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Multivalent late-modernist

Andrew Toovey: Red icon; the silvery yesclowns tumble!are made perform; Shining forth;
The moon falls through the autumn
Zoe Martlew (N-1c),jonathan Powell (pno), Ixion
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Martyrn Brabbins
Largo 5139

Andrew Toovey: The juniper tree; Embrace; Adam; Fallen
Jacqueline Horner, Charles Mutter (vln), Yvan Mikhashoff (pno),
James Clapperton (pno), Ixion/Michael Finnissy, Broomhill Opera/Charles Peebles
Largo 5141

With his guilt-free diversity of style. Andrew Toovey is the very model of the late-modern composer. Born in 1962, and a pupil of both Jonathan Harvey and Michael Finnissy, he has acknowledged a range of enthusiasms extending from Feldman and Skempton to Birtwistle and, of course, Finnissy, not forgetting a wide variety of artists and writers. Artaud and Rothko among them. It could all add up to a recipe for abject derivativeness, the creator in helpless awe of his mighty models: but it's clear from the cross-section of Toovey's work on these welcome CDs that he has the Schoenbergian knack of building quite personal structures on the most august foundations. Those structures might not always succeed, but they are distinctive and, in most cases, very well worth hearing. Largo Records provide good documentation, although the dating is not always consistent, and the detailed synopsis for *The juniper tree* is not as helpful as the full text would be: the recordings vary in quality, with the 'live' ones tending to overly close focus and dryness, but all are clear and, as performances, confident and convincing.

Among the earlier works included, the piano trio *Shining forth* has the kind of refined surface and unstressful cosmopolitanism that is not unlike Harvey, as well as a tendency to intricate expressionistic forays not unlike Finnissy. Motion between West and East is explicit, adumbrating the possibility of more direct contrasts, and of a balance between simple-sounding ideas and more violent episodes which break free of modal or tonal gravity, as in - it can only be an E E Cummings title - *The silvery yesclowns tumble!are made perform* (for cello , 1978).

The image of clowning as both innocent and violent has long been important for Toovey not least in leading him - with mixed results - towards his first opera, *Ubu* (1991). The pre-*Ubu* piece for two pianos, *Embrace* (1987-90) attempts to sustain a more uniform reticence. as if in specific homage to Feldman (who died in 1987): but without that master's stark economy the music seems riskily opaque, at least in the early stages, with tendencies to underpowered rambling rather than hypnotic ceremonial.

What for me. is the best work on either disc, *Adam* (for oboe, clarinet, two trombones, cello and double bass, 1989-90) redeems the weaknesses of *Embrace* with interest. The basic topos is that of violent grief, and the intensity is sustained across clear sectional divisions in which lament can give way to moments of uncertain calm. This particular ensemble is brilliantly devised to project the basic melodic units and elemental harmonies that serve Toovey's expressive purpose, and even if, for sonic tastes, the composer reveals dangerous propensities for aligning himself with the mannerisms of 'pure' complexity, as in what sound rather like Dillon-ish pitch-bendings, these and other associations (*Birtwistle*, *Xenakis*) never seriously obscure the audibility of Toovey's own voice.

For various reasons, neither of the two relatively large-scale works equal the impact of Adam. The juniper tree, whose first complete staging was at Broomhill in 1995, tackles the same Grimm tale as did Roderick Watkins in his opera of the same name (but with a different librettist), first heard at the Munich Biennale in 1997, and then at Almeida Opera. Toovey's second opera is certainly an advance on Ubu, its expressionistic explosions and modal lyricism equally direct and vivid. Only in the first part of the final scene, with the ultimate confrontation between son-slaying, wife and (involuntarily) son-eating husband does the idiom veer towards the parodic (I was even reminded, no doubt irrelevantly, of Maxwell Davies's much-maligned Resurrection) but the hint of effortful melodrama here is otherwise avoided in an operatic style which puts lessons learned from Eastern stylisation and Western psychological realism to good use. Less successful, from my point of view is the BBC-commissioned orchestral score Red icon (1992-96), whose at times remarkably direct evocations of The rite of spring ('Danse sacrale') do work to Toovey's advantage. I've yet to come to terms with the way this post Stravinskian aggression balances against quieter, gentler passages, whose reticences seems more negative, or neutral, than positive. If that's the point - along with the curious formal design, with one longish movement followed by three short ones - then I have more work to do, but I can't feel at the moment that Red icon is likely to match the major orchestral statements of composers (apart from Stravinsky) whose work I hear behind it - Finniesty, Martland, even Barrett.

Toovey's special gifts are heard to far more telling effect in two shorter works from the same, early 1990s years as Red icon. The moon falls through the autumn is a 14-minute piano piece whose persistent delicacy and quietness (and its reflection of Toovey's admiration for aspects of Japanese culture) has something in common with Embrace. Like Embrace, it doesn't aspire to emulate Feldman's monumental repose, but hints of restlessness make its otherwise rapt ceremonial gestures the more telling. Fallen, settings of four Rilke poems soprano and violin, could not be more different, and demonstrates, with an attractive lack of self-consciousness, exactly how music can add a dimension to already richly musical texts. Toovey is always most eloquent when most economical, and when he can challenge his

own remarkable ingenuity in handling instruments. The idiom here (perhaps in homage to the Weill setting of one of the poems, which Toovey refers to in his note) brings Eislers Hollywood songbook to mind, in its evident unease with the ultra-civilised Lieder tradition: and Toovey creates a particularly striking paradox in the way he sets the final poem Herbst. One would normally, conventionally, read this as an elegy of spiritual consolation, but Toovey confronts convention in music that is gruffly belligerent rather than poised and refined. Far from being 'unendlich sanft' - infinitely gentle - Toovey treats the text's aspiring serenity as an affront rather than a consolation, and as a way of reinforcing the earthy directness of the three earlier songs. This tradition-evoking yet convention-rejecting simplicity is - and should be - only one aspect of Toovey the multivalent late-modernist. Such a style is inherently unstable, and, for that very reason, it could well be around for some time.

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