

FIRST PERFORMANCES

hcmf// 2022

This year was the first year I experienced Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (hcmf//) in its full intensity, having only made it to a couple of concerts in previous years. As a young composer and avid listener, I felt welcomed into the festival by faces old and new, and through the range of music present. Having spent a lot of time over the past year attending DIY experimental gigs in Leeds, I was excited to see that, despite some formality, hcmf// seemed to share a similar openness to all approaches to making music, an attribute I have found missing from some contemporary concert hall environments.

The concerts I attended on the first weekend gave an impression of the festival in its bare-bones form, featuring well-known contemporary ensembles playing works from significant composers. There appeared to be a theme of slow pieces that treated ensembles as single shifting entities. It is natural here to centralise Justè Janulté's works in this context, as she is known for writing 'large-scale multi-layered textures and extremely gradual metamorphoses'.¹ I adored her piece *Sleeping Patterns*, for the London Sinfonietta. The texture was full and the timbres rich, with accordion, synthesiser and two vibraphones grounding the music. The piece was fundamentally melodic, yet due to the constant shifting patterns and harmony I was unable to recall any of the melodies that had passed. Though the piece was complex, it was never overwhelming, instead allowing me to be hypnotised by the present moment. Janulté's pieces did not, however, overshadow the other slow shifting pieces in the programme. The festival instead demonstrated the full breadth of this approach. Naomi Pinnock's piece *Landscape*, for vocal ensemble EXAUDI, focused on using the ensemble to bring out resonances in a solo vocal line which often sounded as if filtering, delay or reverb was being added and removed, shaping and deepening the vocal line, before moving back into its raw form. This approach stood out to me as it allowed a similar slow shaping without having a permanently sustained texture. Anna Korsun's *Spleen*, performed

by Riot Ensemble, was far from the richness of Janulté's work, with the ensemble instead acting as a gentle humming voice. The piece used sustained tones that gradually moved into oscillation through glissandi-induced beating effects and flitting rhythms on a single pitch accentuated by subtle introductions of airy timbres, revealing many colours yet never overstating them.

I was anticipating that composer-in-residence Lisa Streich's famously slow and cautious yet somehow impulsive works would bridge an ideal gap between these slower shifting pieces mentioned and the typically prevalent, brisk, extended-technique-focused pieces that contemporary music always seems to be known for. Pieces such as Korsun's *Plexus*, for Riot Ensemble, Franck Bedrossian's *Le Lieu et la formule*, for Ensemble intercontemporain, and Lorenzo Paglieri's *Marea flusso deriva*, for EXAUDI, held this typical role well and proudly. The gap between these approaches was certainly bridged in Streich's piece *OFELIA*, for Ensemble intercontemporain. The pitch content and timbres in *OFELIA* were spectral and otherworldly, with contrasts that were somehow able to flow smoothly, perhaps because the piece was fundamentally grounded by motors gliding paper over piano strings. Streich's piece *FRANCESCA*, for Riot Ensemble, on the other hand, was unpleasantly jarring in its impulsivity. The piece, inspired by Santa Francesca Romana, the Patron Saint of Drivers (known for experiencing revelations of purgatory and hell), featured whip cracking and slapsticks, jolting the audience into sudden violence. These parts of the piece seemed crude and unnecessary, and unexpected for a composer whose works usually appear to be so meticulously considered.

From the Monday onwards, the festival unfolded into an exciting range of approaches towards expression and collaboration. Composer and improviser Raven Chacon had two distinct collaborations with trumpet player Marco Blaauw, the first a piece written for Blaauw's ensemble The Monochrome Project and the second as a duo performing an improvised noise set. I was sad to miss half of both performances due to having to catch the last train to Leeds but was blown away by what I did hear of both parties' constant shaping of timbre. There was also an

¹ Justè Janulté, www.justejanulyte.com/en/about/ (accessed 2 December 2022).

