

FIRST PERFORMANCES

MaerzMusik 2023, Berlin, Germany, 17–26 March.

MaerzMusik, the Berliner Festspiele's expansive new-music festival, spans nine days and manages to squeeze in 21 performances, not to mention the array of talks and lectures happening in the MaerzMusik Library. The latter are a pet project of the newly appointed director, Kamila Metwaly, aiming to open up the space of the Berliner Festspiele (its HQ where most events take place) and promote accessibility, a hard but acknowledged feat. Metwaly along with guest curator Enno Poppe manage to foster diversity and quality in their programming, offering a broad curation of works that tackle vital social justice causes (race, class, queerness) that are often neglected in typical new-music programming in Germany. Due to the scope of the event, this review does not cover all 21 events, but rather attempts to paint a picture of this multi-layered festival by looking at six key events.

The festival opened with a concert-length world premiere by Michael Beil for Belgium's Nadar Ensemble. True to Beil's penchant for the digital, *Hide to Show* explores authenticity, voyeurism and self-representation in the digital age and is as much a visual work as a sonic one. The eight members of the ensemble, as much actors as musicians, contrapuntally conceal and reveal themselves behind six adjacent cubicles (or cells) with Venetian blinds (the kind one can both lower and twist), either playing their instruments intently while making faces to the audience or lip-syncing sounds in the ever pulsating and dominating track. These blinds – as well as the players behind them – exist physically as well as digitally, as identical images are projected on to the cells. This duality of physical vs projected is found in all aspects of the work, where an extremely crafty counterpoint of acoustic and holographic sounds and images both muddle us and wow us with the obvious metaphor that, yes, identity in the era of the internet is indeed bewildering. A special shout out to the ensemble for playing it all by heart and fully committing to their roles as stage performers!

Musically, the work derives its material from the world of pop music, and while some ever returning songs such as the crooner 'Stretch

me, Crop me' evoke nostalgia and the overwhelming feeling of loneliness in the digital age, other movements of pure techno and house – including a Mortal Kombat knock-off – feel derivative and misplaced, perhaps since their function has no deeper connection other than having a cool beat. Although the music is well written, the form of the 70-minute work is basically track by track, giving a sense of playlist fatigue.

Elaine Mitchener and MAM.manufaktur für aktuelle Musik's *On Being Human as Praxis* combined dance, movement and music to create a whole performative experience as a means to tackle the anti-colonial humanist work of Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter. Originally programmed for Donaueschingen 2020, the five written works refer to systemic racism and the general lacklustre state of the world, inspired by Black Lives Matter and the death of George Floyd.

However, it isn't the works that electrify, but rather Mitchener herself, whose presence and execution – along with her 5-MAM band – channel the complexity of emotions that encapsulate the feeling of being human in the twenty-first century. She showcases her improvisational chops in between pieces, where she and the group of musicians and two dancers either crawl or storm through the space (choreography: Dam Van Huynh), channelling the most dominant effects of the evening: despair, anger and exuberance. She also clearly adds her own complex improvisational embellishments to the works that need the extra layers of interpretation in order not to sag (in Jason Yarde's *The Problem with Humans* and Tansy Davies' *The Rule is Love*). Perhaps the strongest moment – after George Lewis' explosively colourful finale *H. narrans*, where expressionist gestures bounce and glisten with force and brilliancy – was Laure M. Hiendl's *White Radiance*TM, a deconstruction of whiteness and sinister capitalism using skin-bleach advertisements as source material. The work opens with Mitchener, standing tall on a chair in a blinding white light, motorically intoning a seemingly endless stream of skin-whitening jargon ('SPF 90+ ultimate hydration melanin [etc.]') on an ever loudening drone which she reads from a scroll, almost as scripture of

white supremacy. Clear sonic images such as these, however nasty they may be, mark our minds much more than lyrically composed lines of theoretical writing.

