

ICEBREAKER
SYSTEM RESTART: A NEW GENERATION OF
WOMEN COMPOSERS
Hall 2, King's Place

King's Place is a singular venue. A relative newcomer to London's range of concert halls, comprising multiple spaces that are of a matching bright and clear acoustic – very well-researched when designed, no doubt. Clean lines and wood panels abound: there are loads of loos and plenty of places to put your coat or pick up a drink. On paper it is the perfect venue for a contemporary classical concert.

This appears to be shaping up into a review of a venue rather than the advertised content: Icebreaker's showcase programme of female composers, System Restart. But throughout the evening my mind regularly pinged back to the choice of venue. The light and bright stylish wooden rectangle, ostensibly ticking the boxes in every way, fought against all the most exciting impulses of the Icebreaker programme, and made me consider how many other performances I had attended that may have been stymied by the venue before without my realising it.

Icebreaker is made up of 11 core members, eight on stage tonight. Specialising in plugged-in contemporary performance, classical and rock, they worked here mostly with click track and were miked throughout. Balance in the hall proved to be tricky – the wind instruments often seemed to be over-prominent and I could have enjoyed much more grounded bass tone, suiting most of the works of the evening.

This was no more evident than in the first two pieces, both by Anna Meredith: the classic Moshi Moshi tracks *Nautilus* and *Orlok*. The last time I heard *Nautilus* performed I was in a tiny cellar and there was a tuba involved: it was infectiously joyous in its cheeky undercutting of cross-rhythms (Meredith's signature). This arrangement felt too tentative and almost workaday, with some uncoordinated corners: what should have been a rocket of an opener was a bit more of a damp squib. A shame, and the venue was absolutely a factor here. The performers were all hidden from the audience by a combination of huge cluttered music stands, mics, speakers, and their own instruments; and then this combination was then positioned on a wide but thin stage, raised high above the listeners. I felt that Icebreaker found it hard enough to communicate to each other in this arrangement, let alone find us on the floor below.

Orlok also suffered from a lack of ensemble communication. The sensuous Meredith groove appeared and disappeared. Areas blossomed: when the texture melted into a pared-down triple time it was very appealing, and the ensemble here was more evenly balanced. The lacy patchworks (woven from the luxuriant hair of Philip Glass?) that Meredith spun were not keenly defined enough for my liking, and the intimacy and collusion with the audience that would have lifted both first works to their proper potential was sadly missing.

Next, a work by Jobina Tinnemans: *Head, Mx, Window* (titled elsewhere as *Head, Mx, Throwing a Window through another Window*), was commissioned by Icebreaker for the System Restart project. Influenced by contrasting urban and rural environments, the three words match the three movements. *Head* began by passing an ominous F# around the ensemble, cymbal rolls adding to the (cerebral) tension. Articulation and texture is nicely shaded through this movement opening, adding plangent depth to the soundworld. The movement loses its way however: the expansion of height and depth became increasingly muddled, and the end was unexpectedly signalled by a melodic splutter. Movement two, *Mx*, a smaller connecting episode, luxuriated in a buzzing texture, ringing with pleasing harmonics. Structured around two crescendi, it successfully anchored its surrounding movements. I would have enjoyed a more involved exploration of this musical material – I felt it had more to give. *Window* began echoing *Head*, also throbbing with ominous intensity and single tones shared around the performers. The final movement had less forward impetus, however, than the previous two, and long shimmering notes impaled the ensemble, shafts of light in the shadow. These gestures were very pleasing, but I felt that once the ear was attuned to this soundworld, the movement didn't say anything further with the material. A pounding rhythm-led final section, led by piano and then kit, felt attached from another unheard work, with two false endings before the actual culmination. I also was confused to hear the click track in this movement, which I initially questioned in case it was a witty part of the composition (if it was deliberate, I rather liked it).

