

AMM saw founder members Eddie Prévost and Keith Rowe at ideological and personal loggerheads. Eleven years later, and with both musicians independently working regularly with John Tilbury, the third member, the trio came back together to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the group's formation. As with all AMM sets, there had been no practice, no advance discussions: the trio sat down to perform again for the first time since they all stood up at the end of the show in London 11 years ago.

The resulting music may have lacked the cohesion and forward motion of the group in their prime, but it carried an overwhelming tension brought about by the weight of the occasion and the history leaning heavily against it, only enhanced by the series of nostalgic talks and films scheduled throughout the week that built up to the occasion. With Rowe returning to tools he used in the group but has since discarded, limiting himself to a set of carefully chosen sounds, and Tilbury choosing not to use his fingers at the piano, instead leaning with elbows, thumping with fists and slamming down the lid, only Prévost took to his percussion without altering his approach. There were many points when the music broke down, brief hints at togetherness regularly collapsing, which perhaps reflects the history of the ensemble. The performance was as much about the remarkable, creatively brilliant and magnificently stubborn personalities on the stage as it was about the music they produced. There couldn't have been a more suitable end to a festival asking its audience to think about the act of listening.

Richard Pinnell

Transit Festival, Leuven, Belgium

This year's Transit festival (the sixteenth) marked an important milestone, as Maarten Beirens took over as Artistic Director from Mark Delaere, who has steered it through the last 15 years. Delaere very much devised the festival's format, with its hard-edged programming and quirky informality, which one feared might be lost, but any worries about drastic changes under the new regime were soon allayed. Indeed, Beirens is to be congratulated on pulling off one of the most successful festivals I can remember, with an almost unbroken series of strong, inventive works and performances.

As usual, everything was concentrated into an intense 48 hours, from 23–25 October, and held at the STUK arts centre in the university town of

Leuven. The only noticeable addition to the familiar programme was a series of discussions in the STUKCafe, providing an opportunity 'to kick back on the sofa ... and exchange ideas about the state of contemporary music'. The programme book, too, has been elegantly re-designed, though sadly without the CD of highlights from the previous year's festival and, alas, without performer biographies.

The first pre-concert talk was given by San Francisco-born Anthony Cheung who claimed, 'Today's music is "sound as sound"; it can no longer be divided up into independent units of harmony, counterpoint or rhythm'. This set the agenda for the first 24 hours, during which many of the works could be said to occupy a post-spectral landscape. Cheung belongs to a generation that moves freely between live performance and music technology; in the opening concert, given by the New York-based Talea Ensemble, we heard his *SynchroniCities* (2012). Drawing on field recordings of things 'that interested him', to form a 'sonic travelogue' in constant dialogue with live instruments, the resulting piece was full of fascinating novel sounds and textures presented in a traditional context.

Undoubtedly the 'event' of the evening (even of the festival) was the premiere of Georges Aperghis's *Wild Romance* (a Transit commission). It was designed to provoke, in the words of the composer, 'the memory of the voice, which in this way finds fragments of a buried memory, a memory that is certainly painful, as it is evident from the tensions it arouses between singer and ensemble'. Well, there could be no doubt as to the work's emotional punch, its escalating frenzied narrative (sung with laser accuracy by soprano Donatienne Michel-Dansac) propelled forward through fractured textures. Here was the compositional expertise of a lifetime delivered with the urgency of youth.

According to the programme notes, Italian-born Pierluigi Billone's 'radical methods' have 'led him to explore uncharted sound worlds and develop idiosyncratic instrumental and vocal techniques'. Radical, in this instance, meant expecting one's performers to build their own instruments. Percussionist Tom de Cock's lecture recital included a fabulously heroic performance of *Mani. De Leonardis* (2004) for which de Cock had constructed his own instrument from Billone's very precise instructions, using a series of car springs that were mounted on wooden bases and struck with hammers. Just in case that all sounds a little too easy, the car springs must come from a now-obsolete vehicle, leading

de Cock to search long and hard for the right springs.

Billone doesn't make things easy for the audience either; in both this work and *Δίκη Wall* (2012), which we heard in the Talea concert, he drew us into a hard-edged Neolithic sound world that, in its relentless traversing of the same territory, made for tough listening. De Cock made an intriguing case for this type of music, proposing that it is difficult to approach because it involves an instrument being heard for the first time: 'the first two minutes are interesting and then boring . . . and when it becomes boring, it becomes interesting'.

