



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.

Niki Zohdi

10.1017/S0040298223001110

---

### 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

ethos of a music inextricably linked to its context as a space of cheer and respite.

Perhaps one lesson learned is that for such a programme to function effectively, concert durations must be impeccably timed and observed in order to avoid any knock-on effect from tardy arrivals. In more than a few critical instances, delicate works were brutally interrupted, causing anxiety for 'late'-comers and frustration for those already entranced by a crystalline Feldman or a gossamer Bailie.

One of the highlights included the Montreal-based Architek Percussion quartet's portrait of two Canadian composers. Sabrina Schroeder's *Stircrazer I* (2022), with samplers and multiple kick and bass drums surrounding the audience, explored the sonic capabilities of rumbling and could be described as an *étude* in tension building. The navigation of timbre, gesture and tension is masterful, although the lack of any huge climax or surprise felt like a wasted opportunity for a lengthy piece in which the audience had been brought into such a trance-like state. Emily Doolittle's *Re(Cycling) I: Metals*, is as conceptually clear in its limitation of materials: an orchestra of recycled metal containers – including pie plates, pudding foils, salad bowls, tins and coffee pods – are rubbed, brushed and dangled, creating various domestic sonic and visual associations and tapping into the rather universal memory of early childhood kitchen play. The seemingly light-hearted work is also political at its core, reminding us that our first memories of sonic exploration were achieved by creating wonder through waste.

The crown jewel of the festival, however, was the co-premiere of Joanna Bailie's 1979, which captures the first year the composer has clear memories of from her childhood. This Proustian endeavour to seize the essence of one's early years through sound and image is not an easy one, but Bailie champions this with her typical slowly unfolding and evocative soundworld, perfectly captured by Ictus' sensitivities. The warm, sonic embrace from omnidirectionally swelling strings and slowly descending antiphonal chains of thirds by the flute and clarinet lull us into a different feeling of time, readying us for the video element introduced to us at the midway point. Projected onto a large, hitherto concealed screen are subsequent black-and-white images of the composer's memories, glowing, blurring and fuzzing each in their own way. Almost dreamlike, they feel just on the cusp of reality, encapsulating the complex set of emotions one feels when recalling early childhood. Just like a child's word, the work is unabashedly honest in its simple and direct means, and of course its unapologetic

yet always tasteful use of diatonicism. Through it, one has the sense of having peered into the composer's soul. Not often can that be said of contemporary composers!

The Langham Research Centre performed thrice on Saturday, displaying versatility and charm in iconic works like Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*, but even more so in their first set, *Into the Analogue*, in which they revisited and remixed great works of musique concrete (including 'Dinotique' by Luc Ferrari) using their instrumentarium of vintage analogue devices. At times saucily intersplicing crisp sonic images of mooing cows with wailing babies, typewriters and apple crunching at unpredictable pacing and tempi, they also demonstrated surprising lyricism in their wacky and broad palette, with astral chants made up of oscillator glissandi in three-voice counterpoint.

Classic Fluxus works were also shown, such as Annea Lockwood's *Spirit Catchers* from 1974, in which four amplified reciters (including Sarah Washington and Knut Aufermann) quietly and simultaneously regaled us with the story of an object that is dear to them. In this very polyglotal version (German, French, English and Luxembourgish), the counterpoint of moods was particularly poignant, as a silly story of a doll intermingled with the sorrowful break-up with a friend and a sober yet deeply moving story about learning to read.

Also refreshing was Sunday's programming, apt for all but dedicated to families and sharing with children the taste for everything that music can be. Various short and interactive events were offered throughout the afternoon with an underlined laxness in concert etiquette. The screening of old 8 mm, often educational, film shorts from the mid twentieth century was inventively accompanied by solo performers Ulic Berg (sax), Angharad Davies (violin), Tim Parkinson (synth) and Frin Wolter (accordion). The original audio track of these films being absent, each performer got to create their own scores, creating new associations between sound and image.

