

musical and acting skill, scores both voices with almost entirely the same melodic material, but with the Wife's line shadowing the Woman's a fraction of a second later. The musical texture exists as an evocative and fractured subtext to the on-stage action as we draw the parallels between the two female figures of the narrative, both tormented by the mundane obsessions of contemporary society. Dennehy's vocal writing displays his unquestionable awareness of the characters' subconscious narratives. The Woman, as she awaits her assisted suicide rehearsal, sings of the torments of anorexia and the dreams of previous hotel guests in high tessitura lyrical lines of indiscernible ascending questions, beautifully capturing the underlying neuroses that have led to her suicidal desires. The barely audible text does not act as a barrier to the narrative, but enhances the extreme psychological state of the suicidal Woman, as we try to understand her and her motives. Dennehy's perfectly timed musical wit is displayed in the Husband's (Robin Adams) buffet scene aria, 'Filling Up Now'. His altering rhythmic repetitions and deconstruction of the text 'filling up now' underpin the Husband's obsessive-compulsive behaviour whilst highlighting Walsh's hilarious and brutal shattering of mankind's pitiful and banal needs.

Dennehy's inclusion of clashing musical genres enhances the array of theatrical practices explored by Walsh's libretto and direction of the opera. His striking and climatic synthesis of traditionally composed ensemble writing with 'imported' dance and pop music (most striking in his use of '90s Irish girl group B*Witched) is refreshing in an art-form where so many creatives – librettists and composers alike – are averse to making the work relevant or even communicative to a non-new-music audience. I frequently leave new operas asking myself two questions: who, and what, is this for? The on-stage action in *The Last Hotel* utilises elegant physical theatre, most notably a moment in which the three central characters enter an elevator centre-stage whilst the lone Hotel Servant performs a sequence of raw and animalistic dance breaks. This is an opera that communicates through simple and complex means with an ease that undoubtedly stems from Walsh's previous theatrical explorations and is fully supported by Dennehy's post-minimalist aesthetic.

If you feel yourself deflating at the thought of seeing or hearing yet another self-aware opera overly concerned with the intellectual instead of the human, then this is the opera you must see. It is refreshing. It attempts and succeeds in

so many areas that numerous other new operas don't – in the use of spoken dialogue; in the high level of emotional communication and acting skill from the singers, most notably Claudia Boyle and Katherine Manley; in the combination of recorded environment sound (seagulls, elevator and TV) within an operatic score . . . the list could go on. In comparison to the critically acclaimed offerings to the operatic canon by George Benjamin, *Into The Little Hill* and *Written On Skin*, this chamber opera gives so much more to an audience that is curious about theatre, people and creative storytelling. For me, *The Last Hotel* is one of the most successful works of theatre I have seen in the past five years.

Crash Ensemble's 12 players were conducted by André de Ridder, and on the Royal Lyceum Theatre stage was a cast of four: baritone Robin Adams, sopranos Claudia Boyle and Katherine Manley, and the renowned Irish actor Mikel Murfi. All gave exceptional performances on 12 August 2015, bringing to life this much-needed offering to the chamber opera canon. I use the term 'canon' with the optimism that a new opera might become part of the frequently performed repertoire, given the current living museum culture of the UK's opera scene. Landmark Productions' *The Last Hotel* offers an audience a theatrical and musical language that doesn't require frequent social and political reinterpretation in order to remain communicative and fresh. For once, I came away from a new opera asking questions about its narrative content (in this case assisted suicide, amongst a plethora of other societal issues) rather than about why it was ever written and for whom.

Laura Bowler

'Soundscapes' at the National Gallery, London (8 July – 6 September 2015)

The 'Soundscapes' exhibition comprised six paintings displayed individually in darkened rooms, each 'accompanied' by a specially composed piece played over loudspeakers. The seven artists (two working as a duo) invited to create musical responses represented a cross-section of disciplines, from wildlife recording, sound installation, film composition, DJing and instrumental composition, and, it must be said, all had some crowd-pulling potential. Given the reviews, one might have expected to discover unspeakable things happening in the depths of the National Gallery; however, I found it to be

an interesting and well-executed exhibition which presented some thoughtful sonic responses to great paintings.

