

## **TWO CONTEMPORARY BRITISH COMPOSERS**

Contemporary British music, interesting by its content and quality, includes number of composers names, who through their works left significant traces in the 20th century music.

Among the constellation of composers who were or are still active and work on the British music scene, the following names can be distinguished: Delius, Walton, Britten, Tippett, Lloyd, McMillan, Scott...

According to James Keller, musicologist, the composers mainly belong to two categories: the ones that can be distinguished as pioneers, promoting new composers ideas and techniques of performing, pushing aside the tradition, and those who successfully use the process of synthesizing the past achievements. Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle belong to the both categories, sometimes joining the two roles in one work..

Friends, colleagues and collaborators ever since the time of their studies, Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle in 1967 founded a performing ensemble called Pierrot Players, later renamed in The Fires of London.. Six musicians played in the ensemble( violin, viola, cello, flute, clarinet, percussion+piano+2 composers and a conductor), and they had the first concert on 30 May 1967, in the new hall "Queen Elisabeth".

The continual existence of this ensemble, during the following 2 decades leaves deep traces in the British music culture from many reasons.

The idea of founding such ensemble, according to Birtwistle and Davies came as a result of their individual experience as young composers who were trying to present their own music. They were not satisfied with the level at which their works were performed at the time and the attitude of the musicians that performed them, which suggested to a general condition and climate of not accepting the new music. Davies during his presentation on the occasion of the last concert of this ensemble held in 1987 says: "Thanks to The Pierrot Players/ Fires of London ( the group of friends, willing to spend many hours of unpaid time with two inexperienced conductors) I learned the basics of instrumentation as never before, and the rudiment of theatrical craft- not to mention , out of frightening necessity, how to conduct. The group has been the most important music experience of my life to date."

The ensemble's name is interesting and it includes the word PLAYERS, suggesting to something musical, but theatrical as well. In 1969 the ensemble performs "8 Songs About the Mad King" and "The Vessalius Icons", which are a music-theatrical work for a player and an ensemble, proving its announced orientation. The both works shock the world; they actually take the musical theater to the world scene.

In 1971 Birtwistle decides to leave the ensemble in order to write music for bigger groups. Then after at Pruslin's idea,(Pierrot Player's pianist), the ensemble gets a new

name- The Fires of London. This group makes a strong influence to the modern British music.

They performed their own works, but at the same time also works of contemporary European composers, thus bringing together the European composition trends. Due to this reason, they are referred to as "pioneers in the idea for opening the British scene to the new music".

Sir Harrison Birtwistle was born in Acrinton, North England in 1934 and studied clarinet and composition at the Queen's College in Manchester. In 1965 he decides to direct his artistic forces towards the composition and soon afterwards he leaves to Princeton, America. Although at the beginning of his artistic work he accepts the serialism, he soon rejects it, saying:

"When you adopt one system, you have to follow that system. But I get bored with the systems. I believe that some things that I have improvised, without having previously planned composition method, carried a dose of irrationality, and that is what is important to me-the irrational."

He says that for him the idea is the most important thing. He doesn't consider himself to be a composer of sound, nor he looks for special effects, but what surprises him over and over again is "how the work speaks, how it tells the story..."

In America he finishes the started chamber opera *Punch and Judy* (the premiere was at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1968). This work together with the *Tragedy* (inspired by the Greek tragedy), *Verses for the Ensemble* and *The Triumph of Time* firmly establish him as a leading voice in the British scene.

Anyhow, among the listed ones, the monumental orchestra procession "*Triumph of Time*" from 1972 is a work that is the most important, and inspired by the Bruegel's painting i.e. from the cruel progression of Time and Death. He says: "I deal a lot in my pieces with what you might call labyrinth. I am concerned with TIME which is CIRCULAR. **I don't know how painting sounds like, but the person who had a great influence on me was PAUL KLEE...it's a sort of way of thinking about things...what he does, is he IMPROVISES HIS INTUITION...**"

The period from 1973 to 1984 is marked by the monumental lyric tragedy *The Mask of Orpheus* (With *The Mask of Orpheus* he suddenly turns towards the OPERA) set by the British National Opera in 1986, and in 1988 he composes the musical pastoral, the opera *San Tan Tehtera*, probably the most successful, from a musical and dramatic aspect.

The remaining works from this period, such as *Meridian*, *Fields of Sorrow*, *Melancholy 1*, are a proof of new musical colour, in which the rough Mediterranean regions in his Greek inspired music are transformed into sound which is smothered and blurred, and of course unexpectedly turned towards the pastoral idiom (although with many authentic effects), but still opposite to everything that the Manchester group was fighting for.

The period has been marked by a series of fascinating instrumental works performed by top ensembles of contemporary music: The Hidden Theater, Carmen Perpetuum e.t.c.

Of a great success are the concerts for trumpet Infinite Parade, Antiphony, concert for piano, Panic, concert for saxophone, and the orchestra work Earth Dances.

When speaking about his music, he often emphasizes that it is a music that explores 3 things:

- the **melody** (I see the idea of the horizontal aspect of music. I do think of music melodically. I don't think that's something I have a reputation for, but nevertheless its true"))

- **the pulse** ("Pulse is something we associate in primitive music and popular music. Its something which is regular, its something you get off on and you forget about it. I tend to never let the listener get off on it. It's always reassessing itself and becomes a sort of ARITHMETICAL thing, but then again, a lot of things in music are arithmetical") and

- the **blocks of materials** ("...One block of music has done a journey in silence while another block of music is taking place...I call it musical mechanisms...")

