



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.

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### 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

intended to be completely understood by human senses. The audience entered the vast space that is the Kulturkirken Jakob through a pink-tasselled tunnel to find performers who, wrapped in large pieces of tubing, were diffusing smoke throughout the space by periodically covering and uncovering several smoke machines arranged on the ground. The audience was later presented with luminous citrusy beverages: a fun touch. The music was initially focused around presenting a complex ecosystem: with performers spaced around the room making unfamiliar calls to one another using objects and instrumental preparations, representing communications as may be understood if you 'let your eardrums grow on your ribs' or had 'tongues on the soles of your feet'.<sup>1</sup> This imaginary ecosystem was also multi-scale, which was emphasised by recordings of soil and projections of microbes on the walls and ceiling. Although there were interesting points throughout, I did find that some of the piece's ecocentric charm was lost due to a bizarre musical shift from this abstract approach to a music that was almost poppy, with regular rhythms and painfully clean synth, which contrasted distastefully with the rest of the ensemble. The tubing-clad performers humorously stood up straight and wobbled awkwardly from side to side, which brought back some necessary silliness. The piece then ended with a Mahler reference. I found this odd for a work that is supposedly so focused on the non-human to start referencing the classical canon. Nevertheless, this concert was still a lovely end to the evening.

My second day of Ultima was patchy, which was surprising after such a strong start. The day began with Mirte Bogaert's *REtransLATE*, which was a contemporary dance performance about communication and (mis)interpretation. This performance felt like an inside joke between the dancers, with awkward robotic movements passed between them eventually leading to various odd fusions of dance styles. The music (by experimental guitarist Stephan Meidell), though well done, felt disconnected from the performance. Following this performance was a two-hour concert from sound artist Trevor Mathison and experimental pop artist Hayley Fohr (aka Circuit des Yeux) at the new Munch Museum. The concert was divided into three parts, with a solo set from Mathison, a duo and then a solo set from Fohr. The solo set from Mathison and the duo were decent,

atmospheric drones and soundscapes which Fohr's processed vocals meshed well with. Fohr's solo set, however, was presented as a testing ground for new material which felt strange for such a long and formal-seeming seated concert. Though Fohr is clearly a skilled musician, known for her four-octave vocal range, the performance was erratic, and her piano and guitar playing were quite unconvincing at times. Though programming works in progress can be a wonderful way to foster the creation of new material, I do think that it needs to be approached with consideration. Perhaps instead, presenting a low-stakes, shorter and more casual gig for the purpose of working on said material would have worked better.

The final concert at Ultima, organised by Ultima's Curation Lab, was handled much better in this regard. The concert was part of a day-long event titled 'To be in the margins is to be part of the whole', intended to unite marginalised voices and perspectives. There were three acts on the bill, each completely innovative. The first was a set from Venus Ex Machina. This set covered every base, bringing mathematically complex harmony and melodic patterns into a powerful industrial context, dipping into a limitless timbral world with bird-call-like swooshes, fierce feedback-like sustain and deep powerful drones, over digital drums. The production and mixing on the set were lush with live vocals sitting perfectly in the middle of the intensity. The second set was an outpour of guitar noise between Sámi guitarist Viktor Bomstad and sound artist Ruhail Qaisar from Ladakh, India. Both performers are adept guitarists and vocalists of considerably different styles, both influenced by their homelands. Bomstad, who stayed mostly on the floor, alternated between pedalboard and synth creating a soundscape of subby synth cracklings, masterfully shaped pedal-controlled feedback patterns and occasional joiking in perfect synchronisation with synth sequences. Qaisar worked with a xenharmonically tuned guitar and voice, expressively attacking the guitar, and singing and shouting in completely raw catharsis. This was all underpinned by a storm of whirling samples creating chaos, where both were able to express themselves without compromise. The final set was a performance from Iranian-born, Berlin-based virtuoso percussionist Mohammad Reza Mortazavi. This was like nothing I had ever heard before. Mortazavi performed solo on tombak and then daf, creating utopian dance music, tapping into both the ancient and futuristic, with rhythms that were commandingly consistent yet never

<sup>1</sup> Night Lives, *Ultima Festival Programme* (2023).

regular, momentarily creating a world where everything made sense. The performance was fast and polyphonic, possessing the detail of a full percussion ensemble, with the tiniest finger movements precisely altering the timbre of every single touch. Mortazavi seemed as captivated by this world as the audience with many (myself included) not being able to help but move along with him. This gig was an immense success, demonstrating how more playful approaches to curation can be powerful in facilitating individual expression and that effort needs to be put into creating spaces that fit the artist or ensemble booked, rather than the other way around. I hope that this concert can set a precedent for future iterations of *Ultima* where it continues its ambitious and diverse programme but with careful effort put into *all* curatorial decisions.

