

a suspension; people are unable to get out of a static situation' – as well as to function together to hold the opera's 'exit point', the point from which the operatic work can unfold. It is in the act of friction that a 'borderline' can melt away, giving rise to all sorts of other vibrant energies hidden within.

Divided into six separate acts, the opera proved to beautifully morph, dissipate and dissolve across its timespan in a way not so dissimilar to six droplets of coloured ink entering the transparency of water. Yet each act was also clearly defined. The beginning of a new act included a 12-second pause, the dimming of lights, and the harsh, metallic, repeated sounds of a metal gate clanking shut, whilst the only piece of stage scenery – a dark, solid, screen stretching the entire vertical surface area of the stage – was repositioned to reveal more and more light, not only horizontally, by opening right to left toward the back of the stage like a door, but also vertically, by slitting into smaller, separate, pillars. All 12 performers (including Trio 1 and 2, who voice extracts from *Homecoming* and *FRONT*, as well as six actors) were also delicately choreographed. Each performer slowly unfolded their movements, being sure to take enough time between one point of reference to another, prising wide open what often seemed such desperate and frightful moments of signification. The slow, visual, pace of the opera respectfully gave licence to the listener to 'just' experience; like a meditation, there was no need to stress or strain.

Czernowin uses her own synopsis of the work to invite the audience to '[i]magine that the hall, the whole space of the hall is the inside of a head/ heart/ body ... of a person who find themselves in a difficult or hopeless situation'. Upon entering the venue, it was not long before the rounded architecture soon began to feel like a resonating sheath or membrane, an expansion perhaps of one's own corporeal space. The four instrumental soloists (consisting of one amplified guitar, one electric guitar, and two violoncellos) were hidden from view in the royal box, as was the orchestra in the orchestral pit, while electronic speakers were positioned all around. The performance encouraged one to become completely immersed, signifying that this is a work in touch with the dispersal(s) stemming from the present moment:

the opera is about more than *Homecoming* or the First World War. It is about our existence now and here. How we survive, how [we] are destined to survive and how even the smallest elements of vitality commend survival and with it perhaps hope.

Such dealings seemed to prove too much for some; an hour into the performance, and just before the start of act four, a small gathering of audience members left the auditorium. The final applause was equally telling: there was an air of hesitancy, the hall figuratively filling with huge, bubbled, question marks hovering over each individual head. Undoubtedly, this striking response had been premediated and meticulously crafted all along by Czernowin.

Yet, it was during act four of the opera that a significant shift occurred: a realisation that every devastating situation encompasses the choice to move forward. In acts two and three, for example, the electronics would fleetingly transform the sonorities of the hall into the boundaries of a circular cage in which a bird is anxiously flapping its wings, flying only in short strides, trying to find an opening to escape from such an alien environment. In act four, however, the listener seems no longer at the mercy of such confinement. Settling into the stillness of breath, the opera reaches a new and unfamiliar place, one that is nevertheless intimate, fathomable and grounded: 'in order to survive, one must find the will to continue and to find hope in the simplest element of existence, the breathing. ("in pain there is breath"–David Grossmann)'. The process and intricacies of each individual breath could be fully experienced as places of refuge in themselves. A BBC News bulletin soon emerges in counterpoint to the breath, transitioning from jingle to a speech that quickly declines into muffled nonsense. Just like the multiple other layers at work in the opera, this gesture is given time to unfold, ensuring that 'what was horizontal, becomes an array, or a collection, of verticality'. In Darmstadt, Czernowin stated, 'at the end of the evening, I hope, that one would feel not that this is a huge and rich production, but one would feel very naked'. Profoundly, the opera achieved this feat from the very beginning; the work voiced the present in a way that seemed in desperate remembrance to our own generation – here and now – if they are to have any chance of true survival from the future(s) on the horizon.

Stephanie Jones

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### Tectonics Festival Glasgow

For those who, consciously or not, have come to associate today's exploratory music with small ensembles, electronics or performative

physicality, the symphony orchestra can seem an unlikely source of new horizons. The orthodoxy of the concert hall, the uniforms, the absorption of human performers into an abstract whole, the stasis of musicians and audience: these aren't new anxieties but they persist in interesting ways.

