



BILL HOPKINS: *En Attendant*; *Two Pomes*; *Pendant*; *Sensation*. ANTHONY GILBERT: *Nine or Ten Osannas*. Alison Wells (sop), Alexander Balanescu (vln), Music Projects/London c. Richard Bernas. NMC DO14.

There can be no quibbles about this first commercially available recording of music by Bill Hopkins, coupled here with a work by Anthony Gilbert. The performances and recording are both excellent, and with regard to the Hopkins, the CD is an essential addition to the catalogue which no one seriously interested in contemporary music should miss. It makes available, to a younger generation of composers particularly, a unique and important voice, otherwise almost unheard. It is a voice of reason, and of great beauty and originality.

Nicolas Hodges has recently given us a highly commendable overview of Hopkins's work (*Tempo 186*). In celebration of this release, I hope it will be helpful to shed further (sometimes contrasting) light on the subject.

The earliest Hopkins on the disc is the *Two Pomes* (1964) – two miniature settings of poems from Joyce's *Pomes Penneyach*. Varying degrees of singing and sprechstimme are requested, and in 'She weeps over Ragoon' the soprano half murmurs, half sings a rainy, mortal sadness of lost love between muted trumpet and onomatopoeic harp. The viola ghosts the soprano's microtones before sliding away in an astonishingly simple and goosepimpling glissando. This early miniature suggests that the 21-year-old Hopkins's imaginative ear may have been almost photographic.

Hodges mentions that the composer considered

the *Two Pomes* to be studies toward *Sensation* – retrospectively? – but they clearly remain distinct and self-sufficient, both from the material and poetic point of view. And I would suggest that Hopkins was seriously misled if he thought that the first *Pome* wasn't worth 'sticking up for'. Certainly there was no need to feel defensive on account of its 'block like structure', as he termed it. Nevertheless, in an age when (for example) a Xenakis-like idiom has threatened to become the dominant development of 'progressive' contemporary music, the fragility and deliberateness of the first *Pome*, and even its refined sadness, is in danger of sounding precious. Avoiding this requires the finest balance of tone and undertone, which these hauntingly atmospheric performances come very close to achieving. Thus in 'She Weeps over Ragoon', Bernas rightly gives the music ample time – but perhaps the soprano must therefore sustain singing tone fractionally longer than would be ideal.

No such reservations apply to *Sensation* (1965), a setting of Rimbaud and Beckett. That the disc owes a huge debt to Bernas is nowhere more apparent than in this consummate performance; and Alison Wells is in fine voice, soaring effortlessly over a wide range of demands. Familiarity has enabled Bernas and MP/L to achieve the impossible – every line of this fastidiously detailed score breathes naturally, and the ensemble is tight. This compound of fluidity and rigour requires a special sensitivity, and is an essential part of Hopkins's connexion to the music of the past (as it was for his teacher Barraqué).

With reference to Barraqué, there are many for whom that composer's stringency and fierceness presents an insurmountable barrier. It is worth mentioning, therefore, that while it has frequently been pointed out that *Sequência* may have formed an obvious model for the younger composer's *Sensation*, the latter inhabits a far softer timbral and harmonic world which, despite strictly serial means, is attached by more than a gossamer thread to the vocal works of Ravel, Debussy and even Duparc. The aching climax on the last line of the Rimbaud poems makes this clear. (I am curious to know what Hopkins's response might have been to this observation. Barraqué, we know, admired Debussy greatly, and detested Ravel: unfortunately, almost no record of Barraqué's response to Hopkins's music has yet come to light).

Hodges is also right to mark these two early works off from Hopkins's later output. But I think it is not true that *Sensation* 'barely hints at Hopkins's future occupations'. From the point of

view of technique, and despite altering radically, all the music Hopkins completed after 1965 proceeds from the serial dialectic inherent in *Sensation*; and in dealing with the relationship between sexual and creative energies, the work prefigures some of his later concerns. By following the Rimbaud poems with those of Beckett, Hopkins chose to form a narrative that traces an apparently inevitable dissipation of youthful excitement and longing. Is this the inevitable outcome of 'sensation'? Almost as if in a premonition, the young Hopkins completed an astonishing musical deconstruction of epiphany. Why was it only performed once in his lifetime?

