

review of

Cinerum by **Horatiu Radulescu**

world première performance, Römisch-Katholische Kirche, Dübendorf, Switzerland, February 9 2005. Hilliard Ensemble, European Lucero Soloists conducted by the composer.

One of the consequences of the extreme paucity of new music broadcasting in Britain is that it is extraordinarily hard to keep up with the output of the major creative talents working in continental Europe. If we leave aside the already-canonical elder figures, only a handful of composers get anything like reasonable coverage (depending on one's definition of "reasonable" – can one new work in four or five really be considered sufficient?). Others seem to have dropped out of listening range altogether. Such is the case with the Romanian-French composer Horatiu Radulescu, now sixty-three and by any standards one of the most fascinating and individual creative figures of his generation, whose music has been shamefully neglected by the BBC for more years than anyone would care to mention. Besides the usual sorts of prefabricated excuses why this is so (so many composers, so little available broadcast time), one speculates about further reasons. Is Radulescu's music considered simply too weird, too extreme, for Radio 3 listeners? Yes, his pieces are sometimes quite long; yes, they sometimes have strange titles (Capricorn's Nostalgic Crickets; Dizzy Divinity, I; Dr Kai Hong's Magic Mountain); yes, they are sometimes not easy to digest at one listening. But isn't exposure to the cutting edge of the performing arts one of the things we should reasonably expect from our broadcasting media, especially in the case of a radical artist of such distinction and achievement?

So, confident that Mohammed would not come to the mountain, I took myself off to Switzerland for the première of Radulescu's latest work, Cinerum, a commission from Pro Helvetica for performance at the biennial Festival Religio Musica Nova in Dübendorf, near Zürich. The work is a large-scale setting of the mass, with seventeen movements (including some primarily instrumental ones) lasting just over ninety minutes. The commission was for the vocal talents of the truly astonishing Hilliard Ensemble, with a hand-picked instrumentarium – violin, two violas, cello, theorbo, two trombones, chamber organ and percussion – provided by players from the European Lucero Soloists, Radulescu's own ever-metamorphosing ensemble, all of whom are skilled at the special techniques (especially in strings) that his music often demands.

Born in Bucharest in 1942, Radulescu was an extreme radical as a young composer and as a mature artist he has never embraced the sometimes deadening demands of practicality. One of the versions of his Outer Time is scored for forty-two Thai gongs; Byzantine Prayer is for seventy-two flutes. One of his earliest mature works, a 55-minute musical fresco for nine cellos entitled Credo (1968-69), explored the strange world of very high harmonics long before "spectralism" (silly word) meant anything. (Radulescu's ideas were in fact circulating in Paris in the early 1970s thanks to his lectures for Messiaen's class; the path he has followed in the decades since is quite distinct from the spectrally-based techniques of Grisey or Murail, with whom he is occasionally bracketed.) To date he has written over a hundred works, including six string quartets which, as a whole, are among the most inventive contributions to the medium since Scelsi. His music is an impressive exploration of the extended pitch worlds necessitated by his "spectral technique of composition"; for young composers as well as for performers and listeners his work is a treasure chest, and it will take several generations before its contents are explored fully. Radulescu's conceptions are both genuinely new and deeply musical; several of his scores, including parts of this new work, occupy an impressive place between fully-composed music and music that leaves pockets of freedom for the player in the pacing of the music. As the French viola player Vincent Royer puts it, Radulescu's music opens a door on the performer's creativity.

Cinerum shows that Radulescu's imagination is every bit as alive as ever. "Monumental" is the word that springs to mind: like a lot of his larger works, Cinerum has the feeling of an extended ritual, unhurried in pace and mesmerising in effect. The work sustains its sense of grandeur over ninety minutes without ever becoming pompous (and the grandeur is achieved with only four singers and nine players). The vocal music, setting the texts of the mass, is essentially conventional writing, though relentless in the demands it makes on the singers' concentration and stamina; it is hard to imagine any vocalists capable of dealing with it as apparently effortlessly as the Hilliards (and all that work for the sake of a single performance). The most characteristic and haunting sound in Cinerum is that of the melismatic vocal writing, modal and chant-like, being slowly and subtly invaded by the extraordinary sounds of the retuned string consort, their open strings tuned to simulate the upper partials of a very low D (as high as the seventy-second harmonic) with immensely subtle microtonal shadings of pitch. The effect is vertiginous, rather like some electroacoustic music where the ground suddenly shifts under our feet and the listening "space" reveals itself to be far wider and deeper than we had imagined. In Radulescu's hands this complex pitch world manages to sound both disorientatingly weird and extremely beautiful. (The string quartet took centre stage in the Antiphonia I – Immutemur, where the mesmeric intensity of its "spectral scordatura" was fully evident.) Also striking to the ear was the writing in various sections of the work for fifteen large bronze plates, which underpinned the ensemble like enormous gongs; the part was played with great virtuosity and physical grace by Olaf Tzschoppe. Other highlights of the work were the second Oratio, an antiphonal reworking for two violas (Elisabeth Smalt and Vincent Royer) of Radulescu's stunning solo string piece Lux Animae; and one of the unaccompanied vocal settings, Agnus Dei, an exquisite piece which stuck in my mind after one listening.

The Festival Religio Musica Nova is a small event, with only five concerts this year, but an extremely well conceived one; unusually and imaginatively, its emphasis is on new music. The Radulescu commission, which filled a whole evening, kept company with works by Walter Fährdrich, Gija Kancheli, Paul Giger, Isang Yun, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, J.S. Bach, and a new work by the festival's artistic director, the composer and organist Christoph Maria Moosmann. Festivals as individual as this one are of great value and deserve encouragement and support. Listening to Radulescu in the cold space of the Dübendorf church, I even managed to forget for ninety whole minutes that the BBC existed.

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