

FIRST PERFORMANCES

London Contemporary Music Festival: 13–15 2015

It seems impossible at first to review multiple nights of the London Contemporary Music Festival all at once – over the course of a week the cavernous Ambika P3 gallery hosted a sensory overload of music that, while not always new, was certainly contemporary in the atypical thematic presentations, bringing together provocative works in provocative ways. Running from 11 to 17 December, the three middle nights of LCMF all dealt with the monumental: large, long works that opened up audience perceptions by virtue of extended contemplation. The concerts on Sunday and Tuesday lasted over three hours; they weren't easy, but they prompted salient experiences.

The name of the Monday concert, '5 Ways To Kill Time', was misleading. If music can be regarded as sound organised in time (to extend on Cage and Varèse), what is left when time is 'killed'? If the concert was any indication, we are left with sound that has an almost observable quality to it, sound almost as a static object. We were presented with works that undid our notions of development on the usual timescale (and attention span), requiring instead other changes to frame the experience. Ellen Fullman's performance of *The Watch Reprise* (2015) on her Long String Instrument was a humble visual spectacle despite the instrument's immense presence, and her careful movements within it became the musical form and phrasing – space became the new time and perhaps the most important aspect to the performance as the strings' timbre changed only imperceptibly, and notes 'outside' the cloud of tonality registered as a brief moment of experiential rupture before assimilating. The whole sound was Eno-esque, which was appropriate as his definition of ambient music (that it 'must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular') was highly relevant to the night's pieces.

Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guébrou's piano works came across as noodling lounge music but, free from the quotidian temporality associated with such, they became comfortable sonorous objects, like a comfy chair for the ears

(the reference to furniture here is deliberately suggestive of Satie). The general response to Guébrou's last-minute absence as performer seemed to indicate that the novelty of her appearance was the most anticipated part of the performance, but in their pleasantness the works were important counterpoints to what was to come.

Subsequent works in the evening posited timelessness as an intensity that could wear on the body, but were largely received by the audience with enthusiasm. A stellar performance of Bryn Harrison's *Repetitions in Extended Time* offered exactly that: a lumbering yet spiky and intricate work, performed with nuance by Ensemble Plus-Minus, which offered plenty of time to examine the entire sound world and its many small layers, changing attention to the layers constituting the real passing of time. Tim Etchells's and Aisha Orazbayeva's *Seeping Through* (2015) presented more spikiness in the performers' hectic motions and Beckett-like fracturing of text and sound, drawing in the audience. The night ended with an awesome (in the biblical sense) set by Stephen O'Malley who summoned massive guitar drones characteristic of his work in Sunn O. Here, sound was felt as much as heard and, lost in that feeling, one was reminded that time isn't something that 'happens', rather it is the consequence of our own responses to stimuli. It shook up the audience as a well-placed conclusion.

The following night, the audience was submerged in Chris Watson's *Okeanos*, a piece during which the listening lessons of the previous night could be taken to heart. The audience lay down around Ambika in near-total darkness as the space was filled with Watson's ocean soundscapes, which were masterfully recorded and included intense episodes of whales, seals, ice and other parts of the ocean one wouldn't think made sound but that turn out to be sonically massive. It was an example of the field recording at its greatest potential, and very well presented, everything flowing seamlessly together. Over approximately an hour and a half, the relaxed yet focused listening environment encouraged by Watson and the festival let the audience take in the work on their own

terms, presumably moving between levels of listening attention to take in both the remarkable little details of the recordings and also their symphonic scope. It raises the question of how the previous night's vast works could have been staged or presented: as an art form increasingly in dialogue with disparate practices of performance and engagement, should (or even can) contemporary art music be proposed solely as a total listening experience? The frequently modular use of Ambika, subdivided into spaces for different performances, appeared mostly to be a practical consideration, but it served to draw attention to the *liveness* of the performances: what staging there was helped to draw our attention to the discrete situation of each piece, thus preventing them from being condensed into a single moment of digestible contemplation; that is to say, saved us from the very edge of boredom.

All of these issues came to something of a head in Tuesday's concert, 'To A New Definition of Opera II'. If multimedia, presentation and environment are proving to be increasingly integral considerations within contemporary music programming and creation, how does one differentiate opera, with its own rich tradition of *Gestamtkunstwerk*, from other genres? The evening didn't seem to answer the question, but it certainly left the audience disorientated and possibly disturbed enough to keep asking it in new ways.

The 'operas' presented could not have been more different. Certainly it was something of a shocking move to open with Ryan Trecartin's *CENTER JENNY* (2013). Trecartin's video work is hyperactive, absurd and unashamed; reality TV excesses are taken to a whole new level, from quick cuts to disorienting sound design to a vaguely sci-fi narrative full of 'screaming betches'. In its overwhelming totality, maybe it's the closest thing to an opera the night offered, despite the fact that it was a video. It provided a sharp contrast to Tim Parkinson's *Time With People* (2014), the title of which perhaps describes the only requirements now for opera. Parkinson's description of his work as an 'anti-opera' seems accurate: Edges Ensemble told little stories in babbling counterpoint, shouted, banged drums and walked amongst piles of trash. The excerpts presented here (I cannot speak for the whole piece) were static yet developing and anti-virtuosic, and they deliberately trod the thin line between bated anticipation and boredom via their sprawling minimalism. Sue Tompkins's *Like Sake* (2015), on the other hand, packed a lot into the small

space of her own body, though to less effect: a sort of one-woman version of the Trecartin, Tompkins delivered rapid-fire vernacular speech, breaking into fragments of song and walking from the front of the stage to a large pile of paper to flip through pages of what was presumably the script. Where the first two works celebrated messiness, here it was acknowledged with a shrug. Tompkins was dwarfed by the huge space of Ambika, and seeing her energetic approach echo into merely observant silence made me wish the work were augmented with the ebullient sound of her band, *Life Without Buildings*.