Tectonics, which puts the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at its curatorial centre, represents a bold response to such concerns. This was the festival's fifth Glasgow edition (nineteenth overall), and as usual, the collaborative energy of conductor and co-director Ilan Volkov appeared to generate an endless stream of exchanges. This year, among other ventures, the BBCSSO dissolved itself into the structured experiment of Eddie Prévost's *Spirals*; enacted a deliriously maxed-out iteration of James Saunders' sequence learning series; and captured the searing, choreographed turmoil of Shiori Usui's *From Scratch*.

Perhaps the most anticipated link-up saw the orchestra in dialogue with Australian trio The Necks, whose slow-burn improv has brought them rare popularity over a 30-year career. The fine-grained interplay of Lloyd Swanton's double bass, Tony Buck's drums and Chris Abrahams' piano has always offered much to enjoy, sharing a little in common with the deconstructions of Supersilent or Oren Ambarchi. One danger here was always that a full symphony orchestra might swamp this density of nuance, and Swanton's feverish extrusions certainly receded from focus more than once. Volkov guided the orchestra via a system of loose cues, throwing up Penderecki-like suspensions of texture that mutated and collapsed as they sought the attention of the trio out front. At one point shards of woodwind were thrown into brilliant, warped focus, but in the end these energies seemed just too much to harness over 45 minutes.

As in 2016, the City Halls complex provided a home for the weekend's action, the formal shoebox of the Grand Hall paired with the renovated and dimly lit Old Fruitmarket. Venues are always more than mere vessels, though, and during festivals they become especially active bearers of meaning. In the Fruitmarket, signs for traders and wholesalers point to the building's original function in the mid-nineteenth century, when Glasgow was thriving as a key node in the British Empire. Two performances alluded to the setting, in very different ways. Against the backdrop of a compact trio of improvisers, Ilana Halperin took the Clydebank shipping industry as one theme in a monologue that also touched

on volcanoes and hot springs, personal biography and world history. The 'felt events' of its title refer to the seismological term for earthquakes, yet for Halperin, delivering her narrative through elastic, jazz-poetry vowels, the phrase afforded a geopoetic linkage of the tectonic and the emotional.

The site-specific allusions of Ash Reid were more contemporary by comparison. Amid broader reflections on patriarchy and exclusion, the artist homed in on the controversial regeneration project that has transformed this section of Glasgow in recent years. With cheap MIDI loops, ironic slogans and participants snaking through the audience, Reid's was by far the most confrontational performance of the festival, even if its strategies never quite seemed to coalesce.

A more prominent theme for the weekend emerged through a thread of works by Linda Catlin Smith, the Toronto-based composer enjoying a distinct surge of interest in the UK following the 2016 recording of her violin and percussion duo, *Dirt Road*, for Another Timbre. Among her four European premieres given at Tectonics, one dates from 2005 and another from 1991: evidence, if it were needed, of just how delayed the discovery of her work has been this side of the Atlantic.

'Why the delay?' we might ask, though a more interesting question might be 'why the discovery?' One response, ventured by Kate Molleson during a recent interview for the *Daily Herald*, has been that Smith's music belongs to 'a quiet revolution of slow, careful, inconclusive sounds that speak, or whisper, against the noise and dogma of the times'. The analogy shouldn't be taken too literally – slow music as the sound of some refusal of political doctrine – but there's undoubtedly a salience to this vocabulary of restraint. It spoke most vividly in *Ricercar*, a solo for baroque cello whose searching contours were animated with extraordinary resonance by Alison McGillvray. Smith has described the piece in terms of 'a melody in search of its harmony' and, amid the perambulation, a cautious, steeply rising three-note motif appeared to pose unfathomable questions. In *Wilderness*, equipped with the more elaborate palette of a full orchestra, her concerns seemed more linked to texture. The piece emerged fully formed, a loosely shifting mass of emotional uncertainty that narrated only the slightest of stories.

