

tribute to the Brazilian jazz musician Hermeto Pascoal, it was based on his video of the same name, in which Pascoal, then in his late 70s, lies on his back, torso exposed, and uses his body and mouth as a percussion instrument.² The catch in Tjøgersen's piece is that while the film is playing, Pascoal's sounds are replaced by those of the quartet, who play in synch with the film. Some sounds are similar (Pascoal's slaps to his body are replicated as slaps on instruments' bodies, for example). Others are very different, and played for apparent comic effect – a high-pitched glissando twang whenever Pascoal struck his forehead couldn't help but raise a smile. But the piece left me uncomfortable: on his back, semi-naked, his grey-haired, drooping body blushing pink from the slaps he is giving himself, Pascoal's film places him in a position of great vulnerability. He only avoids ridicule because he is doing so on his own terms, showcasing his own skill and invention. Tjøgersen's piece strips that part of his performance away, so all we have is an old man pulling faces and hitting himself. There's an undeniable surreal comedy to it all – but at whose expense?

The last performance I saw, on Saturday night, was a three-piano rendition of Julius Eastman's *Evil Nigger* by Heloisa Amaral, Elisa Medinilla and Frederik Croene (I didn't last for the very final concert, a late-night gig by Paal Nilssen-Love's big band Extra Large Unit). This was ferocious. Brexit, Trump, ecological catastrophe; all of these had been in the air the last three days. *Evil Nigger* ripped the roof off Sentralen and rebirthed us all. It's one thing to point at something, I thought; quite something else to offer a solution, or at least a temporary release. The three pianists, their instruments pointing into the centre of the hall (Calvary? Macbeth's witches?), tore into Eastman's hammered, fortissimo tremolos, before, miraculously, staggeringly, refusing to let up for 30 minutes, generating a spinning storm of sound. Hearts stopped, eyes moistened. The marble walls of this former bank almost cracked. Eastman's posthumous reputation seems to be growing almost daily; a composer who has, too late alas, found his time. On this basis the acclaim is completely justified.

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NON-PIANO, IKLECTIK Arts Lab, London

March 18 was the first-ever World Toy Piano Day, and what better occasion for a concert showcasing this intriguing instrument. The pianist Xenia Pestova hosted *Non-Piano* at IKLECTIK Art Lab; the toy piano naturally took centre stage, with guest appearances from other non-piano keyboard instruments. IKLECTIK was an inspired venue – cosy without being cramped, with an acoustic that could accommodate both intimate whisperings and all-engulfing sound worlds. Pestova performed in every piece and was also a very charming host, establishing an informal tone from the get-go. No programmes (a boon! – no rustling), so everything was announced, with explanation of gestation and performance history. The relaxed surroundings well suited the exploratory and educational nature of the evening.

The programme was well balanced, offering compositions by both established and fledgling composers. Most of the world premieres in *Non-Piano* were written by attendees of the first London Toy Piano Composition Workshop, run by Pestova earlier this year. The evening's opener, however, was neither for toy piano nor a premiere: *asinglewordisnotenough2* (*aria da capo*) by Pierre Alexandre Tremblay for ROLI Seaboard and live electronics. Pestova was also joined by a live video wall, with strobing lines that amplified the musical gestures – this heightened my comprehension of the work. The electronics initially provided a luxurious bed, chiefly static, allowing the chattiness of the Seaboard's harrumphs, tics and squeaks to settle the listeners in to the sound world. This bed surrounds us, then plummets downwards, flirting with fifths and fourths, suggesting heartbeats and death rattles, rising in intensity to a frenzied cadenza, then crashing into an exhilarating finale – with tangible appreciation in the room. This bold splash of a work accosts the listener, but does not alienate.

