



Mariam Wallentin performing with Crash Ensemble at New Music Dublin (Photo: Joanne Taaffe)

## New Music Up a Notch

Ireland's largest contemporary music festival New Music Dublin took place at the National Concert Hall and nearby venues last weekend and featured twenty concerts and twenty-two world premieres. Adrian Smith reviews.

- [Adrian Smith](#)

### Introduction

Hoping to build on the success of [last year's festival](#), New Music Dublin 2020 took place last weekend with an expanded programme that packed an enormous diversity of material into the four days between 27 February and 1 March including twenty-two world premieres, the majority of them by Irish composers. While director John Harris' resistance to imposing overarching themes in favour of a freewheeling variety was responsible for a great deal of last year's success, this year's event did weave a thread through the festival by handing over a space to the [Diatribes music label](#) led by Nick Roth and Matthew Jacobson who curated five concerts of music by artists who demonstrated the astounding range and cutting-edge nature of the label's output. This positive move pushed up the edginess of the festival by a couple of notches although there still remained plenty for those with more mainstream tastes. However, as is often the case with new music or indeed life in general, fortune tends to favour the brave and the biggest rewards were for those willing to seek out the more adventurous corners of the new music scene. This review will attempt to give some idea of the festival's range and its energy, as well as highlighting some of its outstanding moments.

### Day 1: Thursday 27 February

#### 7.30pm – Diatribe Stage 1: *For John Cage*

The festival kicked off with a performance of Morton Feldman's *For John Cage*, a ninety-minute meditation on a series of sparse, granular melodic fragments subject to Feldman's characteristic processes of irregular repetition and incremental adjustments. Even if you couldn't quite manage to buy into its spectacularly low-key nature, one could only be mesmerized by the concentration and delicacy with which violinist Darragh Morgan and pianist John Tilbury performed this piece. This was all the more impressive considering that the choice of the non-soundproofed Room 103 was a less than ideal venue, but the occasional intrusion of noises from heavy vehicles didn't take away from the unrelenting focus of the performance.

#### 9.30pm – Úna Monaghan: *Aonaracht I*

The absence of any traditional music representation in last year's festival was the only serious black mark that could be registered against it, hence the prominent slot allocated to traditional music in this year's festival where both the Studio and the Carolan Room of the NCH were the venue for a performance of [Úna Monaghan's](#) *Aonaracht I*, a collection of pieces for solo traditional musicians and computer. Monaghan is a recent [recipient of the joint Arts Council/NCH Liam O'Flynn Award](#) for the promotion and appreciation of traditional arts. While there was no doubting the ambition of this work – which in addition to performances on harp, fiddle, voice, piano and concertina also incorporated poetry, sculpture, improvisation, live electronics and field recordings – the collection nevertheless struck me as being quite uneven.

The strongest piece was the first entitled *Chinwag* which integrated snippets of conversations by three elderly women in rural Donegal, gently submitting them to live electronic manipulation using pitch detection and motion sensor. These were simultaneously interwoven with Monaghan's beautiful harp playing giving their everyday stories and concerns a kind of epic quality filled with poignancy.

On the other hand, some of the pieces seemed to buckle under the weight of the political agenda to which they were coupled. As an example, the third piece in the collection [What Haven't We Heard?](#) illustrated the very real issue of gender imbalance and discrimination in traditional music.

In the first section of the piece, Monaghan asked the question: What if the number of men and women involved in traditional music corresponded to a tune? She then proceeded to play a tune on the harp before asking what the tune would sound like if all the women's notes were removed. The result – played back on what sounded like the midi piano sound from the Sibelius notation software – was, quite predictably, a disjointed collection of notes. The problem here was that the gesture was just too simplistic to be effective in illustrating what traditional music might be when female voices aren't equally represented.

A central section referenced the historical plight of women forced to give up their babies under pressure in a patriarchal society through a setting of the poem 'Weathe Vane' by Maureen Boyle sung by Pauline Scanlon. While this was indeed quite moving the third section of the piece featured a series of read out accounts from female musicians documenting a variety of misogynistic attitudes ranging from the mildly condescending to the quite shocking. Scanlon improvised responses to these statements which were then subject to live electronic processing and intended as a response to their stories. The material was undeniably harrowing but as sometimes happens in political music, the bald presentation of this text made one wonder if the shock created by the words registered any differently than if the audience had simply read the same testimonials in a newspaper article as the connection between words and the following music wasn't clear. A more artistic framing could have enabled the content to speak with greater intensity. On the other hand, the pared back delivery gave a confrontational edge to the message. However one reacted to this event, it was a courageous and provocative concert.

