

electronic pulsations. Performers took turns sitting in a staged tea salon while others played in various combinations. The text used in the performance was very compelling in both content and delivery – an exploration of different experiences of time spanning vast eras, cultures, and imaginations. I only arrived for the second half of the performance, so I may have missed some of the musical development. Some of the improvising was a little bit thin, falling into tropes of ‘conversation’ and ‘mimicry’. However, I feel compelled to view this salon as improvisation in its truest sense: an exploration of meetings, absences, and what it means to watch and listen (and who is doing the watching and listening). When the performance reached its peak, nearing the end of the hour, the ensemble achieved a startling coherence that somehow did not lose any of the individuality found in each performer’s unique voice.

The second improvised event was headlined by Shitney, a trio consisting of Maria Faust (saxophone and effects), Katrine Amsler (keys, micro-guitar and electronic drumming) and Qarin Wikström (vocals, keys, and effects). Shitney’s performance seemed balanced on a razor-wire tightrope. On one side were electroacoustic music, vocal effects and noise; on the other, broken jittering beats and a hint of techno. What kept Shitney in balance was Faust’s virtuosic saxophone playing, which was equal parts smoky sensitivity and searing scales and growls. Shitney was a revelation. This is the future of improv from a Millennial perspective – a messy and sprawling mashup of club, jazz and experimental musical cultures that refuses to colour within the lines.

The first half of SPOR 2018 was framed by two monumental works of music theatre: the existing work *Stifters Dinge* by Heiner Goebbels, and the opera *Gaze for Gaze* by Niels Ronshøldt. This review will not extensively cover *Stifters Dinge*. It is too vast and has been reviewed many times in its 300-plus performances over the past ten years. The work was a *coup d’état* for the festival and an absolute spectacle: three pools of water on stage are filled to reflect a giant wall of mechanical pianos; it rains in the theatre; screens rise and fall to create a glowing sunset; and, finally, the wall of pianos advances silently and menacingly toward the audience, after which it retreats leaving seething dry ice in all three pools. This is a work that thrives in sensual surprise and is best experienced in person.

The second large-scale work was *Gaze for Gaze* by Niels Ronshøldt, created in collaboration with SCENATET. The work begins with a short preamble about the composer’s rejection of

music in favour of theatre. This is followed by instructions for the audience’s participation, delivered by two unison speaking voices. We are led into another space, a huge black studio, where we sit in a circle. On each chair is an envelope containing a few lines, which we are told to read out loud when we are tapped on the shoulder. The piece begins with an intimate duo for cello and a small organ on a rotating platform in the centre of the circle. The organist, Sven Micha Slot, plays cyclical chordal material that is delicate and melancholic, while the cellist, My Hellgren, plays shimmering and skittering gestural material with fluttering virtuosity. The text we read centres around a decaying relationship between a man and a woman, with dramatic points dwelling on adultery and abortion. Unfortunately, this dramatic material – often like a cheap soap opera – is much less compelling than the work’s dazzling musical material. The second half of the performance occurs mostly in the dark, with bright strobe flashes illuminating the room. A chorus of stringed instruments, percussion, choir and two soloists surrounds the audience. The music is otherworldly: lyrical, chant-like singing is interspersed with sharp crashes and bangs (firecrackers and whips). The performers are captivating: Daniel Gloger’s contralto fills the room with an almost unearthly roundness, while Ida Urd Bramming’s alto provides a smooth and unusual counterpoint. *Gaze for Gaze* is a dark and immersive experience that takes some essential steps in bringing opera out of the dark and into the twenty-first century.

The first half of SPOR 2018 brought me into unlikely places, both physically and musically: a small trailer outside a contemporary art museum, wandering the DIY-city of the Institut for (X), the yawning maw of the industrial harbour, blowing into plastic tubes of an organ chandelier (*Orgel [organ]* by Ida Lundénand Johanna Mårtensson) in the Women’s Museum, and many more. With such surprises in the first half of the festival, I wish I had seen, heard, and experienced its promising second half.

Luke Nickel

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Borealis Festival 2018: Part I

Visiting Borealis for two of its five-day stretch in March, I encountered a festival that offered a refreshingly diverse take on the field of experimental music – diverse not only in terms of

who is making it (the festival actively works towards equality of representation) but also in the practices represented. Indeed, perhaps a majority of the works presented in the festival intersected with fields of artistic activity outside of conventional musical performance.

