my own reservations aside, the rest of audience seemed to love every bit of it, receiving each performance with open armed enthusiasm, regardless of genre.

Contrary to all my expectations, the high point of the evening for me was Jamie Lidell's electrifying vocal performance, in which he treated his own visceral vocal acrobatics to astonishing displays of sampling and sequencing. He stepped onto the stage in a Liberacci-inspired jacket made of audio-cassette tape and lulled me into a false sense of security with a performance that began in familiar beat-box territory. But pretty quickly it began to escalate into a hair-raising performance that, along with the live, on-stage video provided by Pablo Fiasco, grabbed my by the throat and dragged me into Lidell's violent, erotic and spectacular world of sound. Despite the visionary use of sirens, airplane propellers and player pianos, even the likes of George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* from 1924 couldn't compete with the incredible sound resources that contemporary electronic composers like Lidell have at their disposal. But this unprecedented concert did make many important connections between avant-garde musics from very different genres. Laurence Phelan hit the nail on the head in his *Independent on Sunday* review when he wrote:

The lesson of the evening was that, via the modernist composers Edgar Varèse and George Antheil and the minimalists John Cage and Steve Reich, there's a lineage that stretches direct and unbroken, between classical music and the abstract contemporary electronica of Squarepusher and Aphex Twin.

Although I believe this to be true, I also believe that there are still many barriers to hearing the connections between these musics. And, of course, it's important that we experience the profound differences, too. But I'm fascinated as to where the connections lie, how we listen for them and what changes experiencing them will ultimately produce in the music that we write and the format in which concerts are presented. As Edgar Varèse himself pointed out, 'each age of man requires a change of set' and it is this transformation that the London Sinfonietta and Warp records, to their very considerable credit, are currently tackling head-on.