

textile artist Matthew Harris. Yet this somehow intensified the work's strength: strangely timeless, the grave simple polyphony seemed somehow to suspend the formal measure of time.

BCMG would be nothing without the superb body of players it has fielded over the decades, and the level of dedication here was no exception: oboist Melinda Maxwell gave a moving improvisation in honour of the departing Newboulds. Two short encores ended the evening: *Secret Psalm* (1990) for solo violin by Oliver Knussen (a long-standing associate of the group) was played with undaunted sweetness and precision by Alexandra Wood, and Howard Skempton sent the audience on their way by playing his accordion piece, *One for the Road* (1976).

Peter Reynolds

LCO Soloists + NU:NORD, Roundhouse Dorfman Hub, London; Riot Ensemble, St Leonard's Church, London

Despite the ever-dwindling pot of public money available to exploratory musicians in the UK and elsewhere, various ensembles are nonetheless busy making hay whilst at least a little sun still shines. In London in the space of only a week or two in the second half of April, for instance, audiences could catch a series of new music recitals given by the Park Lane Group of young musicians, an evening of premieres with the Workers' Union Ensemble, and concerts by the Riot Ensemble and by the London Contemporary Orchestra Soloists. Other cities, from Glasgow to Birmingham, enjoy a similarly wide range of activity.

The liveliness and freshness of the UK's contemporary music scene was reflected in the LCO Soloists and Riot shows, given on 25 and 29 April respectively. Each attempted to present an eclectic mix of new music in approachable but exacting ways that brought out the unique qualities of each piece whilst also providing audiences with clear narrative entry points to the music, the latter coming largely via engaging spoken introductions. These were provided on the one hand by Mira Benjamin (Co-Director of the new music network nu:nord and violinist for the evening) and Robert Ames (Artistic Director and violist of the LCO), and on the other by Aaron Holloway-Nahum and Adam Swayne (Artistic Director/conductor and Programme Director/pianist of Riot Ensemble).

The style of presentation and the setting likewise contributed to each concert's effectiveness.

For example, the church acoustics and backdrop of Riot's show produced a vivid sense of occasion and drama, whilst the in-the-round intimacy and flexibility of the LCO Soloists' concert, which either saw the audience arrayed around the string quartet or vice versa, created a loose but immersive feel. An eight-channel speaker system around the perimeter of the Dorfman hub contributed further to that immersion when deployed in a few of the pieces (including a late-addition *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* by Jonathan Harvey).

Both concerts also made unusual but welcome choices in how each programme played out. Riot's performance unfolded without an interval, for starters. In addition, the three movements of Evan Johnson's evanescent *L'art de toucher le clavecin 3* were distributed across the programme (as requested by the composer), whilst a short selection of *in memoriam* piano pieces was charmingly played by Adam Swayne about midway through in tribute to their composers, Peter Maxwell Davies, Pierre Boulez and Steven Stucky. The LCO Soloists' show, for its part, abandoned a conventional interval in favour of brief but relaxed breaks between each piece.

In both cases, some thoughtful programming and presentation allowed audiences easy access to the music. This is to the good, and those involved should feel encouraged to continue along these lines. I did wonder at times, however, if the tactic of providing detailed introductions to each piece might not be a little self-defeating. This is a larger issue that applies far beyond these two shows, of course, and it would be unfair to expect them to provide a definitive answer to the conundrum of how best to connect audiences to new music, but nevertheless they spoke to the problem in notable ways.

In the LCO Soloists concert, for instance, composer Eric Skytterholm Egan's introduction to his piece *Through the Embers*, as intriguing (and indeed speculative) as it was in its references to Adams and Carwardine's *Last Chance to See* and its oblique descriptions of musical detail, ended up imposing on the mind a narrative shape of coming together and apart that one then couldn't help but hear in the performance. The piece consists of sonically and gesturally distinct and unpredictable music on the theme of growth and decay, full in this performance of unusual skittering and scraping from a spatially arrayed quartet whose playing was productively misaligned throughout. The piece, however, worked best when it seemed to go *against* the grain of Egan's broad outline, the slivery string

titters coming together or not in contradiction of that outline.

