

listening to the resident singer in the coolest club in town, somewhere high in the Arctic: maybe Norway, maybe Greenland, maybe on the edge of Hudson Bay.

After a while the roles reverse. The live singer has the long notes, a tone lower than before, and her pre-recorded self weaves more elaborate, almost skittish patterns, less obviously drawn by the gravitational pull of the sustained tone. Then both Juliets are singing melodies, and not so long afterwards the music finishes. It isn't obvious that the end is coming but it feels right when it happens. It's as if we have been listening to a great executant of a folk music that didn't exist until Cassandra Miller and Juliet Fraser got together to create it, but this is undoubtedly how that music is supposed to go, and this is how, unostentatiously but surely, this piece is supposed to finish. It's a considerable achievement: music that is not so much composed as inhabited.

After a short interval it's the turn of the ensemble Plus Minus to play. In *Traveller Song* there are more pre-recorded voices, cascading, multi-layered variations of more descending melodies, like a congregation in an Old Regular Baptist church, each singer 'laboring' their own version of a shared hymn tune. Two pianists at a single piano play unison triadic harmonies which try, as best they can, to shadow the multiple melodies in the loudspeakers. Eventually they stop; a pause, then the rest of the ensemble – clarinet, electric guitar with e-bow, violin, cello – slide down their own various versions of the taped voices, now fewer, often only one. The pianists play again: a unison A major chord played many, many times; then a cadence, also repeated. They stop and one of them takes over the violinist's seat in the ensemble. He's got an accordion and using just the chord buttons he offers one more accompaniment for the pre-recorded voice. As in *Tracery: Hardanger*, the music ends unabtrusively, but decisively; like Juliet Fraser, Plus Minus give an exemplary performance, their understated virtuosity illuminating every moment of the music.

Like much of Miller's music – most spectacularly in *Duet* for cello and orchestra, premiered at the 2015 Glasgow Tectonics festival, most intimately in the string quartet *Warblework* (2011) – transcription lies at the heart of the compositional process. So *Traveller Song* is based on a recording of a Sicilian folksong, and on the Kammerklang website Miller describes how she turned the song into her own music: 'I sang along while listening to this recording in headphones loud enough that I couldn't hear myself,

and recorded this caterwauling, layered this recording in canon, and listened again, recording myself singing along again, following this process many times'. Similarly, so Miller tells us, *Tracery: Hardanger* uses 'source materials ... from non-notated traditions such as Hardanger fiddle tunes, Sacred Harp singing, experimental improvisations and spoken meditations'.

For Cassandra Miller it is clearly important to explain how she made this extraordinary music. But I don't think the 'how' of this music is as important as the 'what'; it may be made through a process of transcription but it's not about transcription. Falling lines – sometimes melodies, sometimes not – are a recurrent feature of much of Cassandra Miller's music: the multiple string glissandi of *A Large House* (2009), the lamentations of *bel canto* (2010). Sometimes they make me feel sad, as keening is supposed to, but more often they sound to me like lava snaking down a hillside, vivid, compelling, not a little dangerous. In *Tracery: Hardanger* and *Traveller Song* there's a change in energy in each phrase, as the breath runs out, as the line descends, yet the music doesn't seem to be about entropy, rather it's about an alchemy in which one thing turns into another – fire into stone, sound into notation, flow into solid – and, even more remarkably, back again.

Christopher Fox

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#### Electric Spring, Huddersfield, 22–26 February 2017.

In the heart of the University of Huddersfield's Creative Arts Building sits the unassuming Phipps Hall, which has given itself over to five days of total electronic sound immersion. The University has grown accustomed to attracting pioneering artists in contemporary music over the last four decades, both to its in-house research centre CeReNeM, and to the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival every November. The relatively younger Electric Spring Festival takes place every February and is now able to stand alongside its older sibling, offering the public an impressive and diverse programme of composers and artists specialising in electronic sound manipulation. This year was no exception. Running from 22 to 26 February, there was something to suit everyone, from improvised live-coded dance music to classic *musique concrète* masterpieces. From its conception in 1995, the aim of the

festival has been to offer breadth and surprise to its audience.

