

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Decontamination Double-Bill: #12 – fragmentation and distortion / #13 – Lecture about sad music and happy dance

Over the last decade, Larry Goves, composer and lecturer of music at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), has been steadily enriching the experimental music community in Manchester, UK. As an artistic director and curator, Goves regularly presents his and other's work through the ensemble The House of Bedlam, the annual New Music North West festival, and the Decontamination series. This review covers the twelfth and thirteenth instalments of the Decontamination series, presented as a double-bill at RNCM's Carol Nash Recital Room on 28 February 2018.

Initiated in 2014, Decontamination is a series of concerts held at RNCM that feature a wide range of experimental musics. The programming often reflects an inter- or multidisciplinary approach towards experiential music that frequently intersects with performance art, sound art, spoken word, dance and choreographic practices; themes that have been touched on include instrumental re-imagination, emotional lamentation and mourning, multivalent performance behaviours, and artificial landscapes. The series has also been host to several important contemporary composers – including Joanna Bailie, Eleanor Cully, Claudia Molitor, David Pocknee, James Saunders, Matthew Sergeant – and performers such as cellist Oliver Coates, vocalist Juliet Fraser, pianist Mark Knoop, and Manchester-based ensembles Distractfold, Trio Atem, and SHOAL.

Decontamination 12 and 13 follow another recurrent characteristic of the series in providing fascinating portraits of performing artists, here comprising the all-female cast of choreographer and dancer Shila Anaraki, violinist Aisha Orazbayeva, and flutist Kathryn Williams. The cast stage their idiosyncratic performance practices upon a platform of canonised pieces by Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) and Salvatore Sciarrino, and newly devised pieces made with Mark Dyer, Joshua Mock, and Matthew Shlomowitz.

The first half of Decontamination 12 featured breath-driven Williams, who presented two works from her *Coming up for air* project

alongside two pieces from Sciarrino's 1990 collection of flute pieces, *L'opera per flauto: Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi?* (1985) and *Canzona di ringraziamento* (1985). According to Williams, the *Coming up for air* project is 'a collection of creative responses to physical and instrumental restriction. The project currently explores the creative possibilities that emerge when pieces are limited to a single breath.' Dyer's and Mock's pieces on the programme are the two newest additions to the project.

Mock's *Let it all out* (2018), paradoxically enough, may be one of the shortest pieces from the one-breath series that I have heard. Ending almost as quickly as it starts, the piece is composed of a sharp inhalation followed by an aggressively screamed yell through the body of the flute. While demonstrating a daring approach towards the project's prompt, in too rapidly exploding, what might have functioned as a shattering icebreaker to the concert's proceedings unfortunately fell flat, failing to fully unleash the potential energy Williams brings to the stage.

Dyer's *Memento* (2018) is easily one of the most compelling pieces yet to be made for the project, and it represents a highly integrative approach towards the complex subject at its heart: Williams. The genesis of the *Coming up for air* project stems from Williams' history with a chronic sinus condition, her eventual recovery through operation (supported by Help Musicians UK), and a renewed connection to the power of her own respiratory system. Post-operation, the opening flute solo from Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) served as an important touchstone for Williams to measure the progress of her recovery and the control she was able to command over her breath.

Memento dramatises this intimate relationship with a fixed media audio track steeped in a miasma of recordings including devising dialogue between Dyer and Williams about Williams' relationship to her breath and Debussy, and swirling snatches of the full orchestral material. Williams performs live alongside the fixed media, drawing in a single breath that is spread out over several intervals of immobility. After having her lungs pushed to the brink of capacity, Williams begins to expel a laser-focused stream of air while lightly fingering the prelude solo and

slowly raising the flute to her mouth. Breath gradually makes contact with the flute and reveals an echo of the solo excerpt before dissolving into whistle-tones. Williams and Dyer have devised an expertly crafted gesture of a piece that reflects Williams' new-found mastery over her breath and which receives a supremely measured ending to the performance that harks to the what percussionist Debashis Sinha refers to as the 'punishingly simple' diminuendo to silence in James Tenney's *Having never written a note for percussion* (1971).