Unlike Dawies, Birtwistle has worked as a pedagogue and professor, and although he seldom speaks about the manner of working with students, still points out that he harmonizes his methods of work with what the particular student has as his nature, potential, originality, remaining faithful to his idea of developing the individuality. In one of his interviews he points out:

"Nobody wants a lot of Birtwistle CLONES. I go into their heads, find out why they are doing it, if they understand all the implications and possibilities of what they do..."

Peter M. Dawies was born on 8 September 1934 in Salford, England, and today he lives and works in the Sunday Island in Scotland.

Keller for him says: "Dawies' life and works underwent a tremendous shift in 1970 that it can prove difficult to reconcile that certain pieces written after that date are by the same composer as works created earlier".

The newspapers say that he is a shocking person at the music scene, a composer whose musical interest is turned towards the early music, the progressive works or the Indian traditional music, i.e. the rhythmical organization of the Indian ragas (for which he writes in his master thesis at the Manchester University). The calmer style, the ethnical inclination and inspiration, transcendentality and connection between the man and nature in all possible forms are some of the characteristics of the second phase, in which the surrealism and expressionism remain recognizable.

Let us take a quick glance at what happened in 1970. In 1957 Dawies leaves to Italy, as a scholarship beneficiary of the Italian Government where he works with Goffredo Petrassi and starts to create works in which he implements rhythmical and metrical particularities, which are characteristic for the composers from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. After the same principle the work Prolation was created (Renaissance polyphony +serial principle), a work which wins the Olivetti award for

composition, and with which he represents England at the International Festival of contemporary music, 1959.

After returning to England, he becomes Director of Cirencester Grammar School. In that period, Dawies encourages his students to write, but also to perform their music as often as possible. From 1962 to 1964 he works with Roger Sessions and Earl Kim at the Princeton University in America and continues to nurture the fascination which comes from the link between the Middle Ages and the modern music, a link marked in his works with authenticity, originality often through the use of parody.

The four works:

- Eight Songs of a Mad King
- Vesalii Icones
- St. Thomas Wake: Foxtrot for Orchestra
- Worldes Blis

have been written in an **expressionistic spirit**, all of them created in 1969, and the works Ave Maris Stella(1975) and Picture, Reflection and Shadow(1982) mark him as a composer who left the strongest examples of pure chamber music ever written in the second half of the 20th century.

In 1970 Dawies leaves on a trip to the Orkney islands, in Scotland. It is obvious that he was attracted to this journey, because two years later he buys a modest house in the village Racknjick and lives there for 15 years. In 1998 he moves to his new home, on the Sunday Island.

At the beginning we mentioned that the year of 1970 is a turnover in the life and work of Dawies. Its significance is very obvious. He still lives in Scotland. But, as long as his work is concerned, here what Dawies' long time manager Judy Arnold says, and how she explains the influence of Orkney:

“The move to Orkney brought a calm, more reflective Max, more at peace but no less original”

The surrealism and expressionism of his early style can still be recognized, but the works start to reflect local inspiration.

Arnold Wittal, former professor of music theory and analysis at the Queens College in London, in his article in "Tempoe" magazine, dedicated to Dawies, notes:

““ Since 1970 Davies has developed a particular enthusiasm for a culture in which the tendencies to paganism and piety may be rather more convergent than they are in more urban, mainland settings. Many of 1970s works have an ethnic stratum...representing the human engagement with nature and all its forms.”

This is an unusual orientation for a contemporary composer, especially due to the fact that the modernism in the time of globalization widely favours internationalized style, unlike the regional ones.

However, although locally colored, the works of Dawies manage to touch to the international nerve. In the works from the eighties he begins to include the sound of the Scottish bagpipes. One of his widely performed pieces is exactly a piece with a folklore overtone "An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise". In it, for the first time he includes the bagpipes.

Significant part of the works from this period have also a **political connotation**, such as environment pollution, nuclear weapon, regional customs protection, especially in (economically) weaker societies.

He says: **“JUST AS THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY WAS MARKED BY WAR AND GENOCIDE ON A HITHERTO UNIMAGINABLE SCALE ON BEHALF OF POLITICAL AND RELATED FABRICATED RACIAL DOGMA – SO THE COMING CENTURY COULD BE DISFIGURED BY THE SAME THINGS ON BEHALF OF RELIGIONS AND AGAIN RELATED FABRICATED RACIAL DOGMA. IT IS AGAINST THESE TERRIBLE UNCERTAINTIES THAT I COMPOSE MUSIC: IT IS AN ATTEMPT TO KEEP ALIVE AND EVEN TO ACHIEVE SOME KIND OF SANITY WHILE STILL REMAINING AWARE.**

He also works as a conductor, and it has almost been ten years since he was appointed as a Conductor/Composer at the Queens London Philharmonic Orchestra and BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester. He is a guest conductor in Europe and America. In 1987, Queen Elisabeth awards him with the title Sir. The opus of Dawies numbers over 300 works, 60 of which orchestra works, but also educational works for the youngest.