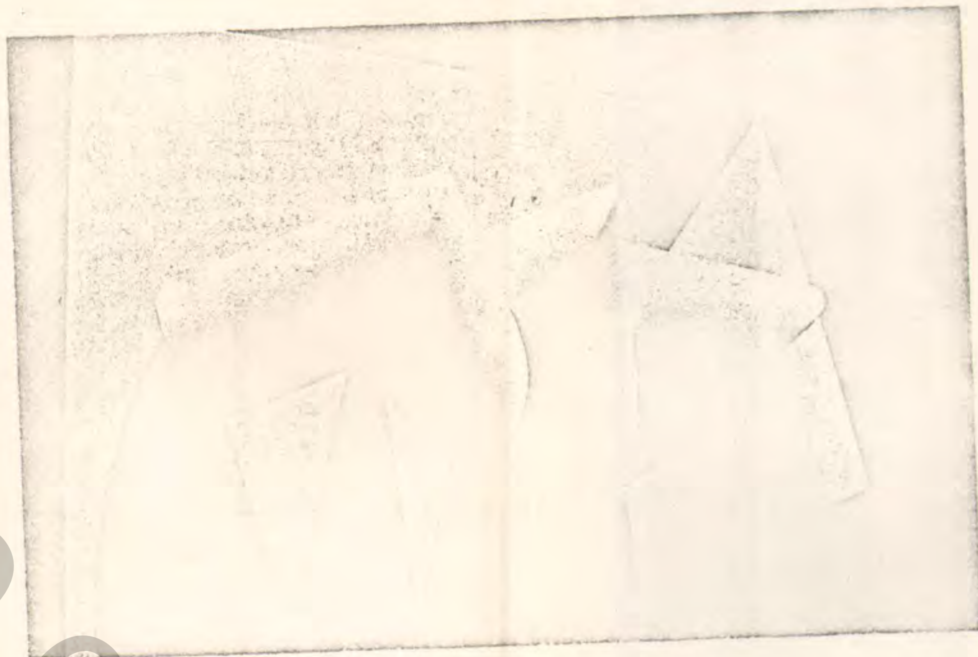
Art

Sergio de Camargo

Gimpel Fils, 30 Davies St, London W1, until 2 February



This Brazilian sculptor, now domiciled in Paris, has exhibited in London twice before. He has now changed over completely from somewhat fussy white wooden reliefs, to geometry in cool Carrara marble. His studies in philosophy may be responsible for the mathematical nature of his work and for its uncompromising mechanics.

It is as though Camargo set out with two principles in mind: first, that he would use only cylinders and prisms, albeit transected at angles, which would not cônflict with his second principle that gravity and friction would combine to preserve the arrangements of the segments to picture what he had in mind. Unlike Newton, who did not forsee the inquiring mind of the Church when he slotted together the bridge at the back of Queen's College, Cambridge, Camargo takes no chances: the pieces are glued together. I find this so significant that I am beginning to ask myself whether he should be called a sculptor rather than a putter-together of bricks. I shall return to the aesthetic problem in a moment, but we ought to be clear about the technique before we go any further.

Of the act of sculpting there is no trace. The component pieces are cut—indubitably mechanically—and the surface finish also looks as though done by machine. The stone is flawless: I do not remember seeing a single vein. While smooth, it is not polished: the cool reassurance of marble is felt only through a sandblasted medium, wholly unsuitable for the industrial atmosphere of the developed world. Although bricks for children are now made of polythene rather than costly wood, they are still made. Our youngsters put them together, and the greater the height and the more precarious the balance the louder the hullabaloo at the time of collapse. There is no sense of precariousness in Camargo's geometry. The calculations are precise and cool, and, because of the seeming absense of all chance, his constructs are as reposeful as the interior of a church. In this aspect they are aided by their uniform whiteness. At a time when every light quantum is counted, the white walls of the gallery are clearly helpful. But to have painted white the supports for Camargo's constructs has done him a disservice: plain wood, hessian, newspaper, anything but white (with the exception of black) would have been better than this.

The objects are numbered but unnamed. This underlines Camargo's approach along the road of three-dimensional geometry rather than that of abstract pictorial representation. His mentality exploits the sort of twist which sculptors of molecules of viruses appear to find indispensable. And because the volumes used by Camargo are so elementary, not to say elemental, his cementations are full of surprises and wit. The tallest of all—two metres in height—consists of ten equal volumes, equal in height and base, but with rhombic sections of different diagonal ratios. It is a very effective way of making you screw up your eyes. It also makes me forgive him that he is no sculptor. *Robert Weale*

Music

Macnaghten Concerts

Wigmore Hall, London

Various composers have chronicled the distress evoked by their confrontation at every stage of a composition with the infinitude of possible choices. In non-aleatoric music the choice of medium is perhaps the only decision where control may be relinquished with a clear conscience to external forces; commissions and competitions are cases in point.

The medium required by the Radcliffe Trust of the four finalists in its latest competition for composers of chamber music was voice and string quartet. The two prizewinners, as well as the runners-up, had their works premièred last week by the Allegri Quartet, soprano Jane Manning, and tenor Paul Taylor under the auspices of the Macnaghten Concerts. This disposition of forces—chamber string ensemble and voice—harks back little further than the turn of the century; aside from a few oddities like Haydn's Seven Last Words of Christ (Op 51, rescored for quartet and speaker) and Chausson's Chanson Perpétuelle for soprano and piano quintet, one thinks directly of Schoenberg's setting for soprano of poems by S. George in the last two movements of his second quartet (Op 10), later to be followed by other experiments in the genre.

In a contemporary work, aural perplexity is often such that a prima facie judgment may well be reversed on subsequent hearings. No such difficulty can have faced the Radcliffe jury, however, for one work stood head and shoulders above its rivals. Only in Barry Guy's first-prize contribution, a setting for soprano and quartet of W. Owen's haunting First World War poem "Strange Meeting", did one feel that the instrumental and vocal resources were fully deployed. He sidestepped the booby-trap of writing for soprano versus strings by composing for five individual "voices" and mercilessly taxing their performing abilities. Significantly, Guy is no cerebral academic but an experienced solo and chamber performer on the double bass, as at home in Ronnie Scott's as QEH.

The prefatory string instructions in the score read like a lexicon of bowing and fingering techniques. Each string-player reads from three staves, two for notation (including vocal participation with isolated phonemes) and one for bow position between fingerboard and bridge. Bow and finger pressure, microtonal pitch alterations, special percussive and plucking effects are all covered. A virtuoso himself, Guy sometimes overtaxed the Allegri players but never fazed Ms Manning whether humming, whispering, speaking, sprech-stimming, or singing.

Awareness of instrumental possibilities, of course, does not guarantee formal and stylistic coherence; a carpenter is not de facto a sculptor. But the work succeeds on all levels, not least because Guy has remained resolutely unprogrammatic. "I knew we stood in Hell"—how trite a *con fuoco* passage would be here; instead, the viola has a simple tune while the cello plays treble harmonics. On the other hand, "truths that lie too deep for taint" follows on a frenzied passage with seeming bursts of howitzer fire and precipitates a violent mandolin-like strumming on first violin while the other strings grind ferociously in the extreme upper register. Yet "blood" occurs in a calm, consonant, not to say sanguine passage. This work merits another hearing soon, this time with microphones as the score requires.

Jon Darius

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