

whole a pensive, lugubrious air, enhanced by the sombre hollowness of the recorders' tone. The effect was a little lost in the slightly blurred acoustics, and might have been improved by a steadier, more measured performance, which tended to rush through the counting of the numerous rests.

Peters' *Rotherham* fared better, bursting straight into an urgent tutti of violently pulsing diaphragm accents, creating an instability of both tone and pitch that was periodically underlined further by the buzzing timbre resulting from singing and playing simultaneously. Sudden silences punctuated this texture at regular intervals, and gradually the music began to lose impetus, eventually coalescing into a series of stark chords – here, finally, we heard the harmony clearly, though it had been there all along. Although Peters' characteristic parsimony is still in evidence, *Rotherham* seems to break through into a more visceral, charged way with materials than hitherto in his work, an impressive achievement that was rendered with confident commitment by the quartet.

Amber Priestley's work is beginning to gain a dedicated band of admirers. Enigmatic, whimsical, often cheerfully bizarre and always deftly put together, her pieces are apt to give the feeling that there is something quite purposeful going on, if only you could work out what it is. Much of this has to do with her use of indeterminacy: players often have a choice of lines to read, with only relative pitches specified, and several scores make use of the conceit of being readable either way up. Put together, these result in entirely unpredictable combinations of materials, giving the surface of the music a playfully serendipitous quality: so it was with *feel things way about certainly don't admire*, on a text by Robert Walser. The piece proceeded in what seemed to be a series of capricious variations on a pervasive walking-bass-like line. The quartet's meticulous preparation added a variety of timbral colourations in response to Walser's text, contributing to a pleasurable uncanny listening experience.

Alex Nikiporenko provided the lightest (but by no means slightest) work on the programme, *Volumus ut Iesus exaltetur*, a wittily lopsided collage of a *caccia* by Niccolò da Perugia and the evangelical song *We Want To See Jesus Lifted High* by Doug Horley. The quicksilver medieval counterpoint provided BLOCK4 with the opportunity of showcasing its considerable ensemble skills and stylistic finesse. With performers of this class, and an industrious and talented pool of composers, 840 could well establish a

distinctive place on the London scene in the coming years.

James Weeks

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**Donnacha Dennehy *The Last Hotel, Wide Open Opera with Crash Ensemble, Edinburgh International Festival***

When greeted by a deconstructed, open set of brutal bleakness (designed by Jamie Vartan), haunted by the waste of the night before – a pink high-heeled shoe, empty coat hangers and discarded plastic cups – one is made immediately aware of the potency of Enda Walsh's theatrical aesthetic. There is a lone orange balloon offering a tragic echo of a party. Underscored with silence, *The Hotel Servant* (played by Walsh's long-term collaborator Mikel Murfi) enters and cleans the blood from the stained hotel room floor, and does so with a charisma equal to that of Michael Gambon in the opening scene of *Krapp's Last Tape*.

*The Last Hotel*, Walsh's first opera libretto, draws us into a hyper-reality that portrays acutely society's preoccupations and the all-consuming pain of loneliness: it's 'Beckett meets Lynch' in a tightly packed, propulsive rollercoaster ride towards one woman's assisted suicide.

Donnacha Dennehy's post-minimalist score is an immaculately orchestrated landscape of intricate pulsating polyrhythms, providing the listener with a necessary and weighted anchor within the often surreal and absurd theatrical world created by Walsh. Like the libretto, the music leans towards an Irish sensibility, leading our ears back to the *sean nós* songs of Irish Folk Music. The music seems to drift in and out of focus as our other senses are busied by the boldly intense and visceral theatrical world of Walsh, and it is this sensation that left me with the question, Does the score need to be the focal point of an opera? As an audience, are we wanting to hear a score that, when performed in a concert format, does not feel lost without its theatrical partner? Or are we craving a synthesis of art in which the several disciplines live and breathe only when presented as a whole?

