

bends and beyond, without compromising its sense of unity. Ann Cleare's 2017 piece *Fiáin* featured doctored, snaggletooth bows used on electric guitar and bass to produce jittery, crunching sounds; some of the higher frequencies were slightly aurally discomfoting, but it was a rich and rewarding work.

The festival showcased a record number of Lithuanian premieres. In addition to those mentioned above, we heard works by two US-Lithuanian composers: the hypnotic *Chiaroscuro Trilogy* by 'textural magician' Žibuoklė Martinaitė and Albertas Navickas' ponderously unravelling *Memory Lines* for strings. Tomas Kutevičius's vivid *A Thinking Reed* betrayed flickers of Balakauskian harmony. Tight parallel clusters in this homage to Jaco Pastorius approximated a radically 'vertically' smudged version of a rhythmically punchy bass line. The same concert premiered *Cosmatesque*, by Justina Repeckaitė. The latter two pieces lent interest to an otherwise dragging programme of uninspired repetition from Pärt and Lang. Repeckaitė's style has elsewhere been described as diamond-like, but while the angular, brilliant clarity and geometric preoccupations of this image are apt, this work seemed more fluid and muscular – a malleable rather than a rigid strength.

Last covered by *TEMPO* in 2002, when the number of contemporary art music festivals in the region was still perceived as 'heartening', GAIDA is thriving a quarter of a century after its inception. This year was no exception to one sponsor's assurance: 'the GAIDA festival always surprises you'.

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Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 2017

My hcmf 2017 started with Montreal's Quatuor Bozzini and pianist Philip Thomas performing three pieces by one of the festival's featured composers, Linda Catlin Smith. Smith's profile has been significantly raised in this country since the release of a portrait CD on Another Timbre, and she featured at Glasgow's Tectonics in May. Her compositional voice is distinct, one that avoids the grand statement in favour of half-familiar nooks and crannies, shading from folkish keening to an elusive chromatic space where Chopin meets Boulez and Feldman. Though each of the pieces, a Piano Quintet and two string quartets, *Folkestone* and *Gondola*, shared several aspects in their

harmony and gesture, the larger picture as the music unfurled was quite different from piece to piece: the Piano Quintet explored quasi-independence between the bowed and keyed strings, while *Folkestone* proceeded in short fragments continually beginning again.

The quartet and Thomas returned a few days later to give the UK premieres of pieces by Mary Bellamy and Bryn Harrison, part of the outcome of a larger collaborative project between the quartet and the University of Huddersfield. Such projects risk being academic exercises, but both pieces were engaging and surprising in their effects. Bellamy's *beneath an ocean of air*, inspired by an experience of James Turrell's sky-space at the nearby Yorkshire Sculpture Park, was indeed in a constant, cloud-like state of flux, with wisps of sound escaping and unfurling – the piano effectively a member of the string quartet, bowing and rubbing strings more than playing the keys. Harrison's Piano Quintet, though it re-established a more conventional relationship between piano and string quartet, continued this restless yet hushed state but to very different ends. It was a mesmerising, discombobulating but ultimately wonderful experience where fore, middle and background merge and separated in the ear. The piece uses tropes familiar to those who have been following Harrison's work (rising figures, not quite repetition, and playing with the capacity to recall details) but to subtly different ends. It is a work of extraordinary concentration for performers, as the piece teeters on the edge of statistical disorder but always draws back just enough with moments of epiphany – be they a fleeting pizzicato or sudden unison with the piano.

Mondays are 'shorts' day (Yorkshire folk have strong constitutions). A kind of capsule of the festival, already packed with events, the day stuffs 15 performances into the course of over 12 hours. Decisions have to be made, therefore, with regard to the limitations of concentration, not to mention the vagaries of transport and finding sustenance.

A number of Polish ensembles and composers were featured this year in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of PRES (Polish Radio Experimental Studio), with an accompanying exhibition at the town's main art gallery. Young ensemble Małe Instrumenty presented a programme of short pieces from a 2013 project by Paweł Romańczuk, which respond to the work of Włodzimierz Kotoński, his 1957 studio composition *Study on One Cymbal Stroke* in particular. Using an array of instruments including

found objects, toys, ukuleles and reed organs, there were affinities here with the post Scratch Orchestra work of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra and related groups; however, instead of the process-driven work of those composers the music leaned much more towards the gestures of musique concrete.

