

Something New, Something Old, Something Else
Philip Thomas - piano

- J.S.Bach *Prelude and Fugue in C major* (book 1)
 Prelude and Fugue in F major (book 2)
- A.Clementi *Variazioni su B.A.C.H.* (1984)
- R.Emsley *Flow Form* (1986-7)
- M.Finnissy *Ives* (1974)
 My Bonny Boy (1977) (from *English Country Tunes*)
- C.Ives *Three-Page Sonata* (1905)
- INTERVAL ---
- R.Emsley *for piano 13* (2003) ** world premiere**

Tonight's concert is the first of two this season - and hopefully of more in the future - grouped together under the title *Something New, Something Old, Something Else*. The primary intention is that a major new work is commissioned from a composer whose music I find to be radical, original and ultimately inspiring. Then, an older work by the same composer is chosen to go alongside the new work and the programme is completed by works by other composers, from any musical period or style, that might demonstrate connections, traces, influences, or even disparities. These works have been selected after discussions between the composers and myself.

The two composers who have written new works this year - Richard Emsley for tonight's concert and Christopher Fox for the concert on 24th February 2004 - are composers whose music I first played in 2001 as part of my *John Cage and Twenty-first Century Britain* series at the Mappin Art Gallery. Since then I have heard and played more of their music in other contexts and have come to appreciate it in greater measure. Their music, though very different, beguiles, entrances and intrigues me. The origins for both works actually date from before I commissioned them. Both Richard and Christopher had casually mentioned ideas for new pieces and it didn't take me too long to find an appropriate and hopefully engaging context for which to commission them.

Three qualities which I value in **Richard Emsley's** music are the tendency toward prolonged and sustained lyricism; the creative approach to musical time and its measurement; and the way it provokes me as a pianist to explore the subtleties of touch. Since 1997 Emsley has written a series of piano works simply titled 'for piano ...', of which *for piano 13* is the latest and longest by a considerable measure. These were composed after a break from composition of nearly ten years and represent arguably a simplification of much of the music he had written previously, which was marked by a heightened complexity.

These piano pieces, the characteristics of which were anticipated by *Flow Form*, Emsley's first piano work and the last work to be composed before his break from composition, have in common the constant depression of the sustaining pedal. This has two main consequences: firstly, a 'cloud' of harmony and resonance is created which colours and shapes each moment and which significantly disorients any appreciation

of a 'tonal base'. (Incidentally, Emsley generally restricts himself to roughly the upper half of the keyboard's register, thus keeping the music 'afloat' and again avoiding a tonal root). Secondly, the listener's sense of melodic line is both *enhanced* by the continuity created by the strings being left to resonate fully and, paradoxically, *disturbed* by the disparate continuities created by the wide intervallic leaps which can give the impression of two or three superimposed melodic lines. What is clear, however, is that a heightened sense of lyricism are at the heart of this music.

The American composer Christian Wolff once talked of the 'tendency toward melody' of his music and also that of John Cage and other experimentalist composers. Much of this music consisted of isolated events separated in time, and which were frequently the result of random or chance operations. Though the musical events in Emsley's work are generally more connected, it is worth alluding to the fact that the pitches of his lines are randomly generated using a computer, but always within clearly fixed parameters. The lines are still demonstrably lyrical reflecting the very personal and humanistic side to Emsley's music. They *breathe* and even soar in an almost late romantic manner though as if dislocated from their context, at once rarefied and detached.

Just as the lines take shape melodically, so also do they move with clearly differentiated temporal energies. *for piano 13* demonstrates this well, being at times teeming with a hyper-energy whilst at other times verging towards the totally static (the second section begins with a single note lasting about 11 seconds). Emsley employs a complex rhythmic notation, surely influenced in part by Stockhausen's innovations in the 1950s and, later, by those of Michael Finnissy, which ensures the absence of a beat for much of the time. This serves to liberate the movement of the line so that it avoids both cliché and the anticipation of traditional phrasing. In combination with the rhythmic notation the notated phrasing serves to further the temporal disorientation.

Despite these intricate complexities, taking a step back and looking at the music as a whole reveals the formal designs to be in fact very simple. Individual pieces do not 'develop' as such but instead expand and contract, move faster or slower, show preference to one melodic or rhythmic motive or another. Each moment of a work could be said to encapsulate the whole. It is this approach to form, and the measurement of time, which presents the listener with a mystery. In one sense Emsley's music is not 'challenging' in that it is not *difficult* - no analytical or historical knowledge is needed to appreciate this beautiful succession of moments (a point which I made with reference to the music of Morton Feldman in a series of concerts last year). However it does challenge our contemplation and experience of time. Here, the context obviously is musical time, but parallels might be applied to our experience of non-musical time.

As in Feldman's music, the listener is drawn to the beauty and vitality of each moment. Emsley keeps the music *alive* and retains our involvement in ways such as I have described above. As a performer I am entranced by the intricacies and variety of melodic and rhythmic nuance. These challenge me to respond with an equal variety of touch that I might enhance the life and breath of this strange song.

