

and inquiries into contrasting social, historical, and stylistic materials and positions.

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### Only Connect Festival of Sound 2017, Oslo

In London the bank – as a building, its symbolism and its position within the cityscape – is sacrosanct. In Oslo banks become arts venues. Although it is moving soon to new premises being built further up the waterfront, the National Museum of Contemporary Art is currently housed in a former bank. A few blocks away is Sentralen, a relatively new, multi-purpose performance arts space, meeting place, restaurant and bar.

Sentralen is housed in the former Christiania Sparebank, Norway's first savings bank, but since reopening last year has already become a popular venue for Oslo's thriving new music scene: both the Ultima and Only Connect festivals make use of it now. For Only Connect, this May, larger concerts were held in the grand marble-walled Marmorsalen; others were held in some of the smaller spaces, including four short solo performances by the electro-acoustic musician André Bratten, held in the dark and claustrophobic space of the former vault.

Only Connect's ambition is to forge links between the worlds of contemporary music and the other arts, and the three-day festival featured pieces involving film, performance poetry, meditation and even a little dance. Composition remains at the core, however, even if broadly defined; and every performance was principally a musical one, even if that definition was also stretched a little beyond traditional norms.

The middle day of the festival (Friday, 19 May) was, in some respects, its most conventional. Given over to a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Norwegian Society of Composers it featured music by Norwegian composers across three concerts: a recital of Hardanger fiddle (Therese Birkelund Ulvo's *Fragile*, played by Britt Pernille Frøholm) and mezzo-soprano and piano songs (Jon Øivind Ness's *Meditasjonar over Georges de la Tour nr. XVII*, a world premiere, and Rolf Wallin's ... *though what made it has gone*, performed by Elisabeth Holmertz and Kenneth Karlsson); the *The Exotica Album*, performed by BIT20 Ensemble, saxophonist Kjetil Møster and analogue synth player Jørgen Trøen; and, at the

start, a celebration concert featuring a medley of Norwegian composers from the last 100 years and a double bass concerto, *The Ark*, by Oslo Sinfonietta bassist Håkon Thelin.

Of the three, the chamber recital was the most easily enjoyable: Ulvo's piece is an exciting, sonically interesting showcase for the Hardanger fiddle, played with great verve by Frøholm. Wallin's 1987 song, which Karlsson helped commission, demonstrated the composer's usual technical facility. I admit I've not yet found a way in to Wallin's music in general; it can leave me a little cold, but this piece provided a wonderful opportunity for Holmertz. Indeed, the singer was the star of the show. While Karlsson's neutral piano style sank into washes of chromatic resonance, Holmertz was by turns strong, sexy, measured when she needed to be, full throated when she didn't. The contrast between the two performers was more effectively played in Ness's piece, in which the piano part's Satie-like efficiency of gesture (the two hands played in rhythmic unison almost throughout) proved a perfect foil for the exuberant expressionism of the voice.

For an outsider, the Norwegian Society of Composers concert was an underwhelming affair. The medley, by the Oslo Sinfonietta's conductor, Christian Eggen, was intended to be enjoyed alongside a quiz – match each extract to a list of 13 composers to spell out a codeword; prizes to the winners at the end. Those around me seemed to enter into the spirit of the thing with enthusiasm; I was completely at sea, only recognising three or four of the names on the list and none of the music. Thelin's bass concerto began promisingly, at least in its set up: the stage was rearranged around a giant bass drum; the wind section was studded with bass and contrabass instruments (the bassoon looking comically piccolo in their company). Yet the promise of a study in orchestral low-end theory didn't materialise. I'm not sure what Thelin's piece actually was, but it wasn't that. There were cameos – at one point the renowned willow flute player Steinar Ofsdal strode to the front for a short cadenza, never to be seen again. There was eclecticism – gimmicky orchestration and extended instrumental techniques sat beside a loose cabaret vibe. But *The Ark* didn't sustain an argument, couldn't work out what it wanted to be. Like its namesake it tried to contain a bit of everything; however, I fear it ran aground.

