

might be hoped, then, but an intelligent tapes-try of unclassifiable musics nonetheless.

Sam Mackay
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Maerzmusik 2017, Berlin

One particularly engaging historical inquiry at Maerzmusik 2017 was the concert titled *Re-inventing Smetak*, a concert with two documentary interludes on Brazil-based composer and instrument builder Walter Smetak, as well as premieres of commissions of living composers to write for his instruments, most notably Liza Lim's *Ronda – The Spinning World*, which integrated Smetak's conceptualisation of the world as 'polarities of energy flowing across and spiraling around axes of evolution and he built his instruments or Plásticas Sonoras (sound sculptures) to express his complex symbology of spiritual relations'.¹ 'Across and spiraling around axis of evolution' referred in part to the sprawling percussion-instrument tree in the centre of the stage with branches of tiny percussion objects dangling from its limbs, and a few scattered barrel-like instruments that made ratchet-like noises when they were turned and rotated by the percussionists. Percussion is already so varied nowadays that one isn't easily engaged by undiscovered instruments from the past, yet Lim's piece also included some sensitive, signature string writing and was able to incorporate Smetak's percussion instruments and jangle and rattle and integrate them at significant formal moments – navigating the physical spectacle on stage and navigating a tricky compositional assignment.

The concert of Smetak's instruments was one item on a festival menu that featured similar cross-cultural projects, historical endeavours, and bold choices of events and musical works that committed strongly to a diverse array of musical material. Other highlights of the wide range of social and historical concerns include a pre-recorded interview with Donna Haraway by the Artistic Director of the festival, Berno Odo Polzer, *Statements on "Decolonizing Time"*, and as part of that same conference a workshop presentation, *Gender Relations in New Music*, by Georgina Born, Arnbjörg María Danielsen and Ashley Fure. Amidst these dialogues and

historical visits were concerts of New Music classics such as Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* performed by the composer himself, and Helmut Lachenmann's *Gran Torso* interpreted by the Sonar Quartett.

The opening concert featured three pieces by Julius Eastman, all for four pianos, *Gay Guerilla* (1979), and two German premieres, *Evil Nigger* (1979), and *Crazy Nigger* (1978). His recently popularity makes one question why he wasn't on the roster of top minimalists from the 1970s and 80s. His flexible and dynamic approach to rhythm and phrasing is a great contrast and relief to Glass, Adams, Reich and Riley, and after listening to two hours of Eastman's music one begins to wonder why the vanguard minimalists had to be so strict with their ostinato eighth notes, and so didactic with their melodic patterns – Eastman's music makes the most out of a minimum of material without drilling the same small motivic melodic idea into your head or conforming to a predictable metrical grid.

Halfway through the concert, a recording of Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert² on 1 June 1980 was played.³ His inventive repurposing of the word 'nigger' is a remarkably creative act in itself:

Now, there was a little problem with the titles of the pieces. There were some students and one faculty member who felt that the titles were somehow derogatory in some manner being that the word 'nigger' is in it. These particular titles, the reason I use them is because I use them, there is a whole series of these pieces. They are called the Nigger series. Now the reason that I use the particular word is because for me it has a, what is what I call 'basicness' about it, that is to say that I feel that in any case the first niggers were of course the field niggers and upon that is really the basis of the American economic system, without field niggers we wouldn't really have such a great and grand economy. So that is what I call first and great nigger, the field niggers, and what I mean by niggers is that which is fundamental, the person or thing that obtains to a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial, or what can we say, elegant. So that a nigger to me is that kind of thing which attains himself or herself to the ground of anything. You see. And that's what I mean by nigger, so there are many niggers, many kinds of niggers. There might be, there are of course 99 names of Allah and there are 52 niggers. And so therefore we are playing two of these niggers.

The speech was received thoughtfully and without much controversy, and the warm social

¹ From the Berliner Festspiele Maerzmusik 2017 festival programme.

² <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2610&context=etd>.

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2XtFZMpw0.

atmosphere of the opening concert was largely due to the music of Eastman and the enthusiasm of the pianists: Ernst Surberg, Christoph Grund, Julie Sassoon and Małgorzata Walentynowicz, with members of the audience eventually joining the performers onstage at the end of the concert.

