

CONCERT

European Women's Orchestra/Martinez St John's, Smith Square

FROM the sound alone, is it possible to tell that an orchestra consists entirely of women? In the case of the European Women's Orchestra it undoubtedly is, although that may have much to do with the principles on which Odaline de la Martinez's orchestra is founded.

The EWO was established in 1990 with the intention of stimulating interest in women composers and suggesting alternatives to the gender-related power structures of western musical life. The consequences for the actual sound they produce are fundamental. Their style of music-making is less glossy, less driven, more cooperative: communication is at a premium. It is a style that makes an eloquent case for the D major Piano Concerto of Mozart's contemporary Amélie-Julie Candeille, an engaging piece of no great pretension whose sensibility would easily be engulfed under more conventional performance conditions. Diana Ambache was the capable soloist.

Martinez's own Five Russian Songs, on texts by Marina Tsvetayeva, juxtaposed two distinct

idioms without convincingly integrating them: one nervous, mildly dissonant; the other folksy and almost sentimental. Only in the final song, "Tonight I Am Alone", was a mood of nostalgia and loneliness embodied with any real persuasiveness in either the vocal line or its accompaniment. Fiona Baines projected the texts with confidence and a warm, clear tone.

Rather less confident was the solo playing of the orchestra's leader, Ann Hooley, in the Elegy for Violin and Strings by Helen Glatz. Evidently influenced by Vaughan Williams and Kodály, respectively Glatz's teacher and friend, the Elegy must have seemed even more old-fashioned in 1967, when it was written, than in our own less iconoclastic time. Yet it is a well-crafted piece and a moving tribute to a deceased colleague.

By contrast the final item, Lindsay Cooper's Saxophone Concerto, had a striking individuality, a presence, previously lacking. Cooper, who played the work herself, exploits jazz rhythms and electronics to telling effect: the long, slow, syncopated build-up in the second section is especially skilfully controlled. But it is the simple eloquence of the opening and closing sections that lodges in the memory: the plangent tone of the soprano saxophone can rarely have been put to more expressive use.

BARRY MILLINGTON