

as much sculpture as fiction, as much one author's text as another's, so Lim's piece is as much music as theatre.

The stage is populated by beings who are part human and part bird, plant or insect. Dressed in white coats and personal protective equipment, the members of Musikfabrik circulate among tables and workstations on which sit strange objects – a giant bird's head; a mask made up of half a dozen faces; unfamiliar-looking musical instruments. A tramp appears to be conducting. The brilliantly versatile clarinettist Carl Rosman, playing the part of the Mutant Bird, performs as both singer and instrumentalist. The brass players play with double-belled instruments, and the ensemble includes a Stroh viola, a visual-aural hybrid of brass and strings.

Lim's libretto (with dramaturgy by Claire de Ribaupierre) combines elements from both Safran Foer and Schulz with extracts from Goethe and Foucault. It tells of the psychological transformation of a son into his father, as well as of realms between life and death, and between human, animal and vegetable. The Father (a silent part played by Yael Rion) is a scientist, obsessed with birds and creating mutant forms of them. He is already dead but, unbeknownst to him, the laboratory workers have turned time back to give him one last day, during which the Son (Christian Miedl) contends with his obscure, almost mystical legacy. Meanwhile, a storm has vivified a hybrid tree-human (Anne Delahaye), who seduces first the Son and then the Father, and later transmutes into the laboratory worker, Adela (Emily Hindrichs), who created her. When she offers the Father the bird's head mask, he accepts it willingly, but it kills him. At the end, it is the Son himself who must wear it.

Many of the themes – masks, anthropomorphic transformations, instruments as proxies for the voice/prosthetics for the body – have been developed in Lim's work over the last decade or so. However, *Tree of Codes* not only brings these together in a fantastical piece of storytelling, but also draws out new depths and dimensions. The score contains some of her most lyrical work: Adela's fairytale retelling of the Father's bird-obsession; the Father's funeral procession; the closing a cappella chorus, sung by all 17 instrumentalists. A radiance that is usually just beneath her music's busy surface has been set free. Everything seems to grow out of itself, like buds within flower buds. In comparison to Venables's stark, one-directional arrow, Lim offers an arborescent profusion of images and sensation. Yet despite the sensory overload,

one's lasting impression of *Tree of Codes* is of a coherence that gradually emerges and is, ultimately, sustained over 90 complex, multi-layered minutes.

The brilliance of Lim's music was matched in the costumes, scenography and even lighting, led by Massimo Furlan's design. (Only a series of video projections on the back wall seemed to add little.) Among the particularly notable contributions were Julie Monot's masks, especially her disconcerting many-faced latex construction worn by the Son as he grapples with the psychological legacy of his father. Rion's non-vocal performance as the Father, too: an actor of extraordinary appearance, perfectly cast, he delivered a risk-filled, highly exposing performance with absolute commitment. Musikfabrik, who have become specialists in contemporary music theatre, excelled not only as players, but also singers, actors and even stagehands; Marco Blaauw (trumpet), Axel Porath (Stroh viola), Lorelei Dowling (bassoon) and Dirk Rothbrust (percussion) delivered some of the most striking solo passages.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Borealis Festival, Bergen

It wouldn't be the worst idea if Anthony Braxton's *Composition No. 58* were used to kick off every music festival. In any event, it's hard to think of a fanfare more fitting for the common fan, whether of classical, jazz or experimental rock. It could, for example, quite easily be followed by a piece of Mauricio Kagel's instrumental theatre or a parade by the Sun Ra Arkestra or the precisely played experimental excursions of the Brooklyn avant-rock outfit Zs.

Braxton's magnificently sinuous marching band music opened the eleventh Borealis Festival (running 9–13 March 2016), played by the Sjøforsvarets musikkorps brass band with fantastic precision. As soon as it ended, before the sound of the military horns could decay in the raw, resonant room, car horns could be heard outside and a garage door was loudly opened to reveal four minivans with their lights on, looking as if they were about to run us over. It turned out to be members of the New York composer/performer collective Ensemble Pamplemousse performing *Motet for 4 Car Horns* (2006) by ensemble member David Broome, the players positioned, a bit menacingly, in the driveway with the composer conducting.

