

Bells, Strings and Keys

A concert given by the Electro-Acoustic Ensemble.

Venue: St. Marys, Lowgate, Hull

Date: Tuesday 28th. March 2023

Times: Open from 11.00 - 16.30 and 18.15 - 21.00

Free admission, but donations to the church would be welcomed.

The programme today comprises of a diverse range of music - acousmatic surround sound, electro-acoustic and instrumental.

Performers:

Piano: Nigel Bartram and Stanislaw

'cello: Nigel Bartram

Diffusion and electronics: John Stead

Production: John Howes and Gavin Kauffman.

The Electro-Acoustic Ensemble would like to thank Hillary Newton, Olga Li La-Vigars and Patrick Plunkett for their kindness and support.

Programme:

11.00 - 11.30

Fibonacci 144 - sound installation - John Stead (2022).

This sound installation utilises just 2 bell-gongs, which are spatialised on 8 loudspeakers. The pitch of these bell-gongs are variously transposed - their spectral components coming into view via a collection of aleatoric processes which run continuously throughout the installation.

These processes use the Fibonacci Sequence (a series of additive numbers) to define, filter and spatialise the sound. The aleatoric nature of the interactions of just 7 of these processes means, that throughout the installation performance, the combined sounds and their transformations never repeat, creating a contemplation of the natural world through magical numbers ...

J.S. 2023

11.30 - 11.40

Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco for 8ch. tape - Jonathan Harvey (1980).

Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco uses just two sound sources - the Great tenor bell at Winchester and a boy choristers voice. The boy is Jonathan Harvey's son Dominic, who was a chorister at Winchester at the time.

Commissioned by the newly opened IRCAM institute in Paris, the work presents the internal spectral components of the bell, which are morphed with the sounds of the voice, using the 4X computer at IRCAM, which at the time was the most advanced.

The structure of this 9 minute piece is in 8 sections based on a single striking of the bell with its subsequent unfolding harmonics presented with the transformed voice.

The title is a reduction of the words engraved on the rim of the bell: '*Horas avolantes numero, mortuous plango; vivos ad preces voco*' - a literal translation is 'I count the flying hours, I cry for the Dead; I call the living for Prayer' - these words, in Latin, are sung by the chorister.

Notably the sounds are not only transformed, but also spatialised to envelop the listener with the 'dead' bell sounds slowly moving around the audience whilst 'life' represented by the voice, flies around the space.

In his analysis, John Palmer states that the composer was well aware of the symbolism included in the function of a bell. As suggested by the engraved text, the bell is ringing for the dead and the living ... The two opposing realities upheld by the same sound; the same sound evoking two apparently contradictory, yet complimentary meanings.

J.S. 2022.

11.45 - 12.15

Children's Songs for piano: 1 to 10 - Chick Corea (1971/80).

Piano: Nigel Bartram

This solo piano collection follows the model of Bela Bartok's 'Microkosmos', though not intended to be a piano teaching tool or as extensive.

The pieces exemplify Corea's signature piano sound; impish, playful, perhaps a little mischievous and child-like. They are designed to be 'portraits' of children, each a magical vignette with a distinct atmosphere.

Throughout the set, Chick Corea's musical influences can be heard, ranging from composers such as Satie, Beethoven, Scriabin, Thelonius Monk, Steve Reich and at times his life-long love for Afro-Cuban jazz.

I have very much enjoyed playing the 20 pieces as a set, which allows an appreciation of gradually increasing complexity with a sense of musical adventure, whilst always trying to 'convey simplicity as beauty, as represented in the spirit of a child' as the composer requests.

N.B 2023.

14.00 - 14.30

Children's Songs for piano: 11 to 20 - Chick Corea (1971/80).

Piano: Nigel Bartram

14.35 - 14.55

Fibo 144 sound installation continues

15.00 - 15.25

A Dream of Numbers for 8ch. tape - John Stead (2021).

This work is dedicated to a close and much loved friend of many years who died 4 years ago. Her interest in puzzles gave her an unexpected enjoyment and interest in my work 'Cycles and Rounds for PMD' (a tombeau for Peter Maxwell Davies) premiered at the Charterhouse Chapel, Hull in 2017.

As in 'Cycle and Rounds for PMD' , a collection of bells and metallic percussion utilise instructions, via cryptography, to translate words and numbers into pitch systems and complex interacting rhythms.

The piece begins very quietly and at a distance, gradually coming into view. Over the duration of the piece, the bell sounds become more 'connected' and build to a plateau of complex interweaving systems. Half way through, these systems suddenly begin to descend, slow down and gradually dissipate into space.

J.S. 2021

15.00 - 16.30

Fibo 144 sound installation.

Early evening concert:

Doors open 18.15

Admission Free: donations to the church would be welcome.

18.30 - 18.50

In a Landscape for piano - John Cage (1948).

This minimalist piece for solo piano or harp was written to accompany a dance by Merce Cunningham. At the time of writing Cage was particularly interested in the piano music of Erik Satie as evidenced by the relative lack of dynamics, consistent tempo and slow progressions. However there are more typically experimental aspects to the work.

