

CONCERT

Holding the fort

by William Dart

DURING A recent visit to Dunedin I heard a lot of complaints about the city's treatment at the hands of the NZSO. Some concert-goers felt slighted that Nigel Kennedy had gone no further south than Christchurch. Others were upset that the orchestra's most recent concert had been relegated to St Paul's where it had been an acoustic free-for-all. It's not surprising, then, that Dunedin's own Sinfonia should have gained and sustained such a loyal following.

The Dunedin Sinfonia is, with the university's music department, a focus in the city's musical life. It presents two concert series a year and also plays for choral concerts and Dunedin Opera Company productions. Later this year the Sinfonia will give three chamber music concerts at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, including works by Nigel Keay, John Elmsly, Stravinsky and Britten, as well as sponsoring a generous competition for young composers.

Conductor Jack Spiers took time out before the Sinfonia's most recent concert to thank the audience for its support over the year, pointing out that this had been influential in persuading the Arts Council to put the Sinfonia on the same level of funding as the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra.

This, their final orchestral concert for 1987, was very much one of soloists. Only one work, Mozart's B flat major Symphony K319, featured the orchestra by itself. Allowing for a certain burr in string intonation — understandable in a group at this stage of its development, and only distracting in the slow movement — the performance had a lot of vitality and attack. Spiers kept the tempi on the brisk side and there were only momentary falterings in ensemble. The woodwind playing throughout was exemplary.

The afternoon had started with Mozart's *Exsultate Jubilate* with Wendy Dixon as soloist. Although technically assured, Dixon's singing lacked the pliancy to do full justice to the work's lyricism, particularly in the "Tu virginem corona". She was best in the flourishes of the "Alleluia".

Britten's *Les Illuminations* was much more satisfying. Some diction

problems had lingered on from the Mozart, but here Dixon revealed much more of herself as a singer, the delicacy of portamento in "Phrase", the exultant virtuosity of "Marine" and sensual low-register work of "Parade". Apart from a few perilous occasions when the deficiencies of the strings were cruelly exposed, the work came across most creditably considering the demands on the players.

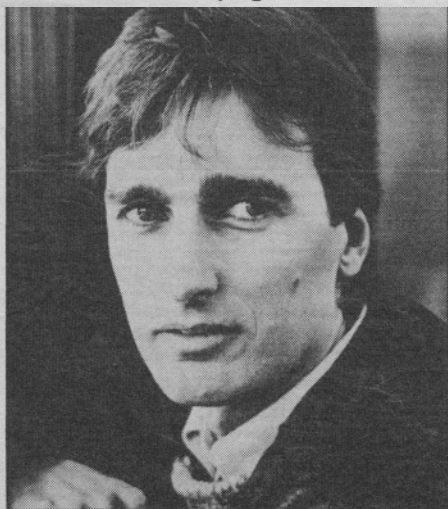
Nigel Keay's *Diffractions for Piano and Orchestra* was commissioned by the Dunedin Sinfonia at the end of last year and was given its premiere performance, with Terence Dennis as pianist.

To some it might seem that the young Dunedin composer is swimming against the tide. In times when so many of his contemporaries are going more than halfway to woo audiences with varying degrees of tonality, Keay writes intensely concentrated, serial-derived music. This might sound daunting, yet the composer's fine sense of coloration and ability to conceive his work in terms of memorable statements make the music anything but dull and academic.

Diffractions has none of the rich textures of Keay's *Movement 2* which the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra tackled in the young composer's workshop a few months back. Single rather than double woodwind and brass keep the new work within the dimensions of a chamber orchestra and the soloist is not a protagonist but rather integrated with the orchestral sound.

While not denying the complexity of *Diffractions*, the scoring is so limpid, the ideas so striking and resourcefully treated, that it never loses its hold on the listener. Neither tempo problems at a few points nor the occasionally questionable string intonation could detract from the overall impact, and Dennis was an eloquent soloist.

The work is one of many featured in the NZSO Sonic Circus to be held in Wellington on October 31, with David Guerin as soloist. This will be a valuable opportunity for Keay to gain an outside perspective on his work. It will also enable a wide cross-section of musicians to hear a piece that could well be picked up by other regional orchestras for future programmes.

Nigel Keay: his *Diffractions* premiered.

Wendy Dixon: best in "Alleluia".