

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 2020

‘There has always been a state of crisis’,¹ we are told in Ziad Nawfal’s wonderful introduction to the underground music scene in Beirut. That the corona restrictions comprise a rather different crisis to that of Lebanon’s capital should be stressed, yet it will have been no easy task creating any kind of Huddersfield festival this year. That any event could occur at all is an achievement on the part of the festival team and the ensembles, musicians, broadcasters and composers with whom they work. Adaptation and renewal are a vital part of a new musicians’ toolkit, even if the pace of change can be bewildering.

One benefit of the placelessness created by the digital nature of the festival this year meant that the sounds and sights of other places had more power. This was the case both for the Beirut podcast as well as Darragh Morgan’s introduction to contemporary music in Iran. Particular pieces from the Beirut survey are tricky to recommend as there were no attributions but it was all worth hearing, while the intriguing sounds of Shiva Feshareki’s *ZOHRA* felt like they could have occupied Morgan’s wonderfully articulated violin a little longer. Listeners were also treated to the ambient sounds from the ‘Far West’ in Hayley Suviste’s exploration of wild urban spaces in Manchester, as well as Speak Percussion’s and Lamine Sonko’s intriguing rescoring of *Hyanas*, a gently surreal film by Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty.

Videos are often part of new music festivals but are usually relegated to a voluntary installation rather than a blockbuster event. The move to digital also meant that they could have their moment in the spotlight. Matt Wright cut and sampled the work of saxophonist Evan Parker over empty landscapes and Anna Koch provided curiously mesmerising visuals to Claudia Molitor’s music (from her recent album *lofty gatherings*). This involved, among other things, cocktail sticks being prodded around by (I believe) wooden skewers, reminding me strongly of the game pick-up sticks, curiously

also mentioned in relation to Arne Gieshoff’s *Spillikins*. We must be witnessing the game’s cultural ‘moment’ – and not before time. There was also the stretched, machine-like vocals of Kelly Jayne Jones’ *A Fire That Had To Burn Forever*, which was gifted with a truly immersive darkness.

The online set-up also allowed a few more events that looked ‘behind the scenes’, with artist conversations and a podcast from the Riot Ensemble’s director, Aaron Holloway-Nahum. The former were a little hit-and-miss as they threw together quite diverse figures in the hope of sparking some shared insight but when they were good, they were exceptional. Clara Iannotta and Cassandra Miller produced one of the highlights of the festival in their unflinching portrayal of the artistic process (e.g. ‘for me music is *full* of pain’, Iannotta). Respect should also be paid to George E. Lewis, here in conversation with Mariam Rezaei, for shouldering the burden of so many of our conversations within new music about diversity and race.

Diversity was also an issue discussed in Holloway-Nahum’s podcast on the creative context around the Riot Ensemble. Personally, it was curious to hear a first attempt at the history of one’s own generation and to have it confront you, as if a stranger. One major takeaway was just how hard it has been to form, run and – perhaps most of all – maintain a new music ensemble in austerity Britain. That Riot have done so well, recently winning the first Ensemble Prize for a young ensemble from the Ernst von Siemens Stiftung, has been achieved through serious graft and, presumably, a good deal of unpaid labour. As another artistic director, Sam Salem from Manchester’s Distractfold Ensemble, states on the podcast ‘there’s a pipeline of barriers’ resulting in a ‘particular type of person’ at the end. Unfortunately, it feels like things are not getting any easier for those wishing to make new music and make a living. It is good to hear Distractfold here, though, not least because so much of the UK scene – including the instrumental contributions to this festival – is so London-dominated.

I first heard Distractfold perform in Darmstadt in 2014 when they won the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis, while Siemens has just recognised

¹ Donations are being taken by the Beirut Musicians’ Fund to support the underground music scene, see www.hcmf.co.uk for further details.

the Riot Ensemble. It is an unpleasant irony that many of the groups to emerge from the last decade have worked to overcome barriers between 'British' and 'European' music, just as other political barriers are being erected. That the Riot podcast begins with Jonathan Harvey is apt, as he was at once both very English and emphatically European.

