

GERALD GARCIA and NEW GUITAR MUSIC at HUDDERSFIELD

by Richard Leigh Harris

'A contemporary music festival? In Huddersfield?', a colleague asked, frowning deeply. Admittedly he wasn't a new music buff, but that comment demonstrates well enough the general reaction by musicians to developments in the music of their own age, as well as to the all-too-familiar clichéd images of Northern industrial towns and cities, perpetuated by numerous jokes and snide asides.

Since its modest inception in 1978, however, the annual Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival has 'taken off' to a degree hardly envisaged in the early days by its Artistic Director, Richard Steinitz, a lecturer in the music department at the Polytechnic. Indeed, within the last few years and despite quite heavy financial difficulties, Huddersfield's annual gathering now very much bears all the hallmarks of enlightened, stimulating programme planning and excellence of execution that makes it in many areas a serious challenger to the major European festivals of new music such as the Venice Biennale, Royan, ISCM, etc as well as those promoted through or via college campuses in the United States. This international quality and ambience was reinforced at the last, 1985, festival by the presence of leading Italian figures of the eminence of Berio, Aldo Clementi, Salvatore Sciarrino (the latter two names relatively new to British audiences), Busotti, Donatoni plus the Italian-influenced Englishman Bernard Rands, now resident in Boston, Mass. Jonathan Harvey and Michael Finnissy completed the list of featured composers who during the eight days of intense activity (19-27 November) talked informally about prospective performances of their pieces, directed student workshops, adjudicated and were on hand generally to give advice and point the way forward.

An incidental aspect of the 1985 festival was the presence of the 'Oxford connection' in the form of guitarists Gerald Garcia, David Harvey, ex-Abingdon composer Jeremy Pike plus the present writer who travelled up from Oxford with Gerald Garcia and pretty well, in the words of the late Philip Larkin ' . . . waking at the fumes/And furnace-glares of Sheffield where I changed/And eat an awful pie . . . ', although not so many furnaces these days and more of a stale BR sandwich than a pie .

Gerald Garcia was invited to Huddersfield in a twofold context: giving an open guitar workshop on pieces submitted for the Yorkshire Arts Association Young Composers Competition, plus a late-night recital held in the Huddersfield Art Gallery and sponsored by W. H. Smith.

At the risk of preaching to the converted, the following points are perhaps worth restating. Until Julian Breams' policy and, indeed, advocacy of commissioning new works from leading composers expressly for the solo guitar, this most subtle and intimate of solo instruments went neglected and unsung as far as new pieces were concerned (see *Classical Guitar*, Feb/March 1986). Since the major mid-Sixties landmark of Britten's *Nocturnal* and the subsequent flow of works from established figures such as Walton, Henze, Maxwell Davies, Richard Rodney Bennett and, most recently and importantly, Sir Michael Tippett and Elliott Carter ('Changes' for David Starobin), at long last the guitar is now being seen by living composers as a viable instrument for which to write, as well as a challenge to produce music which is still recognisably composer X's while being ready and willing to respond to the technical, syntactical idiosyncrasies of the guitar. Perhaps above all, new music for the guitar is now taken seriously and no longer (thank God) relegated to the fourth division of so-called aesthetical 'good taste'.

Even more encouraging, it seems to me, is that many new pieces are gradually finding their place not only in the repertoire, but also lingeringly in the minds and ears of members of the concert-going public who are not guitar players.

In nurturing any sort of performing tradition, no matter how young, there has to be a consolidation, continuity, development and feedback between composer and player. And it was precisely these matters plus points of technique that Gerald Garcia explored in an illuminating and exhaustive (and no doubt exhausting for the participants) three-hour Friday afternoon work- shop in the Department of Music Recital Hall, with added comments from resident composers Jonathan Harvey and Michael Finnissy.