*The Last Hotel* is opera in its most collaborative form. The score is not the focal point, but neither does it become submerged by the distinctive qualities of Walsh's aesthetic. The final, stratospheric duet between the Woman (Claudia Boyle) and the Wife (Katherine Manley), performed with the highest level of

musical and acting skill, scores both voices with almost entirely the same melodic material, but with the Wife's line shadowing the Woman's a fraction of a second later. The musical texture exists as an evocative and fractured subtext to the on-stage action as we draw the parallels between the two female figures of the narrative, both tormented by the mundane obsessions of contemporary society. Dennehy's vocal writing displays his unquestionable awareness of the characters' subconscious narratives. The Woman, as she awaits her assisted suicide rehearsal, sings of the torments of anorexia and the dreams of previous hotel guests in high tessitura lyrical lines of indiscernible ascending questions, beautifully capturing the underlying neuroses that have led to her suicidal desires. The barely audible text does not act as a barrier to the narrative, but enhances the extreme psychological state of the suicidal Woman, as we try to understand her and her motives. Dennehy's perfectly timed musical wit is displayed in the Husband's (Robin Adams) buffet scene aria, 'Filling Up Now'. His altering rhythmic repetitions and deconstruction of the text 'filling up now' underpin the Husband's obsessive-compulsive behaviour whilst highlighting Walsh's hilarious and brutal shattering of mankind's pitiful and banal needs.

Dennehy's inclusion of clashing musical genres enhances the array of theatrical practices explored by Walsh's libretto and direction of the opera. His striking and climatic synthesis of traditionally composed ensemble writing with 'imported' dance and pop music (most striking in his use of '90s Irish girl group B\*Witched) is refreshing in an art-form where so many creatives – librettists and composers alike – are averse to making the work relevant or even communicative to a non-new-music audience. I frequently leave new operas asking myself two questions: who, and what, is this for? The on-stage action in *The Last Hotel* utilises elegant physical theatre, most notably a moment in which the three central characters enter an elevator centre-stage whilst the lone Hotel Servant performs a sequence of raw and animalistic dance breaks. This is an opera that communicates through simple and complex means with an ease that undoubtedly stems from Walsh's previous theatrical explorations and is fully supported by Dennehy's post-minimalist aesthetic.

If you feel yourself deflating at the thought of seeing or hearing yet another self-aware opera overly concerned with the intellectual instead of the human, then this is the opera you must see. It is refreshing. It attempts and succeeds in

so many areas that numerous other new operas don't – in the use of spoken dialogue; in the high level of emotional communication and acting skill from the singers, most notably Claudia Boyle and Katherine Manley; in the combination of recorded environment sound (seagulls, elevator and TV) within an operatic score . . . the list could go on. In comparison to the critically acclaimed offerings to the operatic canon by George Benjamin, *Into The Little Hill* and *Written On Skin*, this chamber opera gives so much more to an audience that is curious about theatre, people and creative storytelling. For me, *The Last Hotel* is one of the most successful works of theatre I have seen in the past five years.

Crash Ensemble's 12 players were conducted by André de Ridder, and on the Royal Lyceum Theatre stage was a cast of four: baritone Robin Adams, sopranos Claudia Boyle and Katherine Manley, and the renowned Irish actor Mikel Murfi. All gave exceptional performances on 12 August 2015, bringing to life this much-needed offering to the chamber opera canon. I use the term 'canon' with the optimism that a new opera might become part of the frequently performed repertoire, given the current living museum culture of the UK's opera scene. Landmark Productions' *The Last Hotel* offers an audience a theatrical and musical language that doesn't require frequent social and political reinterpretation in order to remain communicative and fresh. For once, I came away from a new opera asking questions about its narrative content (in this case assisted suicide, amongst a plethora of other societal issues) rather than about why it was ever written and for whom.

Laura Bowler

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**'Soundscapes' at the National Gallery, London (8 July – 6 September 2015)**

The 'Soundscapes' exhibition comprised six paintings displayed individually in darkened rooms, each 'accompanied' by a specially composed piece played over loudspeakers. The seven artists (two working as a duo) invited to create musical responses represented a cross-section of disciplines, from wildlife recording, sound installation, film composition, DJing and instrumental composition, and, it must be said, all had some crowd-pulling potential. Given the reviews, one might have expected to discover unspeakable things happening in the depths of the National Gallery; however, I found it to be