

Promise and Uncertainty

With its first performances in 2009, Breitkopf & Härtel will be beginning a collaboration with the composer Márton Illés. The focus will be on three world premières: Torso VII, for two percussionists (Munich, 12 February); a piano trio at the Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt (late April / early May); and finally, in May, a work for ensemble as part of the project into..., run by the Ensemble Modern and the Siemens Arts Programme, in which Illés gives a musical account of the burgeoning Arab metropolis of Dubai. Moreover, the publisher is adding a number of existing works from the composer's oeuvre to its catalogue, for instance the ensemble work Torso III, and Post Torso for string orchestra. Both works will be receiving their second performances in 2009 – Torso III at the Berlin festival Ultraschall (25 January), and Post Torso at the Festspielhaus St. Pölten (14 May).

Márton Illés – Born in Budapest in 1975, Illés received piano, percussion and composition tuition in Győr (Hungary). He studied piano performance at the Basel Music Academy, graduating in 1998. Studies in composition were to follow under Detlev Müller-Siemens in Basel (1997 – 2001) and Wolfgang Rihm in Karlsruhe (2001 -2005). Illés has held a teaching position at the Karlsruhe University of Music since 2005. He has received numerous awards and prizes, both as a composer and as a pianist, most recently receiving the 2008 Ernst von Siemens Foundation's career grant, the Schneider-Schott Prize and the Paul Hindemith Prize. In 2009, he held a fellowship at the Villa Massimo in Rome.

To date, Márton Illés' output, consisting of chamber music, ensemble works and orchestral pieces, may not be especially remarkable for its quantity, but what is notable is the astoundingly distinctive and personal idiom which runs through it, and the astonishingly high quality it attains. On the face of it, there may seem comparatively little out of the ordinary about it. The works' durations, the forces employed, the technical demands – there is nothing there that would seem particularly unusual. They observe boundaries that can be accommodated without difficulty within a standard modern concert. They are not given to the sort of iconoclastic posturing which strives for innovation at all costs. Nor do they strike one as being born of a brashly contrary spirit - they seem, in fact, hardly to result from any sort of extra-musical consideration at all. What makes Márton Illés' music so remarkable for me is how it seems to be so well-formed according to an undeniable inner musical logic, from which it derives a powerful and spellbinding quality – especially when it is nurtured by a highly individual form of instrumental proficiency.

All the specifics that we glean from hearing it – the rhythmic gesturalities that springs forth with a practically physical immediacy, the harmonically driven timbres, the simultaneously playful and expressive employment of instrumental virtuosity – all of this stems from a fundamentally musical mode of thinking and aims at an innately musical expressivity. This mode of thinking is not to be misconstrued as a sort of system or formal principle to be ascertained from the musical framework. Rather, music manifests itself in Illés' case as an unleashing of the “vital urges of sonority”, to employ a metaphor of Arnold Schoenberg's, and in so doing touch on an area of musical inventiveness which is of essential importance to Wolfgang Rihm.

The “logic” of these vital urges of sonority certainly has something enigmatic about it, precisely *because* it defies any attempt to pare it back to a system of pre-existing principles. However, the logic is nonetheless *there*, it exists, it is palpable and perceptible; there is something compellingly sensuous and sensual about it – what we would generally refer to as a suggestive quality. This characteristic of Illés' music is striking because it is so directly apparent, because the listener is able to “experience” it. It is from this experiential quality, the ability to propagate its imaginative power

in the listener's sensory apparatus, triggering reverberations of musical experience, that Illés' music derives its inimitable quality. It manifests itself in the listener's awareness of their own musical experience, which is kept continuously awake, as it were, for the entire duration of the composition.

Two traits intertwine with each other in Illés' music to accentuate further its distinctive musicality and creativity, but also its highly personal existentialism. The compositional decisions in his music reveal forms and shapes of an unmistakably gestural quality, whose clear rhythmic and timbral delineations seem to coax the passage of time into quasi-sculpted motions. Not infrequently, the repetitive nature of these gestural formations assumes an air of such obsessive tenacity, of being frozen in, nailed down, temporally and spatially condensed, that one has a feeling almost of oppression at being thus "pinned to the spot". At the same time, however, one senses that these repetitive forms are straining to break out of this captivity, these moments of frozen transfixion. It is through this inward mixture of sitting tight and bursting forth, of constraint and forward impetus, that Illés' music displays a peculiarly contemporary existential orientation. It betrays an indebtedness and dedication to his Hungarian roots, but also to the inconstancy of a world that is falling into a perilous rotation and which radiates a phantasmic allure, in equal measure beguiling us and provoking us to rail against it.