The final work of the first half of the programme was *On Edge* by the American Elizabeth Kelly, also commissioned for this project. Influenced by how different elements rub up against each other, and featuring a section inspired by the Chopin waltzes the young Elizabeth used to play to her grandmother, this

highly personal work was full of distinctive characterisation from the outset. Beautifully wonky smears of jazziness play well with classical gestures, syncopation featuring prominently as the propelling element. A guitar solo, aping a fugue, jarred in a fun way with panpipe tootlings, and made a conversational convention sound unconventional. This kind of compositional originality made the most of the forces on offer in *Icebreaker*. I also felt an elegant three-part narrative structure guiding my ear through the often-gossamer texture, which was clear without being overbearing. The structure was also underpinned by satisfying extended lines, pulling longer and longer like taffy. The first half ends with a jubilant splash of cymbal.

After picking up a drink, the audience settled for the first piece of the second half, Kerry Andrews's *THE, WHAT IS IT, THE GOLDEN EAGLE?* my nomination for Best Title of Anything 2017. As may be guessed, the title is a quotation from the current POTUS, and Andrews's piece deftly characterises the said eagle flying, soaring, and pecking Trump's eyes out. I had not heard a non-vocal work by Andrews before, and I was struck by how very vocal her writing is, regardless of the forces. Introduced by a twisted fanfare, the cello takes central stage as the eagle, and sings a song that is by turns moving and comic, beautifully played by Audrey Riley. The classical melodic lines are undercut by the synth part, which gave me video game vibes, lending a mocking and arch quality to the narrative whilst also creating an inviting and fresh soundworld. The Trump punishment builds into a hypnotic drum rhythm, gelling with the straining and sinuous cello lines. This rhythm then remoulds itself into a freewheeling reel, a joyful folk music. The eagle escapes in this joy; I can only presume holding some eyeballs in its beak. Andrews is a highly charming composer, and this was the concert highlight for me.

Azure by Linda Buckley followed. I didn't feel that the unsubtle addition of blue lighting was necessary – it felt like the music wasn't trusted enough to paint the picture alone. Musically watery from the get go, and flute and clarinet conversation sounded from opposite sides of the stage, as if underwater (one time where the distance between performers worked well). A metallic midi sound then menacingly enters the instrumental pool. Gradually the midi effects threaten to drown the live instruments; I assume deliberately, although the effect does somewhat disengage the listener from the process. The ever-whiter noise continues to ebb and rather overstays its welcome – the odd arpeggio gesture

from the live ensemble would have been a welcome contrast but isn't really given permission to get started – and the piece ends in a synthetic puddle.

The final work of the evening is by Kate Moore, *The Dam*, which was written for the Canberra Festival in 2015, and won her the Matthias Vermulen Award in 2017. Opening with hurried stringy semiquaver textures, the strings reached up and up, then reverted back to their origins. This developed until the piano led the ensemble in a forthright funk (I felt the piano balance was a tad overbearing here, whether by accident or design I cannot be sure). The construction Moore used here seems boxy and sporadic, changing gesture and tempo every 40 seconds or so – an intriguing prospect but hard to cling onto. This all crumbled after a final boxed crescendo, and a sparer texture remained, with panpipes to the fore. This had a distant quality and was engaging; I would have liked this element to be further explored. The remainder of the work for me didn't gel – there were several introductions of new musical material that either vanished as soon as they were introduced or were slight to begin with, and the final wham-bam ending seemed an abrupt decision given the delicacy of earlier gestures. I was again struck that this piece performed in a more intimate space with more collaboration between audience and performers may have had a different effect on me.

The System Restart project is a well-conceived programme, and overall I could hear that *Icebreaker* has fine musicians in it. There were certainly ensemble and technical inconsistencies on this evening, and I would have liked to have heard the same works in a completely different surrounding – perhaps to have had a more immediate and exciting live music experience.

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<<how does it feel?>> rainy days 2017

Questioning whether new music is 'losing touch', Lydia Rilling, in her first edition as artistic director of Luxembourg's rainy days festival, curated a programme which sought, via an exploration of 'the emotional landscapes of contemporary music', to 'reveal' that this is not the case. The festival's scope extended beyond