If these three new works were characterised by a breaking down of the unities of form, medium and sense that classical opera held up as its greatest qualities akin to theatre, the last two works on the programme offered either a look back from which to establish a broader trajectory of development, or an imploration to mind what has come before. In a similar way to the promise of witnessing Guèbrou performing her piano works, the excitement around Ezra Pound's *Le Testament de Villon* was because it was happening at all. Its soloists – singers Robert Gildon and Loré Lixenberg, with rhapsodic violin playing again by Orazbayeva – maintained a high degree of expressiveness during their time in the spotlight, but gradually the production became more and more dramatically stilted, culminating in an unmoving choir that unfortunately stood in the way of the projected surtitles. Pound's composing is frequently awkward and meandering, but, out of its own time, its florid melodic sense makes it succeed as a notable curiosity, if not as a new definition of opera.

The audience seemed almost relieved with the arrival of *Pietà*, an excerpt from Stockhausen's *Dienstag aus Licht*. Here, minimal staging but intense lighting set a striking *mise en scène*, and the electronics, in their grandiose introduction, were an effective palette cleanser and set a bold pace for the concert's finale. Lixenberg, in a regal costume, had a stately presence, though her voice was sometimes overpowered by the excess amplification of Marco Blaauw's flugelhorn acrobatics. Nonetheless, it was the most imposing statement of the concert, demanding attention through the anticipation of the performers' statements, which were held aloft by the electronics. This is not, of course, to say that new opera must be in the mould of Stockhausen, but perhaps what made it so effective was the resounding presence (physically and emotionally) of *music*, in the sense of abundant,

awesome sound, compared to the conceptual manoeuvring which had come before.

The newer works in this year's festival were testing, at the programming level, the balance in contemporary music of musical and extra-musical elements. When the balance is right, we feel in the midst of something truly new and for our time, while still being able to feel the transcendent intensities of the sound. At the very least, unbalanced pieces or programmes will be interesting, and only make us eager to find yet another new thing. Given the high density of both such elements, LCMF deserves much credit for daring to stage so many epic experiments.

Ben Zucker

London Ear Festival

The London Ear Festival is a small contemporary chamber music festival in London, now in its fourth edition. The festival is centred on the venues of the Cello Factory (its festival hub) and the Warehouse, near Waterloo. Despite its centrality and accessibility, the festival maintains a community and village feel: a sort of musical oasis. This year's festival, running 9–13 March, was timetabled against a number of other notable concerts in London – not least those celebrating Michael Finnis's seventieth year – and so can be commended on its ability to draw audiences despite this clash, suggesting, perhaps, that it is genuinely offering something musically different and desirable.

London Ear does seem distinct in its programming. Although many of the composers on the programme are well known and established, such as Helmut Lachenmann, Luigi Nono, Elliott Carter and Heinz Holliger, there are not often many opportunities to hear this music in the UK: the festival is a valuable addition to the contemporary music scene in this respect, and a majority of the works were UK premieres. Well-known specialist contemporary music performers were also showcased, including Roberto Fabbricani (flute), Carin Levine (flute), Mieko Kanno (violin) and Rohan de Saram (cello). However, there was also the opportunity to discover less well-known names amongst them: in particular soprano Silje Aker Johnsen stood out for her excellent performances of Nono, Lachenmann and Beat Furrer. The music was similarly varied and not all familiar: this year there was a focus on percussion,

featuring the guest ensemble DeciBells XXL who presented much music primarily by and for percussionists including a number of different, frequently minimalist-derived, types of composition that often brought together large arrays of tuned and untuned instruments.

Some works and performances from the weekend stand out in particular. Silje Aker Johnsen's tense and captivating presentation of Luigi Nono's *La fabbrica illuminata* (1964) was a rare chance to hear this piece live and featured considered staging and technically perfect delivery (which transcended some balance issues that were a little in favour of the electronics). Similarly, her performance of Beat Furrer's *auf tönern füssen* (2001) – its UK premiere – with Carin Levine was intimate, precise and engaging. *schismatics II* (2007, rev. 2010) by Sam Hayden, performed by the composer on live electronics and Mieko Kanno on Violetra violin, successfully blended the electronic instrument and the live electronics and employed a wide range of tone colours. Also worthy of mention are Alexander Chernyshkov's noise-based work *rather blue* (2012), for clarinet and piano prepared with small electronic devices, and Hannes Dufek's *band/linie/horizont Ib* (2014) for piano and tape recorder: these pieces offered two perspectives on a blend of instrumental and lo-fi/DIY electronic sound which is currently popular but also proving potentially musically engaging.

The effective combining of music theatre pieces commissioned by Alwynne Pritchard (vocalist and actor) as part of her *DOG/GOD* (2015) project with Helmut Lachenmann's *Ein Kinderspiel* (1980), performed by Mary Dullea (piano), was a particular highlight. As part of this set, Adam de la Cour's hysterical music theatre work *Liber Canis* (UK premiere) spilled over into the other works as the unpredicted loss of a shoe was expertly managed, adding to the absurdity of Helmut Oehring's surreal bridal march in *LostDOG* and Vinko Globokar's animalistic voice and percussion piece, *Metamorphosis*, as Pritchard continued to perform them on an uneven keel. The expert and expressive performances from both musicians gave this portion of the concert a fantastical and exciting atmosphere, and the programme structure, which alternated performances by Pritchard and Dullea, invited the audience to consider each set of pieces differently in the light of the other.

The integration of educational and development opportunities for composers and performers through many workshops and