

ROGER REYNOLDS *The Promises of Darkness.*

Mistral. Dionysus. Positings • Mathias Reumert, cond;
Mathias Reumert Group • EKKOZONE 05 (82:03)

In my review of an all-Reynolds disc on the Neuma label, I described my initial acquaintance with Reynolds' music (his music has a smaller reach in the UK; it was via a Proms performance), and welcomed with open arms performances of four of Reynolds' scores (*Fanfare* 47:2). Imagine my joy when I saw not only more of Reynolds' music (now on the Ekkozone label) but, as performers, the Mathias Reumert Group. Reumert has impressed, too, in the past, perhaps most notably on a disc of Ferneyhough, Jodlowski, Xenakis, Donatoni, and Henze on *Metier* (*Fanfare* 40:4), not to mention a simply phenomenal disc of music by Philippe Manoury and Ravel, also on Ekkozone (*Fanfare* 46:6). Manoury shares with Reynolds a need for more exposure. There is a previous piece by Reynolds titled *Watershed* that was performed by Reumert himself on a *Metier* release, reviewed in *Fanfare* 43:2.

This particular Reynolds cornucopia, all 82 minutes of it, launches with *The Promises of Darkness*, a 23-minute piece in four sections that uses both specific and graphic notation. Four movements, four instrumental groups, as Reynolds puts it, "project three concurrent streams of sound, each with its own musical character." It is good to "go in" armed with knowledge of this strategy: there is one stream of sound, marked by accents and sudden shifts in dynamic; then there is another that uses more uniform dynamics and durations plus, finally, one in a state of constant development (using glissandos and chromaticism). "Nodes" (arrival points) result

in 10 “sections” over four “movements.” All this sounds very technical, but firstly it does help in experiencing the piece; and secondly, it also leaves “space” for surprises (such as a sudden moment of dance after the halfway point of the first “movement.” Maybe there is also humor in the brass glissandos, too. The fact Reynolds uses his notational systems simultaneously offers challenges, I would imagine (not least, who can tell the difference?). If one thinks of the exact notation, though, as a “grid,” then everything else is “off-grid” and the somewhat elusive quality of the freer performers does create a separate “layer.” The work is dedicated to the Spanish-Catalan composer Roberto Gerhard, who taught Reynolds; it was completed in late 1975, and is deeply affected by the fall of Saigon in April that year. Despite the complex processes, or perhaps because of them, the music is deeply emotional, and nowhere more so than in the third large section, quiet yet pervaded with keening sounds, of notes more melting than glissando-ing. The demands on performers must be huge, and all credit to the Mathias Reumert Group for their obvious expertise and all-embracing confidence. Although scored for more players (13 as opposed to 11), *Mistral* of 1985 feels much, much gentler. Scored for six brass, six strings, and amplified harpsichord, this piece is the result of the composer’s experience with a mistral in France in December 1983. The gentleness pervades the longest section of the work but does not define it; sudden activity in the harpsichord seems to imply restfulness but is not to last, while the harmonies increase in tension until flutter-tongued brass mark a high point, followed by sudden silvery stasis.

Euripides and chaos theory meet in *Dionysus*; it is not only Dionysus himself, but the Bacchae also that inspired this piece for octet (piccolo, clarinet, percussion, and double bass, grouped against trumpet, horn, bass trombone, and piano). Again, there are four “parts,” asymmetrical in nature, with the proportions drawn from an aspect of chaos theory. One can easily hear the premise of one group beginning chords with an accent (the brass group), the other beginning softly and crescendoing, around the six-minute mark and onward. The performance is exceptional, with the groups changing dynamics gradually, as one. The idea of coexisting strata immediately spoke to me of Birtwistle, but Reynolds himself instead references Ives, and specifically *The Unanswered Question*.

The final work, *Positing* (2013), introduces electronic media. Much earlier, in the 1960s, Reynolds wrote *A Portrait of Vanzetti* at Cologne’s renowned Studio für Elektronische Musik. In the included interview with Reumert, Reynolds talks about the idea of the specific placement of sounds in space (something very close, also, to Stockhausen’s heart). The scoring of his piece is flute/piccolo, horn, cello, violin, piano/percussion, and “computer-processed sound.” So it is that the humans “posit” material via self-contained movements; a “computer musician” transforms the material into “responses.” The effect is nothing short of magical: time and again, the dry explanations fade into music of beauty and substance. In turn, the musicians are able to respond to the responses in a quasi-improvisatory way. Here, it is John Cage that is the aesthetic reference, and his “granting of permission” to use sounds not usually thought of as

“musical.” Varèse is another acknowledged and more easily audible influence here. The sheer beauty of “Response 3” could be the perfect gateway not only into Reynolds’ world, but also into electronic music in general. It is interesting how the piece is so satisfyingly shaped, too: the final “Response 4” feels just right.

A superb release from all angles. Roger Reynolds’ music continues to enchant, and to challenge from a baseline of sonic beauty. The performances are faultless, as one has come to expect from Reumert and his associates. Magical. **Colin Clarke**