No less broad in its range of references, but somewhat more successful in making something new out of them, was Torvund's *The Exotica Album*. For this, two stages were set out – one

for the 15 or so players of Bergen's BIT20 Ensemble, the other for the sax and synth duo of Møster and Trøen. For the most part, the latter pair improvised (in a more or less organised fashion) noisy, uninhibited bleeps and skronks. BIT20, meanwhile, were occupied in a recreation of the cheesy listening lounge atmosphere of a Les Baxter or Martin Denny record. Although billed as 'two concerts at the same time' it wasn't really. After a promising and ear-opening collision between the two groups at the start, the piece settled into a duetting rhythm, finishing each other's sentences. Torvund had done his exotica homework and his score was sprinkled with characteristic touches. I liked, too, the way in which Trøen's synthetic squelches – reminiscent of early Stockhausen – morphed perfectly into the ensemble's exotica flute and vibraphone riffs. If this is a conceptual work (and I suppose it is in some way) it was an unusually charming one. Nevertheless, I wished that it had pushed its premises further: why have two such contrasting focal points if you aren't going to really clash them together?

Things got weirder on Saturday. Jennifer Walshe presented a screening of *AN GLÉACHT*, a completion of her late, great-uncle Caoimhín Breathnach's film, with live improvisation by Walshe (vocals), Toshimaru Nakamura (mixing board) and Martin Taxt (microtonal tuba). *AN GLÉACHT* (and Breathnach himself) is part of Walshe's fictional history of the Irish avant-garde, so of course nothing was as it seemed; art intersected with real life, real life folded into fiction. Walshe's trio soundtracked the obscure, quasi-pagan rituals of the film with music ranging from naïve toy instruments to walls of electronic noise. Utterly thrilling.

A collaboration between Oslo's Rinzai Zen centre, chanting a series of Buddhist sutras, and the vocal and instrumental quintet Nakama, failed for me. Nakama's improvisation was more frenetic than ecstatic, and a poor sound balance (at least where I was) made the whole thing somewhat illegible and hard to buy into. The set from artist and writer Tim Etchells and violinist Aisha Orazbayeva that followed was something else, though. Standing awkwardly under the lights while people took their seats after the interval, they looked like they would rather be anywhere else. Then Etchells broke into character. Reading from a wad of notecards, many seemingly written that day, he spun looping, shambling sound poems from little aphorisms, headlines and other textual ephemera. As his phrases repeated, fragmented and built themselves up again, his persona went

through states of annoyance, anxiety, puzzlement, defiance, resignation and anger – something like the famous five stages of grief, in which the same basic fact is psychologically reconstituted over and over. Trump inevitably barged in. 'Things to look out for in the first ten seconds of the Trump presidency', intoned Etchells' increasingly troubled voice, building step by step until: 'Things to look out for in the first ten centuries of the Trump presidency'. Haha we laughed. Haha. Orazbayeva was a perfect foil, scratching and grinding loops of her own, playing her instrument like a cat worrying at a loose thread on the couch.

Etchells' and Orazbayeva's performance was an undoubted highlight, but the real standout events came at the beginning and towards the end of the three days. Thursday evening was built around the Norwegian premiere of Walshe's *EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT*, written for her and the Arditti Quartet, and the world premiere of Kristine Tjøgersen's *Mistérios de Corpo*; the quartet also performed Cage's *Four*. 'Welcome to Norway's "hangover day"', festival curator Anne Hilde Neset announced, the day before (17 May) being Norway's national day of celebration.<sup>1</sup>

And what a way to shake off that hangover. *EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT*, for voice, quartet and film, has taken the European festival circuit by storm since its first performance at Darmstadt last year. It has been reviewed twice already in this journal (see *TEMPO* 279 and 280), so I shan't dwell on it here, except to note that it is an extraordinary piece, and one that should cement Walshe's position as one of the most significant, original and accomplished composers of her generation. A lot of pieces are being written today that are in some way 'to do with' the Internet, or that are grounded in its aesthetics, structures and vocabulary. *EVERYTHING* is the first I've seen to really grasp the *texture* of online life. If the sixteenth century is characterised by the melancholic overlaying of joy and sadness – think Dowland – the twenty-first century is the overlaying of ecstasy and panic. We don't have a word for it yet, but Walshe captures it perfectly.

