

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Electric Spring Festival 2023, Huddersfield.

Electric Spring Festival proclaims itself as ‘four days of electronic music for the masses’, inviting openness through an eclectic and diverse range of electronic sound-making. The festival also encourages transparency and community through its Creative Coding meet-up/symposium, which allows the audience to unpick and discuss the artists’ technical processes should they wish to. This year’s festival was curated by University of Huddersfield professor Pierre Alexandre Tremblay with help from *ame* (art music experiment), an artist-collective organisation supporting experimental art, sound art and music in the north of England. The events alternated between early evening concerts at the more formal Phipps Hall at the university and later concerts at *ame*’s Dai 大 hall, once a shopping-centre shop, now a cosy venue equipped with bean bags.

Because of the academic grounding of the festival, well-researched computer music is naturally a staple. This year’s computer-music offerings came from Volker Böhm, Owen Green and Wobbly (Jon Leidecker). Volker Böhm’s set-up comprised a modular synthesiser integrated with the visual programming language Max MSP. The performance was detailed, with Böhm, well versed in the power of feedback loops, creating an array of complex well-shaped layered tones. There were a couple of comical moments of random pitch-shifted squelching sounds, which Böhm was able to build from, using them as a tool to expose the process, creating an engaging listening experience.

Contrary to some of his more precision-concerned colleagues on Huddersfield’s Fluid Corpus Manipulation project, Owen Green’s works are often focused around (mis)applications of machine listening and learning techniques. I have previously heard him describe an algorithm as a ‘village idiot’ that slowly learns (badly) in real time, often describing his improvisation process as ‘fighting’ a neural network. In this battle, Green did not overstate, remaining in a sonic environment of intricate noisy rumblings with rich harmonic tones sometimes emerging. I admired Green’s approach especially because of how far it was from the habit of technically

adept computer musicians ruining their performances by doing too many things at once, as was the case in Wobbly’s set. The set-up itself had the potential to be interesting (creating feedback loops through multiple pitch-tracking mobile devices), yet all the set seemed to rest on was an arbitrary claim of intelligence. He began the performance with a too fast spoken manifesto on the development of music technology, allowing his voice to be picked up by the system which then spun out into an overly complicated mess of random beats, bleeps and bleeps and synthesiser shredding. This, for me, achieved very little beyond frustration.

My highlight of the festival was Anthony J. Stillabower, Linda Jankowska and Joe Christman’s performance of Annea Lockwood’s *Jitterbug*. *Jitterbug* is performed by interpreting images of rock surfaces as graphic scores and responding to field recordings (which were cued and mixed by Christman). In describing the score, Lockwood has stated that the images are ‘intricate in their patterns and color shifts’ and, to her, ‘rhythmic’.¹ The performance was certainly intricate and rhythmic with incredibly delicate and considered approaches to shaping sound. Jankowska had a range of objects mapped out in front of her, including glasses, stones, rubber balls and sandpaper. She explored the landscape of objects by stimulating groups of them at a time and causing them to interact with one another. Her approach often involved circular movements, allowing the opportunity for patterns to emerge before seamlessly traversing to the next palette of objects. Jankowska’s approach to the violin possessed a similar delicacy towards rhythm. She had a range of bows, including two with horsehair wrapped around the wood, akin to the gyro bow used in Liza Lim’s *Invisibility* (2009). Her approach magnified this technique, focusing in depth on the minute rhythms created by navigating the points of resistance created by the bow at slow speed. Stillabower’s pattern exploration and traversing was visually more subtle but very much present. He barely moved throughout the performance, poised in front of a microphone with a feedback snare

¹ Lockwood, ‘Jitterbug notes’, 2007.

on his lap, bringing in quiet creaking vocals with gentle rhythms and meticulously controlled, quiet feedback and snare noise. This pair worked so well together with their unique yet unified approaches that I preferred the sparser moments where the field recordings were not present.

The *Jitterbug* performance was followed by Viola Yip's *Liminal Lines II*. Yip is known for visceral performances where she attunes her body to the quirks of a particular piece of technology. *Liminal Lines II* was a gesture-driven noise set where she interacted with a plastic raincoat, lined with speaker cables, attached to a chain of effects pedals. The performance began with a tone slowly emerging, with slight movements, eventually leading to larger movements to touch different parts of the coat together, allowing noise and feedback patterns to gradually emerge. This then built into a full-bodied noise wall and an eventual scrunching up of the coat. The performance radiated tension with certain gestures not always rewarded, or at least not right away, allowing both artist and technology to become symbiotic agents in the work. Yip's set was complemented well that evening by a very differently approached noise set from Nacre (Marion Camy-Palou) working with a simple set-up of electric guitar, amp and effects pedals. The craft that went into this performance was incredible. Nacre's approach possessed a powerful rawness: relentless attacks on the guitar with sounds emerging that were so detailed it almost seemed like magic, given the set-up. The textural detail was particularly special: swiftly and fluidly morphing between and layering percussive tones, voice-like feedback, rich drones and noise walls.

I am always excited when contemporary music organisations make the effort to step out of the concert hall and cross over with popular music, jazz or the more DIY side of experimental music. I strongly believe that these communities should mix more and that they can inspire and learn from each other. This year's Electric Spring put on two acts that did this. Four-piece 'avant-pop experiment' Saenture worked well in this role with a set that moved between drum-machine dance tracks and ambient tracks with synth drones, field recordings and beautiful moments from a gently played processed psalter harp. Two of the members were responsible for a wonderfully organic approach to visuals, drawing and collaging images under a projector. The festival also put on post-rock band Adore//Repel, which frankly was mediocre with a stand-off laddishness that I prefer to avoid when I can. I would have been much more excited to hear a rock band that were more exploratory and

inclined to care about experimental music, of which there are plenty in the north of England.

Though Electric Spring, like any festival aiming to be varied, had points that were hit-or-miss, I truly believe it to be special in terms of programming exciting music, pushing boundaries and bringing together a curious community of listeners and practitioners.

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Beibei Wang, *Wu Xing* (5 Elements), Tangram, LSO St Luke's, London, 28 January 2023.

This slightly belated celebration of the Lunar New Year was hosted by the Tangram collective of young composers and performers of Chinese heritage, founded by composer Alex Ho and yangqin player/singer/songwriter Reylon Yount. Tangram gave their first concert at LSO St Luke's in 2019 and since then they have gone from strength to strength, recently being named Associate Artists of the venue and nominated for an RPS Award. Their world premiere performance of Beibei Wang's hour-long music theatre work *Wu Xing* (5 Elements) drew a capacity crowd that was unusually diverse and largely young.

As part of the international Chinese diaspora, Tangram are interested in contemporary, transnational and traditional Chinese culture. Their work brings together Chinese and Western instruments, ideas and concepts in a highly contemporary manner that acknowledges the complexity and multiplicity of identity. In a pre-concert conversation with Alex Ho, the composer and percussionist Beibei Wang stated that percussion is her 'playground', evoking memories of her childhood playing with stones. She discovered traditional Peking opera as a student in Beijing and explained that performers in this genre have a tone-rich language (far more so than in the contemporary spoken language) and that speech and gesture are as important as song.

Wang's *Wu Xing* is structured in five sections, which each focus on a single element, framed by a prelude and postlude. The performance area was set with a vast array of percussion instruments to the left and right and a row of four large transparent water-filled bowls to the centre. We started in darkness with light picking out the huge arched window frames of LSO St Luke's. Instrumental performers entered carrying singing bowls, circling the rim with a beater.