

Another theatrical event of note was Alexander Schubert's *Scanners* (2013) for Ensemble Resonanz, a string ensemble work resonant of Kagel and Kraftwerk in its marionette choreography, timed exquisitely with lighting and the music. The electronics seamlessly blended into the acoustic sound world; the performers hissed and clicked, 'playing' the electronics while spotlights intercut each articulation, highlighting the dramaturgy of Schubert's conceit. Always intelligent, his work is fun, solid and quirky – cool with an understanding of the materials and elements he's working into a whole. The ending was signified by the drooping and flopping of the played-out player 'marionettes'. Job done.

Across the remainder of the Festival there was, as usual, far too much to see – an excellent fault. For me the introduction of so many theatre-led works was very welcome; different media present new practical issues, and solutions to those issues generate a fresh energy. I hope this will be explored in next year's festival and beyond.

Rose Dodd

**James Wishart: *Mad Songs and English Wo/men*.
Sixtieth Birthday Concerts, Liverpool, 5 October
and 16 November 2016**

Two concerts in Liverpool in autumn 2016 celebrated the sixtieth birthday year of James Wishart, the composer, pianist, conductor, writer and concert promoter who has been a major figure in musical life in the north west of England for nearly four decades. His music reflects his wide cultural and social interests and these concerts showcased three compositions that were witty, emotionally searing and sonically daring.

23 songs for a Mad Woman (2006) was the main work in the programme on 5 October given by mezzo-soprano Louise Ashcroft and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's Ensemble 10/10, conducted by Clark Rundell, in The Music Room at the Philharmonic Hall. Originally sketches for a projected opera, the songs were premiered here as a work of music-theatre. Like Maxwell Davies, in his *8 Songs for a Mad King* (1969), Wishart has created an un-named character who is both historical and a tragic every(wo)man. Wishart's 'mad woman' is an elderly care home resident who is living with memory loss. The text-settings are varied. In song 6, 'giggling', a setting of 'f' and the more suggestive 'fu ...'

are highly expressive, unpitched syllables; song 11, 'gibbering', uses Sprechgesang to portray exaggerated regret for an unspecified action – 'desolé ... I'm sorry ...'. Song 13, 'striding', delivers iconic phrases uttered by Margaret Thatcher – 'The benefits will trickle down ... create a land fit for heroes'; and in song 20, 'imagining', a comic ensemble piece pits cleaner and queen against the main character.

Whether the mad woman is reliving memories of Thatcher's prime ministership, is delusional and thinks that she is Thatcher, or is Thatcher herself, is unclear. This ambiguity, and the question of which of these potential characterisations represents 'madness', leaves the songs open to interpretation: soloist and the audience can respond to songs with quite widely varying degrees of empathetic bewilderment or colder bemusement. Louise Ashcroft's portrayal of the 'mad woman' was magnificent. She made light of the demanding extended vocal techniques and worked in character with the ensemble and conductor to create a troubled and troubling individual, a frightening representative of the effects of dementia.

The ensemble of bass clarinet, cello, piano and two percussionists performed a pointillist array of percussive and pitched sounds. Wishart does extraordinary things with this rapidly changing palette, creating a resonating chiaroscuro that evokes the tension between mental instability and a still-strong sense of personhood in the main character; the formal pacing is brilliant, both poetic and comedic.

On 18 November 2016 the Pixels Ensemble's concert at the Capstone Theatre, Liverpool Hope University, featured more of Wishart's work. '*topologies of sound and silence ...*' (2005) for piano trio is in five short movements whose titles are derived from the words of artist Paul Klee, but the piece also imagines a musical conversation/journey made by Harrison Birtwistle and Pierre Boulez. Each movement develops a distinctive form of instrumental interlocution – acrimonious, striving, proliferating, enquiring, reflective. There is a magical moment in the second movement, 'street continuo', when the instruments arrive at what sounds like a 4/3 suspension but then morphs through a quasi-improvisational passage, no longer retaining a harmonic function, only to return to its initial context and a resolution. Wishart's ability to interrupt and reconnect voice leading over time is remarkable.

The Leaving of Liverpool (1990) for piano quartet takes a poem by Liverpool poet Adrian Henri as its source of inspiration. The three string

players perform off-stage, establishing a unison drone against which the onstage pianist performs a sort of pibroch. Wishart sets up the melodic arrival of certain pitches and their intervallic tensions in a way that is reminiscent of Indian raga. Unlike the electronically generated omnipresence of modern raga drones however, the moments of bow change and wobble draw attention back to the drone and its lack of stability. The point at which the drone unexpectedly diverges via a glissando to become a major second feels like an important structural marker,

yet the later addition of a major third is masked by the coincidences and variations in the piano part, as are the reductions back to a unison drone with which the piece gently takes its own leave.

Sadly, James Wishart was unable to attend either concert – a serious stroke in 2013 has forced him to suspend travel and further compositional work – but the large and appreciative audiences at both events demonstrated the high regard in which he is held.

Helen Thomas