



Octogenarian

Hello! Hello! Hello!

Hello and welcome to the 17th issue of the *Octogenarian*, your friendly reviewer and lobbyist for Bristol's music scene. This week the irrepressible punster Phil Harmonick will wrestle with his modernist demons while he pontificates upon the merits of BULO's latest offering. This proud ensemble remains a thoroughly well-oiled ship, and constitutes the very pinnacle of orchestral discipline. The views expressed by Mr. Harmonick do not necessarily represent those of the *Octogenarian*, or of anyone under fifty. Following this, we traverse the political spectrum with an abrupt and jarring leap, and bear witness to the bile of Gwendolyn Winthrop. She considers the iniquities of the indiscriminately applauding audience with all the righteous fury of the perpetually peeved. Thanks Gwen.

Crime-fighting duo Jay Sunaway and Desdemona Jones will then offer their respective insights into the triumphant return of the Bristol University Madrigal Ensemble. Elizabethan music has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity after mathematicians revealed the bulk of the era's dramatic output to be the work of a seemingly infinite team of chimpanzees at rudimentary typewriters (citation needed). From a similarly simian stance, the spotlight shifts to the *Octogenarian's* science student in residence: the unshakable Jammy McCoy. This time Jammy offers his belated and thoroughly grounded opinion of the Symphony Orchestra and Choral Society's production of Elgar's *Caractacus*, which he attended under the belief it would feature Russell Crowe.

After this display of pagan pageantry, the herald of the ancient music scene, Desdemona re-enters with tell of Schola. Having ridden for three days and nights from Emma Hornby's fortified retreat (Motte, but never Bailey), her tales of the troupe's London based campaign are particularly riveting.

If this panoramic pandemic of pan-historical music-reviewery has not suitably pandered to your needs, then the Pandora's box (or Pan's Labyrinth) that is our prize crossword may be just the thing. Winner gets a Galaxy Caramel. Pantastic.

Upcoming Concerts

When?	Where?	Who?	What?	How much?
Tue 01 May 16:30 - 17:30	Victoria's Room	Simon Shaw-Miller	Research Seminar: Visualising Violins	Free
Wed 02 May 13:15 - 14:00	Auditorium	Brodowski String Quartet	Shostakovich, String Quartets Nos 7 & 8	Free
Wed 02 May 19:30 - 21:00	Auditorium	CoMA	???	Free
Thu 03 May 19:30-	Colston Hall	Bristol Ensemble, soloist Matthew Barley	Rossini, Adrian Sutton, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven.	£8 Under 26s
Fri 04 May 13:15 - 14:00	Auditorium	Bristol University Wind Orchestra	A Sci-Fi Spectacular, including marches from <i>Star Wars</i> ; and music from <i>Star Trek</i> through the (light) years	Free
Sat 05 May 19:30 - 21:00	St Paul's Church	Bristol University Barbershop Singers	???	Free
Mon 07 May 14:30 and 19:30	Manor Hall	Bops	Pirates of Penzance	£4 (£3 BOPS)

25 April 2012, 13:15 - 14:00

Auditorium, Victoria Rooms

Philip Mead (piano) with Rob Godman (electronics) and
Bristol University Loudspeaker Orchestra



I'm something of a self-proclaimed musical Luddite. Call me old-fashioned, but I'd much rather be swept away by the sweet and sonorous sounds of Sarasate and Schubert, than spend an hour trying to comprehend the meaning behind the oft random-sounding, digitally-treated utterances of electronic composition. It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I took my seat in a (surprisingly) full Auditorium for the lunchtime concert on Wednesday 25th April, entitled "Music for Piano and Electronics".

As the audience experienced the first dissonant washes of Jonathan Harvey's *Tombeau de Messiaen*, I consulted the programme note. The key impetus of this work was to express the many 'colours' of harmonic distortion – or as Harvey puts it, 'a prismatic play of light'. This concept was skilfully and effectively executed – the dissonant washes of the piano, whilst clearly non-tonal, were never aurally unpleasant, and Harvey's mantra that the electronic and acoustic sounds 'never entirely belong[ing], [are] never entirely separate' was perfectly fulfilled. As the audience began to applaud, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I had not only been engrossed in the composition as a whole, so effectively done as it had been, but that I had actually enjoyed it. Perhaps I was finally being turned towards the dark side...

Unfortunately, the second piece rather put a spanner in the works. Entitled *Laudate in Cymbalis*, Philip Mead's composition aimed to 'explor[ing] the relationship between extended pianistic sounds..., a single cymbal, and live electronics'. Sadly, the composition rather failed to convince. Whilst the cymbal and piano were clearly audible, the exact role of technology was difficult to perceive aurally (the programme note was rather vague on this). As a result, a key aspect of this three-dimensional relationship was missing. No doubt Mead is a skilful composer – he is certainly a passionate performer – but however complex and clever the compositional process might have been, it was unfortunately not evident to the audience.