The festival's largest endeavour, *GrenzRAUM Hören* (loosely although inaccurately translatable as *Listening to the threshold of audibility*), curated by PHØNIX16, focused on the very quiet works of Jakob Ullmann and Pauline Oliveros, spanning several concerts throughout the week. In Ullmann's *voice, books and FIRE* series from the early 90s, an almost inaudible yet lush drone-based soundscape made up of fixed media, two readers whisper a text (of which one only barely hears its plosives and fricatives), and a 10-voice choir hums and oohs 17 feet above the stage. The works are meditative and beautifully complex enough to endure their static quality and daunting durations (50 to 90 minutes per piece).

The first and longer half of ensemble *mosaik's* concert featured two pairs of works: Sara Glojarić's *sugarcoating* series (1 + 3) followed by the first and last of Sergej Newski's *Ensembletrilogie*. Gojarić's *sugarcoating #1*, extremely brutal yet somehow still joyfully and boisterously chugging along with its sharp rhythms and blunt clusters, is so defiant that the maybe more subtle and sophisticated *#3* just feels meeker when placed directly after the hard-headed original. Newski's *Ensembletrilogie I-Space* hauntingly flows between late-night jazzy tutti jams and intimate solos, with complex yet inviting harmonies. However, his *Ensembletrilogie III Memory*, the only world premiere of the evening, totally spoiled the first piece with its distracting and narcissistic visuals. First, the projected close-ups of the concertante violist and pianist were so unflattering that one could hardly keep one's eyes open without giggling (moments of escaped laughs and sighs plagued the whole performance), but then these were superimposed on spliced footage from the Berlin Love Parade 1997, taken by members of the ensemble in their youth. The idea here was to dedicate the work to *mosaik*, as the composer has known and worked with them for over a quarter century. However, for the rest of us, this homage felt like a big inside joke, serving nepotistic means rather than connecting to its audience, which wasn't 'in on it'.

Luckily, the concert was saved by the highlight of this year's festival, Laura Bowler's *FFF*, a 30-minute multimedia piece for ensemble, video, electronics and herself as an astonishing vocalist. The title refers to our primal flight-fight-freeze reaction, something that we as a society experience with everything happening

in the world towards which we feel powerless. The audience experiences this overwhelming sensation as Bowler chokes, hyperventilates, gasps and screams, when she isn't intoning information at an unintelligible rate, not to mention the ever shifting music and flickering video footage of protests and police brutality. It is both exhilarating and exhausting, not only due to the concept but because of the palpable urgency and commitment behind the work.

Mathias Spahlinger, a once influential figure whose work often seems to be motivated by a belief that real music should be pleasureless, was the subject of a whole concert devoted to the premiere of his 11-piece-long chamber cycle for the *asamisimasa* quintet (cello, clarinet, piano, guitar, percussion), which was, surprisingly, written over the span of the last few years. For each piece the programme notes explained how parameters would be toyed with, plans that the music pedantically followed through. The music is exact, overly structured, needlessly meticulous, risk-averse and purged of poetry, as if the most tedious side of post-war German structuralism was being brought to its logical conclusion: a dead end. Happily, the new-music scene in Germany has moved on from the era when this music was considered relevant.

Laure M. Hiendl's *Songs for Captured Voices* is an hour-long staged performance for vocalist (Elaine Mitchener) and amplified quartet (KNM Berlin on violin, cello, subcontrabass clarinet and rototoms) and electronics. Hiendl's approach to text setting is ingenious, and their ability to draw out form and use instruments sparingly yet effectively while keeping tension is jaw-droppingly impressive. However, the work gives so much space to Göksu Kunak's text, which is political in the worst way, obsessed with dropping uncomfortable truth bombs (systemic racism, drowned migrants, the horrors of Interpol, etc.) and constantly pointing fingers at its assumed progressive audience. Political art can be efficient, but not when it accuses its audience in such a heavy-handed way: "Say their names (*sung ca. 20x*): "You deleted their names" (*spoken soberly*)". It is offensive to simply present such vital issues without properly addressing them in any meaningful way.

All in all, this year's *MaerzMusik* presented very different works, and even though they didn't always succeed, they demonstrated an inspiringly broad range of what new music can be. That is ultimately the sign of a successful festival.

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