

than a 'Te Deum' at the start and end of the film and a diagetic piano performance) with a darker running commentary to the unfolding drama. The music acts as a connecting thread, filling the space created by the absence of a rational explanation for the events enacted on stage with its own logic. In this sense, *The Exterminating Angel* is a perfect vehicle for the meeting of symphonism and absurdity that characterises Adès's understanding of opera,<sup>3</sup> enabling it to carve out an identity of its own, so that it stands independently from the film as a powerful meditation on the (deadly) consequences of mindless ritualised behaviour and loss of the will to act.

Much of the talk prior to the opera was about the large cast, who, by all accounts, had bonded closely during the intensive rehearsal period. And what a cast it was: the exceptional talents on display included alumni from various productions of Adès's *The Tempest* (Audrey Luna, Christine Rice, Iestyn Davies) as well as – amongst others – Amanda Echalaz, Anne Sofie von Otter, Sally Matthews, Charles Workman, Thomas Allen and John Tomlinson. Not only was the singing of Adès's taxing vocal writing of the highest standard, but the cast responded well to Cairns's complex production; the eye was frequently led from the active singers to some detail happening between other guests, as when Sten Byriell's dying exhortations (as the unfortunate Señor Russell) were counterpointed visually, and comically, by the sight of guests on the other side of the stage filing in and out of a makeshift toilet in a closet.

The orchestra is imaginatively deployed, with prominent roles for the piano and Ondes Martenot (played with typical virtuosity by Cynthia Millar). The music frequently taps into the vein of highly atmospheric eeriness that Adès made his own in earlier works such as *America* (1999) and, particularly, *Totentanz* (2013). The macabre aspects of the music were well matched by a series of compelling theatrical gestures in the third act, from Tal Yarden's video projection of a disembodied hand, to the sinister emergence from a cabinet of, and duet between, Sophie Bevan and Ed Lyon's Beatriz and Eduardo, prior to their suicide.

The denouement of the opera expands the role that the diegetic music plays in the film: it is only through Audrey Luna's character of

Leticia singing her long-delayed aria that the guests are released. Her words are adapted by Adès from the twelfth-century poet Yehuda Halevi, and speak of the longing to return from exile; they mirror a similar theme found in added material given to Christine Rice's Blanca. The music of Leticia's aria, though diatonic, is restless: it is about the search for, rather than the finding of, peace; about becoming rather than being. The same is true of the close of the opera: against a similar plea for deliverance, taken from the Requiem mass, the guests (as well as the chorus that had been stationed outside of the room) find themselves trapped on the opera stage, the music repeating in a potentially endless loop. Denied a traditional close (and requiring a blackout and sudden cut-off to enable some manner of ending), the on-stage dilemma is projected out into the audience, as if to remind us that we, too, are bound up in its (social) drama, and caught in an endless tension between action and inaction. An extended standing ovation for the composer and cast indicate that social conventions had been restored, though perhaps not without some degree of self awareness, after the compelling critique of such typical behavioural responses to which the audience had been subjected for the previous two hours.

Edward Venn

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### Gaudeamus Muziekweek, Utrecht

The Gaudeamus Muziekweek is now in its sixty-ninth year and, as ever, it focuses on young music pioneers, in hopes of presenting a snapshot of the newest ideas in contemporary music being developed across the world. The festival's dense and diverse programming is compressed into five full days, in 2016 from 7 to 11 September, squeezed principally within one labyrinthian building, the TivoliVredenburg, whose impressive monolithic glass exterior imposes itself as a pillar of cultural life in central Utrecht. Amid this density, it is impossible to provide anything but a partial account of the festival, and my presentation is far from impartial, as I was one of the five nominated composers for this year's Gaudeamus Award. If only from these fragments and particular foci, then, I will present my own reactions and estimations of how the festival has highlighted some of the innovations and interests of a few of the newest practitioners of new new music.