The remaining programme of Decontamination 12 was an enchanting study in instrumental technique and historical performance practice facilitated by Sciarrino's innovating writing for the flute and violin. At a curatorial level, Williams' paired performance of *Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi?* and *Canzona di ringraziamento* from Sciarrino's *L'opera per flauto* functions not only as an expanded frame to showcase a performer whose practice embodies what it means to be a breathing, moving performer, but also foreshadows Orazbayeva's uncompromisingly distinct interpolation of Sciarrino's instrumental techniques for the violin with selections from Telemann's *12 Fantasias for violin without bass* (1735).

Of the seven pieces comprising *L'opera per flauto*, only *Come vengono* and *Canzona* are performed without pause, *attacca*. Writing about the innovative instrumental technique in Sciarrino's *L'opera*, flutist Megan Lanz remarks:

Sciarrino chose to link these pieces because the first is a development of new techniques, and the second is an exploration of the most unique of those techniques. He has said that *Canzona* is a 'construction on the few sounds left suspended by the incantations'. One piece evolves into the other, and the effect of the two in succession is seamless and organic, as if part of the same stream of consciousness [footnote reference removed from original passage].¹

Orazbayeva's performance of the first three movements from Sciarrino's *Six caprices for violin* (1975–76) mirrors Williams' *attacca* and brings the baroque music of Telemann's *Fantasias* into the same stream of instrumental consciousness as Sciarrino. Techniques such as circular bowing, varying degrees of bowing pressure, and stark shifts of bowing position from above the bridge to above the fingerboard, are explored in the *Caprices* and redeployed to articulate and animate the *Fantasias*. In doing so, Orazbayeva

manages to both edify and make ruin of the Baroque sculptures of music past. Her visionary, some might say 'historically ill-informed',² performances are in a league of their own.

Equally focused on the physicality of performance, Orazbayeva presents her performances in a remarkably understated fashion that belies a performer wholly committed to the craft of their instrument. Afterwards, I, like many members of the audience, was temporarily suspended in astonishment by Orazbayeva's incantation. What had come over us? What strange alchemy had our ears just collectively beheld? And wow, what a singular vision of the past moving into present consciousness was revealed.

The second concert of the evening, Decontamination 13, was dedicated to a single piece, *Lecture about sad music and happy dance*, collaboratively devised by Anaraki, Orazbayeva, and Shlomowitz. This collaboration is a logical progression of the three's history of working together. Anaraki is a long-time choreographic and dancing collaborator in the field of contemporary music composition, having worked with David Helbich, Cathy van Eck, Stefan Prins and Joanna Bailie, to name a few, and has performed Shlomowitz's *Letter pieces* (2007–) and collaborated on *A to Zzz* (2011). Likewise, Orazbayeva has performed several of Shlomowitz's pieces, most notably in this context his *Lecture about bad music* (2015).

This evening's hour-long lecture-performance moves through a sequence of emotional appeals, misdirections, speculations and combinations, as Anaraki and Orazbayeva take turns musically, physically and verbally illuminating a variety of scholarly perspectives on relationships between emotion, movement and music. The performance begins with a purportedly neutral and objective presentation of both music and dance, sensitises audience to their physiological reactions to emotional change, characterises emotional profiles of both music and dance, actively moves audiences through a spectrum of emotional categories, and ultimately combines and mixes different established musical and dancier emotional representations to comment on why happy humans could be drawn towards sad art.

In this review I attempt to partially unpack one of the lecture's final emotional propositions

¹ Megan R. Lanz, 'Silence: Exploring Slavatore Sciarrino's Style through *L'opera per flauto*', *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*, 730 (2010), p. 49.

