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London Festival of American Music

[Musical Opinion, Nov/Dec 2008 by Matthew-Walker, Robert](#)

The final concert, *And Beyond*, in the second London Festival of American Music, 'in celebration of John Harbison's 70th birthday', was held at the Warehouse, Waterloo on 13 October, given by the Lontano ensemble under the direction of Odaline de la Martinez.

The seven works in the programme were all very much of a muchness, dominated as it was by contemporary American academic figures who as a representative body seemed all too ready to take the attractive, but in creative terms, too easy option of a post-minimalist basis allied to pretty constant rhythmic fixations. Harmonic and melodic interests were virtually absent. There were two works by Peter Child, who was present, the first a cycle of *Songs of Bidpai*, for soprano and small instrumental group, settings of poetry by the modern Arabian poet Mohammed al-Faizuri. These were outstandingly well sung by Olivia Robinson, but, in their rather anonymous word-setting, the songs relied too much on derivations of a soaring initial phrase by the soloist. Barbara Jazwinski's *Visions* for solo clarinet, brilliantly played by Andrew Sparling, revealed itself as a work of so many aphoristic effects by the yard, the only genuine piece of musical interest in the score being the unheard, but cleverly implied, notes in the final phrases.

James Primosch's *Fantasy-Variations* for piano trio proved to be another collection of modernist clichés, the instruments being neither integrated nor pitted one or two against the other(s); such invention as the work possesses could have entered the mind of any reasonably competent American composer, with many half-remembered ideas from middle-period Aaron Copland reflected as if in a distorting mirror. Patricio da Silva's *Clarinet Quintet* was quite another matter; here is a genuine creative voice, his work being full of interest and beguiling invention. One's sole criticism of this circa 12-minute piece is that the string quartet was kept hard at it, with very little textural variety, although the frequent pattern-like

rhythmic interests were fascinating. The writing for clarinet was excellent, and the composer was present to acknowledge the prolonged applause.

Peter Child's Prom- enade for instrumental septet chugged along in catchy rhythmic fashion, the ideas were deeply unoriginal, stemming from an amalgam of Paris-New York-Chicago fragments of the 1920s. Odaline de la Martinez's own Cantos de Amor for soprano and ensemble were characterised by many beguiling vocal phrases, yet in terms of compositional skill, the constant repetition of a lyrical phrase, followed by that of another, soon palled upon the ear. Finally, Steven Mackey's Indigenous Instruments for (part-prepared) piano, violins (one player, one scordatura), flutes and clarinet was easily the worst piece in the programme. It fell into three sections - manic, depressive, manic - before petering out after saying nothing musical at all, and saying it in a boringly offensive manner. The performances throughout were all quite superb, or certainly seemed to be, but the overall impression was rather depressing; only Patricio da Silva's piece demonstrated the stylistic consistency of a composer who has something to say, certain of his own direction. Quite why the BBC allowed itself to get involved in this event is hard to fathom; I doubt if many works in the programme would have passed the old reading panel. At the very least, the concert was not broadcast - nor did it deserve to be.

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