Kevin Fairbairn gave a technically demanding performance of three pieces on his self-designed trombone: Richard Barrett's *basalt*, Timothy McCormack's *HEAVY MATTER* and Sehyung Kim's *Sijo_241015* were presented one after the other, forming one metapiece, the sheer physicality of which walked the line between furious aural expression and King Ubu-esque theatre.

The ever-active Philip Thomas returned with a short programme of three piano pieces by Michael Parsons (80 next year) ranging from his first acknowledged composition, *Piano Piece 1962 to September 2001*, a duet in which the composer joined him on a second piano. What was striking is that in spite of a varied and diverse history with the Systems Group and the Scratch Orchestra amongst others, there was a thorough-going sense of consistency of purpose demonstrated: clarity and succinctness of structure but with these pieces in particular a post-serial, post-Cage harmony, with oblique nods to jazz improvisation in *Five* of 1996. This was followed by Huddersfield's edges ensemble in a rendition of Parsons' *Walk*, of 1969, outside on the campus concourse; the composition steps beyond music into movement and observation. That composition is more than the organisation of sounds was a key theme reiterated by a number of younger composers this year.

Guitarist Kobe Van Cauwenberghe's performance of Robert Fripp and Brian Eno's 1970s tape loop albums *No More Pussyfooting* and *An Index of Metals* was an impressive recreation, but, like a lot of recent reworkings of 1970s albums by 'classical' musicians, there was the curious sense of watching a covers act. Of course, it could be argued on the one hand that many orchestras are in a sense covers bands too (#notallorchestras) and on the other that Fripp with his Guitar Craft method is engaging with the process of disseminating his music through a 'classical' teaching method.

I only caught the second 'slow' version of Dominic Murcott's *Harmonic Canon*, featuring a specially built half-tonne double-bell instrument/sculpture, struck and rubbed by the arx duo of Mari Yoshinaga and Garrett Arney, along with assorted metal percussion drawing out an extraordinary array of tones. This impressed greatly: it had some of the

concentrated focus of a Radigue or Radulescu, making the harmonic canon a true instrument with varied potential instead of the gimmick it could easily have become.

Christopher Fox's *untouch-touch* was a twice-told tale, as the solo percussionist at first mimes the playing of gongs, triggering instead sine tones taken from analysing prominent frequencies in the instruments before then actually playing the gongs. The intriguing play with the expectations of sound and action suggested parallels with the recent work of James Saunders. The focus of Serge Vuille brought a calm intensity.

More mime and movement was to be found in Bastard Assignments' showcase. Timothy Cape's *Wildflower* was a mysterious solo confessional, with cartoonish reproductions of songs, spoken phrases and actions with accompanying video, all suggesting the offspring of Harry Hill and Alan Resnick. A further, fully rounded theatrical experience was found in Josh Spear's *Extended Play*, which drew on the lip-synching and archness of David Lynch, talent shows and transcription of rehearsal.

Caitlin Rowley's *Community of Objects* was a further blurring of public and private behaviours as the group discover and attempt to comprehend the instructions. There were hints here of the Crystal Maze and The Adventure Game of Moira Stuart fame, and perhaps something of the everyday oddness of Edinburgh's glorious Usurper.

Edward Henderson was, perhaps, the odd one out of the group in presenting an instrumental piece, *Hold*, for two pianos. A kind of loose-limbed Nyman or more formally constrained Julius Eastman – demonstrating a love of piano sonority in a manner that also hinted at Chris Newman in its blithe shifting between tonalities.

Dutch electric guitar quartet Zwerm presented an immersive event mostly obscured from view within a cylindrical curtained stage structure. Lighting played a key role for the event, transforming the cylinder into a kind of zoetrope cum lava lamp. Christopher Trapani's *Shotgun Shoegaze* felt the least realised of the pieces. With its bluesy bends and washes of feedback it fell slightly awkwardly between Loren Mazzacane Connors and the more egregious aspects of 90s shoegaze. With Joanna Bailie's *Last Song from Charleroi* it was not so much a case of 'Our Ears Felt like Canyons' (the concert title, after Pauline Oliveros) as our ears felt like London Tube lines gradually raised up into the stratosphere. A clear concept resulting in a remarkably visceral experience (industrial field

recordings gradually sped up with guitars sustaining pitches picked out from the recordings). Alexander Schubert's *Wavelet A Societies / Sciences* synthesised the visual and aural elements most succinctly with suggestions of 'endless summer' techno building up to the beat drop before taking on the form of the stuttering concrete poem by Gordon Krieger heard at the start. The piece was seemingly concerned with the optimism of beginning and of ending in malfunction, but with a suggestion of hope to be found in the pastoral (acoustic guitar picking).

