

It is important to notice that birdsong is not here prettily imitated for decorative or programmatic effect, but is the basic material for the whole work. As the title implies, Messiaen does not confine himself to France in choosing his source-material—birdsongs from India, China, Malaysia and North and South America are used. In their stylised form these generate ideas of great variety, characterised by repetition of single notes and phrases and extremely rapid, florid embellishments.

Oiseaux exotiques is in six sections, each separated by a cadenza for solo piano. The first section is very short, and serves as an introduction and also as coda. The next two instrumental sections are also short, the second being an expanded version of the first, and, after the third piano cadenza, gongs, tam-tam and low wind chords herald the central and most extended section. Here the percussion instruments have recurring patterns based on Greek and Hindu rhythms—another important feature of Messiaen's music. Above it innumerable birdsongs are contrasted and combined to form a spectacular counterpoint of colours and rhythms. Eventually the low sounds return and the piano has its most extended cadenza. There is yet one more colourful outburst, before the short, final cadenza and coda. E.J.H.

Next concert: Thursday 26 November

THE JOHN CURRIE SINGERS

Bach

Cantata no. 10, *Meine Seel' erhebt den Herren*

Messiaen

Cinq rechants

Mozart

Litaniae Lauretanae, K.195

Please note change of artists

University of
Edinburgh
Concerts

1970 - 71

THE REID ORCHESTRA

leader Miles Baster

KENNETH LEIGHTON *conductor*

JOHN McCABE *piano*

Thursday 3 December

Reid School of Music

CIETY

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GUSTAV HOLST 1874–1934

Egdon Heath, opus 47

JOHN McCABE b. 1939

Piano concerto, no. 1 (1966)

Largo

Vivo

Lento—Cadenza—Allegretto—

Maestoso—Lento

Giocoso—Danzato—Giocoso

Interval

HINDEMITH 1895–1963

Symphony, *Mathis der Maler*

Engelkonzert

Grablegung

Versuchung des heiligen Antonius

Egdon Heath was composed in 1927. A highly original work, it is prefaced by a sentence from the famous opening paragraphs of Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. The heath is here described as 'a place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.'

As in several of his works, Holst is here successful not in the expression of human passions, but in a mood of almost pure contemplation of the more austere beauties of nature.

The opening theme, given to muted double basses, shows a new refinement of Holst's musical language. The time signature is his favourite 7-4, but, as in *Neptune*, the effect

of this is almost to cancel out any sense of movement. In fact the first thirteen notes belong to a single phrase which hardly contains any sense of pulse or division. The entry of flutes and bassoons reminds one of *Venus*, but with the rising string entries that follow, Holst uses an old device with extraordinary freshness, every note being loaded with meaning.

The stillness is slightly disturbed by a second theme, a 'processional' theme, in which it seems as if the music turns from the contemplation of space and emptiness to the thought of mankind, in Hardy's words 'slighted and enduring'. After a few bars however the time changes to 15-8 and there is a sudden restlessness in the string figuration, against which the oboe enters with yet a fourth idea, containing a fanfare-like shape. Here both melodic and harmonic material use Holst's favourite relationship, the mixture of two tonalities a tritone apart.

Very quickly Holst builds up a great climax, combining with the quaver figuration the opening theme (particularly in its first three notes) heard first on a piercing trumpet.

The next paragraph, *Andante maestoso*, extends the 'processional' theme first on brass, and then on wood-wind and strings. There is a suggestion here of the inevitable Holstian ostinato bass, but the actual shapes are more varied and more subtle than in his earlier music.

There is a pause—complete stillness—while the oboe recapitulates its tortured tune, but the tempo soon changes to andante, and the lament becomes a kind of quiet dance. Imogen Holst suggests that here the composer is returning to the distant past—to the far away origins of the Morris dance as a magic ritual which tried to appease the forces of nature.

Quite soon there is a return of the opening section followed by the 'processional' theme on brass; and finally various conflicting elements in the music are combined and fragmented, achieving a kind of mysterious reconciliation.

One of the most interesting things about the piece is the extraordinary modernity of the form. There is no development in the traditional sense; rather the music moves swiftly, almost disconcertingly so, from one idea to another, and some of the ideas themselves undergo a process of shortening rather than of extension, as if the composer were trying to arrive at the very essence of his material. The things which we remember are really fragments, and this is perhaps one of the features which lends the work a constant fascination. K.L.