This was immediately apparent at the opening of Sue Tompkins' exhibition at Lydgalleriet. The show consisted of pages of text by Tompkins: graphical, rhythmic arrangements of deceptively ordinary words and phrases. Tompkins' practice involves translating these texts into intensely focused performances hovering somewhere between concrete poetry and song. This was demonstrated in a screening of the film *Country Grammar*, a portrait of the artist made by Luke Fowler. The film conjured an uncanny sense of nostalgia (through the use of 16 mm film footage, domestic interiors and obsessively repetitive lines of spoken text); yet it was shot, cut and performed with an immediacy and rhythm that allowed it to dodge any worn-out tropes of performance documentation or music-art film.

Relationships between live performance and the screen played out even more explicitly in asamisasa's concert *Mickey-mousing*. Taking the titular technique of cartoon soundtracking as a central conceit, the programme consisted of three recent works for ensemble and video, contextualised by a screening of one of Oskar Fischinger's groundbreaking experiments in animation, *Motion Painting No.1* (1947). The live works by Kristine Tjøgersen (also the clarinetist of the ensemble), Johannes Kreidler and Joanna Bailie all took subtly different approaches to the music-image relationship but were united in their embrace of the unreal exaggerations of diegetic cartoon sound. Thanks to the astoundingly tight ensemble playing, all the pieces were realised with pin-sharp resolution. Bailie's *Dynamite-barrel/Balloon-anvil* was particularly interesting for its deconstructive take, distending and then orchestrating individual frames and samples of a *Roadrunner* cartoon. Stretched out to extreme lengths, the sense of connection became slippery and uncertain. Slapstick acts and sounds, divorced of their comic timing, were transformed into a woozy meditation on a seam of pathos and violence underpinning mass entertainment.

Across town, at the Bergen Kunsthalle, Joachim Koester's exhibition *Bringing Something Back* was used as the setting for a series of late-night performances. Mysteriously archival, almost anthropological in its assemblage of objects and books, 16 mm films and photographs, Koester's show was reflected back in the most striking manner during a solo performance by Jenny Berger

Myhre. Enacting a hermetic table top ritual with laptop, record player, bird calls, contact microphones and cassette tapes, amongst other paraphernalia, the anachronistic nature of Myhre's instruments was thrown into relief by the precision and adeptness with which she operated them, timing actions with the exactitude of jump-cut edits. The experience was similar to that of Tompkins and Fowler's film in that one had the impression of a musical performance mediated by a visual grammar.

Several events during the festival were presented as more immersive, installation-based experiences. The acclaimed choreographer Mårten Spångberg presented *News From the Last of the International Hot Shots / Natten*, an understated and dreamy listening session for his sound collage work. A similarly hypnagogic experience was had during a guided meditation led by Shauna Cummins, but it was in Peter Ablinger's new work *Remove Terminate Exit* that the pursuit of a focused collective listening experience found its most spectacular realisation. A disorientating mix of concert, installation and psychoacoustic experiment, Ablinger's piece happened over two floors of the Greighallen's glass atrium event spaces. A mass of water-soaked bathrobes occupied the ground floor foyer, the dripping picked up by contact microphones and diffused over a speaker array on the upper level. Seated amidst this array, the audience was immersed in an 80-minute in-the-round performance for ensemble (BIT20), narrators, electronics and outdoor environmental sounds. Performed with unwavering energy and stamina under the baton of Ilan Volkov, the piece began at a zenith of volume and density before being gradually undressed; layers of sound were stripped away, focusing the ears on previously imperceptible levels of detail.

The dynamic percussion trio *Pinquins* took a very much embodied, quasi-theatrical approach to a more straightforward concert situation, presenting three works that variously incorporated a panoply of instrumentations and performance aesthetics. Switching naturally between acoustic instruments, electronics, voices and physical movement the ensemble demonstrated a remarkably versatile ability. Much of this was brought to bear in Brice Catherin's *36,000 Years Alongside Baubo*. As the musicians positioned themselves throughout the space and made references to a certain 'mythical vulva' of prehistoric feminist cave art, 20 or so members of the audience were asked to play recorders and crotales, cued by a departure-board-like video, taking centre stage. The result was a compositional singularity of

media, action and attention that conjured a peculiar, but not unwelcome, sense of cognitive dissonance.

