MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY: CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017

ESTHER LAMNECK: Tárogató

ALFONSO BELFIORE and PETE STOLLERY: Composers

BUTCHART RECREATION HALL

Friday 31st March, 2017

Whether in food, literature, art and especially in music it is always exciting to discover something that you never previously knew existed. I had never heard of the tárogató before today. What is it? Well it is a musical instrument created around the end of the nineteenth century in Hungary where it is sometimes called the Hungarian national instrument. It appeared shortly after the invention of the saxophone at a time when many new ideas for instruments were being explored. As we entered the Butchart Hall we could see and hear Esther Lamneck warming up the instrument. At first glance it looked like a fatter longer clarinet and knowing that Esther is a virtuoso clarinettist I thought that is what it must be. The sound however was more like a soprano saxophone, so was it more like that? Well, no. The tárogató is very much its own instrument. It is partly descended from the Turkish oboe which is a double reed instrument and its fingering system with fewer keys follows the oboe. Like the clarinet or saxophone however the tárogató is a single reed instrument. Esther Lamneck told us that she uses saxophone reeds which she tweaks and alters for use on the instrument. The tárogató was taken up as a folk instrument especially by gypsy folk bands in Hungary and Romania. Like many older folk instruments it is untempered and therefore has many interesting overtones missing from tempered instruments like the clarinet.

To open the concert, Esther played a couple of Hungarian folk melodies, all from memory as was everything else in the programme. There may have been elements of improvisation in these tunes since they tend not to be written down. There was a sense of wide open air and freedom in these melodies reminding me of Transylvanian music which I remember hearing. Esther told us that the instrument has the possibility of a vast array of different timbres and this was immediately obvious in these pieces. We were to hear a lot more of that in the following four works which were to use electronics in a variety of different and fascinating ways.

The first of these modern works was a collaboration between Esther Lamneck and the Mexican born composer Jorge Sosa. Esther played music that was closely related to what we had just heard in her opening numbers. It sounded remarkably like Eastern European vocal music, gypsy music perhaps and it contained little breaks, not quite yodels but that sort of thing which you hear from gypsy singers. The electronic background, and in this piece it was really that, was mostly high pitched, tremulous and rather ethereal in quality. Towards the end of the piece lower tones were heard and as the background music swelled, the impression of a backing choir came through. It was an attractive and atmospheric piece.

Sighs of an Ancient Wall for fixed media and tárogató was a collaboration between Esther Lamneck and the American composer David Durant. Both the electronic background and the music for tárogató were highly abstract. The tárogató part reminded me of avant garde jazz in its freedom, complexity of line and fast moving fingerings on the instrument. It was an exciting piece.

Of the Swan, by Pete Stollery was very different. I felt that in this piece the tárogató part and the electronics were very well matched. The different sound sources mirrored one another beautifully. The idea of place, a constant in Stollery’s music, came in where we could hear birdsong and water. We were taken to a place where the imagined swan might live. Towards the end, Esther just breathed into the instruments and clicked the keys without notes, here again this blended with the electronics, in fact it took me a moment to work out what was happening. These were possibly the sounds of the birds feet ploughing through the water. Maybe I am wrong but that was my guess. The final piece was a live collaboration between Esther Lamneck and the Italian composer Alfonso Belfoire. It featured live sound capture and visuals as well, both of which had to be reacted to in split seconds allowing the piece and the visuals to flow uninterrupted. It was an amazing tour de force from both performers and it gave us in the audience a huge amount to take in. There were
moments of recognition in the visuals – a rustic bridge plaid cloth, a cello?, close up of grass. Nevertheless it was all a dizzying whirl of abstract sound and image – hugely exciting and wonderfully fascinating.
Can I end with a special thank-you to Esther Lambeck for introducing me to an instrument and its music which I never knew existed.