

media, action and attention that conjured a peculiar, but not unwelcome, sense of cognitive dissonance.

Parallel theatrical concerns were at play in *Future Opera*, a trio of short operas by young Nordic composers billed in the programme as 'push[ing] at the boundaries of what opera can and will be'. On the surface, however, all the works seemed relatively content to sit in a comfortable relationship with the institutions of opera – but then why shouldn't they? Indeed, perhaps including this kind of project in a festival that is so wide ranging was a bold action in and of itself.

It was this overall breadth of activity that was something of a defining feature of the festival, and one that was brought into sharp focus during a lunchtime discussion with the Icelandic composer collective S.L.Á.T.U.R., who had been commissioned to create a work that questioned typical performer–audience relationships. The group's response was to send performers out into the streets of Bergen wearing huge, geometrically shaped costumes, soliciting help from passersby to negotiate the city landscape. These relational, unexpected and unscheduled encounters provoked a heated debate around what constitutes compositional practice and how artists might productively engage non-specialist audiences in experimental music. To me, however, S.L.Á.T.U.R.'s work simply sat at an extreme end of a spectrum of activity that examined experimental music and the festival format from multiple perspectives. Indeed, in setting out to really explore and question what experimental music practices sound and look like today, Borealis' programme felt vital, open-minded, inclusive, and not a little visionary.

Neil Luck

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**An Assembly + Ensemble x.y:** Leung, Miller, Harrison, Finnissy.  
St John's Waterloo, London

'Gently rumbling without direction', a programme note appended to the first part of Cassandra Miller's solo for piano *Philip the Wanderer*, might equally have stood in as descriptor for tonight's programme *tout court*. This is not meant as a criticism. Time's arrow, the vector of narratives real or implied, may well be the most burdensome yet most easily sloughed off (and perhaps least missed) item of nineteenth-century baggage to be jettisoned by composers

over the last century or so. What tonight's collaboration between An Assembly and Ensemble x.y (led and programmed by the increasingly omnipresent wunderkind of British new music, Jack Sheen) offered up was a quite different approach, a different *way through* the passage of time. Less music as organised sound; more sound in itself a means for organising time.

Take Anthony Leung's piece from the very start of the programme. The first of *Three Concert Pieces*, each, we are told, 'a reflection on the most common durations found within the activities young composers participate in'. What we get, then, is five minutes of a single chord strung out on length-of-breath notes by a quintet of winds. Always changing, always staying the same, its inner harmonic tension is fraught with a certain taut expectation. The piece is animated by a sense of suspension – we are listening, waiting, as time passes. The music occupies the time, fills it up, teases it as its limits. On one level, it's a joke about handing in a kind of bare minimum for a rote assignment. But at the same time it's an attempt to map out the contours of a formalised timespan, to mark a territory and think through its frontiers.

Following Leung's piece, the remaining 16 members of both ensembles joined the five winds in a long, single-file line at the front of the stage for Paul Newland's piece, *Locus*. The horns, flutes and clarinets were now augmented by strings plus an assortment of less traditionally musical objects and actions like the crumpling of newspaper or silver foil, a coin rubbed around an upturned silver dish, and field recordings played (rather quietly) from three different mobile phones dispersed along the line. The saxophone (played by Harry Fausing Smith) was also wrapped and stuffed with bubblewrap, choking out its notes in a manner that sounded oddly sub-aquatic. As the title suggests – only emphasised by the rustle of the field recordings – the work's steady-state soundworld gives the listener an immediate sense of inhabiting a particular place. But this is not so much a journey across the land as – again – a kind of waiting, an attendance to the minutiae of some impossible vista, simultaneously underground, overground and underwater, urban and rural, sparse and full. The image that came to mind was a of a person humming to themselves at a bus stop, and finding the street thereby transformed and made musical.