Parallel theatrical concerns were at play in *Future Opera*, a trio of short operas by young Nordic composers billed in the programme as ‘push[ing] at the boundaries of what opera can and will be’. On the surface, however, all the works seemed relatively content to sit in a comfortable relationship with the institutions of opera – but then why shouldn’t they? Indeed, perhaps including this kind of project in a festival that is so wide ranging was a bold action in and of itself.

It was this overall breadth of activity that was something of a defining feature of the festival, and one that was brought into sharp focus during a lunchtime discussion with the Icelandic composer collective S.L.Á.T.U.R., who had been commissioned to create a work that questioned typical performer–audience relationships. The group’s response was to send performers out into the streets of Bergen wearing huge, geometrically shaped costumes, soliciting help from passersby to negotiate the city landscape. These relational, unexpected and unscheduled encounters provoked a heated debate around what constitutes compositional practice and how artists might productively engage non-specialist audiences in experimental music. To me, however, S.L.Á.T.U.R.’s work simply sat at an extreme end of a spectrum of activity that examined experimental music and the festival format from multiple perspectives. Indeed, in setting out to really explore and question what experimental music practices sound and look like today, Borealis’ programme felt vital, open-minded, inclusive, and not a little visionary.

Neil Luck

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An Assembly + Ensemble x.y: Leung, Miller, Harrison, Finnissy.
St John’s Waterloo, London

‘Gently rumbling without direction’, a programme note appended to the first part of Cassandra Miller’s solo for piano *Philip the Wanderer*, might equally have stood in as descriptor for tonight’s programme *tout court*. This is not meant as a criticism. Time’s arrow, the vector of narratives real or implied, may well be the most burdensome yet most easily sloughed off (and perhaps least missed) item of nineteenth-century baggage to be jettisoned by composers

over the last century or so. What tonight’s collaboration between An Assembly and Ensemble x.y (led and programmed by the increasingly omnipresent wunderkind of British new music, Jack Sheen) offered up was a quite different approach, a different *way through* the passage of time. Less music as organised sound; more sound in itself a means for organising time.

Take Anthony Leung’s piece from the very start of the programme. The first of *Three Concert Pieces*, each, we are told, ‘a reflection on the most common durations found within the activities young composers participate in’. What we get, then, is five minutes of a single chord strung out on length-of-breath notes by a quintet of winds. Always changing, always staying the same, its inner harmonic tension is fraught with a certain taut expectation. The piece is animated by a sense of suspension – we are listening, waiting, as time passes. The music occupies the time, fills it up, teases it as its limits. On one level, it’s a joke about handing in a kind of bare minimum for a rote assignment. But at the same time it’s an attempt to map out the contours of a formalised timespan, to mark a territory and think through its frontiers.

Following Leung’s piece, the remaining 16 members of both ensembles joined the five winds in a long, single-file line at the front of the stage for Paul Newland’s piece, *Locus*. The horns, flutes and clarinets were now augmented by strings plus an assortment of less traditionally musical objects and actions like the crumpling of newspaper or silver foil, a coin rubbed around an upturned silver dish, and field recordings played (rather quietly) from three different mobile phones dispersed along the line. The saxophone (played by Harry Fausing Smith) was also wrapped and stuffed with bubblewrap, choking out its notes in a manner that sounded oddly sub-aquatic. As the title suggests – only emphasised by the rustle of the field recordings – the work’s steady-state soundworld gives the listener an immediate sense of inhabiting a particular place. But this is not so much a journey across the land as – again – a kind of waiting, an attendance to the minutiae of some impossible vista, simultaneously underground, overground and underwater, urban and rural, sparse and full. The image that came to mind was a of a person humming to themselves at a bus stop, and finding the street thereby transformed and made musical.

After Cassandra Miller’s lithe and exploratory solo piano piece and a see-sawing chamber work by Bryn Harrison inspired by the paintings of Bridget Riley, the evening closed with a performance of Michael Finnissy’s *Piano Concerto no.2*