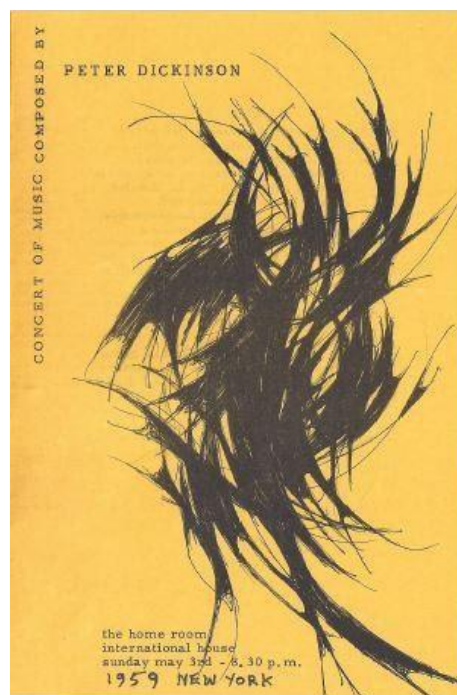


A Peter Dickinson Concert – Stateside, 1959

by John France

In my recent [review](#) of chamber and instrumental music by the English Composer Peter Dickinson (b.1934), (Toccatà TOCC0538), I noted his absorbing *Fantasia* for solo violin, written in 1959. This piece was premiered at an 'all-Dickinson concert at International House, Riverside Drive, New York, on Sunday, 3 May 1959. In my review I suggested that I would appreciate seeing the programme notes for that concert. The composer duly obliged me with a scan of this fascinating document.

Peter Dickinson was spending a year as a graduate student at the Juilliard School of Music, studying with the Dutch American composer, conductor and violinist, Bernard Wagenaar (1894-1971). Dickinson had arrived on 31 August 1958 on a Fellowship from the Rotary International. During his stay in New York, he had many of his compositions performed. During this period, he had opportunity to discover music by composers such as Henry Cowell, John Cage and Edgard Varèse.



The International House concert opened with the premiere of Dickinson's *A Dylan Thomas Song Cycle* for baritone and piano, written in New York. The soloist was Richard Eikenberry accompanied by the composer. It must be recalled that Dylan Thomas had died only six years before this work was composed. Dickinson writes 'at that time the apocalyptic visits of Dylan Thomas were recent history and his barnstorming stance was seen alongside the protest of the Beat generation of Ginsberg and Kerouac.' Heady days indeed.

This song cycle has been released on Albany Troy 365 (2000) Dickinson has written that 'something of Dylan Thomas' blustering but lyrical address comes through in these settings of some of his most famous poems.' Rob Barnett, reviewing this CD, considers that '...[these] songs depict turbulence and anxiety. They are concise and are free with dissonance.'

The 'Variations on a French Folk Song' (1957) for harpsichord is a challenging but vital work. It is based on the well-loved folk song 'Sur le pont d'Avignon'. The theme is followed by eight diverse variations that explore aspects of the 'deconstructed' theme. There is humour, excitement and reflection in these variations: the finale is a 'warhorse'. It is possibly the best 'contemporary' work for harpsichord that I have heard. It was dedicated to the Cambridge harpsichordist Mary Potts (1905-1982).

The above-mentioned *Fantasia* for solo violin, dedicated to Dickinson's fellow student, the Greek American composer Dinos Constantinides (b.1929). Both men were graduate students at the Juilliard School. This is a technically demanding work, that *might* be based on a 'tone-row.' Certainly, this music is full of large melodic leaps beloved by serialist composers. The music is vibrant and exciting, as befits a work inspired by Manhattan skyscrapers. Dickinson writes that the opening 'declamation reaches up, mirroring these' ubiquitous building. The work was performed at this concert by the dedicatee, Dinos Constantinides.

After the interval, two works were heard: *Eight Variations* for piano (now retitled *Vitalis Variations*) and the *String Quartet No.1*. In Dickinson's catalogue, this work represents an important development in his compositional technique. The *Eight Variations* pays homage to Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky. The composer has explained that he has used 'a mosaic/cut-up technique', which was inspired by Satie's

'Prelude en tapisserie'. As far as I can make out, this involves several short phrases, quite different in character, 'cut out' and reassembled in a satisfying manner. Dickinson has stated that 'textures and snippets recur like symbols moving in and out of focus.' *Vitalis Variations* had another life as an orchestral ballet score (now withdrawn), having been choreographed by the Mexican dancer Gloria Contreras.

Peter Dickinson has produced two string quartets. The first was composed during 1958, after he had arrived in New York, but was subsequently revised in 2010. The composer has noted that some American critics found that it was 'aggressively modern.' Listening to this remarkable work more than 60 years later is less challenging. There are three contrasting movements. The opening 'allegro molto' is frenetic, with fragments of melody being tossed around with abandon. It is exhilarating music but is unable to come to a resolution. The slow movement is written in 'ternary' form. An almost Romantic 'Bergian' solo violin melody opens the proceedings. The 'trio' indulges in some bizarre sounds, sometimes played 'con legno'. In other words, the soloist hits the strings with the back of the bow rather than with the hair. Plucked and struck, this is an adventure in string sound. The movement ends with the solo cello recalling the opening violin solo. The finale is a reminiscence on what has been previously heard. Fragmentary melodies, sometimes lyrical, other times dissonant, predominate. This 'allegro misterioso' lives up to its title, but, eventually, a sense of optimism breaks through. All four players combine in a terrific climax, before the work ends in an enigmatic cadence. Incidentally, the *String Quartet No.2* was composed in 1976.

It has been instructive and a pleasure to [re-]discover a concert that was presented more than sixty 60 years ago (I was just preparing for infant school at that time!). Equally satisfying is that the composer is still active and wholly involved in musicmaking. Importantly, all these works are currently available to the listener on CD or download. Few contemporary composers will be able to make that claim.

With many thanks to Peter Dickinson who gave me considerable help and encouragement in writing about of this concert.

John France