

Discovering Richard Rodney Bennett's *Calendar* for chamber ensemble (1960)

by John France

A few weeks ago, I discovered Richard Rodney Bennett's (1936-2012) *Calendar* for chamber ensemble. It was one of four works on an album of music entitled *Four British Composers* issued in 1965. Other music on this LP included Alexander Goehr's *Two Choruses*, op.14 (1962), Malcolm Williamson's *Symphony for voices* (1962) and Peter Maxwell Davies's 'Leopardi' *Fragments for soprano, contralto and chamber orchestra* (1962). None of the works recorded on this album have become part of the mainstream repertoire: most will be known only to aficionados. This LP was one of a number sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation and issued by EMI.



Calendar for chamber ensemble was written by Richard Rodney Bennett in the autumn of 1960, whilst he was residing in both London and Warsaw. It remains a relatively unknown piece by the composer. The work was written specifically for the BBC Thursday Invitation Concerts series and was dedicated to the conductor John Carewe (b.1933). The first performance was given on 24 November 1960 and broadcast on the Third Programme. The performers were drawn from members of the Melos Ensemble, the Goldsborough Ensemble and the English Chamber Orchestra. Amongst the soloists were Gervase de Payer (clarinet), Richard Adney (flute) and Lamar Crowson (piano). The other work heard at this concert was Hans Werner Henze's *The Emperor's Nightingale*. Music composed by Bennett at this time included the cantata 'The Approaches of Sleep' (1960) to a text by Sir Thomas Browne for SATB soloists and ensemble, *Journal* for orchestra (1960) and the one act opera *The Lodge* (1960-1).

Richard Rodney Bennett wrote the programme note for this work which was published in the LP insert for the 1965 recording. He writes that the word 'Calendar' 'is defined in [the then current] *Webster's Dictionary* as 'an orderly arrangement of divisions of time.' The work is presented in three movements: 'allegro', 'lento espressivo' and 'molto animato'. It is in effect a 'chamber sonata' although not necessarily in the 'technical' sense. In fact, Bennett points out that although each movement presents elements of exposition, development and reprise, this work cannot be explained in terms of 'classical' procedure.'

Bennett further explains:

1st movement

'After the exposition and development of the main material there is a lively scherzando section (molto animato) followed by a more sustained coda built upon the material of the opening.'

2nd movement

'This is a slow rhapsodic movement constructed in a loose A-B-A [ternary] form. Brief solos for violin, flute and cello emerge from a closely-knit texture, which incidentally, omits the piano and percussion is used in the outer movements.'

3rd movement

'The construction of the last movement is similar to that of the first. After the main exposition, in A-B-A form, which leads to a climax, there is an extremely brilliant scherzando (vivacissimo, quasi cadenza) which gradually gives way to a slow coda in which the timpani are used for the first time.'

Calendar is scored for flute, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, percussion, piano, violin, viola and cello. The choice of instruments was largely dictated by the line-up of John Carewe's New Music Ensemble. The work was subsequently published by Mills Music in 1970. It lasts for about 12 minutes.

An unsigned notice in *The Times* (20 November 1960) pointed out that Richard Rodney Bennett is 'a most versatile composer, possessing an amazing technical fluency.' The present work 'explores a wide range of emotions with an extraordinary expressive power.' The reviewer felt that 'the serial structure is easily comprehensible and is never used for mere effect.' One wonders to what extent the serial building blocks of this work are discernible without the score or at least a copy of the original 'tone-row.' The review concludes by noting that the work displays '...a fine lyrical imagination that makes this work a moving and satisfying experience.' Even a superficial hearing of *Calendar* will allow the listener to agree with this last sentence.

Conversely, the critic (Donald Mitchell) in the *Daily Telegraph* (25 November 1960) considered that this was a 'slight, unpretentious work, predominantly lyrical in atmosphere' that is 'fastidiously scored but [avoiding] the fragmentation which is currently so fashionable.' He concludes his comments by suggesting that Bennett's music is 'markedly unfashionable insofar as it offers ample thematic interest and no little harmonic density' and adds rather patronisingly that 'if the composer's personality were as self-evident as his fluency, his 'Calendar' would be a good deal more than a notable example of attractive craftsmanship.'

