

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.

They might have heard *Ensemble 20+*, a uniquely ambitious college contemporary music group based in DePaul and led by conductor Michael Lewanski, who gave a gorgeous rendition of Bernard Rands's *Concertino* (with a virtuosic and playful performance from soloist Andrew Nogal) alongside the world premiere of Eliza Brown's *A Soundwalk with Resi*. Brown's music was all about sound and memory: an orchestration of a winter walk she took to the shore of Lake Michigan intermingled with fragments and memories from Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. Her music radiated flexibility in its harmony and quickly shifting levels of intensity. It was a showcase for its performers, and Soprano Jessica Aszodi, in particular, was breath-taking.

Or, perhaps, they heard the Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble perform Joe Clark's *not merely bad or broken*. Clark's programme note referenced the *Moribayassa* dance of the Mardi Gras Indians. This dance is performed 'once and only once' in a woman's lifetime, during a period of intense trial. Joe's original idea for the piece came at 3am, sitting in his car, cold and alone after a year in which his grandfather and father died, his marriage ended, his house was robbed and his cat died. Here's what he wrote:

In the year that followed, I was surprised to find how common these experiences are: not just death, infidelity, crime, and loss – but also rebirth, creativity, and love. Almost everyone has similar stories. We are surrounded by survivors.

Quince's extraordinary performance lasted perhaps 10 minutes or so. And it was shattering, honest, sad, haunting, hopeful and reflective music.

Here's something else that happened. On Friday 7 October, after a live radio-broadcast from the PianoForte Studios, I raced down Michigan Avenue to The Chicago Academy for the Arts with NewMusic USA's Frank Oteri and Molly Sheridan. On the top floor, in Curtiss Hall, five students (Elenna Sindler, Daphne Thomas, Karen Szczech, Mallory Pargulski and Julia Borelli, all 17–18 years old) had assembled to perform for us their new piece *Invisible Cities*.

I had run into these students already this year, in their performance with Studio Musikfabrik at the Ferienkurse at Darmstadt. In Chicago, they had created a Gesamtkunstwerk that imagined a conversation about cities between M.C. Escher and Genghis Khan. They had determined the layout of the room, assembled their own

collection of instruments, and had each created a 25-minute video. Over the course of 25 minutes, they improvised, moved through the space, interfered, supported and performed with one another.

I wrote two things in my notebook:

1. When I say a performance like this gives me 'hope for the future', I don't mean that these artists will somehow 'save' or 'establish' new music. The scope and diversity and audiences for EarTaxi already show that Chicago is one of the world's most important and vibrant cities for New Music. I only mean that I know what I was doing when I was 17, and it wasn't anything as curious and collaborative as this. So I'm genuinely interested, and genuinely hopeful, to see what these artists are creating next year, and in five years, and in 10 years.
2. I think we all begin by playing and pretending. When you have your first relationships, you play at having a relationship – you're like someone in a movie having that relationship. What would someone say in this situation? How would this go? When would 'they' kiss? Or you get your first job and you don't know what to do, so for a while you just act like someone in a movie who has a job. But you have to feel *safe* to really play. You have to feel *safe* to take chances, and to be curious and to be willing to risk.

At the very end of the piece there was a piano and vocal duet going on, when a police car drove past with its siren on, and suddenly Elenna was making a vocal siren, and Daphne was inside the piano ripping glissandi up and down the instrument, and then Julia was hitting gongs and dipping them into a bucket of water, and Karen and Mallory faced directly away from each other and finished the piece with the quietest of duets. Three extraordinarily beautiful minutes, all of us there listening to each other; it has travelled with me ever since.

Aaron Holloway-Nahum

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#### Donaueschinger Musiktage 2016

A theme for the festival in Donaueschingen was popular music, or so I heard in a radio broadcast on the six-hour drive from Berlin to that little Southern German new music metropole. But in Donaueschingen, there really wasn't that