Cage instructs the performer to sustain both the damper and sustain pedals for the entire duration of the work. This creates mesmerising harmonics which build and resonate throughout, resulting in an ethereal and still atmosphere.

As Cage remarks the purpose of the music is 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences'. It is appropriate therefore that we are performing the work today in a beautiful church.

N.B. 2023

19.00 - 19.30

Palais de Mari for piano - Morton Feldman (1986).

The American - Jewish composer, Morton Feldman (1926 – 1987) was for a while overshadowed by his older friend, John Cage. Both were interested in making music free of academic rules or other constraints. With Feldman this often took the form at first of small numbers of isolated sounds – preceded by rests (silences) and followed by rests. A major characteristic of his music is that almost all of it is intended to be played as quietly as possible. In this way the music may often be perceived as slow moving. Many people find it is useful for quiet contemplation.

On the other hand, I first heard Feldman's music more than fifty years ago, at a time when being a friend of Cage's seemed to be the theme for presenting his work. I was still at school but the pieces I heard have rung in my ears ever since. Yes the music was very quiet, for piano and also celeste, and full of silences This was probably outrageous and yet it filled me with a great sense of excitement. No, I did not, and do not find Feldman's music contemplative – rather it has entered a field of great beauty and tension which keep it alive rather than simply floating past our ears. There is a mystery about how the music works – also a mastery of the idiom. Many people have tried analysis but have found that, just as there might be a pattern forming, Feldman does not run with it. The notes do not usually lead to any sense of tonal music or conventional harmony. The composer was very influenced by American abstract expressionist artists such as Mark Rothko and Philip Guston whom he often knew personally. Tate Modern is to host a Philip Guston exhibition this year delayed because of the recent epidemic.

Midway in his career Feldman became hugely interested in the idea of listening for very long durations and some of his music can take an hour and a half to play. His second String Quartet takes six hours! The silences seem to have become much shorter, if they exist at all, and sounds are more bound together. These days Feldman is held in very high regard as a composer and is widely performed.

Palais de Mari (1986) is a short piece by Feldman's standards, however, (some twenty minutes) and is the composer's last solo piano piece. It was commissioned by the composer's pupil and close associate, Bunita Marcus, and dedicated to the painter Francesco Clemente at whose house it was first performed by the commissioner. On a visit to the Louvre Feldman had seen a photograph taken in Syria of the ruins the Palais de Mari. The composer was much moved and seemed to associate these ruins in some way with his own directions in music making, hence the title of the piece.

The piano keeps a sustained sound throughout this work; the performer, as in all of Feldman, is required to count with great concentration throughout, as the sounds are often not regular in time. Many rests are written but the sustain pedal holds the sounds through. Sounds are now more tonal than in previous music. I very much hope you will appreciate the very personal excitement of these sounds.

Stan Hansel 2023.

INTERVAL 20 mins.

20.00 - 20.45

Duet 1 for 'cello and live electronics - John Stead (2022).
dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Harvey.
(first performance)

'cello': Nigel Bartram
electronics: John Stead

... Notes by the 'cellist:

- the work invites the cellist to investigate varying techniques especially bowing techniques (I have chosen col legno, spiccato, jete, tremolando) , strummed chords and harmonics, long 'breathed' notes moving towards the fingerboard or bridge.
- More unusual techniques highlighting the cello as a sound producing object- playing beyond the bridge, bowing the rib of the instrument, finger -tapping, to produce a pure unpitched texture
- Working to interact (duet) with previously played phrases now electronically transformed/captured.
- Challenge of working in all registers to produce new ideas whilst working within the parameters of the score.

... Notes by the composer:

I wanted to explore the sonic possibilities of the 'cello, and was inspired by techniques employed in Jonathan Harvey's 4th string quartet. As in the quartet, the use of technology is very apparent on various levels - sound transformation and spatialisation.

DUET 1 is in 3 parts, and can be played without a break in between. Its duration is very much decided by the performers during rehearsal and ranges from minutes to hours.

Each part focusses on the 'cello as a sonic object;

Part 1 has two sections and opens with non-pitched sounds played on different parts of the cello body but not on the strings, whose sound only emerges in the last part of the first movement, as pizzicato pitches.

The articulation of these sounds comes from a wide range of 'cello techniques gathered from such works as Stravinsky's Firebird suite, and as previously mentioned, Harvey's 4th string quartet ... These varying ways of playing offer differing harmonic or spectral aspects which are collected, transformed and extended into an extraordinary sound world by the live electronics.

Part 2 is completely pitch based and uses the bow in various ways. The sounds are again transformed by various devices including the ring modulator which creates bell like sounds, and transposing software, which extends the range of the instrument.

Part 3 combines, and reprises techniques and sounds of the two previous parts and is entitled "trajectoires asymetrique", alluding to two composers, Henri Dutilleux and Olivier Messiaen.

J.S. 2023