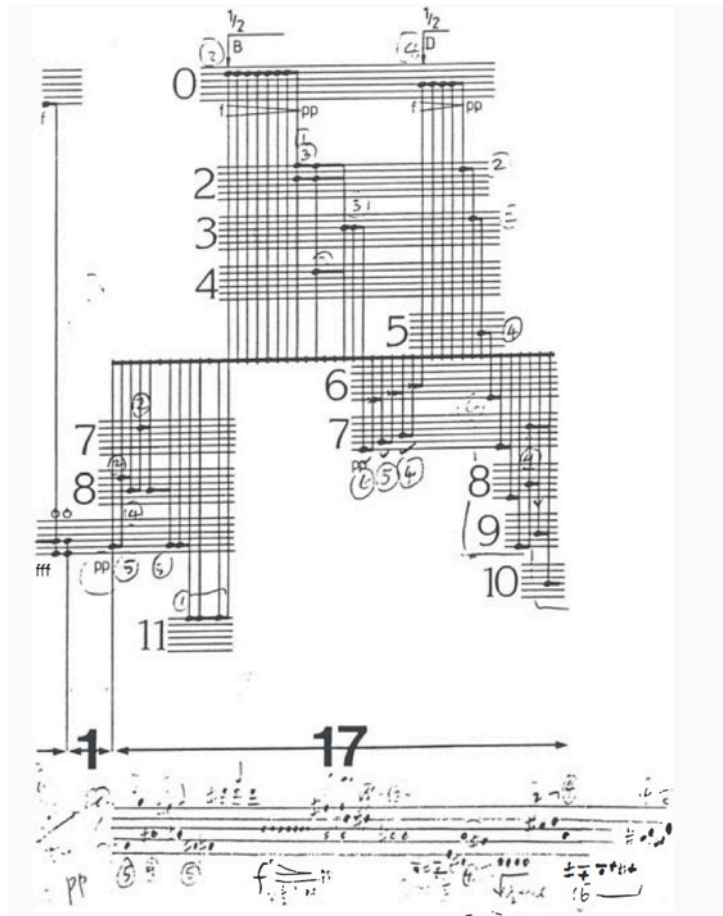
The YAA Young Composers Competition yielded a good harvest from which five pieces were selected by the two above composers for inclusion in the workshop, the winning pieces to be performed later that day in Garcia's late-night recital. First off was David Harvey's . . .and I will sing of the sun. . ., a short, effective piece with a generally high tessitura and monodic content that took its title from a poem by Ezra Pound — a musicianly poet to be sure. The piece was dedicated to fellow-Oxford guitarist, the late Brent Knowland, a gifted and much missed teacher. . .and I will sing of the sun. . . is structured in three main sections based on three differentiated moods of the poem, while not attempting any literal portrayal — a love song, a dance of frustration and finally a transcendental search for a new object of the poet's desire. As was to be expected from Harvey, a professional guitarist, the writing was idiomatic, yet was musically most satisfying in its lyrical lines and quasi- polyphonic texture, particularly evident in the final slow section. This piece together with Andrew Toovey's Veiled Wave III (Scarred Landscape) were the joint prizewinners in the YAA award for a work for solo guitar (there was also an award for an ensemble piece). Toovey's work, deriving inspiration from the bleak landscape of Haworth in Yorkshire, attempted to mirror the barren beauty and shifting hues of colour through music which was competent enough if, as Gerald Garcia explained, not particularly well written or thought out in guitaristic terms. The archetype behind the piece appeared to be a Birtwistle-ike use of mechanical figures in order to create various forms of movement within an overall concept of status.

Jeremy Pikes' Sonata was expertly, if traditionally written in four short movements: Moderato, Allegro con Spirito, Lento and Allegro con Fuoco, all based on treatments of similar thematic material. An elegant, crafted piece with no problems either in style or layout.

If the judges, Harvey and Finnissy, had little or nothing to say either for or against Pike's work, Michael Finnissy at least found plenty to criticise in student composer Nick Redfern's Between Clouds of Intensity II, which by the composer's own admission had been written very hastily (in three days!) and therefore gave an open-ended impression reinforced by the general lack of ideas, either memorable in themselves or memorably utilised. (After all, development is only one way of projecting your material). Finnissy was very sharp in regard to the composer's erratic use of notation-proportional, space/time if I remember rightly. Indeed, Finnissy especially and Harvey to a lesser extent harked on at great length about the composer's duty to the performer via the courtesy of making everything as clearly written, logical and practical as possible, a sentiment with which Garcia as the man on the receiving end of all these new pieces, was only too happy to echo. Above all, continued Finnissy, wearing a Dr Who-length green scarf, the method chosen of notating the sounds should help in the realisation. The visual should aid the aural. These comments were apposite for any composer, but none more so than student composers, who, faced with what initially must seem like a bewildering, array of techniques, must learn to come to