Slightly disappointed, I nonetheless eagerly anticipated

the third piece in the programme – Rob Godman's *Duel* –, hoping it might revive in me the interest that had been stirred by Jonathan Harvey. According to Godman, the work discussed the 'issues of communication ...when working with different media' – presumably, the piano and its technological counterpart. Unfortunately, the tape part suffered from the old problem of simply sounding like random utterances. If communication was Godman's watchword, miscommunication was mine. The piece didn't really sound very much like a duel either – unless, of course, it was a duel between new-age music and audience expectations, in which case it was the conservative audience that ultimately won out.

With the score now firmly fixed at 2-1, and my old-fashioned prejudices still holding strong, I braced myself for the final offering – *Songs and Shards* by Neal Farwell. Now, I have to be a bit careful about what I say here, given the composer is also a senior lecturer at the university, who could easily find out where I live...

No, actually, I'm going to be brutally honest: I liked it. First off, there was clear narrative direction, nowhere near as vague as the previous two pieces; the music and programme note corresponded perfectly. The concept of *Songs and Shards* – 'lyrical elegy' combined with musically-represented crystalline fragments, was perfectly expressed by the melodic piano line in combination with electronic splashes. I also deeply approved of Farwell's choice of words; where Godman separates his piece into 'movements', Farwell used the term 'paragraphs' – an altogether more appropriate choice.

So, the final score – Classical Prejudice: 2, New-Age Music: 2. Am I now converted – an avid fan of the genre? Not really. I might admit, though, to being on the way. Certainly, I have a new appreciation for the skill required to successfully realise music drawn from a fusion of the old and new – the acoustic and the digital. Ultimately, at least I didn't walk out halfway through; the lady that did was apparently later spotted huddled on a bench with her fingers in her ears, belting out *Die Schone Mullerin* at the top of her voice. I guess some people are harder to please than others. Actually, maybe I'll join her – after all, old habits die hard.

Phil Harmonick

Rant of the Fortnight

A good alternative to being angry, upset and rebellious, is being irritated that others are not angry, upset and rebellious. We agree too much. I think someone should disagree, someone should stir things up. Is that asking too much?

I recently had to sit through a performance that was at first simply boring. As I listened more carefully, it grew increasingly painful, it became excruciating and I began questioning my own existence. The fact that a concert will, at some point, finish (unless you are listening to Wagner, which I personally find too risky) kept me going through the rough times. I was relieved and happy when the last note was played.

But not for long.

The audience started clapping and, by the look of it, were never planning to stop. It was not one of those ecstatic applause that would imply that I was wrong – no bravo's, no standing up; I couldn't even spot an impressed nod. Simply clapping. Applause is the expression of approval by the act of clapping. The only thing worthy of approval in that concert was the reaching of the final note (which, to be fair, was almost synchronised).

The applause grew increasingly painful, it became excruciating and I again questioned my existence. What is the point of it all if we are suddenly celebrating this? Had all their hearing aids broken down at the same time? Maybe it was a common misunderstanding, and the two oboes were not in fact supposed to be in tune. There must be an explanation for this ovation other than the audience being completely tone deaf and stupid.

The horror of the poor playing was quickly overshadowed by the irritation of the ovation. Perhaps I could have walked out in rage, demonstrated against both the playing and the applause at the same time but frankly, I was too busy being irritated at the rest of the audience. Have we all become polite and accepting? Is it suddenly okay to torture a perfectly fine piece of music – should the audience celebrate that? It's like receiving a Domino's pizza cold and without cheese, and, instead of complaining and sending it back, applauding the talents of the cook.

What is happening to the world?

I am bored and irritated, and I think someone should take responsibility and do something about this horror. Stand up for something you believe in, whether it is good music or how to make a proper cup of tea. One thing is sure, this understanding, polite mannerism can no longer continue.

Gwendolyn Winthrop

Friday 27 April 2012, 13:15 - 14:00

Recital Room, Victoria Rooms

Bristol University Madrigal Ensemble

A choral miscellany from Renaissance madrigals to 20th century pastoral works and jazz

Being a bit of an 'old music nerd', I was (unashamedly) very excited for the Bristol University Madrigal Ensemble concert on Friday 27th April. Expecting madrigals, for obvious reasons, I was pleasantly amused when I attended the concert. Had the programme only included Renaissance madrigals, I would have been perfectly satisfied, but the conductor, Molly Alexander, also incorporated some fun jazz pieces and some beautiful 20th century repertoire, such as Eric Whitacre's haunting *Sleep*. I have to say, I don't think there was one person who left that concert having not thoroughly enjoyed it. The mix of old and new worked really well and the amusing 20th century anecdotes that the conductor included made the atmosphere of the concert warm, welcoming and relaxed. Unfortunately, I got the impression at the beginning of the concert that the choir took a while to warm up and fully indulge in the music they were singing. I thought that in some of the beginning pieces, compared to the strength and vibrancy of the rest of the choir, the sopranos often sounded a bit weak and weedy. They had mostly recovered by the end of the concert but still not fully established themselves as a group. Altogether they still sounded a bit like a very high undercurrent instead of an integral part of the choir. Try harder sopranos....

