



TUESDAY NOVEMBER 23 1999

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REVIEWS: Italy's contemporary composers and symphonic tradition get airings

RECITAL

San Felice
Contempoensemble
 The Place, WC1

Barry Millington

THE stage is pitch black. Four players sit or stand in their own pool of light and alternate in solo items. As each piece ends, the spotlight passes from one player to the next, ensuring that there is no disruptive applause.

The whole magical sequence lasts precisely an hour and there is no interval.

The San Felice Contempoensemble was founded two years ago by Andrea Cavallari to promote Italian contemporary music, and his skilfully devised programme at the Place juxtaposed solo works from three generations of 20th-century composers: from Dallapiccola and Scelsi, through Berio, Bussotti and Donatoni to Benvenuti and Cavallari himself.

If the notion of seven solo pieces is minimal enough to begin with, immediacy of communication was ensured

by focusing the audience's attention on the players. Programme notes were not allowed to obtrude (there were none), but any complaints on that score were counteracted by the intriguing pleasure to be had from guessing the period of each piece. More seriously, one listened all the more keenly to discern how each composer exploited the medium of monophony.

The soprano Anna Aurigi acquitted herself admirably in Berio's *Sequenza III*, encompassing the whole range of emotional expression and articulation demanded. She proved herself equally adept in Benvenuti's *La leggerezza mi vuole bella*

(receiving its British premiere), covering a not dissimilar terrain.

Giacinto Scelsi's *Maknongan* adds a patina to the sound of the double bass by requiring the player to sing along in unison (or octaves). Corrado Canonici maximised the range of colour by emitting, at the start, the faintest buzz but expanding later to full-throated tone. He also gave an accomplished performance of Donatoni's *Lem* and was joined by Chiara Piccinelli on the piccolo for Bussotti's *Due concertanti*.

Piccinelli herself gave fine accounts of Berio's *Sequenza I* for flute and Cavallari's

Fantasia for alto flute (British premiere). Dallapiccola's ballet *Marsia* — from which Michele Innocenti played the composer's three arrangements for piano — was a diatonic, generally tranquil interlude between his two major anti-fascist protest pieces of the late 1930s and 1940s.

The four players joined forces to round off this remarkable programme in the world premiere of Cavallari's *Studies for Improvisation I*. The piece is at once a homage to Cageian aleatorics and a brilliant interweaving of scurrying, insect-like patterns. Delicate as the tracery was, it was executed with panache.