² For a satirical example of the ideological silos that can close off historical informed performance practice scholarship to radically engaged interpretations, see David Pocknee, 'Historically Ill-Informed Performance Practice: A Documentary', <https://soundcloud.com/dpocknee/historically-ill-informed-performance-practice-a-documentary> (accessed 01 June 2018).

regarding the appeal of sadness in art. To do this, I draw from sociologist Erving Goffman's analysis of lectures and his concept of the 'talking machine' to discuss the progression of Shlomowitz's 'lectures about music' series – which to date includes *Lecture about bad music* and *Lecture about listening to music* (2017) – to integrate an approach towards performance practice that Shlomowitz has identified as the 'performer as automation'.³

Goffman's talking machine is a three-part entity that embodies what Goffman defines with the roles of animator, author, and principal. An animator is a 'thing that the sound comes out of', an author the source of the text, and a principal is the person who 'believes personally in what is being said and takes the position that is implied in the remarks'. For Goffman, it is common and important for lectures that animator, author and principal are the same person. In the first two lectures from the series, Shlomowitz himself effectively embodies Goffman's talking machine. In those lectures, Shlomowitz is located on stage as the lecturing figure who animates the text (the sounding music) with interjected and overlaid contextualising remarks sourced from variety of scholars who have written about the topic at hand. There, Shlomowitz maintains an objective perspective on the authored (con) texts, presenting them more often than not as statements rather than principled beliefs. Yet, in the final analysis, Shlomowitz still manages to occasionally function as the principal, using the text and context to arrive at multiple perspectives and passing belief statements on the lecture's topic.

In *Lecture about sad music and happy dance*, Shlomowitz himself recedes to the background and is obscured as a lecturing figure. Instead, Anaraki and Orazbayeva are figured as proxy talking machines, that/who, in verbally presenting the intellectual vignettes and accompanying slide-show *de rigueur*, become the animators and supposed authors/principles of the lecture-performance's messages.⁴ Anaraki and Orazbayeva function here more like automated performers following a script, almost as characters in a show of verbatim theatre. They are a combined bifurcation and

automation of Shlomowitz-as-lecturer, but they still periodically maintain and exercise their own agency (for example, Orazbayeva incorporates elements of Telemann's *Fantasias* into an illustration of sad and drooping music).

This automation of the performers is in itself largely remarkable, especially given the way that aspects of music, dance, and scholarly sources are presented as objective statements, if not facts. It would seem as though any one, with the prerequisite technique to make music and dance, could stand in as animators in this lecture. However, the implicit role of the talking machine also functioning as a principal results in a particularly striking moment towards the end of the performance when a frame-break happens and a non-objective statement on human emotional response to supporting homeless people confrontationally brings the performance out of the aesthetic realm and into the realm of the subjective everyday.

During the final section of dialogue, when the question of why humans may want to experience sad artwork is raised, Orazbayeva defers to Anaraki to animate this frame-breaking subjective position. The answer that Anaraki animates is that humans are attracted to sad art because it makes them feel happy. Anaraki goes on to claim that that answer is derived from the theory of 'social downward comparison, which proposes that when we encounter a person whose situation is worse than our own, it allows us to see that our situation is actually not so bad'. And finally put into the position of taking a principled stance, Anaraki goes on to say that, 'likewise, being confronted with extremely sad art makes us feel better about ourselves. From this perspective, encountering a homeless person and listening to Mozart's *Requiem* triggers the same reaction'.

In deferring to Anaraki for this argument, it was clear, to me at least, that Orazbayeva's role as a fully formed and semi-automated talking machine had been challenged – her character put in the position of nearly animating a statement that Orazbayeva herself seems unable to commit to in principal. By having one of the talking machines pushed to a breaking point, the confrontational nature of the emotional proposition is doubly articulated.

The immediacy of this isolated and finalising gesture was made all the more striking given a history of homelessness near the location of the performance venue in Manchester. Three years ago and a few blocks north-west of the RNCM on Oxford Road was 'The ARK', a camp located underneath the Mancunian Way

³ Erving Goffman, 'The Lecture', *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 167.

