

AHEM CONFERENCE, SATURDAY 16 APRIL 14.50

DAPHNE ORAM'S 'STILL POINT', AN UNKNOWN PRECURSOR OF TODAY'S ELECTRONIC MUSIC.

Ahem, ahem...Good afternoon. (don't worry Shiva I won't actually say that).

Daphne Oram, as I'm sure you're all aware, is one of the unsung pioneers of electronic music in this country. Not entirely unsung perhaps. There's been a small flurry of activity since her death, including the release of some of her music on CD, and the creation of the Oram archive at Goldsmith's College, and a number of articles in the mainstream press. And she's been taken up by younger musicians – some of you might know the vinyl album *Sound House* from the Anglo-Italian electronica duo *Wall* which came out a couple of years ago. So the basic outline of her life and work is reasonably well known. We know she turned away from a career in medicine to become a balance engineer at the BBC, and over a sixteen year-career there developed very radical ideas about the creative potential of the microphone and of other technologies such as the tape recorder. As a composer her work divides into two parts. There are those that were created using those technologies, to begin with at the BBC, where she was one of the founders of the BBC radiophonic workshop, and later at her own studio at a converted oast-house in Kent. Here she worked over decades on a system to convert shapes drawn onto blank film footage into sound via photo-electric cells, a process she dubbed *Oramics*. The other less well-known part of her work consisted of notated works, written for conventional instruments.

My topic today is a major work of hers which is entirely unknown apart from tantalising references to its existence in the Oram literature. It's interesting not least because it straddles the divide between those two categories of pieces. The piece is entitled *Still Point*, and given its early date of 1948-49 it embodies an unbelievably radical concept. What Oram created was a substantial orchestral score which runs for more than half an hour, in which the score is performed together with live electronic sound. Hugh Davies, in his obituary of Daphne Oram says that *Still Point* "is almost certainly the earliest composition to specify the real-time electronic transformation of instrumental sounds."

Oram began the piece in 1948, and must have completed it by the beginning of 1950, as she was able to submit the score for the Prix Italia in that year. Unfortunately at some point, possibly in transit between Rome and the UK the score became lost, and the most diligent search by James Bulley who looks after the Oram archive at Goldsmith's College has failed to turn it up. What we do have is a stack of pencil sketches for the work, plus written instructions as to how the co-ordination of live acoustic and live electronic sound is to be achieved. James and the composer Shiva Feshareki have been collaborating on a realization of the piece, to be premiered later this year, and in a moment Shiva will be telling you about the puzzles and pleasures of working on the sketches to prepare a performing version.

Before that I would like to sketch in the background to this remarkable piece. One curious fact about it is that Daphne Oram hardly spoke or wrote about it afterwards, or attempted to reconstruct the score from the sketches that survived. It's almost as if she lost interest in the piece, which is astonishing, on two counts. Daphne Oram was very well versed in the history of electronic music, and she must have known that with this piece she had made history. And she must surely have been simply curious to know how her idea had turned out in practice.

In fact it's entirely in character. Oram was always moving on, mentally speaking, and when a piece was done it was done – it's one of the things she had in common with her hero Stockhausen. She was orientated towards the future, and full of dreams about what electronic music could achieve, if only the means could be found to unlock its potential. But she was also deeply fascinated by the past - and this gives a clue to the meaning of the title Still Point. One's natural assumption is that it must surely come from Burnt Norton, the first of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets. That's a fair assumption, given that when Oram was working on this piece the Four Quartets had been published only a few years previously, in 1943. Eliot had become one of the sages of British public life in the post-war period, like Bertrand Russell and C E M Joad, and a woman of burning intellectual curiosity like Daphne Oram would surely have known the Four Quartets. Here are the relevant lines

SLIDE 1

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance*

This is a description of the special state works of art possess of being alive in the moment and yet fixed for all eternity, like Keats's Grecian urn. You can imagine how that might be symbolized in music – it suggests those modernist idioms where pulse is suspended, or perhaps a state of rhythmic ambiguity where it's hard to tell whether the motion is forwards through time, or a kind of dancing on the spot.

Well of course I've not heard Still Point, but I've looked at the sketches, and also taken a look at the instrumental pieces that precede it, such as Piano Sonata in Ab, written in 1943 was Oram was only 18, and the Three Miniatures for oboe and piano of 1947. The idiom of these modest pieces is quite conservative. The miniatures are cast in familiar ABA forms, and they have a mix of astringent lyricism and a certain spikiness in the harmony with angular ostinato – I found as I looked at them I kept remembering film scores of Georges Auric or Muir Mathieson.

My impression is that the orchestral part of Still Point though more elaborate, isn't so far from world. And that immediately prompts the question of how that sort of idiom could possibly co-exist with the electronic treatments she asks for. But the fact that I want to ask that question shows that I am still somewhat in the grip of the mindset that this conference sets out to challenge, that is, the mindset which insists that because electronic music is new, it ought to be new through and through. New sounds demand a new grammar to structure or them – or to put it the other way round, if we want to reconfigure music's grammar, to be true to our experience of living in modern times, then we really must fashion a new vocabulary of sounds to go with it.