Bach's C major Prelude (book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Keyboard*) is possibly the best known of all the preludes. Its repeated rhythmic pattern and consistent rate of harmonic change mean that both performer and listener bring to it a multiplicity of potential interpretations. Its combination of conventional progressions and momentary surprises, expanding and contracting shapes, as well as the final prolonged, teasing cadence miraculously never tires. The Fugue which follows is an example of Bach

deriving each and every melodic feature from the opening rising four notes, creating a rich and dense texture of interweaving scales.

The F major Prelude (book 2) resembles the C major Fugue in its continuous scalic motion, again derived from a basic four-note cell. Here Bach allows certain notes to be sustained over the continuous quaver motion, leaving residues that build to create a slow counterpoint in anticipation of the soon-to-be-developed sustaining pedal. The Fugue provides a lively contrast, dancing rather 'un-fugally' and not without surprises along the way.

Variazioni su B.A.C.H. by Italian composer Aldo Clementi derives from an earlier work simply titled B.A.C.H. The latter superimposed three strands of music: a simple scale in the middle register with the notes B (read B flat), A, C and H (read B) brought to the fore; a contrary motion chromatic scale; and a fragment from Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 906. The later work, being played tonight, combines the earlier work with its own retrograde - thus there are two scales in the middle register, two sets of contrary motion chromatic scales and twice as many fragments. As with Emsley's music each moment could be said to reflect the whole and the piece could quite literally last forever (the pianist is instructed to play it as many times as she/he likes but no less than three) suggesting that any performance of this piece could only be a snapshot of a much larger picture. The work's poetry is both conceptual and musical - the C minor fragments, which tend towards descent, lend a pathos to the piece which never resolves but is simply reiterated. It stands as it is, monolithically signalling a musical aesthetic which is both anonymous and strangely, intimately personal.

Richard Emsley's Flow Form is his first piano work and points toward the piano works which flowered after a period of compositional silence. Its high, rapid filigree passage-work, always presented as a single line, moves between the delicate and fragile to the glisteningly brilliant. The formal scheme can be summarised as four sections, separated by pauses, and subdivided into three further sections of roughly equal length. The material of each larger section is characterised by its sense of movement and energy.

Michael Finnissy's music has been a huge influence on an increasingly large number of musicians, of whom Richard Emsley and myself can be counted. The two pieces being played tonight date from the 1970s and are some of the earliest pieces by which Finnissy is best known. Ives is a tribute to that great American pioneer whose music so generously spills out from the confines of the Western tradition. Finnissy's short work, which was written to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Ives' birth, reflects the expanse and eclecticism of Ives' music, filtered through Finnissy's own persona and unique musical language. Its explosive opening perhaps reflects the 'Hawthorne' movement of Ives' 'Concord Sonata', whilst the dislocated rhythms near the end might be a reference to the ragtime extracts in the 'Three-Page Sonata' (see below).

In complete contrast My Bonny Boy, the 7th movement of Finnissy's (otherwise explosive) classic piano solo 'English Country Tunes', is a beautiful study in stillness. Clearly an influence upon Emsley's music, the pedal is held throughout whilst a modal folk-like tune is objectified and extended, employing complex rhythmic notation to keep it alive and 'afloat'.

Ives' Three-Page Sonata, so called because it filled (in Ives' tiny handwriting) a mere three pages of manuscript, is an astonishingly bold and innovative work, written in

1905. On one of the original printed scores Ives wrote "made mostly as a joke to knock the mollycoddles out of their boxes and to kick out the softy ears!". Certainly much of the work is uncompromising in its bold harmonies, inventive cross-rhythms, and, in the last movement, sheer noise. However the calm and serene middle movement, with its bell-like upper melody, creates a beautiful contrast with the outer movements. The first movement is the most sonata-like and features an opening theme, and a number of similar references throughout, based upon the B.A.C.H. motif. The final movement is typical Ives, combining a deranged march with a ragtime melody in two beats per bar with an accompaniment in three.

Richard Emsley's for piano 13 consists of twelve sections, alternately 'ringing' and lyrical. The first section is actually a piece written for a series of concerts I gave in 2001. The subsequent sections derive (or deviate) from this work. The six ringing sections (number 1,3,5,7,9 and 11) successively open with a chord derived from the very first chord of the work but each time reduced by a note (the last section is reduced to a mere two notes). The intervening sections are primarily lyrical, each one again progressively utilising less pitches than the previous one. Each section clearly has its own character, due to the selections of pitches and the rhythmic and other limitations or patterns imposed by the composer. Additionally each section is subdivided into sections of greater or lesser activity. As the work draws to its close the state arrived at is paradoxically one of tenderness and fragility, warmth and distance - qualities which are to be found in much of Emsley's music. The abstract objectification of the material is presented with a human touch.

