

Klangspuren 2022

Surrounded by majestic mountains with white peaks, under the Innsbruck train tracks, in an underground punk club, Natacha Diels sings about 'a beautiful place'. She sits, her gaze hovering above the audience, a button under each hand, and a big screen to her left. On screen, stick figures drive a car on their way to this 'beautiful place'. Their story, which (spoiler alert) does not end well, is the first part of *Watching Other People's Movies Through the Plane Seats* (2022), a 45-minute long trip-tych where beauty is cast as an unachievable, menacing goal. This ambiguous stance towards beauty is sung in non-expressive, thin, melodic lines that contrast with the bath of ever changing glittering synth sound in which the audience is soaked. JACK Quartet make a surprise entrance for the last movement. They bow in faux ritual to the slow rhythm of Diels' kick drum, joining her in the telling of an absurd fable and monotonously proclaiming AI-created idioms about the meaning of life. Their part ends with all five singing 'You are so beautiful to me', and the quartet waltzes out of the space, whispering 'don't forget to breathe'. Glamorous beauty is the absent target driving the piece: first in a journey towards a 'beautiful place' (it doesn't matter which), then in a repetitive, absurd quest towards 'the most precious of stones'. We are constantly led but never arrive. Without offering an explicit stance or message, the piece unnervingly places ideas, sounds and images next to each other, and even its soft, crisp, self-knowing and ritualistic tone is not absolved from a hovering critical gaze. The piece enigmatically comments on a culture obsessed with the pursuit of beauty, but where beauty itself doesn't matter: it is only an abstract and commodified symbol of status, wisdom and happiness – a culture in which, as Diels reminds us (via Led Zeppelin), 'everything still turns to gold'.

And yet it's hard to imagine a more beautiful place for a music festival than the Alpine valley in Tyrol, where Klangspuren takes place. The breathtaking scenery creates a captivating tension with some of the musical explorations at the festival. In their programming, Klangspuren's artistic-director duo Clara Iannotta and Christof Dienz took a broad and expansive approach to new music, presenting a wide range of artistic positions and styles. In my six evenings at the festival, every concert was different, each putting forward its own aesthetic and set of practices, influences and references. However, some themes run as a scarlet thread, particularly a obscure relationship with beauty, expression and sense.

Diels' ambiguity towards beauty was expressed in a totally different musical language yet with some similarity in theme to that present in Riot Ensemble's performance of music by Klangspuren's Composer Lab. Riot Ensemble workshopped and performed music by ten young composers (Dilay Doğanay, Mathias Schmidhammer, Omer Baresh, Elian Jurgschart, Lauren Siess, William Kuo, Marta Haladzhun, Jonah Haven, Johannes Brömmel, Nicolas Roulive), who were guided by Chaya Czernowin and Matthew Shlomowitz. Each composer had their own musical voice; however, the pieces felt closely related. Using techniques such as scratch tones and overpressure, most of these pieces explore the failure of expression in a highly expressive manner. Dense, dissonant, dramatic and restless, they opt away from melodies towards glissandi and focus on timbre not harmony. Embedded in a European post-war musical tradition, some of these works insert a single aspect or moment that holds on to an unmuted relationship with expression. An example of this is Jonah Haven's *Eleven Years of Pleasure*, in which the post-melodic texture was suddenly thrown into new light by an underbreath tonal chord loop on the piano: simple and emotionally charged.

Snowy mountaintops are rare in this area of the Alps in mid-September. Lucky yet perhaps unsettling, they serve as a reminder that in nature even destruction can be beautiful. Gregor Mayrhofer's *Recycling Concerto* (2021) performed by konsTellation and Unter der Leitung responds to climate change by including 'recycled trash' as musical instruments. With Ivana Pristašová on percussion, the work is performed immediately after Ives' *The Unanswered Question* (1908), without a break for applause, suggesting that this new piece might be the answer Ives was looking for. In addition to standard percussion, Pristašová plays on empty plastic and glass bottles, as well as objects such as cooking and plant pots. These object-instruments are precisely tuned to create well-tempered bottle-phones and pot-phones. The sounds and the music in no way bring trash to mind, nor do they reflect the anxiety of doom; rather, this is a virtuosic jazz-infused concerto that echoes Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The compositional decision to only produce 'beautiful' sounds with the trash expresses an optimism that peaks with Pristašová's charismatic two-plastic-bottles solo, performed from the conductor's podium. The same optimism is apparent on a conceptual level in the piece's focus on recycling, an easy individualistic act for showing care for the environment, but a highly insufficient one for tackling the crisis. With the good intention of 'focusing