After Cassandra Miller's lithe and exploratory solo piano piece and a see-sawing chamber work by Bryn Harrison inspired by the paintings of Bridget Riley, the evening closed with a performance of Michael Finnissy's *Piano Concerto no.2*

from 1975–76. Played dazzlingly by pianist Joseph Havlat in front of a horseshoe of nine strings and two alto flutes, the piece is a wild flurry of activity, full of jagged spikes and dense clouds of interlocking notes. Hardly ‘static’ by any standard metric, yet nor are we really going anywhere. It fidgets and rumbles and dances on the spot, but it pointedly remains where it is, even gesturing wildly at the extremities of its own confinement. If Newland gave us a man waiting patiently for a bus, Finnissy’s protagonist might be pacing in an anteroom, anxiously anticipating the results of a test. But he’s still waiting. In his programme notes, Finnissy wrote that at the time of composition, his attention was focused on ‘the various possibilities (and stereotypes) of “concerto”, its tripartite structure, conventions of leading and following, working ‘concertedly’ or apart. Like Leung’s *Concert Pieces*, it’s a question of filling out a standardised form, of worrying at its limits and gesturing beyond them, marking out a territory and making time audible.

In the mid-1980s, Gilles Deleuze published his second book on film, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. He identified a new kind of cinema emerging outside Hollywood in the post-war period, particularly in the films of Yasujiro Ozu and directors associated with Italian neo-realism. Such films sought to capture a direct image of time. The camera lingers over a scene, as if slowly taking it all in. Characters stare out beyond the frame, apparently lost in thought, watching time pass. Music, like cinema, is often described as an ‘art of time’. The phrase is familiar enough to pass as cliché. Works have stretched out time and compressed it, nullified it or exploded it. But in works like those on tonight’s elegantly curated programme, time is not pushed or pulled, distorted or distended, made to do little tricks or jump through hoops. Rather, time is simply attended to, made present, sounded. We hear time passing and spend time in the company of sounds.

Robert Barry

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**Mark Andre, *Wunderzaichen*.  
Oper Stuttgart**

On the 13 May 2018, under the beautiful, celestial, fresco ceiling of the city’s opera house, the highly acclaimed Oper Stuttgart produced a captivating revival of composer Mark Andre’s

*Wunderzaichen* (2008–2014; *Wunder*, ‘miracle’, and *Zaichen*, old German for ‘sign’). The protagonist, ‘Johannes’, is a ‘speech role’, and André Jung met the challenge with a modest, yet rigorous, intellect. Julia Bauer, as ‘Maria’, displayed a sensitive and virtuosic vocal ability. The orchestra, under the baton of Sylvain Cambreling, mastered the majestically complex signatures of Andre’s soundworld with commendable accuracy and a fluid simplicity.

Interestingly, Andre’s concern with both time and space was already evident upon entry into the hall. The stage depicted a waiting area and passport control in Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv, with a backdrop consisting of a rich blue sky with moving clouds on the left, contrasting sharply with a solid grey marbled wall on the right. Johannes, sitting in the waiting area, kept looking at his watch, slowly moving from his own seat to the one opposite; during all this, the audience was similarly settling, then resettling, waiting for the performance to begin. A sense of arrival and departure was established, as was a strong, yet unassuming, hall-filling, interstitial space.

The structure of *Wunderzaichen* is outlined by four separate ‘situations’, the first of which is *Passkontrolle* (Passport Control). In this ‘situation’, Johannes, a heart transplant recipient, struggles with defining his ‘true’ identity due to the ‘Eindringling’ (Intruder) in his chest: when asked his name at passport control, Johannes searchingly responds: ‘Ich, wer, ich? Er? Wer? Ich? Ich?’ (I, who, I? Is? Who? I? I?). Johannes is subsequently led away to the airport’s police station for further questioning. In accompaniment, the music unravelled a poignant, eerie and increasingly agitated ‘knocking’, like a stethoscope being pressed against Johannes’s own disturbed heartbeat. The onstage choir, portraying the queue for passport control, magnified Johannes’ status as ‘other’ by drifting, in unison, away and toward him, like a swarm of whispering, shadowy, grim reapers, using bass bows to bow their bodies and point to the sky. The ‘situation’ overall was a gripping introduction, convincingly hinting at an existential interruption.

The second situation, *Polizeirevier* (Police Station), conveyed numerous inverted states, including the stage itself, which rose to reveal the police station underneath passport control, leaving both stages simultaneously visible. In passport control, a janitor pensively cleans the floor, and a man, in a reversal of the Greek mythological figure Atlas, arrives with a world around his neck. In parallel, in the police station, Johannes meets Maria, an eccentric lady with bright orange hair. Maria, too, seems not to