

inspired 'My wife is French. (She's French, she's French.) And I always know, wherever she goes, she's French wherever she goes'. Newman also read a selection of recent poems, all in rhyming couplets, most quite autobiographical. In an alternative universe, where Chris Newman is a famous person, he would have his own reality show and celebrity memoir.

Joan Le Barbara's set followed, and sadly passed me by a little. Her recent piece, *Solitary Journeys of the Mind* (2011) wavered between yodels, warbling, fry with changing formants, babbling, harmonic singing and low-octave multiphonics. It sounded a little dated, if not troublingly exoticist. She also presented her 1980 piece *Erin*, prefacing it by mentioning that it had been recently featured in Johann Johannsen's soundtrack for the film *Arrival*: fast layers of babbling, low multiphonics, with ambient drones bare and fragmented at the end. The other piece she sang, *Windows* (2013–17) utilised tape too, with animal sounds, drones, water, bells, and breathing. It was a little new age-y for my taste.

The final set of the festival featured Yeah You. Their brand of noise pop has a vaguely adolescent, shouty quality, thanks in part to the singer Elvin Brandhi (aka Freya Edmondson). The father-daughter grouping, especially given the surrounding melee of wiring and patchboards, couldn't help but bring to mind teams from Robot Wars. This is vicarious, even vicious stuff: menacingly chromatic midi organ, percussive stabs, screeching and shouting, heavy distortion – and somewhere an EDM track buried in the midst of it all. But this is uneasy music, refusing straightforward digestion. Such was the whole festival.

Lawrence Dunn

doi:10.1017/S0040298218000177

### Ultraschall Berlin

In an industry where the brand new and the first performance are fixated upon, Ultraschall Berlin is to be applauded for being less interested in presenting a glut of premieres than in cultivating a twenty-first-century tradition. At this year's festival, its twentieth edition, only a quarter of the 69 works performed were world premieres, with just four of them commissioned by the two organisations presenting the festival, state broadcasters rbb and Deutschlandfunk Kultur.

The programme of the 2018 festival covered just over half a decade of music history, with

most works dating from the last 10 years. It is therefore useful to reflect on the kind of canon that we are tuning into from the white noise of the recent past. On the face of it, it is broadly international, with composers at Ultraschall hailing from 26 countries across four continents, although many of them have studied at German-speaking universities. The gender ratio, however, is disheartening: just over a fifth of composers performed are female. This just about hits the average for European contemporary music festivals.<sup>1</sup> But on gender equality, hitting the average is no longer good enough. Numbers don't tell the whole story, but here the facts are stark, the conclusion unavoidable.

The festival was bookended by large-scale orchestral repertoire in two performances by the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin at the Haus des Rundfunks. In the first, Heinz Holliger – who has now swapped his oboe for the conductor's baton – led the orchestra and soloist Thomas Zehetmair in his own Violin Concerto (1993–95, rev. 2002); actually more a concerto grosso for violin, harp, marimba and cimbalom, a smart way of finding new niches in an over-familiar genre. The work is both an act of homage to and musical biography of Swiss painter Louis Soutter. It begins at the turn of the twentieth century, when Soutter was a violinist and student of Eugene Ysaÿe; the opening movement is a refraction of post-Romantic style, with echoes of Debussy and quotations from Ysaÿe's third violin sonata threaded into disparate ensemble gestures coagulating around the violin. Soutter's deteriorating mental health is reflected in the middle movements by a deepening musical complexity, with intricate harmony and tricky rhythmic figures matched by a fragmented orchestration. The high intellectualism of Holliger's musical language was often alienating and at times came across as artifice, compounded by a performance which lacked clarity, with the orchestra struggling to unpick the knotty instrumental writing. Yet in the final movement, added to the piece a decade later, Holliger offered something arresting and unique. A murky wind chorale stirs in the depths, upon which the violin spins ghostly fluttering figures, evoking the haunted monochrome figures of Soutter's startling late paintings, and pointing towards a less artificial, more naturalistic musical style.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.newmusic.report](http://www.newmusic.report) for a comprehensive analysis, or rather a wall of shame, of the gender balance at major European festivals.