The BBC house magazine, *The Listener* (1 December 1960) gave a detailed commentary of the BBC Thursday Invitation Concert, which tended to (unfairly) lump the Bennett and the Henze together as one entity. Under the headline 'Contemporary Experiments' the musicologist Rollo H. Myers wrote that 'there was nothing one could object to in either piece apart from their similarity to so much of the music now being written in the idiom made fashionable by Pierre Boulez since [his] *Le Marteau sans Maître*.' This important and compelling work was composed by Boulez in 1955 and was a setting of poetry by René Char. It was regarded by many composers (Harrison Birtwistle, George Benjamin and Igor Stravinsky) as being 'seminal.' Actual comparison of Boulez's work with Bennett's *Calendar* is not necessarily helpful. Despite both being 'lyrical', Bennett is much more conventional in what he achieves with his material.

Myers was unconvinced about the overall impact and felt that when 'the sounds have died away there is not very much for the mind to retain.' He then makes a very interesting comparison which could apply to much music written at this period: '[He] is always reminded of the old-fashioned kaleidoscope in which, as you turn the lens, pieces of coloured glass fall into everchanging patterns that delight the eye [ear?] ...' Myers then spoils this splendid metaphor by implying that, like the kaleidoscope, Bennett's (and Henze's) musical result is 'inconsequential.' They are only 'quite skilfully contrived and pleasantly mild and unaggressive.'

Arthur Jacobs, reviewing the radio broadcast premiere for the *Musical Times* (January 1961) suggested 'in a ten-minute span (three movements performed without a break) it displays true invention, [is] individual and consciously modern without being freakish, and confirms the rising status of this young composer.'

Finally, Anthony Meredith (*Richard Rodney Bennett: The Complete Musician*, Omnibus Press, 2010) wrote that *Calendar* '...treated the various solo instruments of the chamber ensemble like so many threads in a tantalising puzzle there for the unravelling – the solo violin...being richly rewarding throughout.'

On a first hearing of *Calendar*, the listener will be conscious of the fragmentary nature of the proceedings. There is a certain degree of pointillism in the score where 'variations of pitch and intensity play an important part.' (Myers, op.cit.) However, after repeated hearings it will become evident that there is much lyrical, melodic content in this work: it is heard being passed between the soloists throughout the entire work, which is also based on a vibrant contrapuntalism. Occasionally, jazz sounds break out, only to be submerged by the serial foundation of the music. Bennett has used a tone-row for this work but has not been subject to its tyranny. I accept the view of Dika Newlin (*Notes*

March 1971) that 'those identifying contemporary English music [solely] with Britten should look into [this score] for a corrective.'

Some 57 years after its premiere, one is led to understand that hindsight is a marvellous thing. This work is a splendid example of Richard Rodney Bennett's undoubted ability to compose music in a widely diverse manner, covering jazz, popular song, film scores and so-called 'art' music. *Calendar* is a little masterpiece that deserves to be reinstated to the repertoire of chamber ensembles.

As noted above, Richard Rodney Bennett's *Calendar* for chamber orchestra was released on *Four British Composers*, ALP 2093/ASD640, during 1965. The performers on this album included members of the Melos Ensemble conducted by John Carewe. Artists featuring in the other works on the album were Geoffrey Shaw (baritone), Pauline Stevens (contralto), Rosemary Philips (contralto) and Mary Thomas (soprano). The John Alldis Choir was conducted by Alldis.

Edmund Tracey writing in the *Manchester Guardian* (17 October 1965) believed that all the works on this LP reflected '...four of the most recent British composers to have made an individual stir on the musical scene and this record will give some idea of their capacities.'

