
Sydney Spring Festival: The Music

The further away one is from a historical period, the more one imagines that one knows what was going on. Baroque, classic, romantic: these seem easy notions, because the passage of time has swept away the surface chaos of conflicting convictions which beset contemporary listeners then, and still beset them today. We decide for ourselves what was significant in the music of previous eras, and then we reconstruct history in our own image. But the present day is not so easily categorised and dispatched. Is that because we are 'too close' to it? Or is it, perhaps, just more infernally complex, more unsummarisable, than previous periods?

As if the fifties (purist avant-garde), sixties (pluralism) and seventies (post-modernism) weren't bad enough, we now have to deal with a situation in which the flow of musical information from almost all over the globe is seemingly infinite, and the basis for judging and 'filtering' it, virtually non-existent. There is no realistic consensus of taste: the Enlightenment, for better or worse, is two hundred years behind us.

So what remains? The Publicity Machine, and personal convictions. Both, it seems, are essential if art is going to survive in the nineties; the question is: which drives which - which is the horse, and which the cart? It is my view that in recent years, the Publicity Machine has had too easy a victory: 'if it can be sold, it must be right' has become the watchword underlying most New Music productions. The Sydney Spring, without being so unworldly as to deny the existence of the market place, takes an opposed view: 'since we believe these things are right (or important, or fascinating, or thought-provoking), it is our business to find ways of selling them'.

How is this to be achieved? Firstly, through the presentation of programmes in whose contents we have the utmost conviction. No concessions to expediency or to local cultural politics! Where a limited number of players was available, we sought out the most striking repertoire compatible with available resources. More importantly, the substantial Australian content of this series is not the result of flag-waving or funds-seeking: it too is an act of conviction. It says: what we present here, we would proudly present anywhere - not as Australian content, but as **art** whose authors are, happily for us, Australian. The focal point of the festival is, of course, the repertoire of Roger Woodward, who has been closely associated with radical contemporary music even before his international career started in London in the early 1970s. Of the many strands, of his post-war repertoire, Iannis Xenakis, Morton Feldman, Toru Takemitsu, and new Australian music are particularly featured. Against these are counterposed earlier versions of post-romantic sensuality (Satie, Debussy, Scriabin), and various more astringent versions of post-war modernism, including some significant glimpses of the 'new complexity' (also distinctly sensual in character) which has given rise to both fanatical adherence and bitter opposition in recent years.

Each of the six concerts has its particular themes and counterpoints. **Concert 'A'** is a sort of digest of discrepant themes. At one extreme are the avant-garde structuralists: Stockhausen and Xenakis. Stockhausen's **Klavierstück IX**, composed nearly thirty years ago, scandalised both adherents and opponents: here was the Grand Master of rigorously organised non-repetition, bringing the same structural methods to bear on a material which is provocatively repetitive (Bartok meets LaMonte Young, one might say) but is gradually decomposed into glistening filigrees, regulated by the Fibonacci proportions Stockhausen had learnt from Le Corbusier's **Modulor**. In the same programme is the work of a composer - Xenakis - who was actually Corbusier's right-hand man in the early fifties, yet whose coolly mathematical methods yielded a music which grows ever more romantic and flamboyant as time goes by. Takemitsu's music introduces a further paradox: