

## FIRST PERFORMANCES

### hcmf//2023, Huddersfield, UK

It is always a warming feeling exiting Huddersfield railway station on a trademark dark and drizzly late November day knowing that lots of contemporary music is about to be performed around the corner. This year was the 46th Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (hcmf//) and, following last year's launch of *The Current Climate* (a commitment by hcmf// to explore how the music industry can be a positive force on a sustainable future), a common theme across the festival was that of the ecological crisis. Many pieces across the ten-day festival seemed to contain themes of activism relating to the abundance of crises happening across the world right now, from Žibuoklė Martinaitytė's *Hadal Zone* to a whole day dedicated to *The Current Climate* to pieces that explored ongoing conflicts and protests.

This year's hcmf// included performers and composers from a diverse range of backgrounds and nationalities in performances, talks and exhibitions, featuring Irish composer and vocalist, Jennifer Walshe as the composer-in-residence. Performance art and the use of multimedia was, like in many festivals around the world, commonplace at hcmf// this year with Walshe as composer-in-residence and with the world premiere of Laura Bowler's *ADVERT*. Owing to the vast number of events over the ten days, I will focus on five performances in the review to give a broad look at this year's festival.

The first concert I attended was on the Sunday of the first weekend and featured Belgium's Nadar Ensemble (directed by Stefan Prins and Pieter Matthyssens) who pride themselves on having a 'strong and critical contact with today's world through the use of new technologies'.<sup>1</sup> Iranian composer Golnaz Shariatzadeh's beautifully poignant *fabric of sorrow.mouth sweat engine bodies*, dedicated to those who have lost their lives in the ongoing Iranian revolution, was a well-programmed contrast to Craig Scott's energetic and rhythmic

piece *Mechanisations*, written for both human and non-human performers, the latter of which he controlled the automation of. Shariatzadeh's piece included the composer's own film and animation involving ancient Persian architecture, her own animations as well as raw imagery of a woman with a missing eye referencing the multitude of Iranian women who have been shot in one eye during the protests. The beautifully crafted music by Shariatzadeh for three players interacted perfectly with the film and was performed with real thought and delicacy.

Piotr Peszat's *PENDERSZATCh Rising*, which included a cellist with a VR headset, was about the political and social situation in Poland. The piece was structured using a paragraph concept (a type of question-and-answer form). There were questions projected on the screen such as, 'do you want to attend a contemporary music concert?' (to which a member of the ensemble replied, 'NO!'), to questions about Pope John Paul II's awareness of paedophilia and sexual assault in the Catholic church. This piece pressed many political and social buttons regarding the subject matter; however, the piece itself was much less effective than Shariatzadeh's in the sense that the multiple forms of media did not gel as they did in Shariatzadeh's piece, making the impact of the subject much less effective and more surface-level. This is a common problem in multimedia pieces, so Shariatzadeh's piece excels itself as a touching dedication to all those who have lost their lives in the Iranian protests through an imbrication of the different types of media.

Following this theme of activism and commemoration, Charles Uzor's two pieces performed by the Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra fell very much into the 'less effective' category. The first piece, 8'46" *George Floyd in memoriam*, opened the concert and lasted exactly eight minutes and forty-six seconds (the amount of time brutal police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck, eventually murdering him). Uzor's piece consisted of all members of the orchestra standing in a line at the front of the stage facing the audience making breath noises in an attempt to evoke the nightmarish events of the day Floyd was murdered.

<sup>1</sup> Nadar Ensemble, <https://nadarensemble.be/about/> (accessed 27 November 2023).

However, given the subject matter, one did not get the effect of asphyxiation but, rather, some fluid and swooping breath noises – the intensity of the piece was completely lost through the types of breath noise used, especially for a subject matter that has the potential to evoke such high levels of intensity.

