

Composition workshop at the Philharmonie

# Adams' Earbox

Ariel and Guy Wagner

**There is no artist in residence as such at the Philharmonie this year, but the idea of asking visiting musicians to leave behind them a trace of their passage, preferably via projects with young musicians, has by no means been abandoned.**

So it was that when the London Symphony Orchestra planned a concert devoted to three works by John Adams in early February, the orchestra's musical animator, Hannah Conway, was invited over beforehand to run an „Adams composition workshop“ with students from Luxembourg's Conservatoire.

The idea was simple: to introduce young people to the work of the American composer from the inside, as it were, by accompanying them in the composition of a piece inspired by his music. The result would be performed in the *Philharmonie's* chamber-music room just before the LSO's concert in the main hall.

It seems a shame that in the event John Adams was taken ill at the last moment and could not be present to listen to the three pieces the young people had „written“. He would surely have been fascinated to hear what his own work had inspired the nine boys and three girls to compose. And perhaps even impressed by the resulting composition.

The pre-concert concert began with the young musicians playing what turned out to be the second of the three pieces they'd

created, with two pianos, percussion, flute, violin and cello. Rhythm was the dominant element and it was recognisably Adams-inspired.

When the music stopped, Hannah Conway stepped forward to tell us the story.

They'd had just two days to work together to create the pieces, using Adams' own techniques.

To get the workshop going, she explained, they'd first done some warming-up exercises designed to get the *stagiaires* to loosen up physically and mentally; to start working together, listening to each other and steeping themselves in rhythm. Some of the most important components of John Adams' music are recurring patterns of great rhythmic complexity, so concentration and coordination are vital.

And then she showed us.

She asked us to stand up and put us through the same exercise - a stepping, counting and clapping routine: 4 x 5, 4 x 3 and 4 x 4 steps, with a clap on the first beat; first all together, then with us doing 5-3-4 and the kids 3-4-5. The result was an exhilarating complex of rhythmic cross-hatching and we all sat down relaxed, receptive and grinning at each other.

Two of the young musicians were asked to tell us what they had learnt from the workshop: both said they'd been fascinated by the complex structures of Adams' music. And more generally, both had realised the importance of being aware of their fellow musicians, of looking, listening - and smiling when playing.

Once they'd begun to function as a group, they could start to compose as an ensemble. First they listened to Adams' music together - the three pieces the LSO was to play - and, let it work on their individual and communal imaginations. The next step was to begin to play together, making eye contact, listening attentively to what the others were doing, trying to understand how they were reacting, perceive the musical ideas they wanted to develop.

Not a single note was written down; the different sequences were composed by ear and played by heart.

The musical ideas, though inspired by Adams, were their own.

The result was an impressive act of communal music-making.

Hannah asked us to clap between movements (an activity that unfortunately seems to come naturally to many Luxembourg audiences these days ...).

Here it felt more like participation: we were contributing rhythmic bridge passages between the three pieces.



Reacting to musical stimuli

The first - and longest - piece, inspired by *Mother of the Man* from Adams' *Naïve and Sentimental Music* (a comment on Busoni's musical portrait of a man meditating at his mother's tomb), begins with a tolling bell: an elegiac atmosphere, reinforced by a dirge-like motif in the cello. A series of crescendos leads to an urgent syncopated central episode before the mood darkens again, with the tolling bell fading into a sustained note diminuendo on the cello.

The piece we heard at the beginning, created after they'd listened to *Slonimsky's Earbox*, is full of colour, with a melodic line wandering around the strong central rhythmic structures, building to a massive final crescendo.

*The Dharma at Big Sur* was the starting-point for the final piece. It progresses from a slow, mystical opening, via a *tutti* crescendo, to a sentimental folksy melody, which increases in density, leading into a dialogue between piano and percussion and a sequence of sharp notes that end the movement.

If we've described these pieces - ephemeral as they are - it is because what we heard was not just an exercise in writing in the manner of a particular composer; it was a glimpse into the creative process. They were the result of twelve individual consciousnesses reacting to musical stimuli and interacting with other consciousnesses in order to communicate their experience.

It was a first approach to the art of composition itself.



Photos: Guy Wagner

The Adams-inspired pre-concert concert