John McCabe's *Piano Concerto* was commissioned for the 1967 Southport Centenary Festival, and was first performed by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Charles Groves with the composer as soloist. The four movements fall into pairs, the first two being without a break, as are the last two. The first pair of movements is, however, much shorter, consisting of a slow piece of a prelude nature, followed by a brief toccata in which the piano plays in semiquavers almost throughout. The thematic material of the work derives almost entirely from the opening of the first movement, with its gradually ascending phrase for strings and then a variant of this for harp; this tune, and the clarinet solo (accompanied by a

long-held piano trill) that succeeds it, form the basis of most of the work.

The third movement begins with a lengthy passage for orchestra only, based on a tune derived from the above-mentioned clarinet theme, and the movement gradually gains intensity until the piano bursts out of the texture with a cadenza. There follows a quicker, dance-like section leading to another climax and then a slow epilogue. The finale is rondo-like in form, with an opening tune initially divided between timpani and piano; the main contrasting theme is for full brass, in an erratic rhythmic structure. This tune and the main theme alternate for a while, with quiet scoring, to lead to the passage that takes the music back to the main rondo theme; this passage starts with swaying, overlapping chords on horns and piano and the texture gradually fills in to lead to a bravura coda that brings the work to a final flourish. Though the scoring is for a normal symphony orchestra, the percussion department is large and includes one or two less familiar instruments, including crotales and bongos. J.McC.

The opera *Mathis der Maler* is still seen to be one of the most important landmarks in Hindemith's career. At the time, the early thirties, it sounded a new note in the composer's work, a new seriousness of purpose, and also a greater maturity of style, which was to remain the basis of the composer's later music. In particular the mystical aspect of the subject and of the music is seen in perspective to have been the mainspring of several of Hindemith's more inspired works. But in few works is this new found maturity expressed with such freshness and power, the inspiration being drawn from the kind of subject which always remained close to the composer's heart, in this case the story of the great Gothic mystical painter Mathis Grünewald, whose life presents in historical guise the ever-present problem of the function of the artist in society. The music of the opera is best known from the Symphony in which Hindemith adapted the material to make a three movement work inspired by Grünewald's masterpiece, the Isenheim altarpiece at Colmar. The work is indeed one of the few orchestral masterpieces in the repertoire which are directly inspired by painting.

Each movement of the Symphony bears the title of part of the altar-piece, which contains ten separate panels. The first movement is concerned with the panel *A Concert of Angels*, in which angels are represented in strange colours playing on various stringed instruments.

The movement begins in tranquillity, with a slow rising figure on wood-wind, followed by a chorale melody 'Thus Sang Three Angels' on trombones. The slow introduction gives way to a more strenuous section, rich in material (there are three distinct themes) and using fugal texture as a means of expansion. At the climax of the fugue the song of the Angels from the introduction is introduced on trombones in conjunction with the fugal argument, the various elements of the movement being moulded together by means of counterpoint.

The second movement describes *The Entombment* as painted

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on the predella, and is quite short, with strings muted throughout. Here we find the slow dotted rhythm which was to remain a constant feature of the composer's style, and the form is extremely simple—A-B-A-B. The return of section A forms a climax of vision marked on the last chord by a cymbal clash, while section B, with its beautiful flute and oboe melodies, returns in a fragmentary and very moving transformation. The third movement is concerned with *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, a painting in which the saint is beset with frightful demons and creatures half beast and half human, in a setting of desolate rock and ruin. In one corner of the painting there is a scroll bearing the words 'Where wert thou, good Jesus, where wert thou? Why didst thou not come to heal my wounds?', and Hindemith heads his score with this inscription.

The movement opens with a quasi-recitative section in which the strings are made to play entirely in unison. The free rhythm and passionate outbursts of wind and percussion seem to portray the doubts and fears in the saint's mind. The tempo changes to Allegro, and a surging melody appears on the strings. After an interruption by dramatic chords on full orchestra a second section begins with a new theme on strings, and the whole Allegro culminates in a climax of great tension.

An interlude follows for strings alone, meditative and, towards its close, filled with inner torments, the material being closely related to that of the slow introduction.

The second Allegro is in the manner of a recapitulation and uses the various ideas of the previous Allegro, but quickened up and constantly transformed. Finally the Coda begins with rapid and brilliant figuration on the strings, against which the wood-wind enter in triumph with a chorale theme which Hindemith labels 'Lauda Sion Salvatorem', and this theme gradually dominates the tumultuous string figuration, ending with a great proclamation on the brass. K.L.

Next concert: Thursday 10 December

THE EDINBURGH QUARTET

Dvorák

Quartet in C, opus 61

Holmboe

Quartet no. 6, opus 78

Brahms

Quartet in B flat, opus 67

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