

# Strange bedfellows

Surprises all round as a pair of unlikely couplings give **Paul Driver** a thrill

**I**t was a fairly bracing surprise to find myself in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, not to hear some glorious Renaissance polyphony or the exquisitely sung Christmas carols for which the place is world-famous, but for one of the most rebarbative early pieces of Birtwistle. This was the closing concert, given by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group under Oliver Knussen, of a three-day festival, Secret Theatres, marking Birtwistle's 80th birthday.

And, in fact, just before, at an evensong in which the choir was directed by Stephen Cleobury, there had indeed been an outpouring of such Renaissance mellifluousness — music by Robert Fayrfax — alongside a Lullaby and motet (Pange Lingua, from his opera *The Last Supper*) by Birtwistle himself. Little incongruence here between modernism and the Renaissance, or the uniquely vaulted surroundings — for choral singing never changes all that radically. But later it was a different story.

Silbury Air, flaunting its deceptive title (no music less aria-like), brought into the sanctuary — or nave, anyhow — a thudding, strident evocation of prehistoric Wiltshire. The drummer was like a pagan hierophant, though not lifting his sticks up high, as requested on occasion in the score; nor was the pulsing textural insistency as searing in the cathedral acoustic as it is apt to be in, say, the Queen Elizabeth Hall. But the work fared better than his short, overture-like *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum*, whose jostling, juggled interior rhythmic mechanisms were not ideally distinguishable.

Acoustics were not, though, a bar to the vivid, driven, two-movement Chamber Symphony by Richard Causton, organiser of the festival, nor Patrick Brennan's brief but highly effective "spectralist" excursion, Polly Roe; even if Alexander Goehr's new chamber symphony, ...Between the Lines, with its intricate contrapuntal working, would have benefited from a more focused resonance.

The unlikely proximity of Fayrfax and Birtwistle was mirrored in London in a

Barbican concert by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by James Gaffigan. Side by side with that epitome of the audience-daunting 12-tone technique, Schoenberg's Piano Concerto, was a *locus classicus* of symphonic jazz, Gershwin's audience-assuaging Rhapsody in Blue. The soloist in both works was Kirill Gerstein, in whose background classical and jazz streams ran together. The juxtaposition was his own idea, the assumption being that since Schoenberg and Gershwin were friends, Hollywood neighbours and tennis partners, and both painted as well as composed, their pieces would shed light on each other. But though Gerstein's playing was stylish and dapper in each case — and the use of Ferde Grofé's 1926 sharply etched "pit band" arrangement of the Rhapsody interesting — no new and insightful connections stirred in my mind.

More significant there was the link between the (1942) neoclassical concerto and Schoenberg's freely atonal 1912 masterpiece, *Pierrot lunaire*, as performed by the Paris-based Ensemble

Intercontemporain at Wigmore Hall, with the soprano-reciter Salomé Haller. She gave the speech-song (*Sprechstimme*) a strikingly operatic lift: more of "song" than previously in my experience, and with much histrionic wielding of her stool. But her account had unmistakable conviction (how nicely she found the note of deranged levity), and the instrumental finesse was memorable.

In the same hall, I caught a recital by an illustrious string quartet, and then another at the QEH. Both the Emerson String Quartet here and the Takacs Quartet at Wigmore offered Beethoven's B flat quartet, Op 130. The Takacs opted for the shorter, lighter, more manageable (though still fugal) finale with which he was persuaded to replace the Grosse Fuge original. But the Emersons scaled the great edifice itself. It is a miracle of genius that both movements are utterly effective, but the more ambitious realisation — and the Emersons, upstanding, matched staggering execution with draining intensity — left me emotionally persuaded that this is the right one. Intellectually, too. For when you look back on the whole work from the achieved end of the Grosse Fuge, you can see an architectural vista unparalleled in music. 

## THE CRITICS

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