

**New Arts Consort at the Museum****Musical break  
from ritual  
lacks tension**By IFAN  
PAYNE**REVIEW**

**CHARLES Barber's *Sex and Death at Covent Garden* is a performance work which sets out to break the rituals of traditional concert and opera-going.**

Performance works of various styles and scales can make powerful experiences.

I think for example of Charlie Moro's wonderfully moving *Toot and Blink* in which he utilised hundreds of boats on Lake Michigan.

At the opposite extreme there are the graphic scores of John Cage which are more works of art, and displayed as such, than performance scores.

In a manner reminiscent of John Cape's installation at the Whitney Art Museum some four years ago, Charles Barber, the New Arts Consort and his co-workers — David Hughes, Martin Wilson and Peter Reynolds — had in *Sex and Death* devised an installation at the National Museum of Wales last night which consisted of an exhibition forming the back-drop to a live performance.

But unlike Cage, this idea of an artwork that is anti-art, of a new ritual which supplants the old musical rituals, was not developed with imagination to support its 80 minutes.

The score of *Sex and Death* was based on the music of the opening chorus of Gluck's opera *Orfeo*, which is then reworked in the manner of Michael Colgrass or Lukas Foss to recreate the music as if viewed from different angles in a fractured mirror.

Indeed it was perhaps ironic that in a work which sets out to provide an alternative to existing musical conventions, the *Adagio*, which provides the central point of *Sex and Death*, was so distractingly reminiscent of Foss's *Baroque Variations*.

Where Barber and his colleagues scored was in utilising the spaces, and the all-too-occasional movement between them, in the museum.

That Charles Barber can write powerfully for the theatre was evident in his recent *Escenas* for Dance Wales, but here much of the problem with *Sex and Death* was the tedium caused by the lack of dramatic tension and development of music or movement in between the odd arresting moment.

In taking itself so seriously as a polemic against high culture *Sex and Death at Covent Garden* lacked any sense of the necessary joy in performance and participation.