Aspects of Smith's music reverberated through other parts of the programme, too. Andrew McIntosh has also found inspiration in

both Feldman and a range of baroque composers, and his *Hyenas In The Temples of Pleasure* shared something of Smith's uncluttered sensibility. It turned out to be among the most engrossing compositions of the festival: two pianos began in cautious, contrary motion, while later an array of unconventional percussion – tuned aluminium pipes, a bowl of water, a pair of wine glasses – produced a drifting, sparsely populated panorama. The members of Yarn/Wire dealt meticulously with the strangeness, spread out in mysterious isolation from one another across the stage.

Meanwhile, Saturday night's closing set from Triangulum stretched the paradigm of unhurriedness to a limit of sorts. Combining Julia Holter, Catherine Lamb and Laura Steenberge – all CalArts graduates with far-reaching and distinctive practices – the performance unfolded as a kind of experiment in harmonic ratios. Long, minimally audible tones were conjured from viola, viola da gamba and synth, as well as the players' own voices, each sound drifting into and out of the next with almost monastic restraint. The inner logic remained cryptic but presumably links to earlier projects such as *Singing By Numbers*, an experimental women's choir formed by the same trio in Los Angeles in 2009.

If the intimacy of Triangulum was thoroughly human, an installation by Rie Nakajima and Pierre Berthet, by contrast, offered a closeness inhabited by automata and found objects. Tin cans hung suspended from metal wires, inflated bin liners wheezed in gentle chorus, and smaller plastic bags fluttered and rustled in currents of warm air emanating from the radiators below. Vibrations unmasked themselves as we gained proximity to each of these 'living objects' in turn. 'Touch only with the ears', urged a handwritten sign, capturing something of the close listening such environments reward. During periodic performance slots the artists intervened more actively, coaxing miniature motorised items into contact with an archipelago of jars, plates and springs arranged across the floor.

Much as it wove its way through the programme, this fascination with the unobtrusive also found vital moments of counterpoint. Duos by James Saunders and Tim Parkinson were wryly paired with Smith's *Ricercar*: there's a primary-colours directness to their work which felt especially bracing here. Another kind of agitation was to be found in the rarely heard orchestral work of Roscoe Mitchell, better known for his sinewy, vital wind playing in the

Art Ensemble of Chicago. In the mid-1960s, through the Association for the Advancement of Colored Musicians (AACM), Mitchell helped shape a new intellectual ferment in avant-garde jazz. Cageian approaches to indeterminacy were interrogated, and community education programmes fostered radical, communal visions – see George Lewis's illuminating 2009 account *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. The Art Ensemble of Chicago became known for its use of whistles, harmonicas and other 'little instruments', but by comparison Mitchell's 'CONVERSATIONS', performed indefatigably here by the BBCSSO, proved less idiosyncratic. Reworked from a pair of 2014 albums recorded with Craig Taborn and Kikanju Baku, this was big, bold, American writing: sassy brass unisons shoved their way through a crowd of syncopation while a larger-than-life percussion combo rolled out fearless, fragmented grooves. And amid the cacophony I couldn't help but hear Varèse, even Ives, as much as the junctures of a later cityscape.

Good, high-energy fun, but more compelling were Mitchell's two solo improvisations at the very start of the festival. Writing in *The Wire*, Meredith Monk recently characterised Mitchell as a 'rugged individualist', and here the description seemed apt. His first solo, for soprano saxophone, began with an astonishing fluidity, swooping vertiginously and perching on microtonal ledges before arriving at a territory of more discrete utterances. Lines of flight were punctuated by sharp diversions, but in the second solo, now on soprano, Mitchell was limitlessly kinetic.

Hosting a panel discussion on the first day, Robert Worby relished the sense that Tectonics 'is not a safe place to be'. If only that were truer: rarely were comfort zones transgressed. Still, few festivals can boast such thoughtful juxtapositions. If Mitchell's dynamism and Smith's ambiguity seemed to crystallise a distinct polarity, there was also something shared across the programme, something more than an obvious refusal of narrative logics. Perhaps it's what Smith gestures towards when, in the same *Herald* interview quoted above, she suggests that her experiment 'is always about whether something will hold'. As for whether the orchestra itself will 'hold', the festival proved my wariness somewhat naïve: at its best Tectonics approaches the symphony orchestra as a constellation of possibilities, something to be reconfigured and unwound: an open resource more than a tightly framed format. Not as unsafe a place to be as

might be hoped, then, but an intelligent tapes-try of unclassifiable musics nonetheless.