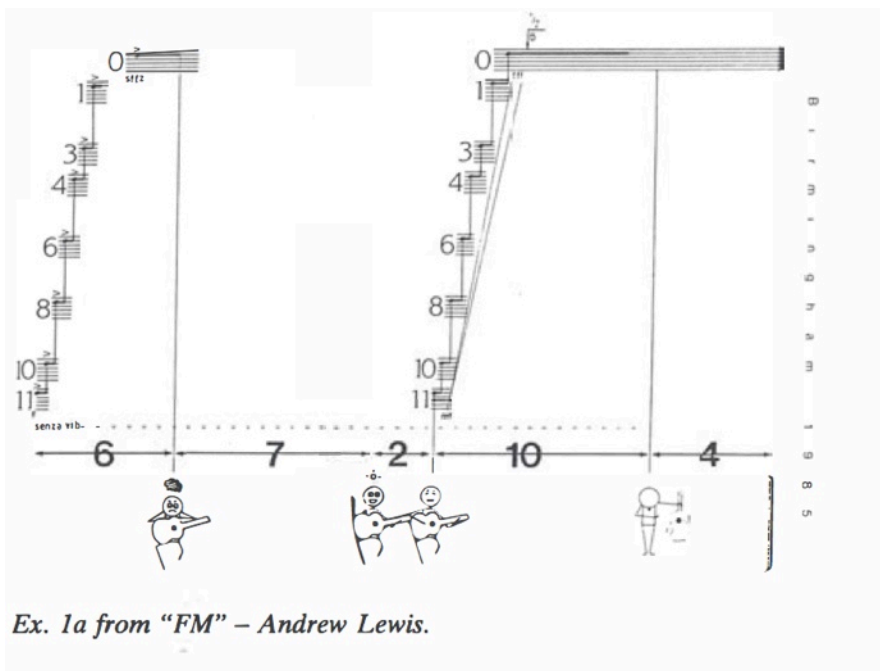
terms with these, select what he-she wants and get on and do it in the most communicable method possible.

I thought of this with reference to the final student item tried out in that afternoon workshop: an inventive (at least on paper) piece of music-theatre, FM by Andrew Lewis. The whole work amounts to a convoluted pun on the notion of 'attunement' and perpetual retuning/detuning of the guitar strings, plus the exploration of frequency modulation (hence the initials of the title). Lewis has had to invent his own system of notation, because, to quote the composer: '...of the unstable nature of pitch in FM, a special notation had to be devised which refers to the physical aspects of playing the guitar, rather than to the acoustic results. The score also includes the gestures, movements and expressions which the guitarist must perform along with the audible part of the music'. (Exxs 1 and 1a) All right — so in a sense Lewis is saying that, for this piece anyway, pitch is of little or no consequence. Fourteen six-line staves are used, each line of the staff corresponding to one string of the guitar, while each of the fourteen staves corresponds in turn to each of the frets. Original planning certainly, but as Gerald



Ex. 1 from "FM" – Andrew Lewis.

had to renovate some of the passages by conventional means for ease and speed of readability, perhaps the whole concept bit off more than it could chew. As in many instances of music-theatre, the actual musical content was exceedingly minimal and the gestural jokes soon wore thin. But at least FM did show decided promise from a young composer.