At first listen, Jamie xx, DJ, producer and member of the band The xx, had composed a response to Théo van Rysselberghe's *Coastal Scene* which was much like many of his other neon, synthy, pop creations. But, as one moved through the room, *Ultramarine's* dense cloud of sound broke apart into detailed, spatialised clusters, a clever play on the pointillist techniques used in the painting.

Canadian sound art duo Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, working with Antonello da Messina's *St Jerome in his Study*, went slightly beyond the brief by building a large, scale model of the study and surrounding it with a collection of pastoral sounds. These seemed to me too hectic in comparison with the stillness of the painting, but even so there was a sort of uncanny spatial effect created when one leaned in to look inside the model: I was left with the strange and rather uncomfortable feeling that I had been eavesdropping.

Chris Watson, the renowned wildlife sound recordist, provided the most straightforwardly 'soundscape' response of the six. He accompanied Gallen-Kallela's *Lake Keitele* with the sound of waves, distant bird song and wind whistling through trees. It was technically accomplished but did seem a slightly simple response.

Nico Muhly's music encircled *The Wilton Diptych*, played over a ring of eight suspended loudspeakers. Bowed strings and percussion formed fractal patterns that held my attention, but as a whole his piece seemed quite separate from the diptych itself.

Oscar-winning film composer Gabriel Yared seemed to have imagined that Cézanne's *Les Grandes Baigneuses* was actually a moving image, and accordingly he composed a fin-de-siècle soundtrack featuring piano, clarinet and female vocalist.

Susan Philipsz chose the famous Holbein painting *The Ambassadors*, a complex painting, which Philipsz responded to with a simple piece composed of sustained violin notes. It was, for me, the most successful of the new works. Played over multiple loudspeakers, the notes moved in the space around me, overlapping to create slowly shifting and unpredictable harmonies. Philipsz deliberately chose not to record a lute or viol to avoid anything too obviously historical, and the effect of her work was as tense and unsettling as the painting itself. Unlike some of the other soundscapes, Philipsz's managed to draw something out of the Holbein, so that I felt

as if what I heard sharpened my focus when looking at the painting.

The technical execution of the exhibition made an enormously positive contribution: footsteps and chatter were muffled by acoustic baffles on the walls; the audio was played over loudspeakers carefully positioned with respect to the spatial character of each piece; visitors made their way between rooms through specially constructed tunnels so that each soundscape was properly separated. This level of care and attention to acoustic design does not always happen in exhibitions, even those involving lots of works with sound, and yet it can mean the difference between success and failure.

So then, if the exhibition had several positive elements, why all the terrible reviews? One critic titled his review 'Jamie xx and friends make pointless soundtracks to paintings' and summarised it as 'a terrifyingly insecure cultural cringe of an exhibition';¹ others denounced it as 'feeble and wrong-headed',² regretting that the paintings had been 'interrupted by sonic interlopers'.³ Notably, the majority of the critics cover the visual arts rather than music, but it seems to me that the way the exhibition was billed by the National Gallery might be partly responsible for the negative response, and may have led some critics to be offended on behalf of the paintings before they even arrived.

First, let's consider the title: in the worlds of sound and art, 'soundscape' is an overused term with its own sort of bandwagon, which doesn't particularly mean anything other than 'there will be some sound here'. I don't think the National Gallery did themselves any favours by using this word. Secondly, the excitable tagline 'Hear the Painting, See the Sound' may be pleasingly neat but is somewhat empty, and rather gives the impression that paintings are unable to stimulate memories or ideas of sound by themselves.

A more accurate (though admittedly less catchy) description of this exhibition would have been something like, 'let's see what happens when a fairly random selection of music creators responds to paintings in the way they know best'. These masterpieces clearly do not require the assistance of loudspeakers to make themselves heard, but this doesn't mean that the endeavour is any less interesting. The National Gallery and curator Minna Moore Ede deserve credit for producing an unusual and thought-

¹ Jonathan Jones, *Guardian*, 06 July 2015.

² Laura Cumming, *The Observer*, 12 July 2015.