Peter Ablinger's *Black Series* (2010–12), based on Malevich's legendary *Black Square*, was performed by bass clarinetist Gareth Davis and the Dutch noise rock band The Julie Mittens. Once again, we were given one idea: blocks of thick, unchanging texture for two guitars, drum kit and bass clarinet formed a satisfying aural metaphor for the idea of a flat painting – a wall of sound (to drop, for a moment, into the idiom of Phil Spector). The result was conceptually pleasing; but, on a musical level, when does 40–50 minutes of predominantly the same material cease to be interesting? There was a fundamental problem here about the relationship of music to painting and space, and one suspected Ablinger's response was too literal, especially when compared to, say, Feldman's response to the flat white paintings of Rauschenberg.

In the case of Frédéric D'haene's *Fluxus – static friction* (2013), part of an excellent concert by Het Collectief, we were given a 30-minute work scored for their usual *Pierrot* ensemble (less the vocalist) in which the effect was one of constantly returning to the same harmonic starting point, what the composer calls a 'static drone chord'. From this sprang a perpetually evolving texture of string harmonics, wind and piano arabesques that built to an increasingly intense dawn chorus. D'haene's convoluted programme note made one fear the worst, but this was a work of extraordinary power and directness.

Preceding it was the premiere of Lithuanian composer Vyktas Baltakas's *Smokey Arnold* (another Transit commission). Baltakas's elegant and witty 'alternative track' for 'Heimweh' from *Pierrot Lunaire* made an engaging curtain raiser: a snapshot of long-lost compositional worlds amongst the sound-orientated concentration of the festival.

The highlight of the weekend was the concert given by Nadar Ensemble. This Belgian group is one for whom presentation is an integral part of

the live performance of new music. For some years now I have been curious about contemporary music in Putin's Russia, and here, in 29-year-old Alexander Khubeev's *The Ghost of Dystopia* (2014), was some kind of answer. Khubeev's work is as much spectacle as musical experience; in this piece, conductor Thomas Moore was chained to the podium, his gestures the result of attempts both to gain musical control and break free. Though Khubeev's training (he's still a student at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire) is rooted in electronics, the sounds here were largely acoustic. But what sounds! The eight-piece, string-heavy ensemble creaked back and forth like a piece of rusty machinery on its last legs: an ugly but utterly compelling piece of musical grunge.

Equally compelling was Alexander Schubert's *Point Ones* (2012) in which the long-suffering conductor now found himself equipped with motion sensors that controlled both the ensemble and the live electronics. The possibilities for technological disaster made Schubert's sharp and witty invention sound even more dazzling.

I wish I could have made sense of Jennifer Walshe's *1984: It's Ok* (another Transit commission). This intense music drama for three members of Nadar Ensemble seemed to have little relationship to the composer's intriguing programme note, which referred to the parallel worlds she inhabited in her teens, performing ambitious romantic classics as a member of the Irish Youth Orchestra and playing electric guitar in bands. But, whatever the intention, the composer could not have received a more passionately committed performance.

After the electronic wizardry of Nadar Ensemble, the interaction between 'five musicians and two laptops' promised by the Walloon LAPS Ensemble was an exciting prospect. Alas, it wasn't easy at all to hear what the performers, bent over their Apple Macs at the back of the stage, were contributing to the overall effect of the ensemble, though this frustration was not helped by a series of lacklustre scores. Only *SONRÍO/SOLLOZO* by Peruvian composer Juan Arroyo stood out: a fastidious mini-concerto for a relatively new instrument, the electronically adapted TanaCello (with the excellent Jeanne Maisonhaute as soloist). In a pre-concert talk, the composer spoke of it as a concerto in which the soloist is 'not at the centre of the piece . . . she plays but is manipulated by others'.

