



AMATI

CONCERT REVIEW: Birmingham Contemporary Music Group / Oliver Knussen

Written by Peter Quantrill

★★★★☆



'Beethoven never does what you expect him to', remarked Sir Harrison Birtwistle after Anssi Karttunen and Nicholas Hodges had played the Cello Sonata Op.102 No.1. It made a fitting climax to the lunchtime recital on the last day of Secret Theatres, a three-day festival of Birtwistle's music curated by composer and Cambridge lecturer Richard Causton.

Nicholas Marston's note pointed up the nature of the sonata as a written-out experiment. Cello and piano don't have the

discrete identities of the model handed down to Beethoven by Bach and Mozart – the protagonist is not one or the other, but both - and Karttunen and Hodges were constantly alive to one another's switches of articulation between attack and legato. In the slow introductions to each movement Karttunen let the chapel's famous eight-second echo do the work for him; an option not open to Hodges, many of whose quick figurations were inevitably lost, though the trademark trills of Beethoven's late style were lent an impressionistic blur that felt like a cousin to the receding horizon of the last piano sonata, Op.111. The recitative section of the finale was interpolated to emphasise the stylistic disruption of a work that hardly finds a tonal centre before losing or rejecting it: rest is anathema.

So it is in Birtwistle's music. Of three excerpts from his Bogenstrich cycle, the fugue worked best, with a solo part that most sounded particular to the cello, without the leaping intervals and sudden attacks of the Variations and Song without Words that seem better suited to the clarinet, Birtwistle's own instrument. Interspersed between them were two first performances: Jae-Moon Lee's insistent Tangram for solo piano offered little beyond its arresting opening, but Causton's own De Profundis makes a significant addition to the rich history of solo cello music in the past century. There's a pleasing literalism to its initial mooring on the G string, and gradual melodic development on the C string, before gathering pace and rising in pitch, mostly in close intervals, with much use of high harmonics on the lower strings and double-stopping in the middle: it is superbly written, an idea perfectly matched to the instrument, its techniques and possibilities, and Karttunen again used the chapel's echo, this time to evoke the chasms of the implied text, Psalm 130: 'From the depths, I cry to you, O Lord'.

This was the psalm sung at Evensong a few hours later in a packed Chapel including Birtwistle himself, who was touchingly offered his own bidding prayer after the sung anthem Pange Lingua, one of four ethereal motets in his opera on The Last Supper. Plainsong and Robert Fayrfax's Magnificat made an appropriately austere context, while also returning the chapel to its own late-medieval age.

The evening concert bypassed Romantic and Classical eras to similarly exhilarating effect. It was bookended by two Birtwistle classics, Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum and Silbury Air, whose prehistoric ritual resounded to imposing effect in the chapel. In between came two chamber symphonies, of which Alexander Goehr's suffered the loss of detail more than Causton's slow processional, building steadily to a stretched, urgent drama. Another world premiere, Polly Roe by Patrick Brennan, was remarkable for its toccata-like energy, harnessing a relatively limited organisation of pitches with few anchor points in its brief course until a low E passed between harp and bass brought instinctive closure. Knussen's typical care for the planning and preparation of the programme produced performances of total self-confidence and technical authority.

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