The concerts are curated by Professor of Composition and Improvisation Pierre Alexandre Tremblay, with the help of the music department's faculty, whose own works contribute to the programme. When speaking about this year's programme, Tremblay said, 'I'm not expecting anyone to like all the gigs, not even myself. I curate things that I think complement each other well to offer one vision of this music in the twenty-first century'. With the addition of the Huddersfield Immersive Sound System (HISS), a flexible and efficient speaker setup equipping students at the University with countless possibilities for experimentation, the experience of this festival is nothing short of exceptional in all manners of advancements in sound technology.

The opening night began in breath-taking beauty with the world premiere of *Capillaries Capillaries*, by the University's own Tadej Droljc. A packed Phipps Hall is darkened and dwarfed by a six-metre-wide High Definition screen. HISS surrounds an arrangement of chairs, creating anticipation for what is to come; careful judgment of where to sit is required for the optimum listening experience. The introduction of the symbiotic interaction between sound and image in Droljc's audiovisual landscape begins delicately and with intrigue. As the relationship plays out, one is mesmerised by the stunning detail and inseparability of parts. Granular and complex layering of textures are offered visibly and audibly, both inextricably linked and reliant on the other. To follow is an improvisation from live-coder Alex McLean. The vast screen remains active, waiting to project McLean's live-coding under titles such as 'stut pan', 'tabby' and 'sine nudge chop', giving those in the know some clues as to what we are about to hear. His mastery of his instrument is deft and virtuosic, with carefully treated manipulation of each sample providing inventive and stimulating builds. He focuses on different families of electronic sounds, creating momentary portraits, moving from what sounded like a kick drum quintet into a 'choir' of synthesized organs panning around the 24-speaker surround sound system. The club-like style of the music could arguably benefit from an alternative venue to the concert hall, but the experience here was thrilling. A relatable level of immersion allowed one to suspend one's disbelief and there was an appreciation in witnessing McLean's algorithmic processes, which needed focused attention to be perceived in full.

Immersion was a theme that continued throughout the rest of the week. The third night had room for reflection as Beatriz Ferreyra offered two works from her extensive catalogue: *Río de los pájaros azules* (The blue birds' river) (1998) and *Echos* (1978). The opportunity to hear her finely crafted music over 16 channels and in a darkened room was a pleasure noticeably shared by the audience. Phipps Hall became a meditative space in which Ferreyra's music could be studied. *Echos* originates from the days of tape cutting and pasting but undoubtedly stands alongside its modern digital equivalent. There is audible perfection in where her sounds stop and start, inspirational in its proficiency to hear up close. Ferreyra also offered a UK premiere of *Senderos de luz y sombras* (Paths of shadows and light) (2017). Her use of 16 channels and stereo created startling depth and offered multiple openings into a spiritual listening experience.

Her supporting act provided a considered introduction from a modern perspective. Frédéric Dufeu, also based at the University, presented 'Happy new year and where are you?', an expansive, lingering passage with an intense and physically felt thematic climax pushing both the speakers and audience to maximum capacity.

There were concerts serving as contrasts to the themes of electronic music, including a collaboration with a symposium for sound and music in documentary film. Here was a rare opportunity to experience some remarkable work, most notably *Mirrorlands* (2014) by filmmaker Emma Dove and sound artist Mark Lyken. It offered the audience an exploration of the Black Isle in the Scottish Highlands, with multi-directional aspects of the place and its inhabitants evoking feelings of unease but also assurance. Dove's eye for the life within life was haunting yet humbling, and was fully realised through Lyken's use of distance and distortion of the familiar. The effectiveness of the music would struggle without its visual counterpart, which one could argue as being applicable to Droljc's and McLean's use of a visual element as a distraction from and even a compensation for a lack of content in the music. However, the inclusion of other mediums moves Electric Spring beyond a simple music festival and into a celebration of art existing outside any given boundary. Again, to refer to Tremblay and his vision, 'Artists are taxonomy-solvent. These taxonomies are put over them . . . Interesting artists always go places and we try to programme interesting artists so it forces us to go places'.

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.