The other highlight of the festival was Eva Reiter's *The Lichtenberg Figures*,⁴ for voice, 11 instruments and electronics, interpreted by the Ictus Ensemble with Reiter herself singing and vocalising. Several large white cubes were stacked on the stage like bleachers, with a top of each one an instrumentalist and Reiter herself at the top of the whole structure. Each cube lit up internally to varying degrees of brightness to coincide with changes in intensity throughout the very audible structure of seven songs and six instrumental interludes.

The creativity of *The Lichtenberg Figures* lies in the play between the varying Rock music materials and the deconstructive compositional imagination that excites, interrupts, suspends and deflates the potential and kinetic energy of the Rock materials. During the opening prologue, low-passed synth lines slowly climb up into the mid-register, and continue as a thread throughout all of the works' movements, occasionally poking through the mid-register to excite bursts of fragmented activity in the other instruments. The visual aesthetics signal as if we're at a Rock concert that has somehow been transported onto a New Music stage, with the distorted guitar of Tom Pauwels, the keytar and synths of Jean-Luc Plovier, the electric bass of Nico Couck and the drum kit of Gerrit Nulens, all at the bottom of the stage in front of the stadium of white cubes. Listening to this small Rock quartet for three seconds, one could imagine that they were at a Rock concert during a loose intro or outro before or after the group was playing through some conventional Rock song structure. To listen longer is to hear small energetic sonic fragments which burst as the lower registral lines rise and grow in intensity, exciting the brass, winds, and strings, and animating the release of the sonic energy at the top of the stage through Reiter's voice.

The energy is handled remarkably well throughout the 50 minutes of *The Lichtenberg Figures*, never losing its tension and potentiality, never fully climaxing, and never relying on any thematic material – the piece is resolutely a-thematic. Since the ear is tempted to listen, on a

micro level, as if it were listening to a Rock song, it expects a climax like a Rock song would provide. Nonetheless, Reiter's voice itself is constantly changing vocal effect between spoken, whispered, and sung, and between different forms of filtering and processing. It refuses to create the horizontal linearity the ears expect from a song, and yet her voice, and the vocal writing, is able to navigate through a diverse array of timbral juxtapositions and release the tension she has worked so hard to create in the hierarchy of instruments she is a top of.

Below is the text from the sixth song, from author Ben Lerner's *The Lichtenberg Figures*:⁵

Blood on the time that we have on our hands.
 Blood on our sheets, our sheets of music.
 Blood on the canvases
 of boxing rings, the canvases of Henri Matisse.
 The man-child faints at the sight of blood
 and so much close his eyes
 as he dispatches his terrier
 with a pocketknife. Tonight,
 blood condensed from atmospheric vapor
 falls to the earth. It bleeds three inches.
 Concerts are canceled, ball games delayed.
 In galoshes and slickers, the children play.
 An arc of seven spectral colors appears opposite the sun
 as a result of light refracted through drops of blood.

From my point of view as a composer, the first drop of blood on the 'sheets of our music' falls from the identification with material – whether chosen for its potential for formal development or variation, or as a personal signature, or to move it through different stylistic fields, it is the primary and the most intimate choice which other compositional acts grow around. Of course, other compositional aesthetic positions de-emphasise the choice of material (structuralist, alleatoric, film, conventional, etc.), but Reiter's unique choice of and engagement with material from another style is another remarkably creative act of Maerzmusik 2017. Her staging and compositional context examines and realises implications of Rock material which might not be able to be realised in its original style. This material immigration and stylistic transposition is able to suspend and play with the formal implications of that material, and distort and exaggerate the expressive power of that material.

Reiter accomplished a deep stylistic interrogation in *The Lichtenberg Figures*, and Maerzmusik 2017 itself achieved something similarly interrogative through its broad discursive framework

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieNGv9bxm8w.

⁵ Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Copper Canyon Press, 2004.

and inquiries into contrasting social, historical, and stylistic materials and positions.