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### Maerzmusik 2017, Berlin

One particularly engaging historical inquiry at Maerzmusik 2017 was the concert titled *Re-inventing Smetak*, a concert with two documentary interludes on Brazil-based composer and instrument builder Walter Smetak, as well as premieres of commissions of living composers to write for his instruments, most notably Liza Lim's *Ronda – The Spinning World*, which integrated Smetak's conceptualisation of the world as 'polarities of energy flowing across and spiraling around axes of evolution and he built his instruments or Plásticas Sonoras (sound sculptures) to express his complex symbology of spiritual relations'.<sup>1</sup> 'Across and spiraling around axis of evolution' referred in part to the sprawling percussion-instrument tree in the centre of the stage with branches of tiny percussion objects dangling from its limbs, and a few scattered barrel-like instruments that made ratchet-like noises when they were turned and rotated by the percussionists. Percussion is already so varied nowadays that one isn't easily engaged by undiscovered instruments from the past, yet Lim's piece also included some sensitive, signature string writing and was able to incorporate Smetak's percussion instruments and jangle and rattle and integrate them at significant formal moments – navigating the physical spectacle on stage and navigating a tricky compositional assignment.

The concert of Smetak's instruments was one item on a festival menu that featured similar cross-cultural projects, historical endeavours, and bold choices of events and musical works that committed strongly to a diverse array of musical material. Other highlights of the wide range of social and historical concerns include a pre-recorded interview with Donna Haraway by the Artistic Director of the festival, Berno Odo Polzer, *Statements on "Decolonizing Time"*, and as part of that same conference a workshop presentation, *Gender Relations in New Music*, by Georgina Born, Arnbjörg María Danielsen and Ashley Fure. Amidst these dialogues and

historical visits were concerts of New Music classics such as Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* performed by the composer himself, and Helmut Lachenmann's *Gran Torso* interpreted by the Sonar Quartett.

The opening concert featured three pieces by Julius Eastman, all for four pianos, *Gay Guerilla* (1979), and two German premieres, *Evil Nigger* (1979), and *Crazy Nigger* (1978). His recently popularity makes one question why he wasn't on the roster of top minimalists from the 1970s and 80s. His flexible and dynamic approach to rhythm and phrasing is a great contrast and relief to Glass, Adams, Reich and Riley, and after listening to two hours of Eastman's music one begins to wonder why the vanguard minimalists had to be so strict with their ostinato eighth notes, and so didactic with their melodic patterns – Eastman's music makes the most out of a minimum of material without drilling the same small motivic melodic idea into your head or conforming to a predictable metrical grid.

Halfway through the concert, a recording of Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert<sup>2</sup> on 1 June 1980 was played.<sup>3</sup> His inventive repurposing of the word 'nigger' is a remarkably creative act in itself:

Now, there was a little problem with the titles of the pieces. There were some students and one faculty member who felt that the titles were somehow derogatory in some manner being that the word 'nigger' is in it. These particular titles, the reason I use them is because I use them, there is a whole series of these pieces. They are called the Nigger series. Now the reason that I use the particular word is because for me it has a, what is what I call 'basicness' about it, that is to say that I feel that in any case the first niggers were of course the field niggers and upon that is really the basis of the American economic system, without field niggers we wouldn't really have such a great and grand economy. So that is what I call first and great nigger, the field niggers, and what I mean by niggers is that which is fundamental, the person or thing that obtains to a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial, or what can we say, elegant. So that a nigger to me is that kind of thing which attains himself or herself to the ground of anything. You see. And that's what I mean by nigger, so there are many niggers, many kinds of niggers. There might be, there are of course 99 names of Allah and there are 52 niggers. And so therefore we are playing two of these niggers.

The speech was received thoughtfully and without much controversy, and the warm social

<sup>1</sup> From the Berliner Festspiele Maerzmusik 2017 festival programme.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2610&context=etd>.

<sup>3</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2XtFZMpw0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2XtFZMpw0).