



Experimental music

Tectonics review – classical meets abstract sound-art in fruitful festival collision

★★★★☆

Kate Molleson

Mon 4 May 2015 13.14 BST

Rapt, intensely subtle, exquisitely slow, the music of [Eliane Radigue](#) was the heart and soul of this year's Tectonics festival. The 82-year-old French composer was a pioneer of electronic music in the 1950s and for decades only produced synthesiser sound-art, but it was her recent acoustic series [Occam Ocean](#) that featured in two concerts here, with playing of virtuosic control from harpist Rhodri Davies, bassoonist Dafne Vincente-Sandoval, cellist Charles Curtis and tuba-player Robin Hayward.

They dovetailed ultra-quiet sounds to reveal infinite gradations of pitch, timbre and overtones, culminating in a glowing, graceful quartet. Radigue's message is uplifting: slow down, listen in close and marvel at the radiant colours contained in the detail. Occam Ocean was an enlightened stroke of programming, if only because it magnified every molecule of every piece heard subsequently. (The microscope was more welcome in some cases than others, but still.)

This was the third edition of [Ilan Volkov's Tectonics Glasgow](#), that playful, dauntless festival that collides an orchestra – the [BBC Scottish Symphony](#) – with experimental sound artists.

[In previous years](#), the emphasis has been more explicitly about crossover, [the original point](#) being to open up the orchestra and its concert hall to musicians and audiences from outside classical music conventions. This time there felt a marked distinction: two formal orchestral concerts upstairs in the luminous City Halls, the likes of turntablist Mariam Razaei, experimental metal guitarist Justin K Broadrick and free-jazz luminary Peter Brotzmann (a magnificently gruff, lyrical set) downstairs in the low-lit Fruitmarket.

But no matter. Tectonics is brilliant for putting all of this under one broad roof, and the shared musical threads were there in drones and overtones and gradually unfolding textures. The two full BBCSSO concerts contained seven world premieres and a first UK performance for Enno Poppe's chunky, tactile 2008 work Altbau. The players approached it all with astounding focus and verve, and what is emerging in Volkov's straight-up orchestral programming for Tectonics is how he uses each edition to showcase a certain trend in contemporary composition. Many of the new works this year were by British or North American composers who knew the late, much-missed musicologist Bob Gilmore, and there were common aesthetic factors in the use of microtones, drone fundamentals and slow-shifting landscapes.

Joanna Bailie's To Be Beside the Seaside is a trite parody of Debussy, Beethoven and Strauss, all sea surges and comic squeaks; Paul Newland's Angus Macphee is a banal portrait of the [wonderful Hebridean outsider artist](#) who didn't speak for 50 years. Christopher Trapani's Rust and Stardust is accomplished and dreary; Peter Ablinger's Quartz had the players counting like mad to produce aimless sprees of notes against an amplified ticking clock.

Cassandra Miller's Duet for Cello and Orchestra is arresting – a lilting solo line (poised playing from Charles Curtis) sparked and jostled by wistful brass fanfares and merry strings. The score could be cut and have the same absorbing effect.

John Croft's ... Che Notturmo Canta Insonne is warm and evocative, with beautiful French horn writing and endearingly innocent inclusions such as wind sound effects.

Topophony is a quiet collaboration between Christopher Fox and Rhodri Davies, the former having scored a gentle orchestral backdrop, the latter improvising delicate sounds on harps and electronics. [Fox and Davies have both formerly renounced working with orchestras](#) because of the associated hierarchies and archaic conventions; one of Volkov's great strengths is his ability to coerce even the staunchest sceptics into the fold.