

commissions, have been common culprits of recent years. Arguments over this inform much of the current musical discourse, rightly of concern to composers, performers and audiences alike, but before we worry excessively about low expectations or a low yield, we would perhaps be wise to remember Sturgeon's Law: 90 per cent of everything is awful.

Jack Adler-McKean

Nordic Music Days 2015, Copenhagen, Denmark

Nordic Music Days claims to be the longest-running annual music festival in the world, having existed as a showcase for contemporary Nordic composers more-or-less continuously since 1888. This longevity raises some questions of category definition: What might unite today's composers working in Helsinki with their counterparts 1,500 miles away in Reykjavík? Has modern communications technology and international study wiped out national characteristics or amplified them? Does anyone working in this year's host city, Copenhagen, ever make the 30-minute journey over the bridge to check out what's going on in Malmö? What, if anything, does being a 'Nordic composer' mean?

This was something Bent Sørensen (speaking in his capacity as chairman of the Danish Composers' Society which was effectively hosting the festival) attempted to get to grips with in his opening address, delivered entirely in Danish and hastily translated for me, appropriately enough, by Norwegian and Icelandic friends. Sørensen alighted on the misty-eyed concept of 'Nordic longing', but over the course of this long weekend at the end of September it became increasingly clear that very few of the featured composers see themselves as twenty-first-century Sibeliuses or Griegs swooning by a fjord and poring over their tone poems.

Instead, there was much evidence of a more timely and international concern with how concerts might be curated. The primary venues for the weekend's events were not concert halls, but two imposing buildings on Copenhagen's Slotsholmen: the Black Diamond, a monolithic, multi-purpose arts centre and extension to the Royal Danish Library, and the astonishing Lapidarium of Kings. Formerly the royal brewery of Christian IV (1577–1648), this is now a repository for retired statuary; cavernous rooms are littered with multiple plaster casts of angels and disembodied stone heads. One

chamber contains the 'Valley of the Norwegians' (Nordmandsdalen): a dense crowd of life-size seventeenth-century working people, frozen like a scene from the *Narnia* books.

Many events were staged around and among the dramatically lit statues. Chamber ensembles and solo performers crouched in a cerulean haze beneath giant horses charging into battle, or between the knees of a Hercules. This unusual staging was ingeniously exploited on the festival's opening night, by presenting all the events as a promenade performance, repeated three times for peripatetic audiences.

Most striking of these was the International Contemporary Ensemble's realisation of Icelander Ingi Garðar Erlendsson's *S:I/V:II (canon)*. As its name suggests, this was a mechanistic, repetitive canon in inversion for flute and clarinet, and was performed on either side of a sculptural installation fashioned from sewerage pipes. With the score pasted onto it, this structure acted as a massive music stand, somewhat like Philip Glass's *Music in the Shape of a Square* and *Strung Out*, in which the pages of the score are pinned to the walls and the performers have to walk 'along' the piece. The pipes, here, doubled as a resonating chamber for rumbling golf balls periodically launched through them by a percussionist, and a digitally frozen clarinet note. It had something of the inexorably weird and witty quality of John White's *machine* pieces, combined with a Heath-Robinson approach to construction.

Meanwhile, among the stone cherubim reclining upstairs, ICE presented three stylistically divergent short pieces for viola and cello by Fredrik Gran (Sweden), Li-Ying Wu (Denmark) and Teitur Lassen (one of the few representatives from the Faroe Islands) – a glistening spectral workout, a quasi-serial miniature and a folk-ish meditation with interjections from recorded voices, respectively. These were linked by improvised segues from the Swedish Dränkvarterten: four performers playing amplified hurdy-gurdies with effects pedals to create gritty walls of sound and pulsing percussive textures. Musically sensitive and ebulliently performed, the collision of composed and improvised music, and refined and abrasive string sonorities was very satisfying.

