

Fredrik Gran, *Rita cirklar* (Draw Circles) by Johan Svensson and *Anti Focus* by Tony Blomdahl. The programme also included one piece by the French composer Maria Misael Gauchat, *Le cinquième élément* (The Fifth Element), and one, *Glam*, by the Norwegian composer Kristine Tjøgersen, who additionally performed in most of the other pieces as a clarinet player.

The most interesting thing about this concert, apart from the high quality of the performances, is the emergent alternative map. Taken together, the six pieces say a lot about the possibilities of sounds and no sounds, how to combine them and how to read the contemporary landscape. Both parts of the concert started with the humorous lighting of sparklers. The tiny crackling sound of these objects, so reminiscent of Christmas, was a reminder of the energy fields of the silence and the ambiances of the room, and all of the pieces more or less paid respect to this dialogue, acknowledging the fact that all sound situations have theatrical aspects.

Lina Järnegård's *Kylan, plötslig* (2013), for clarinet, violin, percussion and piano, has an icy character. The opening piano figure uses the trills of Beethoven's *Für Elise* as a colouring effect, a bit like getting stuck in the physical memory of the phrase. But the friction created, with the other instruments bringing a combination of fragile and sturdy sounds, has its own intensity, and the piece uses an interesting combination of controlled and erratic forces.

Fredrik Gran's *Vox Terminus* (2015), for clarinets/objects, percussion, violin and cello, uses an animated graphic score that is shown to the audience while the piece is performed. Each musician is represented by a colour on screen and interprets the respective signs on the screen. An abstract visual language, easy to follow, with harsh noises, small breathing sounds, stuttering attacks and fluttering harmonics, like an updated version of the Bauhaus aesthetic, open to the irrationalities of our media-focused times.

*Rita cirklar*, for flutes, piano, percussion, violin, viola and cello, is a fairly old piece by Johan Svensson, written in 2010. It creates a series of fragmented moments by the playing of the strings against a monochrome, repetitive piano tone, a superfast figure reminiscent of Terry Riley's *In C*. After a while, silence takes over, creating bigger and bigger holes, and then, at the end of the piece, a quite brutal cluster chord on the piano is played against the delicate character of the other instruments.

Tony Blomdahl's music uses noise sounds, often played at aggressive strong volumes. But

*Anti Focus*, for flute, washboard, piano, violin, cello and electronics, is more sublime and timid, in all its harsh repetitiveness. The overtones make it beautiful.

But the best piece of all was Kristine Tjøgersen's *Glam*, for violin and cello, from 2016. It starts like an ironic version of the rhetoric of Lachenmann's early scrape music à la *Pression* and *Streichtrio*. But after about two minutes the sound activities are accompanied by visuals from the 1980s heavy metal band Ratt's video *Round and Round*, and suddenly a most fascinating counterpoint takes place between the physical movements of the music and the strange action going on in the video. A bourgeois dinner is invaded by rats, and the video is invaded by the strictly choreographed avant-garde sounds. It's a funny piece, playing intelligently with collage effects. It's also the piece with the most obvious connections to the conceptual methods of fellow Scandinavian composers Øyvind Torvund and Trond Reinholdtsen from Norway and Simon Steen Andersen from Denmark. It's a new kind of realism, hypnagogic and freewheeling, saying yes to the disturbances of the world. It has nothing to do with Richard Strauss, but hardly with Lachenmann either. It's the music of today.

Magnus Haglund

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#### Juliet Fraser and Plus Minus, Café OTO, London, 7 February 2017

On a gloomy winter's night in Dalston what could be better than Kammerklang at Café OTO? Out of the cold and into a packed house – standing room only for many of us, and sauna-like levels of humidity – for an evening in which an audio-visual piece about bells by Christine Sun Kim and a new string quartet by Lisa Illean frame the main event, two new pieces by the Canadian composer Cassandra Miller.

First is *Tracery: Hardanger*, for solo voice and pre-recorded voice. It begins with a repeated, sustained sung tone and, from where I am standing, it is not immediately clear whether it is live or pre-recorded, but soon Juliet Fraser adds live ornamentations around the repeated note: strange, half-strangled ululations, not like any sound I've ever heard this wonderful singer make before. Each phrase is the length of a breath, usually with a falling melodic trajectory. Sometimes the live melody anticipates the sustained note, sometimes it follows. We could be

listening to the resident singer in the coolest club in town, somewhere high in the Arctic: maybe Norway, maybe Greenland, maybe on the edge of Hudson Bay.