Robert Phillips
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Only Connect Festival of Sound 2017, Oslo

In London the bank – as a building, its symbolism and its position within the cityscape – is sacrosanct. In Oslo banks become arts venues. Although it is moving soon to new premises being built further up the waterfront, the National Museum of Contemporary Art is currently housed in a former bank. A few blocks away is Sentralen, a relatively new, multi-purpose performance arts space, meeting place, restaurant and bar.

Sentralen is housed in the former Christiania Sparebank, Norway's first savings bank, but since reopening last year has already become a popular venue for Oslo's thriving new music scene: both the Ultima and Only Connect festivals make use of it now. For Only Connect, this May, larger concerts were held in the grand marble-walled Marmorsalen; others were held in some of the smaller spaces, including four short solo performances by the electro-acoustic musician André Bratten, held in the dark and claustrophobic space of the former vault.

Only Connect's ambition is to forge links between the worlds of contemporary music and the other arts, and the three-day festival featured pieces involving film, performance poetry, meditation and even a little dance. Composition remains at the core, however, even if broadly defined; and every performance was principally a musical one, even if that definition was also stretched a little beyond traditional norms.

The middle day of the festival (Friday, 19 May) was, in some respects, its most conventional. Given over to a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Norwegian Society of Composers it featured music by Norwegian composers across three concerts: a recital of Hardanger fiddle (Therese Birkelund Ulvo's *Fragile*, played by Britt Pernille Frøholm) and mezzo-soprano and piano songs (Jon Øivind Ness's *Meditasjonar over Georges de la Tour nr. XVII*, a world premiere, and Rolf Wallin's ... *though what made it has gone*, performed by Elisabeth Holmertz and Kenneth Karlsson); the *The Exotica Album*, performed by BIT20 Ensemble, saxophonist Kjetil Møster and analogue synth player Jørgen Trøen; and, at the

start, a celebration concert featuring a medley of Norwegian composers from the last 100 years and a double bass concerto, *The Ark*, by Oslo Sinfonietta bassist Håkon Thelin.

Of the three, the chamber recital was the most easily enjoyable: Ulvo's piece is an exciting, sonically interesting showcase for the Hardanger fiddle, played with great verve by Frøholm. Wallin's 1987 song, which Karlsson helped commission, demonstrated the composer's usual technical facility. I admit I've not yet found a way in to Wallin's music in general; it can leave me a little cold, but this piece provided a wonderful opportunity for Holmertz. Indeed, the singer was the star of the show. While Karlsson's neutral piano style sank into washes of chromatic resonance, Holmertz was by turns strong, sexy, measured when she needed to be, full throated when she didn't. The contrast between the two performers was more effectively played in Ness's piece, in which the piano part's Satie-like efficiency of gesture (the two hands played in rhythmic unison almost throughout) proved a perfect foil for the exuberant expressionism of the voice.

For an outsider, the Norwegian Society of Composers concert was an underwhelming affair. The medley, by the Oslo Sinfonietta's conductor, Christian Eggen, was intended to be enjoyed alongside a quiz – match each extract to a list of 13 composers to spell out a codeword; prizes to the winners at the end. Those around me seemed to enter into the spirit of the thing with enthusiasm; I was completely at sea, only recognising three or four of the names on the list and none of the music. Thelin's bass concerto began promisingly, at least in its set up: the stage was rearranged around a giant bass drum; the wind section was studded with bass and contrabass instruments (the bassoon looking comically piccolo in their company). Yet the promise of a study in orchestral low-end theory didn't materialise. I'm not sure what Thelin's piece actually was, but it wasn't that. There were cameos – at one point the renowned willow flute player Steinar Ofsdal strode to the front for a short cadenza, never to be seen again. There was eclecticism – gimmicky orchestration and extended instrumental techniques sat beside a loose cabaret vibe. But *The Ark* didn't sustain an argument, couldn't work out what it wanted to be. Like its namesake it tried to contain a bit of everything; however, I fear it ran aground.

No less broad in its range of references, but somewhat more successful in making something new out of them, was Torvund's *The Exotica Album*. For this, two stages were set out – one