Luis Bunel’s Un Chien Andalou
at Royal Northern College of Music
Reviewed by Andrew Marsden February 2018

Looking at the surface, it does seem somewhat incongruous that the RNCM programmed an evening of four short Surrealist films on the evening of Valentine’s Day. But the Surrealists, in thrall to the unconscious mind, were all about delving beyond the surface. On a day traditionally associated with declarations of pure love, it was fitting that these films were screened. For many people, love is often chaotic, liberating, even Surreal.

Each of the four films had new scores composed, conducted, and performed by students at the RNCM. The first film, Rene Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924), goes all out to disorientate the audience. Images of an industrial cityscape are flipped to appear upside down, a man is shot off a roof to his death and his funeral cortege is led by a camel, a lithe ballerina is revealed to be a bearded man, and footage of a roller-coaster is played at various speeds and angles. The score,

composed by **Caroline Bordignon**, made use of a small all-woman orchestra (conducted by **Rita Castro Blanco**), but it mainly relied on an electronic backing track. This track was reminiscent of Karlheinz Stockhausen's 'musique concrete', peppered as it was with distortions and electronic manipulation of sounds. The final five minutes of the film was scored by the backing track alone, the orchestra sitting in silence as the film played out to the end.

The orchestra, again conducted by Ms. Castro Blanco, had more to do for the score of the second film, Hans Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928). This score relied heavily on the percussion skills of **Abigail Flood**, while the score's composer **Dennis Tjiok** joined the orchestra to provide an electronic intervention partway through the film. Richter's nine-minute film is, in many ways, a prototype for the music videos which became popular in the 1980s with the emergence of MTV. The film's subversive qualities, where everyday objects act against their routine uses, would prompt the Nazis to burn all sound versions of the film as "degenerate art". There is, however, a great sense of play and freedom in the film's imagery - in one scene a man's head repeatedly floats away from his body and the animation used for this effect no doubt influenced Terry Gilliam's work for Monty Python!

After a change of conductor to **Tjeerd Barkmeijer** for the final two films, the evening recommenced with the orchestra reduced to a string quartet to perform the score by **Philippos Rousiamanis** to Man Ray's *Emak-Bakia* (1926). Ray's film reportedly prompted a viewer at the premiere to declare that the film hurt his eyes; Rousiamanis's score seemed to be written to hurt the ears of the audience! At one stage toward the end of the film, the musicians were playing at the higher end of the register to create a sound like a distressed bird. The high frequencies they were reaching would surely have affected anyone in the audience with tinnitus. It must have taken the players a lot of control to produce such an effect on their instruments. Ray's film (or *cinepoeme*) is a like a kaleidoscope; shuffling around images, pushing back against any form of

interpretation. It certainly captured the free-form feeling of a bizarre dream.

The final film of the night was the ‘Headline Act’: Luis Bunuel’s debut (written in collaboration with Salvador Dali): *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Despite being nearly ninety-years old, the film still manages to shock and confuse in equal measure and is perhaps the most famous Surrealist film. The film’s opening scene, based on a dream Bunuel had, shows a man (played by Bunuel) sharpening a cut-throat razor blade. He looks at a cloud ‘slicing’ past the moon, and then slices the eyeball of a woman (although it is a cow’s eye which is sliced). This brief scene still packs an almighty punch. The rest of the film explores frustrated sexuality, gender confusion, death, and ants crawling out of a hand (this image was based on a dream Dali had). It has generated much interpretation and it’s doubtful if any of the explanations of the film can fully convey its meaning. The score by **Aaron Breeze** saw the ensemble increased back to a full complement of musicians. During the film’s final section there was a piano piece and the singing of **Dasha Papysheva**, who had the unenviable task of singing against herself, as a pre-recorded track played. The track eventually drowned out the live singing before Papysheva walked off stage, leaving her recorded duplicate to finish the score off.

The scores and their performances all showcased the immense talent that the RNCM has studying there and it was a real joy to be able to watch these strange, disturbing films with a live accompaniment… even on Valentine’s Day!