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**Uri Agnon, *Antisemitism: a (((musical)))*. Camden People's Theatre, London.**

Written and composed by Uri Agnon, *Antisemitism: a (((musical)))* premiered at the Camden People's Theatre between the 17 and 28 October. I was initially sceptical of the appropriateness of a comedic musical on the topic of antisemitism, not least because of the events in Israel and Gaza on and after 7 October and the weaponisation of antisemitism by Israel and its critics. However, I left the theatre feeling wholly convinced – the work had by no means attempted to offer an authoritative stance on antisemitism in the UK. Instead, it created a space for the audience to sit with the issues, wrestle with the contradictions and laugh at the absurdity of it all.

The musical follows an Israeli Jew's first 24 hours on British soil. Curious to experience antisemitism in the diaspora, the protagonist, portrayed convincingly by Maya Kristal Tenenbaum, takes a journey from Tel Aviv airport all the way to North London and is confronted by antisemitism from passengers on the tube, a Tinder date and two kidnappers who take him hostage after mistaking him for Uri Geller. The hostage scene no doubt landed very differently from how it was initially intended and was preceded by a fourth-wall breakage disclaiming that it was written prior to the events on 7 October. It was surprising to me that this moment did not elicit audible shock from the audience, who were perhaps unsure of what to make of it. The material oscillated between presentations of left-wing and

right-wing antisemitism, critiquing its weaponisation from all sides of the political spectrum. A pre-recorded choir (voiced eerily by Peter Falconer) sung (((antisemitic))) interludes between scenes with text drawn from Twitter typifying antisemitic tropes that, in their absurdity, veer towards the comical. The acousmatic nature of the disembodied choir engendered an uneasy ambivalence, in which the anonymous power of the statements could be mocked while simultaneously acknowledging the real danger they represent. Towards the end of the play, one of the characters states in true Brechtian fashion that for the play to end, it needs to have a moral – this sends the rest of the cast into disarray as they lament the impossibility of a coherent moral the play can have. A moment of real ingenuity, it presents the *raison d'être* of the show by pushing back at reductive attempts to explain British antisemitism without offering its own answer. Agnon does this knowingly and is very much aware of the current trends in socio-cultural theories of music that have adopted Mouffe's concept of politics as agonistic pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

With fourteen unique numbers, two reprises and the pre-recorded choral interludes, the music is punchy and energising, interspersed with moments of lyrical reflection. It comfortably sits within the musical theatre idiom but is also heavily citational in a very 'new music' sense. There are allosonic quotations of Schoenberg, Sondheim and Jerry Bock, to name but a few. These intertextual references to almost exclusively Jewish composers are a nod to the Jewishness of musical theatre, with the genre as we know it today being carved out by New York Jews coming from the Yiddish theatre tradition. In this way, the work becomes a perfect example of what Jeffrey Shandler has called 'post-vernacular Yiddishkeit',<sup>2</sup> in which the modality of expression and its relationship to Jewishness has rhetorical weight adjunctive to the content expressed. The two keyboards making up the band (performed terrifically by David Merriman and Oli George Rew) play into the DIY aesthetic and the trope of the 'wandering Jew' drawing on glaringly artificial sounds melded into more traditional showtune keyboard writing. The singers handled the material deftly; despite occasional issues with balance and annunciation, this hardly detracted from the overall experience.

<sup>1</sup> See Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) and Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agnostic Pluralism?', *Social Research*, 66, no. 3 (1999), pp. 745–58.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Shandler, 'Postvernacular Yiddish: Language as a Performance Art', *TDR*, 48, no. 1 (2004), pp. 19–43.