Tiptoe Company, a Flemish chamber ensemble, and guitarist Tim Mariën demonstrated the rich variety of new sounds to be discovered from the (purely acoustic) combination of

strings, guitars and two ancient, microtonally inflected upright pianos. Tim Mariën's *Universal Strumming* (2014) and *Unresolved Streets* (a Transit commission) revealed a dazzling array of new guitar techniques and sounds. The work that stole the show, however, was *Light refractions* by Nicoline Soeter, for viola, double bass and guitar, a joint commission from November Music and Transit. This was a miniature of jewel-like simplicity in which an hypnotic repeating figure on the viola was occasionally broken into by an other-worldly downward plunge from the other two instruments: hard to convey in cold print, but this was five minutes of magic.

The festival culminated in a large-scale work by Helmut Lachenmann, to mark his eightieth birthday. Composers have struggled with the humble medium of voice and piano for some years now, unable to divorce it from its nineteenth-century associations. This performance of *Got Lost* (2008) by soprano Elizabeth Keusch and the dedicated Lachenmann specialist Yukiko Sugawara suggested a rich multiplicity of responses to the medium.

It followed a dazzling performance of Mark Andre's *iv 1* (2010), a work drawing on all the techniques (and even clichés) of post-war avant-garde piano technique, but placing them with such elegance and structural control as to make us hear them anew. In this company, Fredrick Neyrinck's *Kandinsky-Etüde 4–5 Observationen – 2 Improvisationen* (a Transit commission) had to work hard, but nonetheless presented a series of highly wrought, interruptive miniature structures, inventing, in the composer's words, 'a new formal principle'. It's the kind of work that cries out for repeated listening and was perhaps not heard to its best advantage sandwiched between Andre and Lachenmann. Another reason, perhaps, for restoring the Transit CD of festival highlights and commissions?

Peter Reynolds

Donaueschinger Musiktage 2015

An atmosphere of sadness, anger and uncertainty dominated this year's Donaueschinger Musiktage. The passing in November 2014 of Armin Köhler, the artistic driving force behind the festival for the last 23 years, has left a hole that will be hard to fill. Meanwhile, due to state budget cuts Donaueschingen's orchestra-in-residence, the SWR Sinfonieorchester Freiburg und Baden-Baden, paid what will almost certainly be their

final visit. Musically, however, it was business as usual, with the programme featuring a wide variety of world premieres, several of works that will certainly be heard many times again, alongside much experimentation of varying interest and executional success.

An octet of trombones set the microtonal ball rolling, an idiomatic outlet for Georg Friedrich Haas's particular brand of spectralism. With a cantus firmus for support, Haas's *Oktett für 8 Posaunen* (2015) created an effective dialogue between melodic and harmonic consonance and dissonance, but disappointingly settled on rather mono-dimensional usages of texture, metre and timbre. The opening orchestral concert that followed, under Peter Eötvös, similarly demonstrated a variety of musical paradigms with little deeper development. Johannes Kreidler's *TTI* (2015) for orchestra and electronics blended 'de-humanised' piano playback with a rather lethargic orchestration, and although Richard Ayres's parody *No. 48* (2015) amused the audience with Ealing Comedy sound effects, anything more profound was obscured by over-repetition. Yoav Pasovsky panned between orchestral groups in his post-Reichian *Pulsus alternans* (2015), whilst Johannes Boris Borowski's *Sérac* (2014/15) provided a welcome breadth of energy and rhythm, though without pushing any post-Lutoslawskian stylistic boundaries.

The following morning began with body scanners and guard dogs, a meta-artistic introduction to the latest project from Ensemble Nadar, 'WYSI(N)WYG'. The ensemble opened with *Mirror Box Extensions* (2014/15), a new work by their colleague and co-artistic director, Stefan Prins. Impressive episodes of violence and virtual reality are now expected from the composer of *Generation Kill* (2012), but intimate musical gestures and extreme close-ups created a more refined sense of nervousness and confrontation than was evident three years ago. Prins's didactic digital performance art is increasingly well integrated into the performance experience as a whole: as one of 15 or so pre-selected but incognito tablet performers, I myself felt the wrath (psychologically, verbally and occasionally physically) of my fellow audience members as I had to play them a video or take pictures of events on stage. As so often, Prins was paired with Michael Beil. In Beil's latest musical/theatrical work, *Bluff* (2015), highly mannered physical theatre was astutely combined with spoken word and live video playback by choreographer Thierry Bruehl in a style reminiscent of Film Noir, and the musical content was also highly refined, if somewhat over-extended.