Brian Ferneyhough

On Stellar Magnitudes (1994)

Mezzo-soprano, Fl (Picc), Cl (B-Cl), Pf, Vln, Vc

Duration: 11 minutes

First performance: September 1994, Abbaye de Royaumont, Katherine Ciesinski, Ensemble Contrechanps conducted by Zsolt Nag

Commissioned by the Foundation Royaumont

Talking once about his Etudes transcendentales (1982-5), Ferneyhough spoke of being “tired of the Pierrot lunaire ensemble, with the clarinet, the rather white sound,” and of therefore choosing a formation of flautist, oboist, soprano, harpsichordist and cellist with “a hard-edged metallic quality.” For a composer, though, most choices are provisional, and here in the next decade is a work scored for exactly the Pierrot group: mezzo-soprano, flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), violin, cello and piano. That makes On Stellar Magnitudes something of a Contra-Etudes—an impression that might be reinforced by the fact that this is a continuous piece, not a net of separated fragments, that it is (in a sense conversely) based on isolated words chosen for the occasion rather than on the connected phrases of given poems, and that musical features most characteristic of this composer, such as speed, compaction, lightness and entanglement, are given a playful, humorous tilt.

There are ways, however, in which On Stellar Magnitudes pursues further the concerns of the Etudes and of an intermediate work, the Fourth Quartet with soprano (1989-90). In the same conversation about the Etudes, and with specific reference to the problems of text setting, Ferneyhough said how his purpose was not to make music that would illustrate the words in a madrigalian fashion but instead to show “music as a self-sufficient language which is nevertheless rich and flexible enough to conconnections to many other ways of feeling and thinking.” On Stellar Magnitudes explores further this notion of music as independent but linked to other languages, verbal and dramatic, and does so in an alarming manner, since now the range of those other languages is made minute. Single words and short phrases - often further deprived of sense by being rare locutions, nonce coinages or foreign terms - are scanned by the music, as if by a telescope scanning stars. The marking above the piano solo which starts the piece - “tense and uneasy, as if trying to make sense out of chaos” - could
be applied to a lot of what follows, though textures and modes of delivery will vary a lot from moment to moment.

The vocabulary of the work is indeed stellar. At the start the singer enunciates an alphabetical star catalogue: Antares, Bellatrix, Capella, Deneb, Elnath, and so on, as far as Zubenal. The piano continues while this is going on, and reacts violently to the unanimous fortissimo entries of the other four players. Then the singer runs through another alphabet of seventeen stars, but this time the names are encoded in the initial letters of words chosen from all over the place:

A la mode Lehár Did Eider Braxy Angary Read A Nork?
By Exuviae Less Lubrication And then Those Repetends In Xhosa
“Could” Aslant Paralysis (Elenchus Logic Looms Astir)
Delaminated Enantiophonic Nodes Enate Be
Entrenched Lone Numbing “Armipotens” Telos Hadn’t
...and so on.

As Ferneyhough explains: “The very discrepancy between the immense grandeur of the stellar objects themselves and their minuscule and gnomic evocation in the present context suggested a rather ironic and even whimsical treatment.” (Words are a forlorn and hopeless instrument with which to draw reality into consciousness: is music, the work asks us, any better?) Hence “a series of ephemeral and often unstable states which...resemble more than somewhat tiny operatic scenes in which both the voice and the individual instrumental combinations actively define ‘characters,’ which latter, no sooner established, are reabsorbed into, and annulled by, the constant flux of transformation.” The “chain of ‘scenes’ becomes progressively more confused until, towards the end, a florid simultaneity of virtuoso and cadenza-like instrumental solos is abruptly concluded by the swift and decisive irruption of ostinato figurations.”