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**Seen and Heard Concert Review**

**Amaral, Boulez, Berio:** London Sinfonietta, Melinda Maxwell (oboe), Paul Archibald (trumpet), Pedro Amaral (conductor), Jerwood Hall, St. Luke's, London, 23.6.2007 (AO)

What a surprise this concert was! Publicity was so low key that it was almost a secret, but it that made the discovery even more exciting. Pedro Amaral may not be well known in this country, but he's well respected elsewhere in Europe. The eminent Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has chosen his music to feature in the first of its own new series of recordings. The first release, *Works For Ensemble*, presents Amaral's work with premieres of chamber works by Berio, Boulez and Stockhausen. It will be released in July 2007, and distributed through Harmonia Mundi.

The concert began with Amaral's *Spirales*, for chamber orchestra. It may last only ten minutes, but it's densely scored and detailed. There's a strong sense of movement, as if the music were a living organism, curling and twisting in a kind of ritual dance. It turns on pivots, often announced by percussion. Whatever the theory behind it, it's lively and interesting on its own terms.

A musicologist as well as musician, Amaral's grounding in musical analysis is firm. Stockhausen admired his doctoral thesis, *Le monde de la musique*, and made him his personal assistant for the revision of Stockhausen's *Momente*. He conducts a lot of Stockhausen, but for this concert chose to conduct two pieces by Boulez and Berio, who have been his major influences. First, Amaral led six of the Sinfonietta players in Boulez's *Dérive 1*. Although *Spirales* sounds nothing like *Dérive 1*, hearing them together showed how both follow an inner structural logic. As a conductor, Amaral is clear and incisive, perhaps a result of his feel for musical shape and form. He really seems to have a keen perception of "how" music works. After the concert, I crept up to look at his score, and noticed how clearly he had marked it. That sort of vision is the basis of interpretation: there's nothing sloppy or accidental about good conducting.

Melinda Maxwell substituted at very short notice as oboist in Berio's *Chemins IV*. Hearing it live was good, because it revealed a very strong feeling of "sound in space", the music shaped by the dynamics of performance. Nine string players are grouped in three, with two double basses to extend the range. The oboe leads, rather like an incantation. For a

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moment I thought of Tibetan horns calling across mountains.  
Later I thought of Tahitians blowing conch shells across

Lagoons. Berio would have enjoyed such cosmopolitan images! If the playing was less refined than it had been in *Dérives*, it was still good enough, the violins particularly firm. Again, Amaral kept the piece moving with a sense of direction. As it drew to an end, the cellos tapped out sounds like clocks ticking urgently, as if time itself was speeding up, culminating in a dramatic final burst of timpani.

Amaral's *Paraphrase* was premiered in London in February 2006, by the Sinfonietta under Peter Eötvös, Amaral's mentor and conducting teacher. At the time, I thought it was too inhibited, though it clearly had potential. How delighted I was to hear it again, played in a much wilder, more vivacious manner! It's a piece that arose from an earlier work ...*Textos, Paraphrases, Perspectivas*... Apparently, Amaral takes ideas from the first, transmuting them into something completely different. Before the concert in 2006, he described the process as being like the way buildings grow out of earlier structures, an unending sequence of renewal. Whatever its origins, *Paraphrases* is a vigorous, passionate piece. It's shaped with bold, strong blocks of sound. Within each block the layers are detailed, yet are integrated well and move together, each stage of development clearly defined, so even when there are ricochets and reiterations, the overall structure is strong. It must be a pleasure to play because individual parts are interesting. The trombone curls and twists, and, at critical turning points, the violins lead, but playing extremely quietly, so you hardly realize the significance of the figure before it passes, which is even more effective than if they were obvious. Primarily though, this is a dialogue between piano and trumpet, crossing diagonally over the rest of the orchestra. Paul Archibald was the soloist this time (last year it was Marco Blaauw). The pianist was again the esteemed John Constable. The vivacity of the trumpet inventions contrasted well with the more measured, solemn piano.

Amaral is still young (born 1972) but has plenty of potential. I hope the Gulbenkian recordings will be successful and bring more attention. Like the Finns, the Portuguese seem to produce a lot of interesting music relative to the size of their populations, but from past experience, the music hasn't been effectively marketed. Musicweb was the only site which gave full prominence to the Strauss/Portugalsom series a few years ago. Hopefully, the Gulbenkian will provide better performances and better distribution so the music is more accessible. Composers like Braga Santos, Lopes Graça, and Nunes are of international importance and deserve to be more widely heard.

Amaral's music, especially, is distinctly mainstream European, so I hope we'll hear much more of him.

### **Anne Ozorio**

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation:

<http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/news/2007/cd-series-works-for-ensemble>

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