I wish I could say the same about *Mistérios de Corpo*. Another work combining string quartet and video, it touched on a few other shared themes with the Walshe: appropriation, the body, matters of translation between media. A

<sup>1</sup> Neset is soon to step down as Artistic Director of nyMusikk, Norway's centre for new music and sound art and the host of Only Connect; this was her last curated festival in that role.

tribute to the Brazilian jazz musician Hermeto Pascoal, it was based on his video of the same name, in which Pascoal, then in his late 70s, lies on his back, torso exposed, and uses his body and mouth as a percussion instrument.<sup>2</sup> The catch in Tjøgersen's piece is that while the film is playing, Pascoal's sounds are replaced by those of the quartet, who play in synch with the film. Some sounds are similar (Pascoal's slaps to his body are replicated as slaps on instruments' bodies, for example). Others are very different, and played for apparent comic effect – a high-pitched glissando twang whenever Pascoal struck his forehead couldn't help but raise a smile. But the piece left me uncomfortable: on his back, semi-naked, his grey-haired, drooping body blushing pink from the slaps he is giving himself, Pascoal's film places him in a position of great vulnerability. He only avoids ridicule because he is doing so on his own terms, showcasing his own skill and invention. Tjøgersen's piece strips that part of his performance away, so all we have is an old man pulling faces and hitting himself. There's an undeniable surreal comedy to it all – but at whose expense?

The last performance I saw, on Saturday night, was a three-piano rendition of Julius Eastman's *Evil Nigger* by Heloisa Amaral, Elisa Medinilla and Frederik Croene (I didn't last for the very final concert, a late-night gig by Paal Nilssen-Love's big band Extra Large Unit). This was ferocious. Brexit, Trump, ecological catastrophe; all of these had been in the air the last three days. *Evil Nigger* ripped the roof off Sentralen and rebirthed us all. It's one thing to point at something, I thought; quite something else to offer a solution, or at least a temporary release. The three pianists, their instruments pointing into the centre of the hall (Calvary? Macbeth's witches?), tore into Eastman's hammered, fortissimo tremolos, before, miraculously, staggeringly, refusing to let up for 30 minutes, generating a spinning storm of sound. Hearts stopped, eyes moistened. The marble walls of this former bank almost cracked. Eastman's posthumous reputation seems to be growing almost daily; a composer who has, too late alas, found his time. On this basis the acclaim is completely justified.

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#### NON-PIANO, IKLECTIK Arts Lab, London

March 18 was the first-ever World Toy Piano Day, and what better occasion for a concert showcasing this intriguing instrument. The pianist Xenia Pestova hosted *Non-Piano* at IKLECTIK Art Lab; the toy piano naturally took centre stage, with guest appearances from other non-piano keyboard instruments. IKLECTIK was an inspired venue – cosy without being cramped, with an acoustic that could accommodate both intimate whisperings and all-engulfing sound worlds. Pestova performed in every piece and was also a very charming host, establishing an informal tone from the get-go. No programmes (a boon! – no rustling), so everything was announced, with explanation of gestation and performance history. The relaxed surroundings well suited the exploratory and educational nature of the evening.

The programme was well balanced, offering compositions by both established and fledgling composers. Most of the world premieres in *Non-Piano* were written by attendees of the first London Toy Piano Composition Workshop, run by Pestova earlier this year. The evening's opener, however, was neither for toy piano nor a premiere: *asinglewordisnotenough2* (*aria da capo*) by Pierre Alexandre Tremblay for ROLI Seaboard and live electronics. Pestova was also joined by a live video wall, with strobing lines that amplified the musical gestures – this heightened my comprehension of the work. The electronics initially provided a luxurious bed, chiefly static, allowing the chattiness of the Seaboard's harrumphs, tics and squeaks to settle the listeners in to the sound world. This bed surrounds us, then plummets downwards, flirting with fifths and fourths, suggesting heartbeats and death rattles, rising in intensity to a frenzied cadenza, then crashing into an exhilarating finale – with tangible appreciation in the room. This bold splash of a work accosts the listener, but does not alienate.

Then came the first workshop grouping. *Sneeu Druppel* (*Snowdrops*) by Roché van Tiddens for solo toy piano made much use of rests, tripping lines, acciaccaturas and a spare texture, thus highlighting the toy piano's mechanism, making the piece almost a duet for pitches and percussion. Aaron Parker's *Suotnoiyo*, for toy piano and live electronics, began with Pestova tapping on the instrument's body with her fingernails, under and over; this was picked up by a microphone, and the resulting material

<sup>2</sup> That video is available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPMPye2gg3o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPMPye2gg3o).