on the positive' the piece reduces the crisis and our agency. The solution, according to the concerto, is found in us performing as 'good citizens', separating our trash (based on pitch) and repurposing plastic. Nothing in this piece, neither music nor concept, calls upon us to be the kind of citizens we actually need to be if we want to have a standing chance: active, dissenting and angry. The complexity of beauty and doom that is reflected in snowy mountains is dangerously watered down if beauty is used to mask reality, rather than fight for it.

Sitting in front of Studio Dan's impressive 11-person set-up in a big industrial hanger, Karolina Preuschl gives an hour-long spoken-word performance. My non-existent German made it difficult to follow, but the instrumental element is in no way insignificant. Composed by Daniel Riegler, the music is energetic and sounds like an unexpected coupling of prog rock and electronic dance music. It is highly rhythmic with irregular metres, and backbeats, which are created by a hybrid acoustic/electronic drum kit, augmented by percussion such as timpani and tubular bells. The bass line is shared between a bass guitar, a bass clarinet and a contrabassoon. Keys, guitars, samples, strings, woodwinds and brass are all layered to create a rich, dark, big-band sound. The coexistence of instruments from different contexts reaches a climax in the duo-solo between a distorted electric guitar and a multiphonic-playing trombone 'con. plunger-head'. The overarching sound of the group is a tightly interwoven compound instrument presenting a unified front. This groove-based performance, which almost had the audience dancing, expanded the scope of experimental musical experiences the festival offers, enriching it.

Both Studio Dan and Diels engage with the practice of 'composer on stage', which has gained ground in twenty-first century new music. So do Matthew Shlomowitz and Jennifer Walshe in their co-composed *Minor Characters* (2021–22). In this work Ensemble Nikel perform as Walshe's support band, toying with musical styles and genres such as 'rock' and 'world music' and pushing them to surprising extremes. The result is a succession of absurdly contrasting songs tied together by narrative. Both words and music zigzag between sense and nonsense, meaning and its absence. One song, for example, is sung from the perspective of a person who likes to eat pasta that has had the sauce rinsed off it, claiming 'something of the essence remains'. This metaphor is perhaps a useful one for a piece in which the audience can feel the power of a message yet never completely grasp it. *Minor*

Characters was preceded by three recent compositions. Didem Coskunseven's *Ext. The Woods. Night* (2022) opens as an atmospheric soundscape, situating the performance in an imagined, mystical forest. It starts as a slow wander through the woods, but accumulates and washes over the audience like a great wave. Sarah Nemtsov's *Shvi'ra* (2020), Hebrew for 'shattering', takes its title from the cabalistic term 'the shattering of the vessels' (שבירת הכלים), a crucial movement in creation that explains its multiplicity. Accordingly, the piece is explosive, a curated chaos with short outbursts of almost metallic breakdowns. Nikel also premiered Elena Rykova's *Forget Me Not*, which maunders through a dark, fragmented, wobbly musical space constantly finding new depths. The programme notes tell us that it is the Russian composer's reflection on the war in Ukraine. In each of these works the ensemble creates a unique soundworld, utilising technology but never fetishising it.

Another path between beauty and 'beauty', expression and its failure, is presented in JACK Quartet's performance of Catherine Lamb's *Two Blooms* (2009). In this 46-minute-long quartet, lush microtonal chords are presented in slow succession. Yet nothing in the piece tries to lure the audience in. If Diels explores the way beauty becomes a mere symbol, this piece welcomes a de-signified listening to a beauty that escapes meaning. The chords are placed one after the other in simple rhythms and without any rhetorical tools. It is up to the listener to engage: to form their way and frame their experience of these unique sound objects. Liza Lim's *neues Werk* (2022), with its ever changing textures, is a mirror image of sorts. Every movement of this piece is engaged with a bowing technique and the sounds that it creates. These are explored through a playful variety of textures, rhythms and melodic fragments. In this somewhat Bartókian quartet the foreground and the background and the centre and periphery keep shifting. Instruments sneak in from silence to navigate the ship in different directions. Expression's failure features here in an almost theatrical moment when Christopher Otto presses his bow so tightly against the violin strings that it hardly makes a sound; he then produces a soft but loaded grinding not by moving the bow but by shaking his entire body.