In the closing concert four days later, works by Nina Šenk and Bruno Mantovani indulged in the rich textures of the modern orchestra. In *Echo II* (2010), Šenk is in thrall to a post-romantic sound-world, with luscious portamenti string melodies and searing brass crescendi daubed onto an aural canvas that is large in scale yet brief in duration. With the piece only five minutes in length, Šenk's feverish expressionistic writing doesn't get the chance to develop into anything more than a fleeting musical recollection, a visitation from the ghosts of orchestral past. Mantovani's concerto for flute and orchestra is ironically entitled *Love Songs* (2015) – the hard-edged attack of the solo flute, performed with gusto by Magli Mosnier, and the furious tumult of the orchestral writing create something far from easy-listening or saccharine. Yet the title had the unintended effect of emphasizing a comparative lack of feeling from the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin under Evan Christ, in whose hands the piece seemed somewhat stolid.<sup>2</sup> Both Šenk and Mantovani's works were assured and well crafted yet somewhat over-familiar, with overly polished textures and bombastic gestures, and a narrow view of the possibilities of the ensemble. If large-scale repertoire is to remain at the centre of contemporary musical life, we need to think more laterally about the potential of the orchestra in the twenty-first century.

Great performers play a leading role in bedding a piece into concert culture. In a solo recital at the Boulez Saal, violinist Carolin Widmann brought her supreme insight to sets of miniatures by Salvatore Sciarrino, Hans Abrahamsen, George Benjamin and Enno Poppe as well as Pascal Dusapin's *In vivo* (2014). The title is Latin for "at the heart of life", and the piece is animated by organic processes. In the first movement, melodic patterns grow from a single tone like musical organisms, orbiting around the harmonic centre in countless fascinating constellations; in the last, we perceive the evolutionary cycle of a single motif, with simple melodic material transformed through harmonic cycles and rhythmic diffraction. This was a beguiling study in fascinating procedures of fluid and shifting transformation, as well as proof of the power of an outstanding artist to find endless nuance, fascination and delight in solo repertoire. Widmann's account of the work

was captivating, her technique effortless, her tone remarkable and vibrant.

Away from the world of prestigious orchestras and big-name soloists, the beating heart of Ultraschall was a group of young, bold and innovative chamber ensembles featured across three concerts at Radialsystem V on the penultimate day of the festival. Ensemble Nickel play instruments more often associated with a pop band: electric guitar, saxophone, keyboard and percussion. They have been challenging composers to explore new musical avenues since they were founded in 2006. In Berlin they performed works that took this challenge in different directions. Whereas works by Ann Cleare and Mark Barden were both introspective explorations of the sonic possibilities of the ensemble's instruments, Yair Klartag turned his focus from the instruments themselves to the way sound manipulates our experience of time. In *Fragments of profound boredom* (2012) for saxophone, piano and percussion, Klartag overlaps different temporal layers – at times literally with metronomes set at different tempi – with a patchwork stylistic language that incorporates both Lachenmannian extended techniques as well as traditional music material – such as the octaves and triads which make occasional intrusions into the texture – yet always remains immediate. With this, he builds an aural sense of the busy-ness yet meaninglessness of activity, inspired by Heidegger's conception of the deepest state of boredom. Indeed, the real success of the piece lies in its creation of a perceptible and intelligible structure that points to something larger than itself, escaping an all-too common tendency in contemporary composition towards musical navel-gazing.

Although the oldest of all the composers performed by Ensemble Nickel, Enno Poppe went the furthest in challenging what classical composition can look and sound like. *Fleisch* (2017) is written for full band – electric guitar, keyboard, saxophone and drum set – and is an in-your-face paean to twentieth-century rock music. Poppe explains that he is fascinated by the point at which rock starts to gather dust and its syntax starts to disintegrate. In *Fleisch* he chops up and distorts familiar stylistic tropes such as wailing lead guitar, 1980s synth pads, raucous sax solos and explosive drum fills, and fashions something new from the debris. The resulting work, a spiky, pointillist three-movement sonata for ensemble, is not only outrageously fun but a serious-minded meditation on sound. It was performed with attitude, swagger and an easy virtuosity by Ensemble Nickel. Across its concert, the ensemble proved itself an open-minded and

<sup>2</sup> For a more convincing performance of the work, hear Juliette Hurel's world premiere performance with the Rotterdam Philharmonic under Yannick Nézet-Séguin: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XII4t7wqv8M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XII4t7wqv8M) (accessed 9 March 2018).

dedicated champion of a range of compositional voices, which while diverse in style shared a sonic experimentalism as well as a flexible and un-dogmatic compositional approach.