<sup>3</sup> See Adès's numerous comments on opera in Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

I was delighted to see the manifold ways in which the works showcased in the festival pushed the frontiers of the musical experience in ways that extend beyond what can be communicable through pitches and rhythms in a written score. Even the most conventional music I heard, epitomised in a surprisingly traditional opening-night concert with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, presented an extended vision of concert music with multimedia, theatrical elements, and a rupture of the assumptions behind the sanctioning of musical space, sound and action in concert performance. Michel van der Aa's *Up-Close*, the centrepiece of the evening, demonstrated that even rather traditional conceptions of music are being situated in ever more extended interdisciplinary frames, with a stage split in two between a video screen and the ensemble, with Kaori Yamagami, the solo cellist, breaching the bifurcated layers of spectacle in key moments of the work as she crossed the stage.

Works with a more ambitious use of electronics and new media played a key role throughout the festival, presaging the electronic extravaganza to come the following week through the International Computer Music Conference, hosted this year by Gaudeamus Muziekweek, again primarily at TivoliVredenberg. This ambition was particularly evident in the works of the five nominated composers for this year's Gaudeamus Award, all of whom had works with some form of electronics, often with video projection or interactive lights. David Bird's *Drop* was a highlight of the festival, bringing together forces from the two ensembles-in-residence, Oerknal! and Quatuor Bozzini, to form a string octet performed in the dark with tightly synchronised LED strobe lights. Sophisticated and precisely-realised integration of electronics and amplified instruments could be found in works by Giulio Colangelo and Shih-Wei Lo, and in the 2016 Gaudeamus Award Winner Anthony Vine's work, *For Agnes Martin*, delicate and refined held tones sensitively performed by Ensemble Modelo62 were extended and blurred to marvellous effect by sine tones played back on cassette recorders.

Perhaps most compellingly, however, this year's festival presented a great number of new works that engaged with aspects of the concert experience that extend beyond the borders of sound and the assumptions of the concert ritual. This included genre-bending exhibitions in the exciting 'Saturday Night Live' evening, densely-packed with short performances all over the building, including a meditative interactive work for new electronic instruments and voices,

*Bellyhorn, Pulse yarn*, by Dianne Verdonk and Stephanie Pan, and a comedic and somehow emotionally resonant spoken-word and synthpop performance by Gunnar Gunnsteinsson, entitled *Finding your Mind Patterns*, that gave me and my fellow concert-goers, in Gunnsteinsson's own words, 'the science goosebumps'.

Among my own works in the festival, I was pleased that *AMONG AM A*, a theatrical mixed piece that attempts to blur the boundaries of musical sound and action with other 'non-musical' aspects of the concert experience, was paired with the premiere of *A Sensorium* by Emre Sihan Kaleli, collaboratively realised with Ensemble Modelo62 to create an ambitious 40-minute work that combined extensive lighting changes, movement and smells, with punctuated sound events. The work was an exciting romp through different sensory modalities that nonetheless felt fractured; it offered a diversity of experiences but without a steering conceptual or aesthetic aim to give them weight and a direction.

Much more successful was *THIEVES*, realised by the sextet Looptail and composer Thanasis Deligiannis. The festival concluded with this collaborative and scoreless work, which presented an emotionally rich, charmingly bizarre and conceptually ambitious sequence of strained-voice confessions, movements of lights, quarter-tone tuned pianos imitating speech, and, in one poignant extended moment, the ensemble barking like a pack of dogs stone-faced at the audience. Evidently still a work-in-progress, with some sections more awkwardly constructed than others, it nonetheless captured well the innovative spirit of Gaudeamus Muziekweek.

Being a featured young composer in this context gives me the occasion to reflect on how such an event frames artists of my generation, and what it says about where we come from and where we may be going. I can only speak about such a pluralistic 'we' in a very limited way, necessarily narrow and personal, but for whatever it may be worth it seems to me that more and more composers are coming from backgrounds removed from traditional conservatories, multi-generation musical families, and extensive training on western classical instruments. References to computers, electric guitars and interdisciplinary art practices appear in composer biographies perhaps more frequently. It's then not surprising to me that many of us have assumptions about the infrastructures and practices of the performances of our music different from the received notions of our forerunners. So we are confronted constantly with the question of why we continue to be fascinated with these

received notions, these instruments, and these performance practices. From the works that I heard, I have no doubt that we are and will continue to be, but in each performance those assumptions necessarily become a feature of the work. It seems to me no longer sufficient that the basic materials and rituals of our art form recede invisibly into the background; they reassert themselves in contexts where those elements are radically extended and juxtaposed with novel frames and disruptions.

