

Concert Review:

BCMG, Sunday 15th December, 2019, CBSO Centre

Located at the end of a quiet side street in the middle of Birmingham, the CBSO centre is the venue for many of BCMG's concerts throughout the year. If the venue seems somewhat hidden away, concealed behind a Victorian red brick façade, the music that takes place inside is certainly not insular. As one of the world's leading contemporary music ensembles, BCMG's longstanding commitment to commissioning new work, and to fostering relationships with composers, has continued since 2016 under the artistic directorship of Stephan Meier. The final UK concert of 2019, *Migrating Sounds*, provides clear evidence of the ensemble's aims. Of the four works performed, Richard Causton's *Transients* and Vito Žuraj's *Tension for two ensembles* were world premieres, Rebecca Saunders' *Scar* was a UK premiere, and Shiori Usui's *Deep* was commissioned by BCMG in 2014. The pieces by Causton and Saunders were also 'sound investment commissions', part funded by many individuals who, in return for their support, receive various rewards, including rehearsal and reception invitations. The concert was conducted by Michael Wendeborg.

The opening work, Richard Causton's *Transients* (2019), arose from the intriguing question of how to make the piano speak. In the programme note, Causton described how the title refers both to the acoustic idea of *transients* (short, high amplitude sounds, such as vocal consonants) and *transience* (as in the immediate decay of piano notes as soon as they are sounded). Musical material is based on Causton's detailed analysis of his reading of a poem (with the first line 'I heard a fly buzz – when I died') by Emily Dickinson. The resulting material is reordered, developed and greatly expanded over the course of 14 minutes, demonstrating Causton's meticulous attention to subtle harmonic detail. Although written for an ensemble of 10, the two pianos are the most obvious audible link to the rhythms and contours of the poem. Indeed, the pianos' quasi-vocal role is emphasised in the score by the line of poetry that often runs between the staves of the two piano parts. The precise, expressive and highly nuanced playing of the pianists, John Reid and Siwan Rhys, allowed the delicacy and intensity of Causton's material to blossom. At times, when the pitch contours and rhythmic content of speech were most apparent, the material seemed reminiscent, perhaps unsurprisingly, of a work such as Jonathan Harvey's *Speakings* (2008). At a macro level, the very structure of the piece seems to reflect a speech-like ebb and flow; sections of rhythmically complex material are followed or preceded by moments of near stasis that allow the music to breathe. During some of these moments of respite, very quiet vibraphone tremolandi create an intriguing, ambiguous wash of sound, coloured by the microtonal flattening of vibraphone 2 (using blu-tack attached to the ends of the keys). Near the end of the piece, a startling new sound world is revealed when an array of 12 electromagnets (developed specifically for this piece by Causton's colleagues from the engineering department at Cambridge) are applied to piano 2. For the first time in the piece, the piano is able to transcend the natural decay that follows when a key is pressed.

In contrast to the evening's other works, Vito Žuraj's *Tension for two ensembles* (2018–19) was specifically revised for this performance, to include a separate ensemble made up of early career performers from the BCMG NEXT programme. Now in its second year, this scheme, developed in conjunction with Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, is the only such

programme in the UK to provide a year long training in contemporary music. In Žuraj's work, the two groups of musicians are often closely integrated. Over the course of 12 minutes, the music reaches several moments of climax, as instruments come together in extended ascending or descending passages. The tension of the work's title is further amplified by a heartbeat-like pulsation that emerges at some climax points. Throughout the piece, imaginative combinations of extended playing techniques allow sounds to pass through the ensemble in unexpected ways. An example occurs near the beginning, when material played by the harpist (Céline Saout), who taps a screwdriver back and forth between two strings, is echoed by the brittle sound of violins bowed with pencils.

Whereas Žuraj's *Tension* is scored for two ensembles, Rebecca Saunders' *Scar* (2018–19) at times draws attention to antiphonal ideas by the mirroring of piano and percussion sub-groups at either side of the stage. Written for 15 soloists, the music is immediately powerful and engaging. The programme's statement that 'silence is the canvas on which the weight of sound leaves its mark' seems the ideal metaphor for the refined and yet viscerally emotive music that it describes. At times the accordion, played by Stefan Hussong, adds beautiful air sounds and sustained notes in the highest register, seeming to cover the ensemble in a metallic sheen.

In Shiori Usui's *Deep* (2014), the placement of musicians on the stage is taken to the extreme, enveloping the listener within a universe that is both strange and awe-inspiring. Performers are arranged across three levels (the ground floor and two balconies that encircle the space); the score provides detailed instructions for how the musicians must move to between 8 and 12 different placements within each area. The encircling, moving sound creates an almost claustrophobic impression, immersing the listener in a world in which anything can (and does) happen. Much of Usui's music is inspired by the sounds of living, organic processes, such as the internal workings of the human body, or the worlds of animals. In *Deep*, Usui's inspiration was the deep sea. Predominantly low sonorities are set against the backdrop of live electronics, with low, beating effects provided by a subwoofer. At times, moments of more animated, contrapuntal material emerge from the shadows, only to sink back into the underwater gloom. The piano provides occasional flashes of light in the form of colourful chords, chromatic clusters and sometimes rapid, wide-ranging material, giving a welcome respite from the otherwise brooding, relentless intensity of the piece. Instrumental material is rich in breath sounds and glissandi, sometimes joined by an amplified voice. The vocal writing, drawing on Usui's experience as an improvising performer, requires the vocalist to produce a huge palette of sounds, including white noise, forceful consonants and repeated inhalation. Yfat Soul Zisso demonstrated remarkable vocal agility and stamina in realising a demanding and highly specialised role. In *Deep*, as the composer's other works, there is a sense that Usui's prodigious, searching imagination leaves no sound beyond the bounds of possibility. Usui combines scientific fascination with an inspiring, playful sense of exploration, with striking and engaging results. *Deep* is testimony to the way in which BCMG nurtures relationships with its composers; the work was written when Usui was BCMG/Sound and Music Apprentice Composer in 2013–14. Since then, Usui's numerous accolades and awards have included a three-year Ricordi Lab publishing deal from Ricordi Berlin (2016), and an award from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (2019).