The Musical Times (September 1965) reviewer, fellow composer David Blake, wished '...that Bennett's *Calendar* gave me as much pleasure...' as Malcolm Williamson's *Symphony for Voices*. The greatest compliment that he could pay was '...that it provides effective contrast.' He hoped that it was simply a 'block' on his (Blake's) part.

A detailed appraisal of the album was provided by Frank Granville Barker in *Music and Musicians* (October 1965). Unfortunately, he said comparatively little about *Calendar*: 'Bennett is the sophisticate of the quartet, fluently skilled in several styles that are kept quite separate from one another according to their different purposes.' He reflects that the present work 'makes dramatic use of melody and harmony in [a] changing instrumental perspective.' From a technical point of view Barker thinks that *Calendar* was recorded 'in sharper focus' than the other works on the LP.'

Anthony Payne (*Tempo*, Spring 1966) was impressed by the '...the sheer craftsmanship of Bennett's *Calendar* for chamber ensemble is a joy to follow.' Giving an overall rating of the album he observes that 'the performances by members of the Melos Ensemble under John Carewe...are impeccable, and the recording clear.' Payne, so it should be noted, had produced the introductory notes for the album.

The most comprehensive analysis was given in *The Gramophone* (September 1965). J.N. (Jeremy Noble) wrote:

'[When I turned] ...to Richard Rodney Bennett's *Calendar*... one cannot help being struck by his far more fluent command of his medium. Where Davies often seems to be composing against his instruments, or at least in spite of them, Bennett's almost seem to do his composing for him, so natural is the result. For him, too, continuity seems to pose no problems; the two outer movements of *Calendar* are quite complex in shape, yet I found no difficulty in following the general outlines of the argument without a score. The danger with so fluent an imagination and so accomplished a command of the sheer craft of composing is obviously facility, and I don't think that Bennett has always avoided it. In this he is very similar to Britten, who has also been ready on occasion (especially in instrumental works) to let ingenuity do the work of imagination. But the mere fact that the comparison can be made is some indication of Bennett's position among the younger generation of English composers.'

A decade later, J.H. reviewed the re-issue (ARGO ZRG 758) of this disc (*The Gramophone*, May 1975). He was generally pleased that the four works on this album had appeared again. He insisted that they were originally 'well-chosen to illustrate the musical characteristics of these four composers.' He felt that 'only Richard Rodney Bennett...fares less well than the others: *Calendar* (for chamber ensemble)

is attractive and well-made, but just a little faceless compared with most of his vocal music.' Not a fair assessment, when one examines the wide range of Rodney Bennett's music which includes many splendid and musically diverse genres: orchestral, chamber, stage, instrumental *and* vocal music.

A backward glance was given by Elliot Schwartz to *Calendar* in his review (*The Musical Quarterly* October 1977) of this re-issue:

Calendar is, one would guess, not a major work. It is more likely to be regarded, even by its highly prolific and eclectic composer, as a casual, incidental piece of occasional music. It is successful, in part, precisely because it is so unpretentious: a charming, atonal 'divertimento' - or, given the ease and stylishness of it all, and the fact that Bennett had just recently studied in Paris with Boulez, a 'divertissement.' For a composer aged twenty-four (in 1960), it is a particularly impressive feat.'

Finally, Paul Griffith writing in the *Musical Times* (September 1975) suggested that Richard Rodney Bennett's *Calendar* is exactly 'the sort of music that George Gershwin might have written if he had come into contact with [Anton] Webern.' It is an extremely apposite and perceptive summary of this work.

Three works on this LP are available on CD. Richard Rodney Bennett's *Calendar* and Peter Maxwell Davies Leopardi Fragments have been released on *Icon: Music among Friends*: Melos Ensemble, Warner Classics (5099991851451). This is a remastering of the original LP. Malcolm Williamson 'Symphony for Voices' has been given a new recording on Naxos 8.557783 (2006). I am not aware if the version on this present LP has been re-issued. I think not. Finally, Alexander Goehr's Two Choruses, op.14 does not appear to have been re-issued.

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