The next Uzor piece, *Katharsis Kalkül*, was the third part of his memorial for George Floyd, this time for orchestra. This was a twenty-minute piece that used lots of heavy chords which were not always balanced and were sometimes a little messy on the part of the ensemble. The piece was quite relentless in its heaviness (even if this was intentional, it was hard to relate the heaviness to the subject matter). Towards the end of the piece came a short interrupting section of piano and marimba in complete contrast to what was heard previously. Even though it presented a sort-of respite from the heavy chords, it seemed very separated and did not particularly work in the context of the piece. Perhaps the most interesting element was the fixed media with the composer's voice explaining his intentions behind the piece. This had the potential to be very effective but, in the end, it lasted for less than a minute and recited details that could have been included in the programme notes. Again, to a larger extent, like Peszat's piece, *Katharsis Kalkül* exemplifies the somewhat ineffective surface-level and disconnected relationships that some activist or commemorative pieces have towards their subject matter.

To close this concert was Liza Lim's hotly anticipated UK premiere of *Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time*, which referenced the ecological crisis in relation to time. The piece had multiple layers of media. As well as the orchestra, it included a gestural performer (Winnie Huang), sounds of a river, and a film by Morena Barra. I thought that Huang's performance, as beautiful as it was, with gestures of flowing water reacting to the fixed media and the film, became a little predictable and sometimes felt separated. Huang also played a singing bowl, and when she did, I felt this was a more effective use of a gestural performer in the context of the piece. As typical with Lim's work, the thought and craft that went into the music and sounds themselves were impressive; however, there were moments where they were masked by the sound of the river over the speakers which was a pity. The film itself consisted of a violin being held in a river and the river 'playing' the violin as the water flowed over it, described by Lim as a 'collaboration of the sentient living

life world of a river'.<sup>2</sup> This was an intimate touch on which the piece was based. *Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time* contained a lot of elements (perhaps too many) to create an experience that was somewhat underwhelming especially in comparison to some of Lim's previous large-scale works.

A programme of string quartets by Henry Threadgill, Sivan Eldar, Chikako Morishita and George Lewis was performed brilliantly by the Mivos Quartet. Eldar's *Solicitations* offered delicacy and perfectly judged textural and gestural interplays, exchanges and densities between the ensemble with a mixture of solo, trio and quartet playing. This paired well with Morishita's robotic-like *Doll Time* which also contained lots of gestures but ones very different to the subtle gestures in Eldar's piece. Morishita shows her interest in ventriloquism and the first and third person with the almost frightening robotic text spoken by the quartet who stopped playing and turned to face the audience. Threadgill's *Sixfivetwo*, an improvisation-heavy piece, opened the concert, and Lewis's *Playing with Seeds* closed it. Both of these pieces were evidently well-crafted; however, they did not have the same effect on me as the Eldar and Morishita.

Closeness and space felt like ongoing themes during hcmf//, starting with a celebration of Jürg Frey's seventieth birthday – a composer familiar to some at hcmf// because of his residency in 2015. The transience in Frey's work exudes a kind of closeness solely through the experience of listening. The day started with EXAUDI, conducted by James Weeks, and ended with the Bozzini Quartet, with an interview with Frey and a piano recital of his work by Reinier van Houdt in the middle.

I am beginning to run out of superlatives to describe EXAUDI. They consistently perform a wide array of music to the highest possible standard (whether it is on the 2019 CD recording of Gesualdo's madrigali or the Frey exhibited during hcmf//). It is *always* a treat to hear them perform live. Stéphanie Bozzini (violinist from the Bozzini Quartet) interspersed Frey's scalic *Mit Schweigen wird's gesprochen* I, II, III & IV between Frey's vocal pieces. The pieces were originally scored for bass clarinet which the composer rescored for viola (III and IV were much more effective for viola than I and II). The highlight was Frey's ephemeral *Because I Could Not Stop*

<sup>2</sup> Liza Lim, [www.lucernefestival.ch/en/magazine/liza-lim-on-multispecies-knots-of-ethical-time/298](http://www.lucernefestival.ch/en/magazine/liza-lim-on-multispecies-knots-of-ethical-time/298) (accessed 28 November 2023).

for *Death* performed exquisitely by EXAUDI. A *cantus firmus* was passed between all parts, utilising text by the ancient Chinese poet, Bai Juyi while interacting with a text by Emily Dickinson and was sung with remarkable balance, sensitivity and blend. This piece was not only a highlight of the concert, but a highlight of the whole festival. Frey's other vocal works, *Polyphonie der Wörter* and *Landscape of Echoes*, were performed with equal delicacy and gave that real sense of closeness.