The festival's new director Peter Meanwell has done a fine job of maintaining the sense of pleasant confusion that his predecessor, Alwynne Pritchard, fostered during her tenure, especially for opening nights. The audience was herded throughout the building for a variety of short performances, including a resonant new work by John Chantler for church organ, electronics and resonant frequencies, and Jessie Marino's glitchy *Ritual I :: Commitment :: BiiM* (2011) for snare drum and light bulb.

Resident ensemble BIT20's concert on 10 March offered world premieres by a pair of Fischers, and was a highlight of the five nights. Argentinian composer Santiago Díez-Fischer writes scores that at times dictate the players' physical actions more than the sound they make: his *óyelos desgarrar la tela del presagio* was built around the sound produced by bowing a small, plastic storage container and moved in thick waves with electric guitar, strings, clarinet, trumpet and flute. It worked well given its rather dubious featured instrument. The second piece on the programme held greater appeal: *Sserenades* by Sigurd Fischer Olsen was a set of seven pieces written for and featuring the astounding Swedish vocalist Sofia Jernberg. The piece called for a fair bit of improvisation as Jernberg moved around the orchestra, at times sitting down to join different instrumental sections. She has both the vocabulary and the pitch not merely to make bird calls and dog growls (not to mention harder-to-peg sounds that were called for) but to sing them with the orchestra, in key. Rather than falling to frantic energy, the piece was slow and beautiful, crafting unusual textures out of breathy reeds, a slide harp, timpani, parade drum and steel drum and celesta.

The New York company Object Collection presented a new work commissioned by Borealis and the Bergen National Opera over two nights (a rare multiple booking for the festival). *It's All True* was such a sonic onslaught that at one point it seemed as if there were another drum track playing in the back of the room (in truth it was either a bit of slapback echo or just a failure of the mind to track properly and sort the frantic components). The piece used transcriptions of the 'nonmusical sounds' (noise, tuning, between-song banter) from hundreds of live recordings of hundreds of shows given by the American punk band Fugazi to create a flood of announcements, pronouncements and feedback that seemed (in large part because of the band's leftist leanings) to craft a narrative for the four actors. Such phrases as 'police use

violence, militaries use violence, gangsters use violence' were swapped among the actors, along with comments about political protest and terrorism and AIDS and police and stage lights and boredom and homelessness and the pope and rock gigs and summer camp and more protests. All the while, the actors moved about the sparse set as if afflicted with the repetitive motion disorder that affects bears at the zoo. The electric guitar quartet Dither and a pair of drummers, meanwhile, blasted through the strictly notated score of previously unintentional and inconsequential sounds. While the libretto was essentially formed of Fugazi singer Ian MacKaye's offhand, dystopian diatribes to American and European audiences, this production came across as Americans talking to Norwegians (or at least non-Americans) about their country's increasingly troubling role in an ever-more calamitous world.

A concert by the students of Bergen's Grieg Academy provided some of the festival's most memorable moments. The matinee on 11 March opened with Natacha Diels's *The Colors Don't Match* (2014), a graceful piece in which a young singer in a crown of roses dramatically announced – at the appropriate pitch – each note the ensemble played. The music gracefully overshadowed the conceit, even as the whole of the ensemble slowly joined in with the strong pronouncements (delivered without glissando or vibrato), crafting an odd, perfectly paced narrative. The drama that Ketil Hvoslef delivered in his *Kammerspill* (1995) was palpable, cinematic and quite exciting – even to the point of feeling, at times, on the verge of a Twentieth Century Fox drum roll, a *Psycho*-esque violin screech or Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. Yet somehow it didn't seem derivative or overly referential. The Bergen-based composers – Hvoslef and Olsen – showed they have no fear of dynamics and, indeed, contributed two of the festival's most memorable pieces.