This was just a small negative however that was completely outweighed by the positives in the concert. The choir very clearly had a lot fun singing the pieces and I definitely had a lot of fun listening to them! Although it was not quite the Renaissance music I was expecting (and secretly hoping for), the concert, I believe, was all the better for that.

Desdemona Jones



I begin this review with a frank confession: For me, this concert came the morning after a particularly raucous Wind Orchestra social, and felt about as appealing as being beaten about the head with a hardback book of inspirational self-help quotes. What gave these madrigalists the right to be so happy? The weather was biblical, and everybody was too depressed to start ark building in earnest.

I took my seat in the back row of a recital room full to capacity, and feared that Farmer and Weelkes' raunchy wordplay and jubilant 'fa-la-la' would seem incomprehensibly alien. The exulted prattle of the Renaissance was separated not only by the intervening centuries, but by a veritable gulf of emotional energy and behavioral integrity. Thankfully, and possibly attributable to the diminution of my higher brain functions, I was completely wrong.

BUME are entirely liberated of the stuffy connotations of ancient music performance. This is due in part to their integration of more modern repertoire, but is just as attributable to the sheer pace and frenetic kineticism of their performance. They are as exciting to watch as they are to listen to, and it is this unrestrained enthusiasm that makes the inane happiness of the madrigal catching. The finale came in the form of Randy Newman's *Short People*: The disgruntled composer's hateful tirade (we hear Mr. Newman has yet to come to terms with his wife's elopement with a team of jockeys) was handled effortlessly by a chameleon-like ensemble capable of channeling an enormous range of genres with apparent ease, and obvious relish.

The hall-full of people that left the afternoon concert bore scant resemblance to those that had occupied it an hour before in demeanor, and the day's drizzle couldn't diminish this impression.

An acute sense of editorial balance makes me want to disagree with Desdemona's gushing review, but I can't do it. BUME are great.

Jay Sunaway

Philistine's Corner

17th March 2012,

Auditorium, Victoria Rooms

Bristol University

Symphony Orchestra

Caractacus



On the final week of last term, the Ed. called me into his office and said he had a proposition for me. Phrases such as 'culturally enriching' and 'personal improvement' were bandied about with impunity, and I had to re-run the conversation several times in my head before I realised he intended to send me to a concert of sorts.

"I think you'll like this," he said. "It's set during one of the largest battles of the Roman conquest of Britain. Think of it..." he paused awhile in thought. "think of it as a musical version of the opening scene of *Gladiator*."

How could I refuse an offer like that? That battle scene was bloody amazing.

So, with barely contained excitement, I sat in the Vic Rooms awaiting an epic spectacle of Roman military might. I had brought popcorn, but the sharply attired gentleman in the row in front turned and glared at me so much, even after I offered him some, that I was forced to hide it 'neath my chair.

My suspicions that I may have been misled were aroused when the chorus began to file out. Surely with so many vocalists, all available stage space would be occupied for the upcoming event? Upon the arrival of the soloists, I twigged and felt a little hard done by that I would be missing out on the heroic action I had been promised.

Such notions of disappointment were utterly dispelled once the performance began. The first movement, in which the British sentries are alerted to the invasion of their homeland by the Roman Legions, was so sweeping and dramatic that I remained agape for a considerable length of time; an amazement that lasted for the entire performance. It was like spending an hour and a half sat in John Williams' head, a glorious experience that everyone should go through at least once in their lives. The soloists were utterly incredible, and the skill and precision it must take to sing with such high quality for a performance so long left me in awe. I get stagefright singing in front of the bathroom mirror, never mind a concert hall full of people...

Luckily I had the program with the words printed, or otherwise I would not have had a single clue what was going on. In terms of the story, the beleaguered king of Britain, Caractacus, is suffering widespread defeat at the hands of the Romans. He goes to the druids, presented here as ethereal hippy types, who then proceed to betray him for no concrete reason that this philistine can understand, advising him to make a stand against the Romans in an ill thought-out location. The battle is lost, (out of sight, of course), and Caractacus is captured by the Romans with his daughter Eigen and her ex-druid betrothed Orbin. Upon presentation to the Emperor in Rome, the three display such high qualities of selfless, stiff upper lip Britishness that he decides to let them go and gives them a villa in Italy. What follows is a finale of such bombastic, inspiring nationalism that the eyes of even the most apathetic patriot would begin to water.

