

## CONCERT

# Emergent composers

by William Dart

**L**ET US consider the lot of young composers enrolling at our university music schools. Three to five years will be spent learning their craft, producing works that will be heard, at best, in a few departmental concerts. Of necessity, these pieces will probably be modest in both technical difficulty and in the performing forces required. The works will be heard by a small, if select, group of people.

On graduation, our young composers might find that the opportunities to practise their art are even more scanty. There are more commissions around nowadays, but they tend to be given to established names. The annual Composers' Workshop in Nelson provides a boost to those who can attend, but the music performed there is restricted by availability of rehearsal time and musicians on hand.

I felt more optimistic about the future of our young composers after two days recently spent at the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra's "New and Emergent



MICHAEL DAWSON

**APO conductor John Hopkins: fatherly sympathy.**

Composers' Reading Workshop". The APO has been making a real effort to place more New Zealand works in its programmes and this workshop is part of the same enlightened attitude. The concept is American, introduced by regular guest conductor Donald Thulean, and brilliantly adapted to the local situation by orchestra manager Christopher Blake. Twenty composers submitted scores and the APO under the baton of John Hopkins performed and recorded works by six of them.

The meeting got under way with an untitled piece by Leonie Holmes, who was the first composer-in-residence at the Nelson School of Music last year. With its highly approachable idiom and well-calculated scoring, this was a shrewd choice for opening the first ses-

sion and it drew a positive response from the players. Although it was not flawless — a monumental climax was encountered and acquitted rather hastily and the latter stages of the piece seemed a little earthbound rhythmically — Holmes's instinct for orchestral colour was evident in the solid string writing and the fine dovetailing of the woodwind lines.

Bryony Philips's "Sinfonia di Requiem" was even more accessible — unambitious but neatly crafted in its modal way. Much more challenging was Dorothy Ker's "Melodies and Interludes". This was premiered last year by the Karlheinz Company and had been re-orchestrated by the composer for a larger ensemble. As in last year's performance the work gained much from Tanya Haddock's solo oboe contributions.

Although serial in intent, Ker's work encompasses a wealth of colouristic effects, from the subtle juxtapositions and mingling of timbres in the opening Prelude to the passionate, almost Oriental-tinged outbursts on the oboe later in the piece. It was the Finale, with its teasing rhythmic play, that proved most testing for the players.

Nigel Keay's "Movement for Orchestra", too, made few concessions to the musicians. This used the full orchestral resources in a rigorously worked out musical argument. Although the textures were densely structured in terms of extensive contrapuntal writing, Keay had calculated his orchestral effects well, from a tremolo cello idea that required special attention by the players to the closing bars, with their sombre scoring for low strings, bassoon and horns.

If Keay's work tended towards the cerebral, then Bruce Crossman's "Piece No 1" and John Young's "And the Sky Was Tense with Blending" were scores of immense physicality. Both called for big effects from the orchestra and the players came up with a magnificent body of sound. Young, launching his work with a 45-second free-for-all for the musicians, pinpointed his sounds perfectly, nowhere more so than in the flamboyantly clangorous moments for full brass section, two side-drums and timpani.

Of all the composers, Young seemed most at ease in the rehearsal situation — as conductor of Christchurch's University Orchestra he was going back home to prepare a concert that included a number of New Zealand works. Crossman's work, despite some sensitive writing for solo strings, did not carry off its "special effects" so successfully, and smacked, to my ears, more of textbook than soul.

The two days ended with a forum. Opinions were exchanged and orchestral members had their opportunity to comment on various practical aspects concerning the pieces. Throughout the 10 or more hours of playing their commitment was never in doubt. The recordings produced were of professional quality, and remarkably so considering the time allotted to this project. There are few conductors, too, who could have held a workshop together so effectively as Hopkins, who brought a special experience and fatherly sympathy to his task.

For all the participants it was a unique learning experience but, as Crossman remarked, it was particularly heartening to be treated on professional terms as composers. ■