

The final two nights of the week brought us back to experiencing live interaction through performing musicians. London-based drummer Dave Smith displayed incredible technique and flair in a collision of acoustic and electronic worlds. Through improvisation, he effectively melded harmonic and acoustic qualities from his kit with the main electronic body of looped backdrops combined with highly amplified distortion and reverberation, although the set lacked a little direction in terms of progression over its 40-minute duration. Closing the week was Richard Scott and his thoughtful use of the analogue synthesiser, one last avenue to explore within the wide spectrum of electronic music.

The integrity of the festival was felt in the hub-bub amongst the audience. There was an intimacy to the enclosed space in Phipps Hall, the late-night fringe events providing necessary post-concert interaction, and the circle of visiting artists taking positive interest in each other's work outside of their individual spot. The generous amount of rehearsal time dedicated to each artist allowed for individual setups to be perfected and even permitted some last-minute experimentation. The flexible properties of HISS supported adaptable performances that kept the music organic and in touch with the human behind the technology, rather than as would be the case with a fixed interface. Opportunities to delve deeper into the layers of understanding were made possible via tech-specific symposiums run by Alex Harker and Ben Wilson. This year's festival is Tremblay's last; he has succeeded in offering a diverse and ear-opening exhibition of fine electronic music composition.

Kate Ledger
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ECLAT 2017, Stuttgart, Germany

Unlike many other New Music festivals, Eclat has so far resisted the temptation to build the festival programmes around central themes. The Eclat festival is one of the major annual gatherings of the German and international scene for contemporary music, taking place in Stuttgart and organised by 'Musik der Jahrhunderte' (Christine Fischer) in collaboration with the SWR (Lydia Jeschke). The lack of a central theme doesn't indicate a pragmatic or vague approach to curation, but the festival organisers' aim to assemble a selection of artists, ensembles and pieces that are either directly asking or

indirectly raising questions considered relevant and at the forefront of the scene's discourse at the time of the event.

In this regard, it can already be stated, this year's issue of Eclat was a success. The programme in general was extremely diverse, covering a vast palette of genres and pieces from a large variety of different, in many cases opposing, aesthetic positions. Not least, and particularly relevant following significant discussions at the Darmstadt summer courses of 2016, one major decision was to programme, during the first two days of the four-day festival, almost exclusively pieces written by women. About time.

By bringing together artists working on a multitude of 'construction sites' of New Music, the festival could not only serve as a cross section of the scene but achieve something even more impressive: while respectfully giving room to all the different positions, styles and perspectives – intentional or not – the festival programme simultaneously created a space for questioning them.

While many of us are currently busy asking ourselves what New Music can or should be in the twenty-first century, whether or not the very notion of music is sustainable for what we do, whether it should be extended, left behind, or dissolved into a more general notion of 'art', how on the other hand the 'New' in 'New Music' could possibly be redefined and charged with significant meaning – for many composers, these questions don't seem to have much of an impact on their day to day production routine, which is of course not at all surprising in itself – and admittedly not necessarily regrettable either. It was fascinating to see how some of the pieces that did not claim to deal with the aforementioned set of topics at all, by being performed in the same programme, seemed to deal with those questions anyway, or in some cases seemed to comment on those pieces that explicitly did.

To some degree, there appears to be a confusion between a) finding a form for bringing an issue to the stage and b) working 'about' it. Framing can undoubtedly be regarded as a form of processing by itself, if the frame and the issue being framed are definite and sharp. Instead of a desire to be sharp though, there seems to be a widespread need to come across as extreme and intense. But intensity, at least in my experience, is achieved by precision, focus and honesty. When the general tone gets louder and louder, an appropriate reaction could be to work on precision, to concentrate on whatever matter the current work is supposed to be about and to leave everything nonessential behind.

In this regard, there was a lot to be learned at this year's festival, in particular from the older generations of composers. Of course, being mature doesn't necessarily prevent the production of hot air. For example, a cut-up of fictitious pieces, as one well-established composer described her piece in its programme note, is in fact nothing but a permutation of self-invented musical material. Why not simply be honest about it?

It was quite striking that only very few composers, and most of them middle aged and older, presented pieces that were streamlined and focused on point. Even though some of those pieces might have come across as a bit outdated in respect to their means of expression, and despite some at times rather awkward echoes of the 1980s, the music still seemed very fresh, resulting in an opening up of the ears.

Those pieces that actually questioned the identity and role of the composer and the notion of music the most (whether by directly challenging them or indirectly raising those questions), had surprisingly not been written by composers of the younger generations. All in all, approaches persevering in the relinquishing of unnecessary decoration, attitudes seeking to take means of expression seriously, seem – in my personal view regrettably – to have gone a bit out of fashion.

The performers on this year's programme were superb. With such a vast variety of challenges within the pieces, it was a delight to see so many performers fully immerse themselves in their respective roles. Instrumentalists and singers in all the represented ensembles showed altogether stunning qualities, not only in the performance of some very difficult repertoire, but also in moments when asked to go out of their comfort zones, to lay aside their instruments or to take up more theatrical roles. Although it has been demonstrated that actors are the better actors, with more and more composers demanding abilities that are not necessarily to be found in a singer's or instrumentalist's primary set of skills, it was a pleasure to see so many performers of the highest ranks happily and brilliantly implementing even the most challenging of parts.

Maximilian Marcoll
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In A Deepening Light: Musica nova Helsinki 2017

As the audience's rustling quietens along with the memories of everyday pulses, ethereal sounds appear. We are at Helsinki's iconic Rock

Church, on the eighth night of the biennial Musica nova festival for contemporary music. The Helsinki Chamber Choir sound the first, lingering lines of György Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna* from the balcony, behind the audience. The peculiar acoustics give the illusion that the choir is hidden in between the crevasses and cracks of the stone wall in front. The listener is surrounded. Marvellously kept together by Nils Schweckendiek, the singers transform the colour of their voices into sine-tones and oboes in a strangely soothing way. This rendition now somewhat more present than the night before, when the choir echoed the same micropolyphonic lines across the aula of the Kiasma art museum. There the cool distance of the work really spoke in a mesmerising way, with an unreachable caress.

Lux Aeterna remains an unmoveable, indistinct monolith. Its strange presence resides over the atmosphere of the following work in the programme. The young Kamus Quartet are already seated centre-stage, and they begin with the tremulant gestures of Bryce Dressner's *Tenebre* almost immediately as the applause soberly fades out. Similarly, the sounds of the string quartet are diffused by the space so that the source is cached. The first tremolos sound as if they come from behind, bringing us steadily back into listening for pulses and periods. Digging into the coarseness of the lower tremolos and celebrating the lightness of the higher strings, Kamus strives to bring subtle relief to the poppy, repetitive textures of the work. Periodicity also appears in the large form, as we are led from one tremolo-variant to another. They trigger allusions to Reichian, repetitive diatonic cells that attempt to move this piece where it sets out to move – forward. Many moments are reminiscent of other musics, from Western folk-fiddle-like textures to ones that seem to move towards the Middle East.

I'm aware of stepping on thin ice when I say that Dressner's quartet seems to me to be bordering on the unnecessary. It barely plunges into the depths that are there to be explored in quartet writing. I admit I rejoice in music that manages to illuminate sound at different depths, but that need not always be the case, and is certainly not so for everyone. Is Dressner's quartet the famous 'this is what people want to hear' statement at play? No music scene survives without enough listeners. The need for new – one might argue bigger – audiences for new music concerts is a common thought among organisers. Eavesdropping on a few conversations at the door, I heard some people say that they indeed came to hear Dressner especially, perhaps