James O'Callaghan

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### EarTaxi Festival, Chicago

I so wanted to write something about how extraordinary, how diverse, how *friendly*, the New Music community in Chicago and environs is. About how righteous [Augusta Read Thomas's] decision was to focus on this remarkably expansive midwestern meta-alt-community. About how good the music is, and will be, and the performers and their performances. About the unique pleasure of unanticipated audition. But it is now mid-July, and the old Brecht line about 'these times' coils my mind like a childish superstition: 'A conversation about trees is almost a crime'.

Seth Brodsky, EarTaxi Programme Book

This review of the EarTaxi Festival, a beautiful, vibrant, kaleidoscope of events that celebrated New Music from every corner of Chicago in six days in October 2016, was written on 10 November 2016. There were 32 events featuring more than 350 Chicago musicians performing music by 88 Chicago composers. The festival gave 54 World Premieres, and included five sound installations, a colloquium from George Lewis, numerous panel discussions and countless drinks and meals with friends old and new throughout the week. But at the moment of writing, as I was casting my mind back over the concerts, many of the same musicians and composers were outside Trump Tower in Chicago, protesting the election of a man elected on a platform that demonised, belittled and threatened the very idea of a community and festival built on diversity, the global-nature of music-making and inclusion.

The music I was remembering had already travelled a long way. It began as an idea in Augusta Read Thomas's head in Millennium Park more than three years ago, when she first dreamed up the idea of a Festival celebrating the variety, energy and scope of Chicago's

emergent new music scene (not even a handful of these ensembles existed while I was doing my undergrad at Northwestern University, from 2001–2005). From these dreams, the music travelled through phone calls and fundraising dinners, through commissions and planning meetings, through rehearsals and, finally, became wonderful concerts. From there, it travelled again: into the bars after those concerts, on trains, boats and planes, and finally for me, that morning in November, onto my computer screen. So much travelling, just for us to chat about trees?

Throughout EarTaxi's span, there were nightly concerts which universally blew the roof off the Harris Theatre for Music and Dance in Millennium Park. The 1,500-seat venue hosted some of Chicago's most exciting ensembles, and it was packed night after night. The performers included training organisations such as the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, Northwestern's Contemporary Music and Contemporary/Early Vocal Ensembles, and the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, alongside the new generation of exceptional Chicago-based artists such as ICE, Third Coast Percussion, the Chicago Harp Quartet, Arcomusical, Ensemble Dal Niente, and the Spektral Quartet. Most of these ensembles were performing at Harris for the first time, and they gave universally moving, persuasive and world-class performances of music from an array of Chicago's composers.

On its two middle days – Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 October – the EarTaxi Festival hosted 11 free concerts in the Chicago Cultural Center. The hour-long events took place back-to-back, alternating between the ornate and spacious Preston Bradley Hall with its floor-to-ceiling windows, and the more intimate and somewhat academic Claudia Cassidy Theater. There were no tickets, so Preston Bradley Hall took on a festive atmosphere as each concert drew large intended and accidental audiences: people who slowed and then stopped as they passed by on some soon-to-be forgotten errand. These accidental audiences are important. It's easy to forget how, under the right circumstances, most people enjoy encountering and listening to new things. It's easy to forget how much New Music can be a part of this until you watch dozens of people stumble upon it joyfully, hour after hour, for two days. Without any pressure or guidance or 'road map' to bring them in, they arrive in haste, pause for a moment, and then find an entire afternoon has drifted away in an experience they couldn't have even imagined when they set out on their way.