Continuing the Polish theme, the Gęba Vocal Ensemble demonstrated their full throated, full throttle approach in group-founder Baskak's *Delightful Buzz*. This overlaid loops of Polish folk song, operatic blasts and Mike Patton-esque manglings in dramatic fashion but stopped before it could really take off. Dark brooding distorted rumblings followed in another PRES-related piece, Krzysztof Knittel's *Norcet II*, whose anecdotal diversions from the raw digital noise felt unnecessary. Noted improviser Thomas Lehn joined the group on synthesiser for the late Zbigniew Karkowski's *Encumbrance*, a piece originally conceived for Gęba. For all the extremes of frequency and walls of noise that issued forth it was a strangely calming piece, a distorted sheen from the combination of pure sung tones and sibilants plosives.

The members of Polwechsel were reunited for their performance with saxophonist John Butcher and were joined by composer Klaus Lang. Lang's solo organ joined the rest of the ensemble in interleaving improvisations structured by bassist Werner Dafeldecker. While there were certainly strong affinities between the musicians and a number of striking and involving moments (Lang's knack for peculiarly resonant chord voicing's or Martin Brandlmayr's woozy skitterings at his drum kit – noticeably listening as much as playing), the whole never quite gelled on this occasion, and there was a slight sense of marking time.

Rhodri Davies, maven of the expanded harp, was afforded the opportunity to display some of his current interests. A blistering solo performance began his two-part set, combining aspects of his 2012 album *Wound Response* (overplucking strings, splintering rhythmic combinations and overdriven amplification) with his interest in the autodestructive art of Gustav Metzger, as he whittled down his options as strings broke one after another. The music brought to mind a vivid whirlpool of Derek Bailey twang with raw blues, and hints of begena traditions of Eritrea and Ethiopia as the strange

mix of 'musical' invention through limitation with utter heads-down doggedness spiralled its way like a warped bicycle.

Davies's new piece, *Transversal Time*, brought together a hand-picked band of some of the extraordinary musicians Rhodri has worked with over the years. This was a performance of incredible calm and focus, as the musicians carefully elaborated on the slow pulsations initiated by lamps glowing near each of them. Of particular note were singer Stine Janvin Motland and bassoonist Dafne Vincente Sandoval: a performance where all of the musicians' listening was palpable.

To open the final weekend, London's Riot Ensemble gave a showcase of some of the up-and-coming composers they have been helping to nurture. There was an element among all of the pieces, in varying degrees, of composers who are 'finding their feet'; but the commitment of the ensemble to the music gave a strong sense of joy through discovery. Stephanie Haensler's *daan und waan* explored a world of resonances and energised juxtapositions only occasionally, though less confidently bursting into figurations such as scales. Katherine Young's *Where the Moss Glows* operated in a related area of soft susurrations, taking a number of risks in its sudden shifts of texture, not all of which came off, such as the use of recorded footsteps. *Ombak* by Nikolet Burzyńska provided a convincing impersonation of Balinese wind instruments through careful retuning of parts of the ensemble, however the feeling overall was that these moments felt a little exoticised in context rather than intrinsic to the piece as it progressed. The most assured piece was Laurence Osborn's *Ctrl*, which showed a confident hand with larger forces and a talent for synthesising different kinds of harmony and stylistic reference points in a manner reminiscent to Thomas Adès or Maxwell Davies. The three movements of this song sequence each presented a different masculine characteristic with Birtwistle-esque operatic shards in the first (some of the text was lost here amidst the strident gestures of the ensemble) applying a high autotuned tone to the powerful soprano of Sarah Dacey. The quasi-soul 'baritone' croonings of the second movement led to the high and frail uncertainties of the third which gradually grew in confidence as Osborn span parodic, then oddly affirmative variations on Sloop John B to the words "We do what we want" – a staple used and abused across football terraces. The use of autotune and a female voice to represent masculine attributes was suggestive of the reported qualities of the castrato voice (a highly

complex figure in the history of masculinity – ‘emasculated’, yet desired, and somehow superhuman).