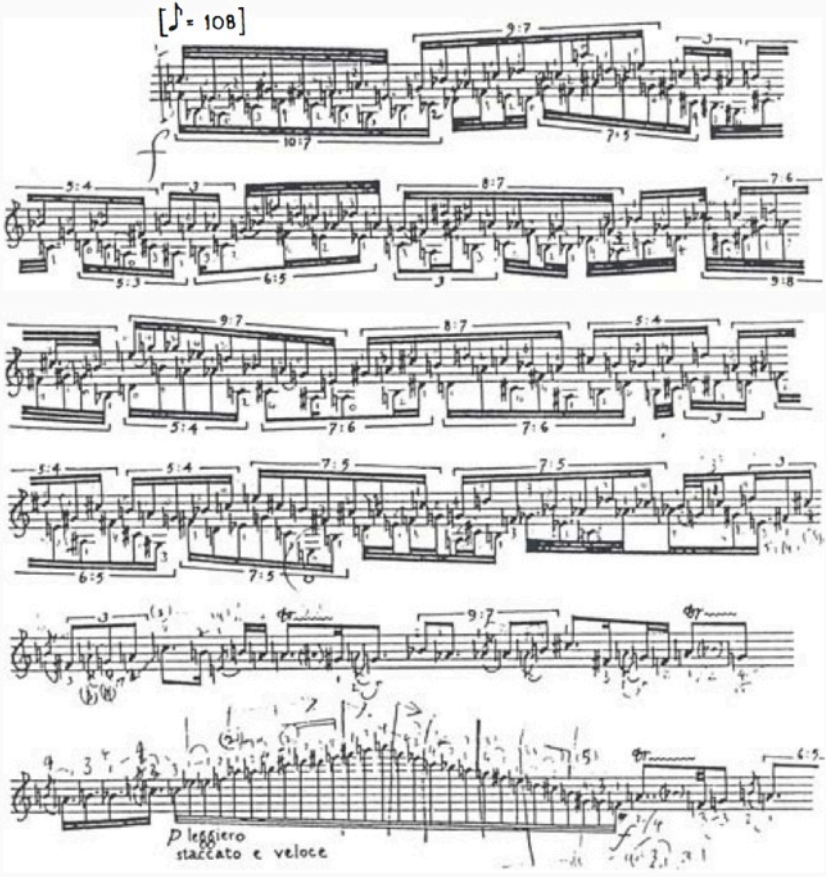
Ex. 1a from "FM" – Andrew Lewis.

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If the afternoon session had exhausted Garcia, this was only temporary for he sprang back to life for the late-evening informal cushion concert at the Art Gallery, redolent of similar events in the halcyon days of the Arnolfini at Bristol. Bussotti's Rara, a product of gestural virtuosity and graphic notation, gave off a potent whiff of post-Darmstadt sixties nostalgia, invoked in a suitably flamboyant and extrovert reading by Gerald. While the recital contained recent and good examples of works by guitarist-composers Gilbert Biberian (Aronne) and Leo Brouwer (El Decameron Negro), the primary focus of attention was on the new works such as Harvey's . . . and I will sing of the sun, Tom Williams's (a student of Roger Marsh at Keele University) intriguing Talk with a Wood (Part2) which requires scordatura tuning, plus an assortment of wood taps in nine specified areas. The section played on this occasion, however, utilised only the 1st and 2nd strings, while the lower four acted as resonating drones. Some interesting, well-imagined sonorities.

Michael Finnissy's Nasiye, based on Kurdish folk-music and dedicated to Gerald Garcia, proved to be a short, highly-charged and frenetically packed piece, suggestive of a cross between the Hammerklavier Sonata and horn solos by Coltrane and Sonny Rollins rolled into one spiralling, freewheeling entity, which received a brilliant, dazzling performance.

Certainly not least was Tippett's The Blue Guitar, already established as a small masterpiece since Brems' premiere in Pasedena in November 1983. Garcia could have perhaps been a little more secure in the outer two movements, but the central slow blues section was wonderfully spacious and serene.



The image displays a musical score for 'Nisaye' by Michael Finnissy. It features two staves of music with a complex rhythmic structure. The tempo is marked as [♩ = 108]. The score includes various rhythmic notations such as 9:7, 7:5, 5:4, 6:5, 8:7, 7:6, and 7:5. There are also dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p' (pizzicato), and performance instructions like 'pizzicato staccato e veloce'. The notation is dense and intricate, reflecting the piece's frenetic and spiraling nature.

Ex. 2 from "Nisaye" – Michael Finnissy.

A gruelling recital and a gruelling day but, for players and non-players alike, a fascinating glimpse into the mysteries of the guitar. Gerald Garcia's message is: keep writing those pieces. Luciano Berio, Harry Birtwistle, are you listening?

Richard Leigh Harris; harpsichordist, pianist and composer, is a keen advocate of contemporary music who in 1977 organised a performance of Erik Satie's rarely heard 'Vexations'. He won a prize for composition in 1978, and together with Bach scholar Stephen Daw was the joint author of an article on the recently discovered Canons by J. S. Bach.