incredibly refreshing performance from Swedish singer and composer Sofia Jernberg's Freedom to Move project which featured five singers of different styles performing and improvising both solo and as an ensemble, which was unified yet uncompromising. The second Saturday was especially notable with regards to collaboration and expression. I appreciated the inclusion of jazz pianist Pat Thomas in the programme, a clear nod towards the marriage of the free improvisation and contemporary music scenes that thrives at venues such as London's Cafe OTO, where Thomas's regularly plays. Thomas' performance explored the piano inside and out with the most sophisticated approach to articulation I have ever seen. There were many instances of obscuration through ferocious muddy harmony featuring low pitches that then allowed just the most delicate, resonant, high pitches to be sustained from the chord at the end of the passage. Thomas moved inside the piano multiple times, playing bell-like harmonics and rhythmically scratching the strings. This performance included three encores, between which Thomas checked the time. The first encore involved vigorous stamping, the second polarised textures and the last, with one minute to spare, playful poking his walking stick around the inside of the piano. Later that evening was the Australian Art Orchestra's performance with composers/improvisers Cath Roberts and Mandhira de Saram. This concert was my personal highlight of hcmf// and encompassed a collaborative approach to making music between a range of musicians. The work they performed, *Fresh Water – Salt Water*, sung and guided by Yorlju traditional songmen David and Daniel Wilfred, was moving and spiritual, taking the listener on a journey inland from the mouth of the Walker River. The music was continuous and seamless, alternating between rhythmic sections driven by the vocals and clapsticks, and more atmospheric parts featuring field recordings of rain, birdsong and crickets. Each musician's contribution was creative yet completely fitting, and it felt as if every player was able to speak alongside Daniel Wilfred's passionate vocals. The more atmospheric sections included sustained didgeridoo tones from David Wilfred and breathy sounds from Aviva Endean's harmonic flute and Helen Svoboda's gentle singing. There was also use of moving harmonics from the strings and small pops and reversed sounds from Martin Ng's turntables. Peter Knight's trumpet processing created rich sustained tones to ground the textures. Often the clapsticks and vocals were accompanied by percussive sounds from all instruments.

I was also impressed by the range of unique approaches towards making sound at the festival. Hcmf// shorts were particularly fruitful for this. The shorts take place on the Monday as a series of free concerts giving emerging artists a platform to perform. I really enjoyed Sam Longbottom and Tanguy Pocquet's performance of *threaded | spinning | abrading | possibly breaking*, which explored broken drones using fishing line looped around a turntable to bow two guitars, a viola and a violin. The result of the set-up was a variety of fragile, layered drones with gentle disruption caused when knots in the fishing line moved over the instruments, with noisy rhythmic patterns entering when new objects were introduced. I did find the staging to be very formal for two guys sat on the floor mucking about with turntables and guitars. Despite having been concocted in the glossy studios of RNCM, this performance shared a likeness with the accomplished scrappiness often found at DIY experimental gigs at venues such as Wharf Chambers in Leeds. To me the performance was begging for a looser, perhaps more installation-like set-up, with the players in the centre instead of the front and the audience able to walk around. The performance ended up evolving into this anyway, as many audience members couldn't see and instead moved to stand at the sides. I was also able to catch Ann Rosén's performance of *Liquid Air*, which explored graphite on paper as a sound source. The performance was successful in its creation of new and exciting sounds. The sounds coming from the graphite were wet and intricate, squelching along, akin to that of a creature scuttling or swallowing, with occasional deep rumbling. I was, however, less convinced by the processing of the sounds, as they often sounded sloppily looped, with the loops continuing for too long and not developing, to a point where the performance became overloaded yet tedious. I was nonetheless glad to see Rosén's approach to graphite for the first time, which I'm sure works exceptionally in a workshop context.

Though I plunged myself into attending 14 concerts at hcmf// this year, I did not feel my stamina tested. The bold yet attentive programming of the festival kept me stomping through the puddles of a cold rainy Huddersfield. I hope that this ethos of variety, playfulness and progression continues in future iterations of the festival, which I will be attending.

Mia Windsor

10.1017/S0040298222001309