I had a similar experience with parts of the Riot concert. Aaron Holloway-Nahum provided enjoyable and penetrative insights, but I was left wondering if these could have been condensed or even avoided. Djuro Zivkovic's bluster and charged Grawemeyer winner, *On the Guarding of the Heart*, for instance, culminated in 30 loud, repeated bars that saw the chamber ensemble roiling around in a tumult of clanged chords and thwacked assaults; having this advertised beforehand meant that one couldn't avoid anticipating these repeats, every sound becoming a pre-echo of the closing gestures. Despite a little jumping of the dynamic gun once we finally reached those repeats, and some brashness in the writing that emphasised brunt over subtlety (though with some ear-catching instrumental detail), the performance was engaging for the most part – but it was haunted by expectation.

A similar thing dented the performance of composer-in-residence Nina C. Young's *Traced Upon Cinders*, albeit to a much less dramatic extent. *Cinders*, we were told, is a piece about the persistence or transformation of memory. This process could indeed be heard in the music's sure-footed and tightly unspooling progress from its initial seven-note piano motif, but with much vaguer signposts our listening was free to go where it might. Various comings-together on held notes, elusive shards of tonal shapes and transformed echoes of that initial motif were shaped dramatically by a charged-up Holloway-Nahum and ensemble, pulling the audience forward to enjoy a thunderous climax with preamble in mind or not.

Rounding out the concert were the near-silences of Evan Johnson's delicate, attention-recalibrating *L'art*, for violin, piccolo and percussion. The sounds of this piece are locked in a struggle with audibility, environmental noise, the audience's tolerance for silence and reduction of detail, and the tensions that run across and between all these elements. Though the performance here occasionally verged on silent farce, for the most part the little trills, glides and knocks of the musicians cohered disarmingly. Johnson's three movements made for winning, enigmatic interventions into an otherwise forthright and wholly enjoyable evening of music.

In the LCO Soloists + NU:NORD programme, the performances were strong even if some of the pieces proved more interesting than others. The range of the featured composers reflected the mission of nu:nord, a project-

based music and performing art network that 'engages new-music creators from Canada, Norway and the UK'. Amber Priestley's ... *And go ahead! Dare to be irrational!* was a typically exploratory graphic piece that was played by Mira Benjamin and backed up by environmental recordings Benjamin had made of everything from the opening of the 'Moonlight' Sonata to a gypsy jazz band. The performance itself was perhaps less interesting as a sonic event than it was as a theatrical realisation of a set of broad parameters (from a top-line melody to the set of images on the bottom strip of the score) but it was engaging nonetheless. The same could be said for Xenakis's rip-roaring *Tetora* that closed the show, even if in leaning heavily into the drama and spectacle of the score the performers underplayed the nuances inherent in the interplay between different sections of the music.

I found the surround-sound string quartet loops of Claire M. Singer's 4–8–1 less stimulating: once the music got going it was obvious that we were locked into a one-chord groove until the close. There were certainly some fascinating moments, particularly when the spatial layout of the speakers and players conjured an aural-visual hall of mirrors, sounds ricocheting about the hall in unpredictable, seemingly arbitrary ways, but this wasn't quite enough. On the other hand, despite its simplicity of materials, which consisted largely of glistening, sustained diatonic chords with passing chromatic feints and shadows, Isaiah Ceccarelli's *Bow* hummed away invitingly. The focused and fused playing of the LCO quartet prepared the ground especially well for the sudden taking of flight heard in the piece's closing bars, with birdlike high strings suddenly straining upwards and around each other in curlicues of sound.

Stephen Graham

'New Blood': 130701, 15th Anniversary Showcase, Brighton Festival

The Spire, St Mark's chapel, is an artist-led creation space in Brighton. Normally it's a blank space without heating or equipment but for the night of 10 May it is fantastically dressed up with lights, pictures and a projection saying 'landmark post-classical recordings'. This is a label showcase for 130701, an offshoot of FatCat Records set up by Dave Howell in 2001. Hauschka, one of the label's longstanding artists who has opened up his imaginative and playful inside-piano playing to commercial