There was also concert music in the festival with a recital by Sarah Cahill, a series called the Zeitgeist commissions performed by members of the Riot Ensemble and the late-night slots broadcast on BBC Radio 3. The former was perhaps the most traditional example of a recital, with strong and unfussy playing from Cahill. It came to us (pre-recorded) from a studio in California, replete with candles and foliage, hammering home the difficulties of presenting unaltered the formats developed for live performance. It was, though, fantastic to see inside the piano for the various techniques of Annea Lockwood's *Ear-Walking Woman*, my particular favourite being bubble wrap over the lower strings. In a 'normal' concert the spectacle of a piece like this is often akin to watching a plumber trying to sort out your underfloor pipes, so this made for a real improvement.

The Zeitgeist commissions each had serious character with an incisive performance from cellist Louise McMonagle in Hannah Kendall's *Tuxedo: 'Hot Summer No Water'* and wonderful, languorous saxophone from Amy Green in Anna Appleby's *13.8 Billion Years*. Matthew Grouse's excellent exploration of a moment of crisis in percussionist Sam Wilson's life was crossed rather deliciously with a newfound obsession with playing the board game *Risk* online, while Auclair's piece for clarinetist Ausiàs Garrigós Morant was striking for the amazingly matter-of-fact way her mother recounts her astonishing and terrifying escape from the Rwandan genocide. Memorable, too, was Adam Swayne looking at the camera with an almost psychotic intensity while returning to his hidey-hole under the piano keys in Heloise Tunstall-Behren's *Picea 433*.

The evening concerts were also very strong. Explore Ensemble produced another festival highlight for me, presenting works by Lawrence Dunn and Oliver Leith, the latter having something of a break-out year with his unique brand of gentle, tonal subversion. With fans such as Thomas Adès, Susanna Eastburn (chief executive of Sound and Music) and the team at the BBC's New Music Show, expect to hear a lot more from where this came from. The sun-kissed aura of Dunn's *Sentimental*

Drifting Music was also hugely effective but the stand-out from this concert was Joanna Bailie's *Dissolve*, even without its planned video component. The integration of field recordings and instrumental textures is hardly new, but Bailie did it here in revelatory fashion.

GBSR duo (George Barton, percussion, and Siwan Rhys, piano) with Angharad Davies and Heather Roche were our companions for the second late concert, with the finely wrought work by the aforementioned Arne Gieshoff and the nature-inspired soundworld of Lisa Robertson's *Heartwood*. Birds and trees also featured in Martin Iddon's *Sapindales*, with multiple clarinet lines creating shifting textures from which somewhat haunted melodies appear. The London Sinfonietta and pianist Noriko Kawai rounded the festival off with a world premiere each by Scottish composer, and long-time friend of the festival, James Dillon, who celebrates his seventieth birthday this year. Both these exhibited his expansive musical personality, with ritual repetition, sidestepping forms and sometimes surprising historical reference.

There is a sense that a review of an online festival becomes a reflection on oneself. 'Was it good?' becomes a difficult question to answer when as an audience we are learning how to cope in a digital world. How did I do as a listener? Reader, I could have done better. We are still finding out how best to listen at home. As Iannotta described her early pandemic experiences: 'online concerts, online concerts. It became for me a tiny bit heavy.' Indeed it did, and indeed it still does. Yet I saw and heard more of the festival this year than I have ever done in the past. Digital giveth but it also taketh away.

Next year I hope to be there in person, though, to relieve some of the weight. I look forward to walking through the streets at night after an evening concert, seeing the juxtaposition of bright shops and dessert cafés against the handsome civic architecture. I look forward to that faint sense that I have (once again) forgotten how to navigate the town. At this stage I even feel like I look forward to getting on a train back to my friend's house in York with a selection of heavily perfumed teenagers on nights out to Leeds. What will remain of these digital excursions, in which so many organisations are engaged, is yet to be seen. Thus far, though, there is little that can match the live.

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