I think Daphne Oram would have had no time for that kind of dogmatism, and it's not because she lacked a visionary streak in her nature. On the contrary, she was very alert to what one might call the esoteric side of electronic music; that sense that part of its appeal lies in the ways it transcends our cultural boundaries, and connects us both to the vibrations of our bodies and of the cosmos – that's the side of her

that is close to Stockhausen – and which also is connected to ancient ideas about the power of sound, particularly its power to heal. If you search through Oram’s diaries and letters at the Oram archive you discover her interest in occult knowledge persisted right through her life. She attended Parascience conferences, and was a member of the Wrekin Trust and other organisations which explored the idea that mankind was in possession of esoteric knowledge that we have since lost.

In 1947 she wrote a wonderful visionary manifesto entitled Atlantis Anew, which was clearly inspired by Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis and even echoes some of its phraseology. It’s relevant to our theme, as you’ll see:

SLIDE 2

We have also soundhouses, where we practise the healing powers of sound; where we analyse each human being’s innate waveform and induce those harmonics to resonate which have fallen out of sorts; where the criminal is put into a harmless, restless sleep until his mental powers have come to terms with themselves and he is again in harmony with mankind; where man and beast are given the means of communication, one to the other, so that man despises not the animal kingdom, nor any other form of life, no, nor even the ‘inanimate’, but humbly learns the wisdom derived from contact with another aspect.

Here we learn the harmonic series of the elements, the cycles of the years, the oscillations of the tides, and the induced resonances from those forces far out in space. We explore the sounds which move boulders, the overtones which transmute the metals, but moreover we acknowledge the wavelength of our own time and respect the existence of beings without that time, finding thereby means to produce summation tones penetrating the very fundamentals of these worlds beyond our frontiers. For here we excite by the subtle higher frequencies the inner consciousness of man linking him, in truth, with the infinite timelessness of that still point where all is comprehended.

You see there the reference to a ‘still point’, which here is conceived differently to Eliot. For him it’s an aesthetic quality embodied in art works which in a sense are designed for our mental capacities; they offer a metaphor for a state which we cannot literally attain. Here Oram suggests that, through the beneficent power of vibrations, we could literally put ourselves into a higher state of consciousness.

All very mystical, but then there’s the other side of Oram which was very far down-to-earth and far from mystical. Or perhaps it would be better

to describe that side of her as humanist, in the sense that she refuses to dismiss history. She didn't have that mindset common amongst male pioneers of electronic music that inspiration could only be found far away, in ancient or exotic music, or in modern music. She embraced everything, just as in her intellectual life she ranged high and low. She coined the term *montaigner* from the name of the essayist Michel de Montaigne, meaning 'to consider facts from all directions,' and that included the facts of human nature too. She thought human beings were just as rooted in their culture as they were in atoms and their vibrations. And her notion of culture was very wide, embracing high and low.

You see this in the miscellaneous jottings in the Oram archive, where you can find thoughts about the Council of Trent in 1581 right next to sketches for a mechanical contraption that would help with chores around the house, and also for a bath suitable for use in an old people's home.

Another revealing item in her lecture notes is a series of musical items called 'Daphne's Delight' which she recommends for healing purposes. This runs all the way from Handel's Rodelinda, as recorded by Malcolm Sargent, to Hildegard of Bingen, Robin Holloway's Idyll, and the folk song, Daisy, Daisy.

There's something else I'd like to quote, a loose sheet I found among her lecture notes, which includes this:

I have a FEELING we must NOT PLUNGE headlong into the DEEP END & try madly to SWIM about in this POOL OF NEW SOUND. CAN WE NOT TAKE SOMETHING ACROSS from the HERITAGE of music of the last 4 CENTURIES. COULD WE NOT EDUCATE OURSELVES TO ONE NEW FACET AT A TIME. WITH THAT IN MIND I HAVE BUILT UP AN EXPERIMENTAL PIECE using the SIMPLEST of MUSIC FORM (sic) – A. B. A. coda and mostly the simplest of HARMONIES (tonic/dominant). BUT EVERY SOUND IN IT IS ELECTRONIC SO I'M FACING ONLY ONE NEW PROBLEM AT A TIME.

The upper-case words are authorial, by the way - for me they evoke a woman who'd become used to having to explain herself very slowly and

with a raised voice for the important words, because so few people could keep up with her.

For the die-hard modernist this is all quite embarrassing, but for those of us who've got beyond that, which I suppose is most of us, it makes Daphne Oram seem both humanly appealing and radical. She dreamed of a music that would appeal all sides of our nature, which makes her perhaps the most Utopian of all the Utopian dreamers who helped to create electronic music.

So now I'd like to hand over to Shiva Feshareki....

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