

Arts in the Valley

Rustiques

Kangaroo Valley Community Hall, Sunday March 7th, 2021 at 11.00am.

Performers: Nicola Bell-oboe, Melissa Woodroffe-bassoon, Alex Morris-clarinet, Jonathan Henderson-flute

Music by Canteloube, Bartok, Stravinsky, Janacek, Jolivet, Villa-Lobos and Berger.

Once again, this little group of wandering players (they arrived from Sydney in an Audi) gave us a concert to savour. One thing of which I was reminded in this and the previous concert given by this group was that the Australian conservatoires (and their European counterparts) who have quite recently incubated these musicians have done a wonderful job in training up a stunning next generation of young Australian classical performers of whom we can be very proud. Whether each will have satisfactory careers in the post-COVID classical music world, is, I suppose, another question, but there is no doubting the credentials of these young musicians, including their deep love of what they do. Nothing pleases them more than to be sharing their talents and abilities in concerts such as this.

Aside from the excellence of the performers, your reviewer found himself reflecting upon some important historical and philosophical questions, each of which was stimulated by the quality of every aspect of this concert.

Each piece performed at this concert was written in the early part of the twentieth century. At that time, with the music dramas of Wagner casting a giant shadow, a new generation of Western art-music composers was looking to create something new that would, in a sense, minimise his influence. Some who are to this day regarded as *avant-garde*, such as Schoenberg and his followers, developed atonalism, which eventually morphed into serialism; others were influenced by American jazz; some turned back to the music of the eighteenth century for their inspiration (often now referred to as 'neo-classicism') and a large number found inspiration and a certain 'newness' through basing their art-music on folksong material, which they roamed all over Europe and the UK to collect. This gave their resultant music a certain rustic quality because the original material usually remained obvious in some way to the listener, albeit at the same time sounding somewhat 'worked over'. It is this latter type of music which formed the basis of the repertoire we heard in this concert.

Using folk song as a starting point for new classical music leads to all sorts of philosophical discussion and conjecture:

- How much of the original folk music element remains?
- Is this a true example of 'nationalism' (or 'regionalism') in music, or is the folk element only a starting point for what becomes serious and more cosmopolitan-sounding music?
- Does this new music 'replace' the folk music?
- Is serious art-music better than folk music because it is more highly developed by more accomplished creators?
- Are the rustic peasant folk who created the music in the first place well-served by having sophisticated composers turn their important traditional songs - which, incidentally, carry their stories and history - into something that is more rarefied and divorced from its origins?

A partial answer can be found in the fact that each composer seems to have had the deepest respect for the originators of this orally transmitted music as well as for the original music itself, most of

which was now being transcribed (written down) for the first time. Bartok, Grainger, Villa-Lobos, Jolivet *et al* regarded the folksingers they encountered as musical equals and held their music in the highest esteem. But then another philosophical question arises: if one feels such reverence towards something, why try to change it by turning it into something else? Perhaps they felt that by using folksong as they did, they were, in one sense at least, doing something to both elevate and preserve the music at a time when a rapidly changing world would threaten its very survival.

One way to view a concert of this type is as a sort of pan-European travelogue; sitting in our community hall, this concert was a bit like receiving beautifully drawn postcards from different European locations, each one having been filtered through the lens of its composer and delivered via our engaging young performers.

Perhaps the ultimate test for this music, all of which is brilliantly crafted, is to ask if the spirit of the original material remains or is obliterated in the process of composition? To produce something new which retains the spirit of the original is a tough compositional challenge. What came through at this concert was that the humour and openness of the folk material upon which each work is based has somehow remained as a strong and obvious component despite its artistic working-over. This spirit was caught, not only by the excellent ensemble of performers, but, in turn, by the audience as they reacted to the little musical jokes and rustic musical picture painting they were experiencing.

Robert Constable AM