

TEMPO

A Quarterly Review of Modern Music

No. 181 / June 1992 (*Scandinavian Issue*)

Andrew Toovey *Michael Finnissy*

The Cello Music of Arne Nordheim *Guy Rickards*

A Conversation with Kalevi Aho *Martin Anderson*

Rautavaara and the Voice *Ivan Moody*

The Music of Magnus Lindberg *John Warnaby*

Special Record Feature: Icelandic Music on Record

First Performances: Recent Robin Holloway *Paul Driver*

Book Reviews: Rued Langgaard, Vagn Holmboe

£1.85 / \$5.00

Michael Finnissy

Andrew Toovey

Identifying points of reference in Andrew Toovey's work can present quite a challenge. Not only are his musical sympathies unusually diverse and deliberately unaligned to the readymade categories of our recent past (minimalism, neo-Romanticism, new complexity), but the fundamental stylistic 'gesture' can as readily be compared to the visual arts as to any music – to the work of Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg or Stanley Hayter.

Consider the basic tenets of 'Abstract Expressionism' in painting, particularly the work of Motherwell or Rothko. The appearance, shape and form is simple, sometimes even crude, a distillation of reality, geometry. But in close-up a myriad resonant details are revealed – signifying a volcanic activity contained within (and often in tense opposition to) an apparently direct and monolithic exterior. The outward appearance is deceptive; the single black line or blue rectangle are potentially highly-charged symbols – simple becomes complex when one perceives that the line or rectangle doesn't merely represent itself, but can infer, reveal, be a code for, something else. This strategem of 'abstraction' is familiar to musicians, music being only indirectly depictive and a highly developed self-referential art-form. But there is a more markedly emphatic preference for concealed, obscured, significance in Toovey's music. Starting with the titles (often from paintings or prints by the aforementioned artists) and extending to the compositional techniques: 'ludi', puzzles, formalized and distanced – displaying far more of the abstract tendency than the empathic – exteriorizing emotion and rendering it emblematic, even turning it into extreme instances of impersonal violence or transcendent tranquillity.

The graphic work of Hayter and Mirò has also been absorbed by Toovey's music: bright, full of vibrant colour, playfully suggestive, as capable of being brashly offensive as of assuming a delicate Japanese-inspired wistfulness, unpredictably childlike or ultra-sophisticated. Small wonder, then, that the work which forms a climax to, and perhaps rounds off this first rich and varied phase of Toovey's output, is an opera (*the* all-embracing

genre), and one based on Jarry's *Ubu Roi* – a character Toovey himself can occasionally embody (as we all can), and certainly a play that he was born to set to music: *Ubu* at the founthead of modernism, inspiring Dadaist anarchy and surrealist revolt, the dark and most tyrannical side of the ego.

But while *Ubu* is the biggest, it's not the only significant work that Toovey has written. The one composer to whom Toovey has declared allegiance is Morton Feldman, and there are obvious reminiscences of Feldman's work in several Toovey scores – *Music for String Quartet*, *Adom Adomah*, *Down there by the Sea* – a love of those apparently 'isolated' chords, either as if an established polyphony had suddenly frozen, turned a corner, or been slammed into a brick wall; or (more like Feldman's own work) dazzling shafts of sound, audible light-beams, held still for our ears to walk around and enjoy from different angles. Perhaps these 'chords' also stand at one extreme of Toovey's sound-world – at the other pole all is upheaval: coruscating, scrambling over itself, rushing and getting tangled in luxuriantly detailed heterophony. These qualities (and at these extremes) are present right from his first works – as is a similarly contradictory use of pitch-materials, embracing quarter-tones (though mostly as 'distortion'), non-serialized chromaticism, and white-note modality. This is a music striving to define its limits, its available territory; and here, certainly, *what* is being done with the material is more significant than the material itself: extrovert and intuitive writing, not confined by dogma, nor self-consciously introspective.

'Other music' (the exotic, the found, and the quoted) forms a large part of Toovey's compositional arsenal. In *Winter Solstice* (first version 1984) the original choice of text (Japanese haiku) colours the musical material: modal melodic lines embellished in Gagaku or Noh style, sometimes with attendant echoing heterophony (see Ex. 1).

The deliberately distorted time-scales (extremely slow, or extremely fast) alongside similarly extreme dynamics (ranging from *ppp!* to *fff!*), and unpredictable changes in texture will be familiar

Ex.2

Falling (For John Cage).

Slowly and Spaciously.

hold Pedal throughout.

Andrew Toovey
London 1990

as challenging in musical terms. A delightful set of 14 *Piano Pieces* (1990) offers even more temptations to the warier pianist, and is designed to appeal equally to fledgling composers. Since Toovey is a highly experienced and much-loved teacher, this idea is carried out with great skill and disarming charm (see Ex.2).

Andrew Toovey also directs an ensemble, named IXION after an early work of Feldman and a beautiful print by Hayter. IXION's concerts have celebrated the work of many composers, and demonstrated the generous breadth of its director's enthusiasms. He has also

photo: Hanya Chlala



created a large number of works for its personnel, and as a viola-player himself, it's not so surprising that much of this 'chamber music' is for strings. These works display possibly the most accessible side of Toovey's work. They are hugely enjoyable to play, and luminous and exciting to listen to. The piano is skilfully and imaginatively integrated into half a dozen or so of these pieces, such as the piano trio *Shining Forth* (1987): Ex.3.