⁴ This is a unique approach among some of the most well-known lecture-performances within the field of contemporary music, including, as curator Goves points out in a blog post marketing the event, Johannes Kreidler and Trond Reinholdtsen. See Larry Goves, 'Decontamination #12 & #13', <https://larrygoves.com/2018/02/27/decontamination-12-13/> (accessed 1 June 2018).

flyover highway consisting of a group of homeless people who collectively banded together to form a relatively more sustainable living situation.⁵ No longer able to look down upon the sad situation of an isolated individual instance of homelessness and feel a condescending sense of happiness, and due to an alleged danger to university students and concerns about vandalism (in other words: a politics of visibility discordant with the images and emotions the city wishes to project), the Manchester City Council banned the ARK's cooperative living effort. Today, across the road from the now fenced off empty space that was formerly home to The ARK exists a developing site of gentrification: Hatch, another assemblage of stacked shipping containers that are set on mimicking Shoreditch's BoxPark, an iconic site of gentrification in London's East End. Mancunians can now pass by and patronise individual homeless people who still surround the area, obtain a distorted, *Requiem*-like, happiness, and then proceed to exercise their privileged position in society again by patronizing Hatch.

The brief exposure of the machinations at play in *Lecture about sad music and happy dance* – revealing the performers' convoluted roles as both free and autonomous agents – strikes to the core of the lecture's topic of emotion. Unfortunately, this fissure is not further explored in the performance. While I am unable to say whether it is the intention of Anaraki, Orazbayeva or Shlomowitz to eventually delve into this type of fissure in more depth, I cannot help but perceive a fruitful area to be further explored and developed in this ongoing series of lectures. Overall, *Lecture about sad music and happy dance* receives a powerful and committed performance by Anaraki and Orazbayeva, and proves to be an important and ultimately troubling piece of contemporary composition looking to unpack art's relationship to and influence on emotions and how we relate to each other in contemporary society.

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Johannes Kreidler, *Mein Staat als Freund und Geliebte*. Oper Halle.

Johannes Kreidler has written an opera. This is, alongside Alexander Schubert making Ensemble Intercontemporain sync up to strobe lights and Jennifer Walshe making Lucas Fels do a silly dance, a symptom of the inevitable institutionalisation of former iconoclasts who less than half a decade ago were still being championed as figures who, in Michael Rebhahn's polemic terms, 'resigned from New Music'. But Kreidler does not seem to feel threatened by this. Indeed, his willingness to adopt the official genre of opera without qualification – in contrast to Ferneyhough's 'thought opera', Lachenmann's 'musik mit Bildern', and the more common designations of 'music theatre' or 'musical action' – signifies just how comfortable he is with his position as an established composer.

In fact, in all respects *Mein Staat als Freund und Geliebte* is a mature, confident and almost subdued work. Certainly, compared with the high meta-melodrama of *Fremdarbeit*, *Audioguide* and the various Protestaktionen, the composer's touch is far more delicate and self-contained here, to the extent that Kreidler himself never once appears onstage, not even at the end to receive applause. The premise, conceptually rich if somewhat well-trodden, is the relation of the individual (acted by a pianist/speaker) to the state (portrayed by the chorus, wearing, in a minor stroke of costuming brilliance, full evening dress with black socks and sandals), and specifically the contemporary German Federal Republic. Fortunately, the sort of edgy civics lesson this might suggest was only the superficial dramatic content of the opera (although, in weaker moments, like bits of easy mockery of the far right, it threatened primacy), and, as is often the case in Kreidler's oeuvre, the real focus of the piece was how musical aesthetics are translated into political aesthetics, and vice versa.

The star of the show was undoubtedly Stefan Paul (stylised stefanpaul in the programme and elsewhere), who, embodying the individual against the state of the chorus as a sort of Brechtian everyman, served exhaustive duties as actor, pianist (both solo and accompaniment), reciter, and master of ceremonies. Paul plays the piano extremely well – there's a bit towards the beginning where he plays a Liszt piece to somewhat gratuitously illustrate 'die Virtuosität des Individuums' – but his skill as a performer, and above all a stage presence, is completely transfixing. His ability to create an

⁵ Fin Murphy, 'Meeting the Creator of Manchester's Unauthorized Camp for the Homeless', *Vice*, 15 September 2015, available at https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dp5xy7/the-ark-manchester-homeless-camp-585 (accessed 01 June 2018).