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London Contemporary Music Festival

Bold Tendencies, Peckham Multi-Storey Car Park, London

25-28 July, 1-4 August 2013

— Newton Armstrong

There's a certain audacity to four young curators adopting the title 'London Contemporary Music Festival' for their first large scale collective venture. For a festival that deliberately sets out to sidestep the musical establishment, there's an aspect of calculated provocation in the appropriation of a title what would seem to be the preserve of that establishment. The gesture, however, goes some way further than staking a symbolic claim. At the same time as the curators (Aisha Orazbayeva, Sam Mackay, Igor Toronyi-Lalic and Lucy Railton, in collaboration with the commissioning body based at the Peckham Multi-Storey Car Park, Bold Tendencies) have effectively bypassed the establishment networks and funding structures, they have set out a clear alternative narrative about how contemporary music may yet be practised and understood.

This narrative is not without precedent. The 'post-classical' sensibility—and its attendant curatorial philosophy—is already some decades old. Many of the erstwhile initiatives that reacted against the traditionally stuffy venues and rituals of concert music have, in time, become as insular and exclusionary as the culture they originally protested. In painting reactionary caricatures of the classical and modernist establishments, and in appropriating signifiers of revolt (more often than not from popular culture), these movements effectively concretised as the negative image of what, in the first instance, was a rather too convenient straw man.

While certain aspects of the post-classical attitude were evident at the LCMF, the curatorial stance was both more subtle and more inclusive. In the choice of venue, in the way in which the festival sought to establish an audience, and in the steering clear of the usual agencies and funding bodies, the curators positioned the festival at a step removed from the dominant institutions of British classical and contemporary music. In the curation of the actual programmes, however, there was no notion of any kind of ideological imperative, no apparent bias towards any particular idiom or genre, and no sense that decisions were informed by the need to communicate a 'brand'. Rather, the decision-making would seem to have been informed, first and foremost, by a simple—but in these times apparently radical—idea: the music should make a proposition. Each of the festival's eleven events posed a more or less specific question, but none offered an easy answer. And this was perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the LCMF as a whole—music was allowed to be difficult.

The opening night—*To a New Definition of Opera*—was emblematic of the propositional basis of the festival as a whole. A diverse collection of pieces connected more or less loosely to the broad theme of opera offered various points of synthesis, but also various points of productive disjunction. The unique space of the Peckham Multi-Storey Car Park was put to particularly imaginative use, with the audience being led, over the course of the evening, through its various open areas, alcoves, and hidden theatres. The experience may have been closer to that of medieval allegory than it was to the unfolding of an operatic narrative, but it nonetheless provided a clear sense of developing dramatic structure to a programme that was in all other respects a bricolage. Excerpts from Philip Glass'

Einstein on the Beach bookended the event, with a sequence of beautifully characterised performances running in between: excerpts from Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, Laurie Anderson's *United States*, Jennifer Walshe's *Die Taktik*, as well as complete performances of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* and Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*.

The conceit behind the following evening's concert—positioning the music of Helmut Lachenmann against that of Ennio Morricone—was perhaps less carefully considered. The programme booklet made the thinking behind the juxtaposition clear: 'it remains a fact: Morricone is Lachenmann's favourite composer'. While Morricone's early experimental music displayed many fascinating features (for example, the patterned spatial motions within and between instrumental groups, and textures which evolved from quasi-canonic exchanges of materials), there was no real sense that these features had been developed and integrated as part of a broader, individualised language. This aspect may have been less conspicuously evident had the programme not also included Lachenmann's 30-minute solo piano work *Serynade*—played with an extraordinary range of timbral nuance and formal control by Roderick Chadwick—the full effect of which left the Morricone pieces sounding distinctly lightweight. The concert concluded with a spatially-conceived arrangement of the theme music to *Once Upon a Time in America*, which left one wondering whether it might, in fact, be the rather more compelling film music of Morricone that makes him a favourite of Lachenmann.