Then came the first workshop grouping. *Sneeu Druppel* (*Snowdrops*) by Roché van Tiddens for solo toy piano made much use of rests, tripping lines, acciaccaturas and a spare texture, thus highlighting the toy piano's mechanism, making the piece almost a duet for pitches and percussion. Aaron Parker's *Suotnoiyo*, for toy piano and live electronics, began with Pestova tapping on the instrument's body with her fingernails, under and over; this was picked up by a microphone, and the resulting material

² That video is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPMPye2gg3o.

was used to generate the electronics. The tapping was an intriguing effect that I'd have liked to hear further explored: the long fade ending could have accommodated a call-back to these taps, pulling the audience from electronics back to physicality. Lastly, *The Fragmented Weave* by Dorothy Lee (solo toy piano) was a consciously retrospective work. It had a formal air, recalling the harpsichord, but also showed a contemporary disjointed quality.

The first half ended with a new work by Ed Bennett for Indian harmonium and drones (Bennett on drones). Introducing *Harmonidrone*, he explained that it incorporates vinyl run-out grooves and also heavily modified musical material from the Bowie album *Low*: the second piece of his to do so. *Harmonidrone* was aggressive yet sensual, structured as one long crescendo. Jostling and throbbing moved to insistent upward motion, with lifting phrases and slow syncopation in the harmonium. Mozzarella strings of seconds pulling to thirds, then fifths; then clusters intensifying further. The throbbing broke with a sudden dive into the lowest register, clawing ever lower until the piece ended in the depths of the harmonium. An arresting and beautiful work.

The second half began with *Digitalis Purpurea* by Christopher Fox, for solo toy piano. This work comprised unbroken threads of melodic roundels, sometimes with childlike rhythmic playfulness, cross-rhythms adding frisson. It had a singing quality, as if the instrument itself was using circular breathing. A tour de force of compositional invention in miniature, and exquisitely rendered by Pestova.

Astraglossa, or *First Steps in Celestial Syntax* by Helga Arias Parra, is a work for two aerospace engineers (!), prepared piano and live electronics (with Parra on electronics). Pestova acknowledged that there was indeed piano in this work, but most of the sounds weren't produced by the keyboard – so let off on a technicality. There were nods to music theatre here: the white lab coats for the 'engineers', a tinfoil 'planet' created with a flourish to decorate the piano (tying in with a fabulous noise made by foil blowing across piano strings), the video wall implying alien communication. However, to have concrete significance these elements should have been pushed further and given more than just passing thought. I didn't know, for instance, whether removal of the foil from the piano strings later was of dramatic significance, or just a practical move to change the sound world, or both. There were several pleasant

musical moments in the composition, but it was not wholly a successful enterprise.

The last item of the evening was the second group of workshop compositions, starting with Sarah Westwood's *And the Stars, They Listened* for solo toy piano. This had a large amount of musical material for a short work: flourishes, ornaments, recurring answering phrases, bursts of tantrumming, and a delightful noodling figure that I wanted to hear much more of. This could have been a much more effective work had she concentrated on one or two ideas and developed them with more discipline, and saved the other material for future works. Daniel James Ross's *Miniature Fantasy* for toy piano and live electronics followed – a beautifully structured study in how to lead an audience through a single idea. The delicate initial toy piano material emerged into an electronic world, then to be swept away into an audacious bass chest-thumper of a culmination. I'd love to hear much more from Ross. Helene Greenwood's *Bee in Rain* was as pastoral as it sounds; Greenwood joined Pestova, adding a folksy vocal line and sporadic music box. A slight work, which sounded improvised – by design or not, I couldn't be sure. Lastly, Omar Peracha's *Colour Etude II* for two toy pianos and live electronics (pianist Késia Decoté joining Pestova) blended the pianos – in more traditional duet form – with a subtle but effective electronic soundscape: an uplifting conclusion to the programme.

Xenia Pestova is a powerhouse of contemporary keyboard repertoire, and *Non-Piano* displayed her wide-ranging expertise as well as showcasing new composition. Her knowledge and artistry are the perfect guiding force for the uninitiated to the world of the toy piano.

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James Weeks *Libro di fiamelle e ombre*, EXAUDI, Wigmore Hall, London

The easiest part of running a new music group in Britain is probably the beginning. You gather some like-minded musicians, make a programme, find a venue and perform. After that it gets harder: establishing a reputation, persuading someone to fund you, negotiating with promoters, maintaining the commitment of your musicians, keeping going year after year. But EXAUDI have done much more than just keep going: they have established new standards for