Ensemble ascolta are another group whose unusual instrumentation – brass, percussion, piano, cello and guitar – means it has to be more proactive than most in creating its own repertoire. *Ascolta-Rojzok* (2017), part of a series of musical ‘sketches’, was written especially for the ensemble. Composer Marton Illés creates delicate nuance and an evolving texture from an ever-shifting instrumentation: from plucked piano strings through droning brass and strings to the soothing effect of shell shakers played in unison. Despite being given a solid performance by Ensemble ascolta, the piece seemed to lack the formal discipline to become more than a succession of ingenious timbral inventions. Birke J Bertelsmeier’s *TIC* (2016) was rather more forthright, using broad-brush strokes to create something immediate and direct. Biblical extracts on mortality and a running tally of the number of deaths during the piece were feverishly intoned by bass soloist Andreas Fischer, accompanied by swelling brass figures that felt like sudden rushes of blood to the head, as well as the incessant tolling of a bell, a constant *memento mori*. This taut and incisive work was a powerful hammer blow to the chest: one had little choice but to submit to its frantic and unhinged *Affekt*.

Young Cologne-based chamber ensemble hand werk eschewed instruments altogether. Using DIY gadgets and everyday objects, the ensemble performed works that seemed to ask: “what does the digital age sound like?” In *SMOG* (2012) Sergej Maingardt imagines the hidden scream of the modern machine, juxtaposing the clutter of the twenty-first-century office environment – computer monitors, cables, keyboards and mice – with the electronic howl that is emitted from it. Tobias Hagedorn reduces digital to its most basic elements, 0s and 1s, in *3bit* (2014), which uses three sound controllers with two settings, on or off, to alter pitch, volume and duration. Andreas Eduardo Frank’s *Table Talk* (2016) adds physical theatre to gadgetry, with two performers seated opposite each other bashing buzzers and moving transducers to manipulate electronic drones and a flashing video projection. These three works, just a selection from a jam-packed forward-looking programme, were all somewhat unsubtle and unpolished, and really tested the boundaries (and often the audience’s patience) of what can be achieved with simple musical material. But this is the hard edge of experimentalism. With

the rough and ready comes a provocation to re-imagine what a twenty-first-century canon could look like – bold, bright, loud and digital.

Sam Johnstone

doi:10.1017/S0040298218000189

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**Francisco Lopez**  
*Café Oto*

The audience sits blindfolded in concentric circles, facing away from the performer. Refusing any visual accompaniment, and presenting sounds from his vast archive of field recordings without context or explicit identification, field recordist and sound artist Francisco Lopez asks the audience to wear these blindfolds to remove any distraction, and encourages them towards an intense focus on the sonic material he is about to present. Lopez describes the blindfolds as a ‘voluntary commitment to listening’. He believes that sounds are ‘things’, physical entities that have character(s) and substance. What follows is a bewildering array of material: rural, urban, animal, elemental.

Humans and their actions are audible in many of the recordings, many having the feel of out-takes: slamming doors; urban hum; the sound of the recordist walking and breathing heavily, trekking to a recording location. This presence, extended into reorganising the material into a performance, enters Lopez into discourse of authorship and the presence of the operator in field recording practices, and throws open the process, from preliminary research through to the physical recording, post-production and final presentation of the work.

His performance suggests a view of field recordings as something with which humans – who are themselves part of the ‘field’ – have an active relationship and dialogue rather than being passive observers of sound. Indeed, there is no acoustic ecology at play in Lopez’s performance. Rural sounds jut up against cityscapes, and material is processed with equalisation and filtering, and diffused via multi-channel speaker system, creating an otherworldly audio space. No straight-laced documentation here. Archetypal hit-record-and-come-back-tomorrow recordings still feature heavily, but through this electronic manipulation are brought into the same strange realm as the cause-and-effect material.

The hour-long performance drifts between near-inaudible microsound explorations to dense meshes of audio, swirling in quadrasonic. The