

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

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### 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

competitions are a positive aspect of the festival. The composers' competition, won this year by Ulrike Mayer-Spohn for the ensemble piece *fLEC-UE* (2015), offered a fairly international and cross-career perspective, with finalists ranging from a final-year undergraduate composer to others who could be considered much more established. The featured young violinist, Jian Ren, gave a convincing and assured performance as part of the Uroboros ensemble. The education project involving primary school children performing a new piece by Will Handysides – commissioned by the festival – was successfully integrated into an evening concert rather than sidelined. These aspects demonstrate the value that the festival places on disseminating contemporary music, offering opportunities for young people and, ultimately, developing its audience.

One criticism I have of the programming is that the female composers are vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts, and of only five female composers in the whole festival programme, most could be found in the concert of Ensemble Platypus whose biography expounds gender diversity as an explicit aim.

A festival commission from Dominic Murcott which opened Dullea's and Pritchard's concert included the bizarre combination of a piano solo with the ingestion of five small bites of different foods, such as garlic toffees, invented by the composer. A riff on the 'brunch' theme of the concert, the piece was, unfortunately, largely musically unsuccessful. This concert (and some others) left one with the feeling that a shorter programme that focused on fewer pieces would have been preferable. Similarly, the pairing of all of the pieces by Ensemble Platypus with, for the most part, seemingly unrelated video material seemed like an unnecessary gimmick when most of the music was perfectly able to stand on its own.

Most concerts were full or nearly full; despite the intimate and friendly atmosphere (it is hard to describe the festival directors as aloof whilst they are serving you scrambled eggs!) it does seem that London Ear has nearly outgrown its venues. It will be interesting to see where it might progress in future years: a partnership with the Southbank in the UK premiere of *Speicher* (2008–2013) by Enno Poppe this year marked a move away from its regular venues and its core repertoire of chamber music, but lost in that move was the community atmosphere. Whilst the Cello Factory feels like the festival's natural home, this venue currently leaves few further opportunities to expand the audience

base; as a result it would be advisable to buy tickets early for the next iteration.

Lauren Redhead

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Louis Andriessen *La Commedia*, Barbican Hall, London

In what would become known as the *Notenkrakersactie*, a group of composers, Louis Andriessen amongst them, famously disrupted a Concertgebouw Orchestra concert in 1969, protesting its Establishment politics and unwillingness to engage with the younger generation of Dutch firebrands. Nearly half a century later, Andriessen is a recipient not only of commissions from said orchestra but also of what is arguably the most prestigious (and certainly the most lucrative) composition prize in the world, the Grawemeyer Award. There is no great irony here, of course – music history is littered with examples of iconoclasts whose originality disoriented contemporary opinion, not to mention angry young men whose radicalism mellowed with age – but the case of Andriessen is certainly striking.

The work that landed him the prize was the large-scale 'film-opera' *La Commedia*, first performed in his native Amsterdam in 2008. Odd, then, that at the UK premiere on 12 February 2016 the video component should be entirely lacking, especially when the programme note discusses at some length this collaborative aspect. One imagines that performances of so large and complex a work are unlikely to be commonplace, and so it seemed a particular shame to lose this dimension.

*La Commedia* is structured not so much as a narrative opera, but rather as five quite distinct tableaux, with few obvious musical connections between them. The first, *The City of Dis* (or *The Ship of Fools*, as it exists in its other life as a standalone work) begins *in medias res*, Martyn Brabbins launching into action the ever remarkable BBC Symphony Orchestra above an atmospheric cityscape that had been bubbling over the speakers, one of several electronic interpolations by Anke Brouwer which were infrequent enough to be rather effective. Alongside this hubbub, the excellent Synergy Vocals provided the detached commentary as a sort of Greek chorus, its homophony and flatness of inflection redolent of that other master of 'post-opera', Steve Reich. In passages of falling harmonic figures, they bear witness to the vice and foolishness of the citizens of Dis. Indeed, some of the