Microtones are not a prominent feature of Hopkins's music, and it is only in *Pendant* (completed 1973) that they make a more or less systematic appearance. On this topic I am grateful for a very recent conversation with Christopher Rowland, who gave the work's première in 1975. Rowland recounts that Hopkins described the inflections in *Pendant* (notated by arrows affixed to accidentals) as having resulted from listening to birdsong: they were to be played freely, but alluding to bird-like tunings. I confess that, although Anthony Gilbert, who was a close friend of Hopkins, has already noted the repeated appearance of the blackbird in the piece, I have wondered for some time as to Hopkins's exact conception of the inflections.

Alexander Balanescu, perhaps in a similar predicament, seems to have decided to interpret them as fairly strict quarter-tones, and uses little or no vibrato for most of the piece, thus making them clearly audible. He also brings much fire to the music. In combination, however, this gives the performance a fierce, aggressive quality that sometimes sounds snatched and mannered. While this is undoubtedly an admirable approach, I am not convinced that the piece (as I understand it) survives. This is a pity because (and I hope not to exaggerate) *Pendant* probably ranks amongst the finest of 20th-century works for solo violin, comparable with the Bartók *Sonata* and Scelsi's *Xynobis*. I should add that it was Balanescu's own inspired performance of *Pendant* at St. John's Smith Square in 1985 (recorded by the BBC) that makes me quite certain of this.

Hodges recently made the apposite comment on *Music in our Time* that Hopkins's musical path led toward 'music of such rarefied continuity that the logic of [its] argument . . . became increasingly obscure: it made . . . completion well nigh impossible'. We might therefore expect *En Attendant* (1976), Hopkins's last completed work, to be all but impenetrable. This goes some way toward explaining why Bernas takes 15½ rather

than the 12½ minutes Hopkins specified. The resultant pace and clarity of this honest, empathetic response provide a welcome opportunity to get inside the strangeness of the piece. The music will go faster in its own time.

Composed during a period of re-evaluation, the language of *En Attendant* is ostensibly lighter and in part a simplification of what had come before. Octaves, while not prominent, are no longer 'special effects' (as in they are in *Sensation* and the *Etudes en Série*); there is less emphasis on the use of registral schemes; and key motivic and chordal reference points are made unusually explicit. I am unaware of any intended programmatic relationship between this piece and Beckett's *En Attendant Godot*, but the ambiguity of the elision (and whether it is one!) is characteristically suggestive. I wonder if it is far off the mark to suggest that the unfamiliar muddling of tonal and non-tonal implications is in some way akin to the humour of Vladimir and Estragon as they flip chronically between literal and non-literal, mundane and metaphorical meanings, until no one knows which is which. Despite misunderstanding each other perfectly, they are powerless to break out of their situation or, indeed, of language – in the one case through communication, and in the other because of it. Curiously forceless and disarming, *En Attendant* perhaps represents a kindred tragi-comedy of expression.

Anthony Gilbert's *Nine or Ten Osannas* (1967), which complete the disc, is not only a set of aphoristic celebrations, but also an experiment with open form. Nine or ten out of 14 movements may be given in any order, while three specific movements frame the whole – beginning, middle, and end. Over 25 years on, Gilbert has not lost his sense of experiment – inviting the listener (in the sleeve note) to take part in this, using the programming button on the CD player. The music is highly varied, each movement presenting a new microcosm in an endless variety of textures and treatments. Much is through composed, but mobiles, semi-synchronous voices, independent duos and the like play their part.

The performances are full of life, and there is some exceptional horn playing by Roger Montgomery particularly. However, I found a number of the tempi overly slow, especially the *Osanna for S*, which drags out almost twice as long as Gilbert suggests in the sleeve note. But this may also be a danger of leaving the placing of movements, heard at an unalterable tempo, to the CD button. What might be organic relationships in a live, directed performance are broken by inevitably mechanical choices. Now, if these



movements were being replayed on an interactive twenty-first century sequencer . . .

*Patrick Ozzard-Low*

---