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Douglas Lilburn's "Birthday Offering"

DOUGLAS LILBURN has just written a new orchestral piece for the National Orchestra's 10th birthday called "A Birthday Offering." It is a work of brilliance, excitement, spontaneity, and it is very deeply felt.

Congratulations must go to the Broadcasting Service—and in particular to James Robertson—for commissioning such a work. As you will see, the work presents its problems, and on some of these it has been difficult to formulate opinions after only two hearings—once at a rehearsal and then the public performance.

The form of "A Birthday Offering" is decidedly rhapsodic. Mr. Lilburn puts this in a curiously negative way in his programme note. He says, "There's no evidence of sonata form," but goes on to say that "the music is rather in concertante style, that is, each player or section is treated as a soloist and the

In a recent session of 2YC's "Fortnightly Review," PETER CROWE discussed Douglas Lilburn's latest orchestral work. Here is a slightly abridged text of Mr. Crowe's comments

work aims to present a large range of colour and mood." I believe Mr. Lilburn thought Mr. Pruden's suggested title "Overtura Concertante" was quite close to the mark. There are three main sections: a lengthy introduction presenting the various sections of the orchestra; a suave and relaxed middle section, nostalgic and warmly emotional ("Nights in the Botanical Gardens" perhaps?); and a spirited finale. I have to confess that the Introduction had me a little baffled: I was unable to hear the connectives between the sections of this part, but it

must be remembered that this is not the kind of piece that makes its best effect on casual acquaintance.

Mr. Lilburn says that the work is based on "a theme of four notes," B Flat, C, F, A—"and everything that follows melodically and harmonically derives from these." In other words, the theme is used in the original shape, upside-down, backwards and upside-down and backwards. The 4 forms of the theme can also be transposed 11 times each to give a total of 48 permutations in all which can be used horizontally or vertically as desired. This is what we call nowadays "serial composition."

It is a technique similar to the one evolved by Schoenberg in 1923, but it has its real antecedents in Ars Nova and Renaissance music. Nearly all Stravinsky's works in the last four years employ this manner of composition, and in fact there is a world-wide tendency to adopt serial techniques. The significant thing is that Douglas Lilburn's new work is the first piece to be played by the National Orchestra that is through-composed in something like this manner. I am unable to say how rigidly Mr. Lilburn applies the so-called rules of serial composition, but I suspect he has not hesitated to use the "notes in between."

Compared with his other symphonic works, Douglas Lilburn's new piece springs its greatest surprise in the uninhibited use of the orchestra. It is the most arresting in its sonorities—at times brittle and brilliant, at others soft and shimmering—in his whole output. Triple woodwind including alto sax, a full complement of brass, five timpani, celesta, harp, piano and four other percussion players are needed as well as the strings. More than in any other department, Lilburn's mastery of scoring is shown in the resourceful and confident string writing.

The score shows signs of the composer's study of Bartok—especially in the short canons and extensive glissandi—also Copland and Stravinsky. It is not long ago that we thought Stravinsky was anathema to Lilburn. It is easy to say that there are echoes of these other men in the music, but I believe that when we make a statement like this, we are only showing signs of the difficulty of placing the new music in perspective with what we already know. What does it matter today when we say there are traces of Vivaldi in Bach's music? In spite of any comparisons you may like to make, "A Birthday Offering" is a highly original work.

It is impossible for me to say how well the work was played last Wednesday night, but I did have the feeling that it was performed rather gingerly. In any case, the audience made a great show of affection for Mr. Lilburn.

St. Cecilia's Day Concert

THE concert to celebrate the Festival of St. Cecilia held annually in London is now a Royal concert, whose profits go to help distressed musicians. Last year's programme was arranged by Sir Arthur Bliss, and presented two young musicians as soloists, the pianist Patricia Bishop and the Canadian organist Hugh McLean. The concert will be presented on two consecutive Sundays in the Main National programme, starting at 2.0 p.m. this Sunday, November 18. The first programme will be introduced by Sir Arthur Bliss, and also includes Frederick Harvey taking the solo part in Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet*.

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