The final two days of the festival's first week were addressed to drones, avant rock, minimalism, and post-minimalism (all very broadly defined). The Glenn Branca Ensemble presented the UK premiere of *Twisting in Space*; a progressively shifting and intensively accumulating harmonic and textural mass of detuned guitars, bass and drums, saturated in fuzz and distortion. In Tony Conrad and Jennifer Walshe's *Ma la Pert*, an initially bare quasi-spectral drone was slowly thickened and transformed by an ever more animated overlaying of gestural activity, the drone eventually disintegrating into sinuous strands, noises, and snatches of melody. Charlemagne Palestine's *In the Strumming Style* began with an oscillating 2-note ostinato, the piano resonances transformed via subtle alterations of touch and dynamic, and a gradual filling-out of the harmonic space. The psychoacoustic effects had a peculiarly tangible quality, shifting the listening awareness from the visceral action of hammer on string, towards wave-like phasing patterns operating across distinct and non-overlapping timescales, and eventually towards an indistinct netherworld between harmony and timbre.

The festival's second weekend opened with an *Immersive Opera Double Bill*. The audience shared the same provisional stage as the singers and instrumentalists for two terse monodramas, Kate Whitley's *Roma* and Gerald Barry's *La Plus Forte*. A *New Complexity and Noise* event on the following evening was effective in foregrounding connections between sets of improvised and fully notated music, at the same time, thankfully, demonstrating that the denominational monikers of the event's title have little practical utility when it comes to accounting for the experience of the actual music. It was the improvised sets (by Steve Noble and Anthony Pateras, in duo and solo configurations) that demonstrated a greater adaptability to the peculiarities and particularities of the acoustic space. Pateras' short solo set for custom analogue synthesiser progressively molded itself to the room, the slippery low-frequency glissandi folding around and occasionally settling on resonant axial modes, setting into motion a range of interference patterns and vertigo-inducing spatial effects.

The piece to garner the most press and social media attention over the course of the LCMF was Philip Corner's *Piano Activities*—the work that closed the final concert (prosaically titled *Keyboard Breakdown*). It was perhaps to be expected, but still somewhat disappointing that the anticipation of witnessing the dismantling of a piano would narrow much of the collective focus to the spectacle, and trigger a subsequent conversation that never managed to move beyond the immediate 'anti-music' gesture that the piece would on first glance seem to be making. (Ben Beaumont-Thomas' review in *The Guardian* on the day immediately following the concert was exemplary in this respect; as abundant in moral outrage as it was entirely lacking in critical engagement with any aspect of the work other than the apparent provocation.) While the piece undoubtedly has an element of destructive spectacle to it, the aspect that was more strongly foregrounded—in a performance that was both subtle and sensitive—was the tactile nature of the sound itself, and its gradual transformation through a series of overlapping but clearly differentiated textural fields. The overall effect was problematic in precisely the way that the best conceptually-driven music can be: it was not purely concept, nor purely spectacle, nor purely sound. Rather, it was the inseparability of each of these aspects that lent the experience its peculiar complexity.

It's not uncommon for the narrative around contemporary music to take on a gloomy tone: the music is in crisis, composers and performers have lost contact with their audiences, and so on. But what if the issue is not a crisis in contemporary music, but rather a crisis in contemporary music curation? The LCMF says something to those who proclaim the (seemingly ever-imminent) demise of contemporary music, and bemoan its failure to connect with an audience. In fact, it highlights the ways in which the token gestures that have been directed towards an apparently finicky public—via market-driven logic, focus group decision-making, and a 'contemporary lite' mentality—have made an entirely negligible impact on the attitudes of both actual and potential audiences. Why were the 5000 tickets to the LCMF snapped up within two days of being made available? That they were free certainly helped. But the more key aspect was that the curators devised a programme that did not patronise its audience. In doing so, they demonstrated that there remains a significant number of people prepared to engage with a broad and challenging curatorial proposition, and there remains a significant number of people prepared to listen in new ways.