Richard Emsley was born in Goole, Yorkshire in December 1951. During his formal musical education at University College Cardiff Emsley tended to specialise in analytical rather than compositional options, his first year dissertation being on the subject of musical stasis and later ones exploring movement and time in twentieth century music and the work of Pierre Boulez. During this period Emsley frequently attended the composition classes of Peter Maxwell Davies at Dartington Summer School of Music, and composed his earliest acknowledged work *The lunar silences, the silent tide lapping...*

On moving to London in 1976 Emsley took on work as a music engraver, which continues to be his principal form of livelihood. A central activity at this time was the London new music ensemble Suoraan, co-founded and directed with the composer James Clarke. Consisting of a small band of outstanding specialist performers, the ensemble dedicatedly promoted the music of, centrally, Iannis Xenakis but also younger British and European composers such as Michael Finnissy and James Dillon. Six ensemble works were composed by Emsley for the group, including in 1981 the music theatre piece *The Juniper Tree*.

After leaving Suoraan Emsley fulfilled a number of commissions including a children's music theatre work for the Inner London Education Authority and *...from swerve of shore to bend of bay...* for The Fires of London. In 1988 an article on Emsley's work by composer Richard Barrett appeared in Tempo magazine, leading to an invitation to participate in the Composers' Forum at Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik. However, following the composition of the piano solo work *Flow Form* there ensued a lengthy period of reappraisal and experimentation.

The creative silence of this period was finally broken with *finnissys fifty*, *Little Sunderings* and the first of the *for piano* series, these works representing the discovery of a new pared-down piano idiom which has proved a fruitful seam, the latest work to be completed in this series being *for piano 13*.

finnissys fifty was commissioned and first performed by the pianist Ian Pace, who has continued to be a major exponent of Emsley's work, performing it, as well as in Britain, at festivals including 'Evenings of New Music' Bratislava, 'Music Summit' Cologne, '...antasten... Internationales Pianoforum' Heilbronn and 'Mostly Modern' Dublin. Additionally, works in the *for piano* series have twice been selected for performance at ISCM World Music Days - in Bucharest (1999) and Yokohama (2001) - and have been taken up by other pianists including Isabel Ettenauer, Robert Keeley, Kate Ryder and Scott Tinney.

Currently, in contrast to this exclusive focus on the solo piano, Emsley has begun *Still/s*, a series of 24 solos, duos and trios exploring various combinations of a five-instrument reservoir. Involving even more drastically pared-down material than the piano works, this series sprang from a collaboration with the visual artist Joan Key whose Six White Paintings for Composition were shown in the 2002 Colour White exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion Bexhill concurrently with the first performance by Anton Lukoszevieve of Emsley's solo cello piece *Still/s 1*. Further works in the series are being scheduled for performance by the clarinet/piano duo Carl Rosman and Mark Knoop as well as Apartment House and the Australian ensemble Libra.

Philip Thomas (b.1972, North Devon) graduated from Hull University in 1993 with a 1st class honours degree in music and the Departmental Prize. He went on to study with Peter Hill at Sheffield University, gaining a Masters degree in 1994, for which he performed and studied the piano sonatas of *Sir Michael Tippett*. Remaining in Sheffield, in 1998 he was awarded a PhD in the performance practice of contemporary piano music. He is currently based in Sheffield, from where he pursues an active performing career and teaches privately and at the University. In September 2000, he was appointed Head of the Sheffield Music School.

Philip specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. His concerts are noted for being both accessible and provocative. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, often addressing an underlying theme or issue. Philip's most recent solo projects have included a highly successful three-concert festival of the music of Morton Feldman, alongside three specially commissioned new works by British composers (this took place in October 2002 at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, and subsequently toured venues across the country); performances of solo music by Lachenmann, Zimmermann and others in Spring 2002; and a John Cage and contemporary British composers festival in February 2001, including a number of world and British premieres.

Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included a 'Fluxus-Defluxus' event in Berlin as part of the 'Maerz-musik' festival; a performance in Ghent, Belgium, as part of Ghent's contemporary music series; 2 concerts at the 2002 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, including a major portrait of the music of Christian Wolff, featuring the composer himself in a rare visit to England; a Luc Ferrari/Sylvano Bussotti presentation at the 2002 Hoxton New Music Days; a world premiere by Christopher Fox, broadcast on

the German radio network WDR and subsequently released on CD, in April 2002, at the Witten Neue Musik Tage, Germany; and a portrait concert of Clarence Barlow at the Hoxton New Music Festival in June 2001, which included two solo works and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

Other recent collaborations have been with electronics improvising duo Transient v Resident, and Manchester-based Ensemble 11.

Philip has premiered solo works by Richard Ayres, Chris Burn, Stephen Chase, Laurence Crane, Richard Emsley, Bryn Harrison, Michael Parsons and James Saunders. His repertoire also includes works by *Clarence Barlow, Gerald Barry, Luciano Berio, John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, John Croft, George Crumb, Morton Feldman, Michael Finnissy, Graham Fitkin, Christopher Fox, György Kurtag, Helmut Lachenmann, Olivier Messiaen, James Macmillan, Per Nørgård, Katherine Norman, Arvo Pärt, Wolfgang Rihm, Robert Saxton, Howard Skempton, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mark R.Taylor, Michael Tippett, John White, Christian Wolff, Walter Zimmermann* and others.

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