

Reviews of Environments (Divine Art)

British Music Society (20th May 2024)

The Ulster composer Greg Caffrey is a new name to me, though I have been aware of the Hard Rain Ensemble that he founded a decade ago.

Aingeal is a tribute to a loved one. Strings scurry downwards, a bell tolls, and we are clearly listening to a threnody – somewhere between Pärt and Pettersson? Long shimmering chords, a glowering tam-tam, the sinister rattle of percussion. The music isn't going anywhere much, nor is it trying to, it is a jagged meditation on loss.

Bells again launch *Environments II*, but soon a guitar (the great Craig Ogden) picks out a theme to be examined and explored through a sequence of cool meditation, brief urgency, and at last an abrupt silence; a glittering twelve-minute musical mobile.

A Terrible Beauty is a response to, rather than a setting of three poems by Yeats. Again, long string chords – warmer now – are coloured this time by wind and brass. Though not in any way illustrative, like the other pieces this music evoked in me clear mental pictures, this time of the hushed and teeming jungles painted by Douanier Rousseau. If the first part is all expectation, the rest ('Things fall apart') is mostly action, as scraps and fragments of theme are juggled and tossed; and while sounding nothing like him, the music retains throughout, much of Webern's absolute lucidity and clarity.

In *Environments 1* the piano wanders through another lush landscape – sometimes serene, sometimes menacing – of shimmering colours and delicate flecks of light: again, the music evoked (in me) pictures – the long shadows of De Chirico, the cool abstraction of Ben Nicholson – maybe I need to get out more. At sixteen leisurely and ruminative minutes this is the longest single piece on the disc, and the only one that maybe slightly overstayed its welcome.

If the music inhabits a somewhat circumscribed sound and emotional world that puts him in good company with others outside the mainstream (eg Robins Stevens and/or Walker): and on first acquaintance it is definitely rewarding – only time will tell how durable it may be. Recording and presentation are excellent, even if the promotional blurb ('transports listeners on a visceral journey through the depths of human experience' etc.) is a tad overblown. The Ulster Orchestra copes admirably with some very exposed writing. This, then, is contemporary music that comes highly recommended.

Review by Kevin Mandry

Kevin Mandry reviewing in the British Music Society