The final concert was by none other than superstar Laurie Anderson, whose latest show, *Let X = X*, is more than anything a nostalgic retrospective tailored for Gen Xers, where she revisits her life and hits with her tired band Sexmob. Weirdly enough, she brings up global collapse an alarming number of times, but with a blasé attitude that feels deeply complacent to anyone from a younger generation. Although it was a thrill to see a legend live, one could unfortunately tell that this was just another show on her tour.

It is rare to find a theme that composers truly engage with, which is why as a theme for this

year's Rainy Days, memory was such a strong binding agent. Memory fascinates us intrinsically, both as humans and as artists of ephemeral matter, as it allows us to make connections with the music of the past and present and ultimately makes us aware of the cognitive faculties that allow us to emote through sound. The feeling of contentment after such a festival arose thus not only from captivating works and performances, but from a tight-knit curation that made us ponder and remember.

Thierry Tidrow  
10.1017/S0040298223001122

---

### Ultima 2023, Oslo, Norway

I attended three days of Ultima Festival's jam-packed ten-day programme this year. The festival had a bold and playful charm to it with an immense breadth of approaches to experimental music, presented in an array of formats including dance performances, sound walks, installations and even a cooking event, in both public and private spaces. Although most of the concerts I attended were fantastic, I did find that there were a couple of sloppy curatorial decisions. The festival had a changeover of directors in February from Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen to Heloisa Amaral, which I would imagine made the curation process more difficult. I was also unimpressed by the website being covered in what looked like bad AI-generated art, a tasteless choice for a high-profile festival whose programming puts effort into showcasing interdisciplinary practices.

The first evening I attended was aligned towards contemporary classical music in its more traditional form, with three standout works. The first was Christina Kubisch's *Strømsanger* performed by Trondheim Voices. Kubisch has, since the 1980s, been reaching into the complex hidden soundworlds found through amplifying electromagnetic induction. Being able to hear this in recorded form, or in the form of a sound walk (of which there were some as part of Ultima) is mesmerising in itself, but hearing this work live was even more special. The piece was crafted together in a beautiful cycle in an organic collaboration with the vocalists. Both raw and electromagnetic recordings were taken from a journey along a tram route in Trondheim that the vocalists then improvised in response to. These recordings were then repetitively re-recorded in a church, using the resonant frequencies of the space to blur the

recordings back to having electronic qualities like the original electromagnetic waves. The layering and morphing between these sounds in the piece worked perfectly. The piece started with various complex drones and harmonic cycles from the tape part and sung parts from the vocalists. Kubisch's collaging mastery shone through when it came to pitch in this section, maintaining a strong sense of harmony while working with electromagnetic sounds that, though pitched, were untuned and often featured multiple pitches at once and moments of complex spectral variation. The harmony of the tape part grounded the live vocalists while still expanding and contracting beyond understood concepts of pitch, creating something otherworldly. The second section of the piece was also fantastic. The soundworld became grittier with the vocalists improvising fluidly and like cyborgs, leveraging their individual skills to morph between odd machine-like formants and overtones in synchrony with sawtooth-like sounds and noisy glitching hums from the tape part. The work finished with the vocalists isolated, speaking the name of the final tram stop, Lian, concluding their journey.

The second concert of the evening was *Beveget cellist*, devised and choreographed by Gunhild Bjørnsgaard and composed and performed by Tanja Orning in the exhibition hall of the old Munch Museum. The work was an exploration of Orning's bodily relationship with her cello. The performance started with Orning slowly moving around the edges of the dark hall, playing constantly. Warm spotlights were shone on her at points where she lingered, letting the movement of her playing cast shadows on the wood-panelled walls. She eventually moved to the centre of the room where two other cellos were placed and spent the rest of the performance alternating between them. Her playing throughout was relentless yet nostalgic, with bow pressure and position seamlessly traversing between noisy textural material with leaping harmonics, to fast scales and snippets of Bach. The choreography and lighting were extremely focused, centring rather than extending Orning's movements, resulting in a meticulous yet personal performance.

The final concert of the night was Kristine Tjøgersen's *Night Lives*, performed by the Cikada Ensemble, which encapsulated the bold and playful charm found throughout the many events at Ultima. The piece represented the unique sensory world of nocturnal creatures, with the set design and choreography being especially silly and abstract, as if it was not