³ Ben Luke, *Evening Standard*, 'Paintings Should be Seen and Not Heard', 08 July 2015.

provoking exhibition. It's important to remember that no paintings were harmed in the making of 'Soundscapes'.

Georgia Rodgers

Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music (BIFEM) 2015

Each September, contemporary music enthusiasts, composers, scholars and performers from around Australia migrate toward the Victorian regional city of Bendigo for BIFEM, a remarkable music festival now in its third year. The festival has established itself as an annual event of unparalleled significance in Australia – not only as a forum for the presentation of exciting and little-heard music, but as a gathering of like-minded peers. A high proportion of the audience consists of musicians and composers, so informal conversations between concerts are almost as stimulating as the programmed forums and workshops that take place during the festival. In 2015, over the weekend 4–6 September, almost every work in the programme was an Australian premiere, which gives some further evidence of the importance of the festival to the nation's cultural ecology.

Bendigo is a very beautiful town. It was the centre of one of the great gold rushes, and during the later decades of the nineteenth century the city's founders spent their wealth lavishly on grand public buildings. One of these, the splendid Capital Theatre, serves as the main home of BIFEM – but the festival makes good use of other excellent venues around the town. This tradition of building for the community continues today, and in 2015 several BIFEM concerts took place in the newly completed Ulumbarra Theatre, a beautifully designed contemporary sister to the venerable Capital.

The idea of 'exploratory music' suggests a broad range of possibilities. For example, the festival is not only presenting radically experimental music, and neither is it limited to the strictly contemporary, although there is a tendency towards both of these in the programme. What is being explored varies – it might be musical or abstract sonic materials, it might be the nature of an instrument, or it might be the capabilities and limitations of a certain technology. Equally vulnerable to explorations are the performers themselves, the spaces in which they perform, and the varying tolerances of the audience. Part of what makes a festival such as this so stimulating is the sense that we are collectively exploring and

being explored in manifold ways over a uniquely intense, brief period of time.

This year, the weekend was punctuated by trumpet fanfares. Opening the festival on Friday, *Flayed Identities – Forlorn Remix* (2014), a work by Australian composer Thomas Reiner for trumpet and flugelhorn, was played at sunset from the dizzying heights of the Poppet Head mineshaft tower, an industrial relic of the gold rush era that looms over the town just behind the Capital Theatre. Shortly after, Stravinsky's *Fanfare for a New Theatre* (composed for the 1964 opening of the Lincoln Centre) sanctified the foyer of the new Ulumbarra Theatre. The audience drew a collective gasp of delight as this tiny, jewel-like piece ended, and the performers responded by playing it again. The third of these fanfares, at sunset on Saturday evening in the cavernous Sacred Heart Cathedral, was ... *à Reims* (2010), a work for an orchestra of trumpets by Argentinean Daniel D'Adamo. This is a beautiful work, and the performance made use of many local trumpeters, tapping into the strong band tradition of Bendigo. The great clouds of radiant overtones, ringing out in the golden heights of the cathedral, had a visibly uplifting effect on the audience and left a lingering memory in the mind's ear.

The festival is aptly described as international, not only for the range of composers presented (albeit with a strongly European rather than North American sensibility), but also in terms of the performers. Each year, the mix of Australian and international performers has been a key aspect of the festival, and while previous years have each featured excellent performances, in 2015 the quality of playing was consistently extraordinary. The Paris-based ensemble Soundinitiative, for example, gave superlative performances of recent European music, including Clara Iannotta's gorgeous *D'après* (2012) and a major new work by Bernhard Lang, *The Exhausted* (2015). Lang's hour-long piece, taking its title from Deleuze's writing on Beckett, is by turns puzzling, amusing, and profound – arguably, rather like the works of both these writers. The ensemble's total commitment to the performance in both music and choreography made it a compelling experience, with mezzo-soprano Fabienne Séveillac's contribution a tour-de-force of music theatre (even, at one point, singing upside down).

Central to the festival programme was the resident Argonaut Ensemble, a flexible group mostly of Australian and expatriate Australian instrumentalists. The Argonauts' performance of Boulez's *Sur Incises* (1996/98) on Saturday