After a while the roles reverse. The live singer has the long notes, a tone lower than before, and her pre-recorded self weaves more elaborate, almost skittish patterns, less obviously drawn by the gravitational pull of the sustained tone. Then both Juliets are singing melodies, and not so long afterwards the music finishes. It isn't obvious that the end is coming but it feels right when it happens. It's as if we have been listening to a great executant of a folk music that didn't exist until Cassandra Miller and Juliet Fraser got together to create it, but this is undoubtedly how that music is supposed to go, and this is how, unostentatiously but surely, this piece is supposed to finish. It's a considerable achievement: music that is not so much composed as inhabited.

After a short interval it's the turn of the ensemble Plus Minus to play. In *Traveller Song* there are more pre-recorded voices, cascading, multi-layered variations of more descending melodies, like a congregation in an Old Regular Baptist church, each singer 'laboring' their own version of a shared hymn tune. Two pianists at a single piano play unison triadic harmonies which try, as best they can, to shadow the multiple melodies in the loudspeakers. Eventually they stop; a pause, then the rest of the ensemble – clarinet, electric guitar with e-bow, violin, cello – slide down their own various versions of the taped voices, now fewer, often only one. The pianists play again: a unison A major chord played many, many times; then a cadence, also repeated. They stop and one of them takes over the violinist's seat in the ensemble. He's got an accordion and using just the chord buttons he offers one more accompaniment for the pre-recorded voice. As in *Tracery: Hardanger*, the music ends unabtrusively, but decisively; like Juliet Fraser, Plus Minus give an exemplary performance, their understated virtuosity illuminating every moment of the music.

Like much of Miller's music – most spectacularly in *Duet* for cello and orchestra, premiered at the 2015 Glasgow Tectonics festival, most intimately in the string quartet *Warblework* (2011) – transcription lies at the heart of the compositional process. So *Traveller Song* is based on a recording of a Sicilian folksong, and on the Kammerklang website Miller describes how she turned the song into her own music: 'I sang along while listening to this recording in headphones loud enough that I couldn't hear myself,

and recorded this caterwauling, layered this recording in canon, and listened again, recording myself singing along again, following this process many times'. Similarly, so Miller tells us, *Tracery: Hardanger* uses 'source materials ... from non-notated traditions such as Hardanger fiddle tunes, Sacred Harp singing, experimental improvisations and spoken meditations'.

For Cassandra Miller it is clearly important to explain how she made this extraordinary music. But I don't think the 'how' of this music is as important as the 'what'; it may be made through a process of transcription but it's not about transcription. Falling lines – sometimes melodies, sometimes not – are a recurrent feature of much of Cassandra Miller's music: the multiple string glissandi of *A Large House* (2009), the lamentations of *bel canto* (2010). Sometimes they make me feel sad, as keening is supposed to, but more often they sound to me like lava snaking down a hillside, vivid, compelling, not a little dangerous. In *Tracery: Hardanger* and *Traveller Song* there's a change in energy in each phrase, as the breath runs out, as the line descends, yet the music doesn't seem to be about entropy, rather it's about an alchemy in which one thing turns into another – fire into stone, sound into notation, flow into solid – and, even more remarkably, back again.

Christopher Fox

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#### Electric Spring, Huddersfield, 22–26 February 2017.

In the heart of the University of Huddersfield's Creative Arts Building sits the unassuming Phipps Hall, which has given itself over to five days of total electronic sound immersion. The University has grown accustomed to attracting pioneering artists in contemporary music over the last four decades, both to its in-house research centre CeReNeM, and to the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival every November. The relatively younger Electric Spring Festival takes place every February and is now able to stand alongside its older sibling, offering the public an impressive and diverse programme of composers and artists specialising in electronic sound manipulation. This year was no exception. Running from 22 to 26 February, there was something to suit everyone, from improvised live-coded dance music to classic *musique concrète* masterpieces. From its conception in 1995, the aim of the