

Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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Is there any justification for the rumblings that are sometimes heard today from senior composers, from Stravinsky down, to the effect that life is now too easy for their juniors, and that all the encouragement goes to the young? More than half the editorial space in this issue is taken up with accounts of new works performed during the past few months – over a dozen works in all, by ten composers, all of whom except one are between their twenty-fifth and thirty-fifth years. What is more, at least nine of these works were commissioned from one source or another for important occasions. Nor does this exhaust the list: the Promenade Concert in which Tavener's *In Alium* was performed also included another new work commissioned by the BBC, the impressive Violin Concerto of Don Banks, as well as Thea Musgrave's Concerto for Orchestra, a Feeney Trust commission which was first heard in London earlier this year and has already had several notable performances. Nicholas Maw and Gordon Crosse are both working on commissioned operas, Richard Bennett and Malcolm Williamson, having already proved their gifts in this direction, both have several operatic commissions to fulfil, and several other of these composers have as many commissions as they can cope with, or more, for a long time ahead.

All this certainly suggests that life for the young composer is easier today than forty years ago – though perhaps not more so than 240 years ago, when private patrons were plentiful. And although even a spate of commissions may not mean enough to live on, a young composer who arouses any appreciable interest will probably find a publisher willing to invest in him to the tune of a modest retainer. It is as he approaches the age of forty that the composer today faces the really tough years of his career. The number of promising young composers in any generation who have sufficient talent and stamina to sustain public interest into middle age, against the challenge of the new talents of the next generation, will always be small. Those few will not lack performances or commissions, but the rest will inevitably find them getting ever more infrequent. Commissions to give a helping hand to the once promising who seem to be fading can generally serve little purpose except as acts of charity, and commissions as a means of getting a work of guaranteed public appeal from an established composer are scarcely necessary, although sometimes a useful incentive or stimulus. The most valuable purpose commissions can serve is to give the talented young the maximum chance of finding, realising and developing whatever potentiality they may have within them. In this respect the list of works reviewed in the following pages reflects a sound policy in the distribution of commissions, and if some of the ten composers later drop out of the running, as is almost bound to happen, it will at least not be because they have lacked the opportunity to prove themselves.