Day two of the festival centred on solo performances. Norwegian artist Signe Lidén's exploration of the volatile sounds of suspended bells and electronics had a placid beauty, but suffered from the festival's decision not to supply any explanatory programme notes (for almost all events). It was unclear what the processes and

thinking were. *The Girl Who Never Was* by Erik Büngrer (Sweden) was a clever conceit: a PowerPoint lecture/performance on the slippery nature of sonic memory. Büngrer's opening gambit was the fascinating story of the rediscovery and restoration of pioneering sound-recordist Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's 1860 'phonograph' transcription of *Au clair de la lune*, complete with ghostly audio reconstructions, but quickly strayed into examinations of the 1922 silent film *Nanook of the North*, Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, the 1631 so-called *Wicked Bible* (with its misprint, 'thou SHALT commit adultery') and so on and so on, until the point was muddled. Büngrer's model for this performance may have been Robert Ashley's concept of infinite 'digressions' on a subject, but Ashley always managed to maintain an atmospheric thread and internal logic, whereas Büngrer's libretto resembled a disconnected stream of internet memes. His interpolation and touching performance of a Danish hymn, remembered from his childhood, rescued the performance and gave it an emotional resonance.

A day of mild panic and benign bewilderment ensued, with an event entitled *Jouissance* (presumably with a very intentional nod to Lacan's painful excess of pleasure). This comprised more than a hundred free concerts occurring in 15 different spaces over eight hours. As a result of this daring experiment in programming, it was impossible not to miss most of what was happening. The sheer density of events had the intriguing effect of attracting unexpected listeners, such as groups of tourists wandering in to find out what the noise was, then staying put for the next concert. It was 'audience development' in action, an irresistible lure.

Among the most interesting of the events I fleetingly caught were *When Silence Came*, a miniature chamber opera by Louise Alenius Boserup (Denmark) on the subject of the death of a parent, which fused elegant string textures with an understated pop aesthetic (as represented by the composer's own coolly restrained voice, with its echoes of Nina Persson of The Cardigans); at the opposite end of the spectrum of emotions, *Willibald Motor Landscape* by Øyvind Torvund (Norway) saw the ensemble asamisimasa battling against sci-fi synthesiser effects in a virtuoso display of exuberant ridiculousness.

Kaj Duncan David (Denmark/UK) and Mathias Monrad Møller (Germany) presented a collaborative work, *Packaged Pleasure*, a deadpan parody of a composer film portrait/hagiography. This featured Andy Ingamells (UK) performing

his own, frenetic, dadaist works in sync with his onscreen doppelgänger while pondering whether he should be seen as 'a genius, or a kind of genie'. Superbly entertaining, it felt like the Britishness of the satire didn't translate for the somewhat suspicious Nordic audience. Ingamells also played dead (and naked) for Danish composer Jeppe Ernst's unsettling *Rekviem – Part One: The Physical Treatment*, which saw a trio of female performers alternately percuss and caress him, according to Ernst's score. The deeply ambiguous sexual politics of the piece kept the audience deathly silent, while the tension between the aesthetics of new music and live art represented one of the festival's more explicit demonstrations of the blurring of the boundaries between art forms that ran throughout the weekend.

The most 'Northern'-sounding pieces came from two Icelandic composers (perhaps not unexpectedly). An idiomatic choral work, *Ice Age*, by Hugi Guðmundsson, was full of lush harmonies smudged by glissandi, like mist rising from a glacier, while Anna Thorvaldsdóttir's *In The Light Of Air* was an expertly sustained 40-minute piece for small ensemble and a halo of subtle electronics. Exquisite as the aurora borealis, the piece moved from string harmonics, prepared piano and bowed harp to melodies that brought to mind Angelo Badalamenti's chilliest film scores for David Lynch.

Perversely, after this tumult of overlapping events, the final day of the festival featured just one performance, *Trembling Superheroes* by Juliana Hodkinson (British, but a long-term resident of Denmark), a bravely uncompromising set of music for children, performed with super-powered gusto by the Esbjerg Ensemble. The piece is a 45-minute sequence of solos and duos, giving each of the players an absurd characterisation and scenario, something like the instrumental music theatre that occurs throughout Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle. The audience, a good percentage of them under the age of ten, seemed initially enraptured by the spiky writing for piano, cello and violin and the creative use of ping-pong balls, an amplified floor and a cascade of feathers; a bravura solo on an outsized balloon by percussionist Christian Martinez marked him out as star of the show. However, in the last ten minutes attention began to wane and some of the crowd crawled off into the darkness, or fell asleep, suggesting the piece could do with a small amount of tightening up.

