

**Elaine Mitchener/Apartment House,
Wigmore Hall, 26 May 2023.**

The programme of this late night concert at London's Wigmore Hall was very much a throwback to the 1960s. It was a showcase for the mezzo-contralto Elaine Mitchener, a regular collaborator with Apartment House; both are Associate Artists of the hall. Two works from the decade that are very different but proved ideal companions were on the programme. This was a rare opportunity to hear Peter Maxwell Davies' classic *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) live, preceded by the UK premiere of a work by the American composer, artist and poet Albert M. Fine (1932–1987), who was associated with the Fluxus movement though is now little known.

Although *Eight Songs for a Mad King* was premiered by the South African vocalist Roy Hart and Davies' own ensemble, the Pierrot Players, Hart and the composer fell out and the first recording, made in 1970, featured Julius Eastman in the title role. Both Apartment House and Mitchener have been central figures in the contemporary rediscovery in the UK of Eastman as composer, and in an interview for *The Wire*, Mitchener stated that she was fascinated that two early performers of the work were gay Black Americans (the other being William Pearson). She said, 'Two Black baritones both played the King of England. The optics are subversive and political. I thought, why not have a go myself?'¹ She is not the first woman to tackle the role – the Iranian-American mezzo-soprano Haleh Abghari gave an award-winning performance in 2007 – and she asked Peter Maxwell Davies in 2013 for permission to perform the work, which he granted. Davies told her to change octaves when necessary and 'make it work for your voice'. Intriguingly, gender-switching is inscribed on Davies' score: the opening of the vocal part of the seventh song, 'Country Dance (Scotch Bonnett)', is specifically marked 'female vocalist'.

Anton Lukoszevieve, the cellist and ever-adventurous director of Apartment House, arranged the first of Fine's *Three Movements for Piano*, 'White On White' (1965), for his ensemble (which also comprised Kerry Yong, keyboards; Emma Williams, flute; Heather Roche, clarinet; Gordon MacKay, violin; Simon Limbrick,

percussion). Fine's work was hypnotic and modally minimalist, based on an ascending riff on Yong's part-prepared piano that had a strangely veiled quality. It was overlaid by sustained flute, clarinet, violin and cello lines, with percussion interjections that hinted at Javanese gamelan sonorities. Individual pitches only occasionally stood out from the texture, and the overall impression was of a mesmerising halo of resonance growing out of the piano riff. At the front of the stage was a mute Elaine Mitchener, already in character as the King, wearing a black mesh crown, lost in thought, looking blankly at the audience or to the side of the stage, or removing and examining a shoe.

Lukoszevieve's evocative programme note described 'White On White' as 'a psychological precursor' to the Davies, 'a heavy and dark velvet curtain of expectation and suspense'. Emerging from this aural framing, the brutal opening gesture of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* was all the more shocking, and the skewed quasi-minimalist repetitions of the first song were still more unhinged, coming as they did immediately after the gentle and regular undulations of Fine's work. The members of Apartment House dealt with the extreme demands of Davies' piece with considerable aplomb, navigating a polystylistic mélange ranging from pseudo-Baroque to pseudo-dance band, from strictly notated to semi-improvised passages, and in Yong's case from piano to harpsichord and back very frequently. Williams' piccolo came into its own during the third song, her instrument dialoguing with toy bird calls.

Mitchener's performance was quite simply extraordinary. She held nothing back in her traversal of the enormous vocal range of the work, and her total inhabiting of the character was the enduring memory of the evening. Hers was an empathetic portrayal of a very human King, one who cried in anguish 'deliver me from my people' and insisted 'I am not ill' in the face of evidence to the contrary from the slippery clarinet and harpsichord parts. In turn vulnerable, growling, tender, pulling her voice back until only a fragile thread remained, and with an unnervingly direct manner of projecting the text, Mitchener proved herself an outstanding actor as well as singer. This was never for one second a histrionic, deranged spectacle prompting the audience to gawp at a mentally fragile character. The notorious violin destruction scene, for instance, was not a toddler-like frenzy of smashing; instead, Mitchener nuzzled the instrument before trampling on it. The end of the work, with the King repeating the word 'howling',

¹ Elaine Mitchener interviewed by David Grundy, 'A Cry of Anguish: Eight Songs for a Mad King', May 2023, www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/eight-songs-for-a-mad-king (accessed 1 August 2023).

leaving the stage pursued by Limbrick banging a bass drum, the pathetic cry retreating backstage into infinity, was truly moving, a theatrical moment that will live long in the memory.

Fine's and Davies' pieces somehow both came over as 1960s period pieces and as works that

speak to contemporary audiences. And was it strange that Davies' *King* was performed by a woman? Not one bit.

Caroline Potter

10.1017/S0040298223000554