So large a number of works becomes impossible to illustrate adequately without the scope of an even more extended essay, and mention must now be made of some of the larger-scale pieces that more obviously pave the way for *Ubu*. The earliest of these, other than *Winter Solstice*, is *Ātē* (1986), where the sonorities of a large ensemble are kaleidoscopically exploited, intercut and counterbalanced in an avowedly ritualistic manner – and yes, for those playing 'spot the influence', there are indeed echoes of both Birtwistle and Stravinsky – distant echoes. The mood is one of stark and heavy tragedy – captured in a series of ornate tableaux – but, as in the films of Kenneth Anger or the novels of Genet, this becomes so entrapped in close-up detail as to disregard ongoing 'narrative' or provide sufficient ventilation to breathe. (There are any number of highly respected precedents in European high-modernism!) *Black Light* (1989) seems better 'paced' – more concerned with forward propulsion, though certainly no less

Ex.4

The musical score for Ex.4 is a complex orchestral arrangement. It features a variety of instruments, each with its own part. The woodwinds include Piccolo, Oboe, Bass Clarinet, and Double Bassoon. The brass section consists of Horn, Trumpet, and Trombone. The percussion is divided into two groups, I and II, with specific instructions like 'Contas.'. The harp and piano parts are also present, with the piano part showing some specific chordal textures. The strings are represented by Violin I and II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is marked with numerous dynamics, including fortissimo (ff!) and pianissimo (pp!), and includes performance directions such as 'Anco' (likely 'Anco' for 'Anco'). The tempo or rehearsal mark '60' is indicated at the top of the score.

Ubu's only legitimate musico-theatrical forerunner is *The Spurt of Blood* (1988-90), inspired (like the piano trilogy) by the work of Antonin Artaud, but more directly involving Artaud himself as scenarist and poet. Artaud's theatrical ventures were visionary (sometimes indeed only imagined and genuinely hallucinatory) and 'poetic' – contemplative and ritualistic – rather than 'realistic'. The scenario verges, like *Ubu*, on

the obscene. It is sexually explicit, hardly possible to stage literally. It reveals, though, an aspect of the world we live in. An aspect we suppress and often leave unseen and unheard and not understood. Confronting what we may still regard as our most 'bestial' aspect is an enormous risk, something artists are possibly less timorous about than most people, but nonetheless have to undertake with responsibility. The defence will

sound, however eloquent, like a cliché. Toovey intends to shock, and the shock will either illuminate or be treated with even deeper revulsion and rejection.

Having evolved a recognizable, vital and sufficiently flexible musical personality the road to an opera was open. For the most part, Toovey's music eschews the conventions of the Austro-German symphonic tradition, as filtered (and largely castrated and de-energized) by British notions of good taste, caution and respectability. This does not mean that there is any lack of expertise – only that Toovey's preferences and choices lie elsewhere. The model of American Abstract Expressionist painting; the music of Feldman; sectionalized structures – blocks or 'moments' of musical material often in stark contrast to each other. These are preferred to the motivically or harmonically developed quasi-symphonic paragraph. Repetition is not excluded; it is often emphasized. Ostinati are prominent. Localized detail is abundant and extravagantly

precise. I could be describing Messiaen or Xenakis, but Toovey is *evasive*, doesn't neatly conform to the Darmstadt/modernist stereotypes either (even if he has been there and done that). He tends, in a manner increasingly familiar from post-modern pluralism, to regard – as grist to his mill – any sound or historical style, and to embrace any process or inherited formal principle for its treatment ('development' used to be the word!). There is no particular fetish for originality. With so much of the material placed in inverted commas (cross-referenced and great fun to de-code) this would hardly be appropriate. The particularity of Toovey's work lies in its flair for combining ideas, and timing their interaction. He doesn't need to worry about always being, quite recognizably, Toovey.

Musical Examples 1, 3 and 4 © copyright by Boosey & Hawkes (Music Publishers) Ltd.

Ex.2 © copyright 1991 by Andrew Toovey.

Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Limited

Andrew Toovey

Ubu (1991-1992)

Chamber opera in two acts (five scenes)
 Libretto by Andrew Toovey and Michael
 Finnissy based on Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*

Commissioned by Music Theatre Wales with
 the assistance of the Welsh Arts Council and
 the Holst Foundation

23 September	<i>St David's Hall, Cardiff</i>
25 September	<i>St David's Hall, Cardiff</i>
1 October	<i>Torch Theatre, Milford Haven</i>
3 October	<i>Arts Centre, Aberystwyth</i>
5 October	<i>Queen Elizabeth Hall, London</i>
7 October	<i>Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea</i>
10 October	<i>Wyeside Arts Ctre, Builth Wells</i>

<i>Ubu</i>	Richard Morris
<i>Ma Ubu</i>	Gale Oxley
<i>Captain Crap</i>	Andrew Watts
<i>King/Queen</i>	Elizabeth Harley
<i>Army/Nobility etc</i>	Twylla Augustson
<i>Conductor</i>	Michael Rafferty
<i>Producer</i>	Keith Turnbull
<i>Designer</i>	Simon Banham
<i>Lighting</i>	Ace McCarron

Further information on Andrew Toovey and **Ubu**, including a full list of works, is available from the Promotion Department

BOOSEY & HAWKES

295 Regent Street, London W1R 8JH Telephone 071-580 2060