Having made partial appearances already, Pamplemousse presented a full set of their own inventions, with works including a Bryan Jacobs piece built around a mechanical slide whistle (with cello and percussion); Jessie Marino's imagined radio station with static, white noise and processed beats creating an atmosphere of desolation; and a maniacal sampler keyboard loaded up with bits of Billy Joel and played by Broome. The strongest work was also the only one in which the full ensemble played, Andrew Greenwald's episodic *A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not (iv)* (2014) which moved through sections of carefully structured

and well considered group dynamic separated by long near-silences. Diels presented another piece employing ensemble utterances. Her *Child of Chimera* (2015) began as a percussion trio but let Broome and Marino move to and from their primary instruments (piano and cello respectively), all threaded together by wordless vocal and electronic utterances.

Dither made a second appearance on the fourth night of the festival. The guitar group is remarkable at controlling the feral energy of rock guitar without killing its spirit, which was especially evident in the driving opening piece, *Mi-Go*, composed in 2012 by member Joshua Lopes. They are also capable of a level of precision that suggests more than a few hours playing along to prog albums in their respective teenage bedrooms, as evidenced especially by the demanding precision of New York composer Jascha Narveson's *Ones* (2012). Such skills have made it possible for them to commit to tape some stellar renditions of John Zorn game pieces (released on Tzadik in 2015), and at Borealis they gave a murky, doom-laden reading of his *Curling*, no doubt an anticipated moment for many in attendance and, as it happened, a great ending for the late-night set.

Meanwell has done well in preserving the unusual atmosphere of the festival in his two years at the helm, maintaining the sort of academic party for avant-garde eggheads. The evenings ran late with music that drifted toward the clubby, and the final night concluded with Object Collection performing their own soundtrack and new dialogue for the Steven Segal action movie *Under Siege*; afternoons were filled with artist talks and presentations; true to the festival's Nordic roots, the mornings began with 5°C swims. It's a shame the stars don't align so that the Aurora Borealis is actually visible during the festival, but in any event the sounds glow.

Kurt Gottschalk

SPOR Festival: 12–15 May 2016 'The Illusionists'

Halfway through Stefan Prins's *Mirror Box Extensions* (2015) a guy next to me stretches out his arms to hold up an iPad. I've noticed his fiddling with the gadget throughout the performance, lacking the courage to tell him just how distracting it is. As other iPads emerge in the crowd, all of them making noises and projecting tiny details from the stage, I realize I've

been tricked. I never figured he was simply following Prins's instructions and was actually participating in this work that focuses on blurring the borders between the virtual and the real.

I should have known better, of course. This year at SPOR Festival, held annually in Aarhus, Denmark, the theme is 'What You See Is (Not) What You Get', an open invitation to tricksters from all around the world. With Belgian illusionists Nadar Ensemble acting as guest curators, the focus is on audio-visual works, and their inclusion of *Mirror Box Extensions* in the ensemble's only concert at the festival was, in hindsight, a harbinger of illusions on display.

Video was also a key element in this concert's second piece, *Bluff* (2015), a co-production between German composer Michael Beil and French-German director Thierry Bruehl. Intent on deconstructing the elements of music, Beil and Bruehl present a theatrical piece which begins with the Nadar musicians entering the stage looking confused and alienated. At times they play on their instruments – rigorously repeating an atonal fragment until the music becomes just one more prop on stage – and at times they run around in circles as if warming up for gym class. Above them are two large screens on which are projected a series of manipulated videos of the eight musicians, seemingly having something to do with their regular disappearances behind a red curtain to their left. 'We've encountered some technical difficulties', the trombonist tells the audience several times, staring conspiratorially at us from mid-stage. They haven't, of course, it's all glitch and tricks, and at one point the red curtain is pulled aside to reveal a photo booth, a gesture somewhat like a magician revealing his secrets.

Outside the concert hall, Belgian director Nicolas Provost's *Plot Point* film trilogy (2007) is showing, a fascinating tribute to anti-plot. Perhaps a Christopher Nolan movie might have better reflected the widespread will at SPOR Festival to capture the listeners' attention with surprising visuals and sudden twists. The Nadar concert definitely makes me wonder if there is some kind of coup going on in the world of new music; as yet I'm not quite sure who is usurping whom or what, but I'm pretty sure the revolution is to be televised.

This year's edition of SPOR Festival is the one with the biggest focus on performance and video we've seen so far. Ensemble asamisimasa begins Trond Reinholdtsen's *Music As Emotion* (2007/16), only to see the composer 'interrupt' the