

Wissam Boustany and Aleksander Szram  
St. John's, Smith Square, London, 22 May 2008

Review by Richard Stagg



Organised by volunteers from the group Lebanon United, and with its proceeds to be donated to the charity Child of Lebanon, a concert of music for flute and piano was given by Wissam Boustany and Aleksander Szram at St. John's, Smith Square on 22 May 2008. An enthusiastic audience of several hundred gathered to hear the event which featured two well-known twentieth-century works as well as three contemporary works, one of them a world premiere commissioned by Wissam Boustany,

The Hindemith *Sonata*, with which the recital began, was anything but Teutonic in its presentation. From the opening bars onwards the emphasis was on pastoral lightness, mystery and gentle humour. If the concluding *Marsch* of the third movement suffered from a slight lack of bite, this did not detract from the overall message of their interpretation: Hindemith should laugh, flow and sing. With Ian Clarke's *Touching the Ether* we seem to have become mesmerised by the peace of a dawn chorus in a remote Chinese valley. Special fingerings are used to make a supple pitch vibrato, others to create seamless *glissandi*, always maintaining a mood of enchantment, and showing off further facets of this versatile composer's gifts for balance and invention. The first half concluded with Jolivet's *Sonate* of 1958, whose lonely and tormented slow movement erupts into fury in the finale—a fury in which the pianist seemed almost hesitant to take part. When music portrays conflict in the raw, musical conflict is an inevitable part of the spectacle, and an 'accompanist' (for that is what we call them!) should throw courtesy to the winds and engage in sonic combat.

After the interval, Bushra el-Turk's *Marionette* contained conflict of a less human-sounding, more robotic nature, in which the flute-player shouts syllables in the middle of flute-phrases (words which mean three ways of saying 'no' in Lebanese.) Next came Wil Offermans's *Honami*, which featured a mixture of Japanese and Middle Eastern scales, as well as sibilant effects mimicking the sound of wind over a rice-field, harmonics used melodically, quarter-tones, singing-and-playing, *bisbigliando* and stamping.

The programme ended with York Bowen's *Sonata* of 1946, given with noble phrasing and scrupulous balance, and the third movement being delivered with tremendous speed and energy. The players' obvious passion for transparency of texture once more seemed to be verging on the over-polite, and I felt that a little more freedom with the dynamics of the piano part would have done no harm at all.

In accord with earlier promises, neither music-stand nor one sheet of music-paper was allowed to clutter the stage from start to finish of the concert and, never minding the toll in human endurance of such a regime of self-imposed constraint, this extremely demanding programme came over as convincingly accurate throughout—an impressive achievement. The obvious benefits to be gained are those of closer contact between performers and of closer contact between them and the audience. You also get (dare I say it?) ultimately a sense of liberation and an added confidence, both of which may be suddenly undermined in the event of any attempts to return to the safety of the music-stand! But this, no doubt, will be old hat to those who have stayed the course.

The *Swan*, played as an encore, came as a comfort to those of us who know that we, too, can at least manage that by heart!