Later, Austria’s Ensemble PHACE presented a whipsmart programme at a breathless pace. Bernhard Lang’s saxophone concerto *DW24 – Loops for Al Jourgensen* burst into life and fairly bounced, pounded and skittered its way combining samplings of the dedicatees voice and juddering drum machine-driven metal, with references to Eric Dolphy and Evan Parker in the solo, nimbly played by Michael Krenn, and textures at times redolent of Charles Mingus’s ensembles cut up and reordered. The programme notes to both Lang’s and Jorge Sanchez-Chiong’s pieces noted that their composers considered the pieces to be twins or doppelgangers of other works in their respective oeuvres. However, as Sanchez-Chiong’s *USED REDUX* for electronics, ensemble and jittering film launched hot on the heels of Lang’s piece it was hard to escape the thought that these pieces were each other’s twin (though as to which was the evil one it’s harder to say). Sanchez-Chiong’s piece acting as a kind of hardcore rave cut up of *DW24*. Laura Bowler then joined the ensemble for her new work, *FFF*, somehow sustaining the pace and intensity of the preceding pieces but to very different ends. Though it made extensive use of film through shards of news reportage featuring demonstrations, police assaults and actions by oppressive regimes, Bowler was very much at the centre of the piece – a centrifugal force driving things along. The ensemble was at times called upon to move or to wear masks, as the tone shifted in handbrake turns from pressurised throat-scalding anger to absurd parodies of flight attendants (the one false note) and the embodiment of an emoji. The whole whirlwind of activity gradually fell away as the ensemble departed the stage and a video of the composer at home detailing her expenditure concluded the piece in a way that was both flippant and entirely pertinent to the political themes of the piece.

The final Sunday afternoon brought a return visit to the festival by Ensemble Grizzana, this time in an expanded version of musicians from classical and improvising scenes. Simon Reynell, of the record label Another Timbre, put the band together two years ago, in order to perform and record music by Jürg Frey, and this concert saw Frey return along with another AT favourite, composer/improviser Magnus Granberg. Both pieces were written in response to music by Ockeghem and William Byrd at the request of

Reynell, however this did not significantly divert the composers from their distinctive sound-worlds. Granberg’s *How Vain Are All our Frail Delights?* allowed the musicians some lassitude in their chosen sounds and amongst the carefully placed pitches were the crackle of low grade electronics and scraped zither from Dimitra Lazaridou-Chatzigoga and variegated whistle tones from Richard Craig’s amplified flute. The piece sailed slowly along, parts converging and drifting by yet never losing focus. In spite of the similar (though reconfigured) ensemble combination and general low volume, Frey’s *Late Silence* inhabited quite a different world of solos, duets, and other ensemble layering’s, finding room for scraped stones and harmonica tones, and lush, near jazzy chord sequences.

Alexander Schubert returned to close the festival with *Supramodal Parser* an attempt to utilise the full resources of the clubland and gig experience – light show, dry ice and sound-system. The work delved into a phantasmagoria of ‘losing oneself’ not so much to the dance but to the psychological states around these spectacles. Opening to swathes of dry ice, the scene was set with a stadium rock act about to unveil their latest portentous sci-fi concept album, then, via free jazz bursts and rockist gestures cued by Beckett-like on off lighting, the music slowly started to fuse together and achieve lift off. But not for long. Vocalist, Mohna returned for a slow Fever Ray-like dub mix which gradually seized up to the point of near extinction (the piece explicitly courted some of the longueurs of the gig/club experience) before misfiring resuscitations led to a pounding techno conclusion ended by the sound of the composer/director clicking open a can.

‘40th edition’, *not* anniversary is how the hcmf 2017 was billed, and in spite of the presence of some familiar faces from the festival’s past, such as Ferneyhough, Dillon, and the London Sinfonietta, plus tributes to Pauline Oliveros (all unfortunately missed by this reviewer), the feeling of the festival was anything but nostalgic. 2018 promises gender parity in the programming, an area in which hcmf has seen some improvement, and this can only add to the vitality of the music it showcases.

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