

John Kenny/Chris Wheeler

Poemes Electroniques

John Kenny:

Carnyx, alto, tenor & bass trombones, alphorn, conch, Messo American gourd trumpets.

Chris Wheeler:

sound projection, turntabling.

From 1980 to 2004, John Kenny performed internationally as a duo with the legendary sound designer John Whiting (of Electric Phoenix fame). In March 2004, after a final tour together throughout Ireland, with the Vanbrough String Quartet, John Whiting retired - at the age of 73. Over the previous three years, Christopher Wheeler had frequently gone out on the road as assistant to John Whiting, and acted as recording producer for John Kenny. From April 2004, Kenny invited Chris Wheeler to join him as a duo, not only to preserve the repertoire established over so many years, but more importantly to develop an entirely new repertoire. Wheeler is not only a superb sound projectionist - he is also a fine trombonist and composer, and is rapidly becoming recognised as one of the UK's most exciting and adventurous DJs. Kenny and Wheeler made their debut as a duo in July 2004 at the Arctic Trombone Festival in Tromsø, Norway, giving the world premier of Ankh by Morris Pert, followed by a Deveron Arts residency in the ancient north eastern Scottish town of Huntly, where they created the electroacoustic tone poem Doric using environmental sounds of the natural and human landscapes of the region where the carnyx was originally made and used. Kenny and Wheeler have since performed at the Edinburgh Dialogues, and Belfast Sonorities festivals, the Dartington International Summer School, and St. Magnus Festival, and the Sage, Gateshead. Current projects include the creation of music for the Welsh animation company Cineteg, based upon the work of artist Sean Harris.

Program

The Voice of The Carnyx

John Kenny

For Carnyx Quintet (one live, four pre-recorded)

This piece is for one live and four carnyx's multi-tracked, and as such it was recorded in single takes by John Whiting in the main hall of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. One day soon I hope it may be possible to perform with five musicians live, but as yet there are only two playable carnyces in the world!

The first question everyone asks about the carnyx is "how did they play it?" - and the short answer is, we just don't know. We know they were played in time of war from Roman accounts - terrified invaders described not a mere musical sound but the very landscape coming to life! These instruments were used in multiples, obviously to great effect - but they were almost certainly used in time of peace for other functions in society, perhaps rites of passage, funerals, festivals. Magnificent in their stylized embodiment of a wild-boar's head, these instruments were highly tooled and crafted out of exceedingly valuable materials (indeed, analysis of the bronze alloy shows that the Picts hijacked some of the constituents from the Roman invaders!). It is certain that the players of such an instrument occupied an important place in society, and likely that the craft of playing would be passed down from father to son, becoming a guarded mystery. These were a highly sophisticated people, with a mighty oral poetic tradition - most unlikely, then, that the playing technique of the carnyx should not be fully explored.

As a modern brass player it is fairly easy to get a sound out of the carnyx in the conventional manner - however, because the tube and "mouthpiece" aperture are so wide the player's breath disappears very quickly. One blast and it's all over! I found I could achieve a range of nearly five octaves, with a most unusual overtone series and some overtones much stronger than others. In addition, the wooden tongue becomes a percussion instrument as it moves inside the head; the head itself has a bronze "soft-palette", and so the sound emerges through a divided resonating gourd. The full range of brass players tonguing effects can readily be employed - but to find a distinctive voice for the carnyx, I believe one must look closely at the instrument itself, and what it represents: a wild boar. This beast, once common throughout northern Europe, was a terrifying adversary, fast, powerful and vicious - and totemic to the Celts. The scream of this animal is shrill and almost human - and so I have combined my voice frequently with the instrumental sound, to try to animate it. Finally, to overcome the problem of lack of sustaining power, I have incorporated the technique of circular breathing, further bending the sound by changing the shape of the oral cavity in exactly the same manner in which we produce the varied vowel sounds of speech. Given the ancient Celtic predilection for drones in music, I think it is not too far-fetched to imagine that these people learned how to circular breath - many other ancient cultures have done so, most notably Australia's Aboriginal folk, who's Didgeridoo is the world's most ancient lip-reed instrument.

The Voice of The Carnyx was recorded in the splendid glass-vaulted hall of the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, on May 24 1993. John Whiting recorded the individual tracks and then played them back in the space, with me playing "sound-on -sound in "real time". The final section, an amalgam of ideas from the rest of the piece, was then subject to live digital sound transformation. This is the first ever notated piece for the carnyx, and the first composition for the instrument for at least 1,800 years - since then many composers have written for it, in a huge variety of combinations. The carnyx has sprung back to life, and I hope that other players will now help to enrich its voice.

John Kenny

DORIC, by John Kenny

for trombone, recorders, carnyx, voice, & stones with Electronics

In autumn 2004 John Kenny and Christopher Wheeler were invited by Deveron Arts to be artists in residence in the ancient town of Huntly, Aberdeenshire. Together they spent a week sampling many sound sources of Huntly and its local environment. These sound sources reflect many faces of the area, from domestic human situations to local industry, agriculture, and the natural environment, recorded at all hours of the day and night. There is a particularly magical association between this area and the carnyx, which was created by Pictish craftsmen in this area around 2000 years ago – a significant number of sounds derive from the Deskford area, where the carnyx was discovered. These sound sources were then woven into a tapestry of sound which can be projected into a performance space, against which a live performer creates new textures and commentaries. The result is in effect an electronic tone poem, reflecting a journey through time and place, with very special reference to both the accent and cadence of the Doric speech, and the course of the River Deveron from Huntly to the sea. Doric was premiered in Huntly on Halloween 2004.

INTERVAL

ANKH by Morris Pert

The work is for pre-recorded tape and soloist, playing alto and bass trombones, carnyx (an ancient Celtic war horn), alphorn and conch shell. The word ANKH itself refers to the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, a cross surmounted by an oval, the crux ansata.

The five movements are:

1. PTAH : One of the original creator gods (ca. 3100BC), who later became a god of the arts, artists

and artisans.

2. THE TOUCH OF PAN: Originally the Greek god of shepherds, Pan was part human, part goat, playing on the syrinx. He became more and more associated with rural terrorising and sexual promiscuity, finally being regarded as an overall deity.

3. DE RERUM NATURA (On the Nature of Things): This brilliant work by Lucretius expounded the theories of Epicurus. The book covers atomic physics, astronomy, biology, the human mind (body, spirit and sexuality), geology etc., the whole idea being to dispel fear of the gods by the understanding of scientific reality.

4. SPLENDOR SOLIS: The work by the 15c. alchemist, Solomon Trismosin, concerned with the explanation of all previous philosophies through alchemy. The book contains 22 extraordinary, mystical illustrations, many of the details of which are inexplicable.

5. THE CENTAUR SLEEPS: The centaurs were a race of half-human, half-horse creatures that lived in Greek Thessaly. They were generally wild and orgiastic in behaviour, apart from Chiron who studied medicine and music (he was taught by Artemis and Apollo). This movement is dedicated to him.

6. CODA: A return of the PTAH music and a final close.

The pre-recorded tape, which is the foundation of the piece, consists of a great variety of material: pure electronics, treated vocal and instrumental sounds, sampled and found sounds. These were prepared, played and pre-recorded by the composer. The role of the soloist is twofold: Firstly, to perform passages of written score which have no apparent vertical co-incidence with the tape. This means there are two independent time-streams of music; Secondly, the soloist is required to improvise on given material. This, however, is not free improvisation for it involves the soloist listening, responding and interacting with the tape, a technique requiring skilled and highly intuitive musicianship.

The work was written for, and is dedicated to, John Kenny.