A different kind of closeness was exhibited in Adriana Minu and Christine Cornwell's *Between you and me* performed by the Nadar Ensemble which explored a type of explicit intimacy that was somewhat surface-level and left me feeling a little cold. The proposed intimacy felt a little forced with the amplification of the ensemble making the intimacy between the audience, the piece and the performers rather ineffective and distanced.

Bára Gísladóttir took on the difficult task of ending this year's hcmf// with her ear-popping *The moon is an eye is a pond and so on and so forth*. This piece was quite a spectacle for both the eyes and the ears due to Gísladóttir's fondness for exploring sound quality, density and volume – all of which were pushed to the maximum. Riot Ensemble, with conductor Adam Swayne, performed this fifty-minute piece with real intensity and embodiment. It was loud, in your face and extreme involving lots of percussion, prepared harpsichord and an angle grinder. The piece used very few pitches and had echoes of Scelsi's *Quattro pezzi su una nota sola* but pushed to the extreme limit. However, it was not the piece itself that was the highlight, it was the actual experience of sitting in the Bates Mill Blending Shed and hearing those sounds and volumes at their full extremities. The piece is all about the overwhelming sonic experience, and that experience is probably a little bit like Marmite to some – I, for one, enjoyed it. I have not experienced anything like it before and, when the piece ended, I felt as if I could listen for another fifty minutes just because of the sheer intensity of the volume and the closeness you felt sat in the audience to the sound, the space and the performers.

Overall, this year's hcmf// produced some interesting and provoking performances with lots using performance art and multimedia dealing with important matters in and around the world. Admittedly, I could not attend all days of the festival, but with what I did see and by reading through the festival programme, I felt as if the festival lacked some real musical grit.

The programme this year was not as varied as I have experienced in previous years attending the festival so I was left feeling a little underwhelmed with what I saw on the whole.

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### Rainy Days 2023, Philharmonie Luxembourg

The Philharmonie de Luxembourg's plumply funded Rainy Days festival has gradually been establishing itself as a festival of international renown, and was this year marked by the new artistic direction of multidisciplinary composer Catherine Kontz. What is clear at first glance, with Feldman, Lucier and Lockwood peppered through the programming, is that Kontz has made a conscious aesthetic choice in her curation. This music of *deep listening* focuses on the act of listening itself, with no distinction or hierarchical bias made between improvisation, written acoustic music, post-fluxus conceptualism and electronic music of yore, and tends to involve musical experiences engrossed in delicate, slow-booming processes. While that may not be to everyone's taste, it is delightfully refreshing to see a clear and pointed vision instead of a hodgepodge of who's hot in new music. Using the very elemental theme of *memory* as a vehicle for the aesthetic direction as well as a means to link past and present contemporary music (however oxymoronic that may sound), Kontz manages to brilliantly curate a tight four-day program full of surprising, ear-opening experiences.

Each day comprises an extended line up of short performances, with an average of one to two works (or 40 min) per event, allowing for many ambulatory breaks between the halls, in which the audience can decant their thoughts while admiring the many facets of the architectural wonder that is the Philharmonie. The effect of such programming is much like that of a ten-course meal, where one can savour and digest many more sonic experiences than if one were to sit in one 100+ min, pitch-heavy concert. With each break, the option of exploring the various installations scattered around the sumptuous venue is always an option, including *Welcome Here Kind Stranger*. In an authentically furnished pop-up Irish pub, Owen Spafford and his band revel in authentic quaintness, as they perform traditional music with fiddles and flute while drinking draught Guinness available to all. More than just a break room, the work explores the