I got tears in my popcorn.

Jammy McCoy

News and Events

- Octogenarian* would like to offer its congratulations to Schola and Emma Hornby, who took part in a high-profile concert and recording session in the Temple Church, London. They performed a large variety of chant and polyphony from medieval French and Spanish monasteries, much of which has never been recorded before. Despite the many long rehearsals, attempts to speak Latin with a French/Spanish accent, challenges (yes, I'm talking about the scooper), and the intimidation of some very big names (Sally Dunkley and Jeremy White... casual name dropping), they performed exceptionally well. It was a personal triumph for all of them and hopefully the music department is proud, as they definitely deserve it! Watch out for the CD next year....
- The government has today announced plans to ban the interval of the minor 3rd. 'In these times of austerity', a spokesman tells the *Octogenarian*, 'people simply don't want to hear the sulking of over-privileged groups of musicians, and would much prefer something more cheerful.' This legislation will necessitate the reworking of an enormous proportion of the canon, thus creating jobs, and plans are already underway to extend the ban to the major 6th: 'basically the same thing, living under false pretenses for too long.' The interval of the minor 3rd has been a ubiquitous presence throughout the history of music, and many will be sad to see it go. It even forms an element of the familiar major triad.

'What the opposition don't appreciate', the spokesman tells us, 'is that it is entirely illogical to form a major triad with anything but major 3rds. It just doesn't make sense.'

To the *Octo's* concerns that this may augment anti-government feeling he simply sighed; 'You're not even funny'.
- Costa coffee on the triangle is to claim 10% of all profits from academic work carried out in the music department: 'It only seems fair' claims their manager. 'When you consider that much of the mental energy invested in scholarship is a direct result of our product, 10% even seems a rather paltry amount.'

Controversy surrounds this claim, with many academic staff protesting that far greater sums than this are already being spent in the establishment.

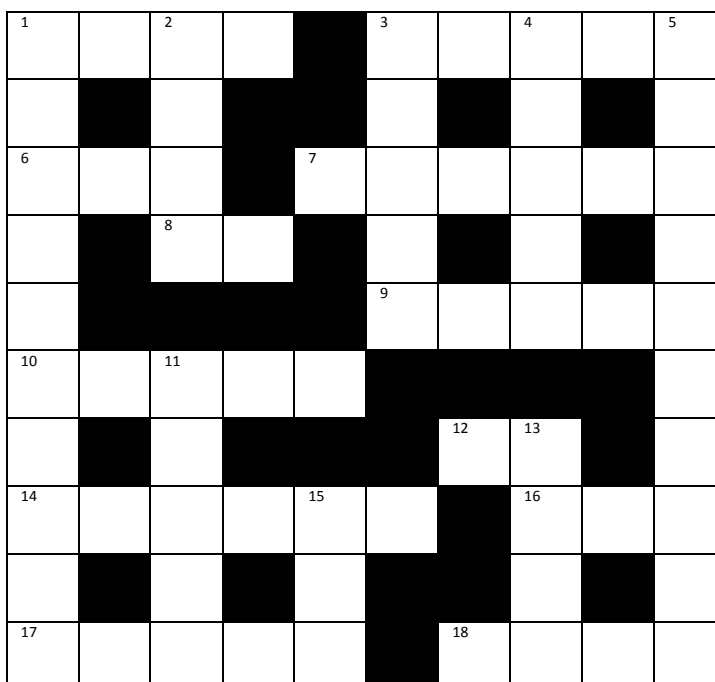
'What!?' was the response of one esteemed department member, spraying our shocked reporter with flat-white and hazelnut syrup.

Across

- Short, small flute (4)
- Blind jazz pianist. Art for his sake? (5)
- Breezy song (3)
- The Aristocats* learned '___ and Arpeggios' (6)
- A musical work's number (abbr.) (2)
- Near the bridge, sounds delicious *sul* ___ (5)
- Rimsky opera sounds unhappy (5)
- Carries about 80 mins of music, now predominantly used for scaring crows (2)
- Debussy wrote some *pour orchestra* (6)
- Library in Bristol's netherregions? (3)
- Ethnomusicology is everybody else's? *Music of the* ___ (5)
- Rank of Shostakovich's *Macbeth* (4)

Down

- Very quiet (10)
- Italian choir (4)
- Performance direction in 4'33" (5)
- A bell does this, but for whom? (5)
- Russian composer is not arrogant (10)
- Grim companion to Schubert's *Maiden* (5)
- Inter-war anti-art movement (4)
- Sensory organ, useful in music to have a good one (3)



Crossword by Jay Sunaway

Answers to octogenarianbristol@gmail.com to win a Galaxy Caramel!