Beauty presents a compound problem for new music: it's subjective, commodified and seen as naïve. However, the moment for a complete rejection of beauty in art has passed. At Klangspuren, musicians presented varied ways of living in the small gaps between sense and

nonsense, expression and its failure, beauty and 'beauty'. Umberto Eco argued that atonality is the composer's way of resisting a conservative world view which is inherently expressed by the very structure of tonality.¹ The multifaceted musical project at Klangspuren, however, does not take the tonal/atonal binary as embodying conservatism/progressivism. In fact, by engaging with non-classical tonalities (jazz, rock, folk, etc.), focusing on timbre and including theatre and text, tonality and atonality are not experienced as exclusive nor mutually exclusive. At times I wished for a viewpoint to be more concretely expressed in these formal explorations, but even if they mostly eluded taking a detailed stance on a tangible issue, they definitely felt contemporary, embodying the moment we live in.

The festival's broadness was supported by the truly remarkable line-up of performers: Riot Ensemble played the student compositions with generosity and deep attention to detail; Studio Dan were tight, expressive and highly engaging; Ensemble Nikel's adventurous explorations were always masterly handled; konsTellation gave a sparkling performance with Pristašová demonstrating virtuoso charisma; and JACK Quartet lived up to their reputation in reshaping ensemble work. The composers who took to the stage, Walshe, Diels and Riegler, tied composing and performing in a totally convincing manner. This broadness was also emphasised by the variety of venues tailored for performances. Shows were held in luxurious concert halls, an underground club and an industrial hangar. The festival's uncharacteristically long span, unfolding over three weeks, means that every evening only showcases one performance. While this limits the number of shows a visitor from far away can watch, it allows time to reflect on each performance. The shows were all well attended by a mostly local audience who seem to be totally engaged with the programme. If you are not from Tyrol, it's unlikely that you will be able to see all, or even most, of Klangspuren; however, over a few days I saw a varied array of beautiful performances exploring new ways to express and to fail at expressing the (non)sense of this present moment.

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Megan Steinberg, James McIlwrath, James Creed, Peter Nagle, Neil Luck, Walshe: The Text Score Dataset, Iklectik, London.

It's pretty tricky to play guitar while laying face-down on the floor with your arms stretched out in front of you, fingertips reaching out to the fretboard like it was a stray plank drifting from a sinking ship. The notes splutter out cumbrously from James Creed's guitar, prone before the feet of the audience in the front row. Peter Nagle fares a little better, eking out a relatively spry melody from the cello he seems to be in the process of wrestling to the ground like a bear, one leg wrapped around the bout in a quasi-erotic entanglement. Erratic bursts of mariachi band music leap jerkily from a single turntable, behind which only Megan Steinberg's legs are visible. James McIlwrath is peeling an orange, hands projected into the air from the rear of a table splayed with kazoos, Coke bottles and a small child's tambourine. The peel projects a delightfully zesty olfactory note in counterpoint to the tumble of sounds all around. Projected on to the wall behind the stage, the score reads: 'Performers are asked to lie down on the floor and do the best they can.'

I was at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in July 2018 when composer Jennifer Walshe delivered her lecture, titled 'Ghosts of the Hidden Layer'. She spoke then, among many other things, of her love for text scores, the most 'democratic, efficient, powerful form of notation', and her frustration that their grammar and syntax seemed perennially stuck in a Fluxus-shaped rut. Over the previous year, she said, she'd been building up a vast corpus of such scores in order to train up a neural network to produce new scores using Deep Learning. The initial results, shared by Walshe with the class that day, seemed promising. 'Get a girlfriend,' she read. 'Look after your daddy.'

A little over four years later, Walshe's neural net now holds a dataset of over 3,000 scores and is generating new verbal notations at a rate of knots. It is these new, AI-powered partitions that are being performed tonight by Steinberg, McIlwrath, Nagle and Creed with occasional contributions from Neil Luck.

Luck's part in the proceedings required the removal of both shoes and socks. The score, an epic four-page prose marathon entitled 'Vernacular Stories of the Rural Family', called for such non-standard musical materials as 'regional accents' and 'back issues of Jane's Defense Weekly'. McIlwrath recited fragments of conversation and computer-shop sales patter at breakneck speed, occasionally holding a

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 139–43.