Summing up the Nordic aesthetic on the evidence provided by this festival, it would seem to revolve around a playfulness and resourcefulness

regarding material, new technology and curatorial practice, and some stylistic seepage from extra-musical sources. The inspiration comes from an international outlook, rather than from the old national stereotypes and archetypes; multiplicity trumps domesticity, resulting in festivals such as this one: imaginative and bold.

Leo Chadburn

Melos-Ethos International Festival of Contemporary Music 2015

In the closing sentence of an essay titled 'Music and New Music', from 1960, Theodor Adorno claimed, with his characteristic lack of equivocation, that the difference between new music and music in general was akin to the difference between good music and bad music. His rather sweeping claim was mitigated somewhat by his definition of 'new music', which was highly restricted in terms of its technical and moral imperatives. With respect to technique and style, 'new music' for Adorno meant almost exclusively the freely atonal music of Schoenberg and his students. Morally speaking, 'new music' was defined as that which embodied a critical resistance to the existing order and preserved the freedom of subjective expression as demanded by a Hegelian view of history.

Such a definition of new music may be easy to criticise today. After all, one can now see that Adorno used complex philosophical ideas about moral superiority and 'world-history' to promote traditions of which he was a part, for he was both a student of Alban Berg and a late member of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*. In other words, his appeal to ethics was a cover for his personal preferences. Furthermore, his arguments about the superiority of one tradition over others are now generally seen as untenable: we who live in this age of relativism are taught, for better and worse, that all traditions should be valued because all traditions have valuable, if different, things to offer.

But for those of us who would like to rescue standards of judgment from the oblivion of relativism in which we now swim, the concept of 'new music' might be worth revisiting. And this year's Melos-Ethos festival, which took place in Bratislava from 7 to 13 November 2015, provided a perfect occasion for reassessing the usefulness of the concept. For those who don't know the festival, a little history is in order.

The first Melos-Ethos International Festival of Contemporary Music was held in Bratislava in

1991. The fact that it began shortly after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 is no coincidence: the festival was founded specifically to present modernist works that had been marginalised during the period of 'normalisation' that followed the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The festival's name is a testament to this history – a reference to both the formal (melos) and ethical (ethos) dimensions of music. The festival has, therefore, an essential connection to the purported moral duty of 'new music': not because it corresponds to some Hegelian idea of history, but because its own history was shaped by the critique of a totalitarian regime and by the desire for freedom of expression.

The festival has been held biennially since its founding in 1991. Past festivals have featured guest composers, including György Ligeti, Vinko Globokar, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Krzysztof Penderecki, Zygmunt Krauze, Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steve Reich and Kaija Saariaho. This year's festival did not have a featured guest, but was instead organised around an idea: that all pieces on the programme be composed in the last five years. This, then, was a 'contemporary music festival' that was truly dedicated to *contemporary* music. To the extent that that which is contemporary is also 'new', Melos-Ethos 2015 had another connection to the concept of 'new music', one beyond the ethical dimension noted above.

But not all that is contemporary is new, of course. To designate something as 'new' suggests that it is original and unheard. The 'contemporary', on the other hand, is *everything* that lives with us today, be it 'old' or 'new', familiar or unfamiliar. Adorno made a similar distinction between 'new' and 'contemporary' in his essay 'Music and New Music', but whereas he used 'new' as a badge of honour for music that embodied a cry of protest against an overwhelmingly oppressive social reality, I prefer to use 'new' to describe music that is (merely) original. If 'original' also implies a value judgment, if it suggests that something is 'better' because it is original, I am quite willing to live with that.

The question before us, then, is: to what extent did this contemporary music festival contain music that was also 'new'? Of the 52 compositions presented in 11 concerts, there were 15 world premieres and 24 Slovak premieres. Additionally, there were fringe events, including composition and performance workshops and a film screening. It was a rich programme – not only because of the amount of activity during this weeklong festival, but also because it