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## Day 2: Friday 28 February

### 1pm: Lunchtime Concert – Royal Irish Academy of Music

Following on from their collaboration with their colleagues from the Paris Conservatoire at [last year's festival](#), musicians from the Royal Irish Academy of Music returned to the National Gallery of Ireland with a programme of European and Irish works.

The concert was bookended with two pieces by Jonathan Nangle. The first of these was a piece for viola entitled *Crowned with a halo of gold and decorated with white flowers* performed by fellow composer [Sebastian Adams](#). The piece alternated between delicate repetitive figures and meditations on resonant sonorities utilising open strings and harmonics. Written especially for Adams himself, this was a very polished composition and the range of timbres that he managed to draw out of the instrument was impressive.

A blistering performance of Luciano Berio's *Sequenza I* for solo flute by flautist Gilles Stosel followed before the next Irish piece – Ailís Ní Ríain's *Under the Rose*, a four-movement work for violin, flute and piano with each movement titled after a painting by Jack B. Yeats. Throughout the piece, Ní Ríain's textures were endlessly inventive and colourful in their combination of register and instrumental pairing. This was particularly the case with the last movement where a traditional melody was seamlessly integrated into a contemporary idiom, forming a moving conclusion to what was the highlight of the concert.

The concert also included excellent performances by violinist Inana Garis of György Kurtág's *Selections from Signs, Games and Messages* and by trumpeter Glen Car of John Maxwell Geddes' theatrical *The Reform of Rank Bajin*. The concert finished with the world premiere of Nangle's *Surface Patterns* for piano, a piece inspired by the Chladni patterns – a phenomenon whereby different resonant frequencies create visual patterns on rigid surfaces. The piece consisted of fast repeated figures that were continually refracted into different shapes over a duration of ten minutes or so.

### 3pm: Andreas Borregaard – Solo-Act

Friday's mid-afternoon concert featured the Irish premiere of *Solo-Act*, a performance by Norwegian accordionist Andreas Borregaard consisting of two works commissioned especially for him: [Jennifer Walshe's](#) *SELF-CARE* and Simon Steen-Andersen's *Asthma*.

Walshe's piece began with some opening theatrics which had Borregaard stretching, jogging on the spot, practising yoga, listening to self-help tapes and flipping out, all to get to the point where he could actually bear to pick up the accordion. A long sustained tone eventually emerged and led into a description of crypto-currencies over more fragmented, rhythmically syncopated playing on the accordion. From here, the piece traversed through a dizzying array of subjects in characteristic Walshe fashion that included tractor protests, Lidl carparks, social media, and space toilets, while the pace of change between these subjects became faster as the piece headed towards its tipping point which came in the form of another dramatically acted out meltdown from Borregaard. A poignant coda featuring a montage of video accompanied by a gentle meandering melody on accordion over ambient electronics lent the piece a tragic poignancy that placed in stark relief the minor query which Walshe posed in her programme notes: 'How does an accordionist – or anyone really – deal with being alive and being a human in this modern world?'

In a similar way, Steen-Andersen's *Asthma* effectively concealed the disturbing aspects of its subject matter until its conclusion. Written for video with live performed soundtrack, the piece took as its subject matter the theme of breathing which, as the composer notes, is something that both humans and accordions have in common. It started out harmlessly enough, almost as an avant-garde divertimento, with different breathing sounds from the accordion in sync with short video clips of humans breathing in different situations – sleeping, breathing through a tube, stethoscope, air-conditioning, etc. A clip of a woman using an asthma inhaler functioned like a recurring ritornello, hence the title of the piece. Compositionally speaking, very impressive was the fact that Borregaard was supplied with enough directions to extract a different 'breathing' timbre to match the subject of each segment of video. As the piece progressed, the images gradually darkened in subject matter becoming alternately brutal (gas chambers) or inane (bath diving). At a time when air quality is a pressing concern worldwide, the hyperventilating quality of the piece carried a sense of panic that underscored our fragile dependence on something most of us rarely think about in our day-to-day lives.

### 5pm: Juliet Fraser and Sonar Quartett

This concert by the Berlin-based Sonar Quartett opened with a collaborative composition by the members of the quartet itself followed by two works for string quartet and soprano by British composer Naomi Pinnock and Swiss composer Heinz Holliger. All three pieces were Irish premieres.

The most intriguing piece in the concert was Pinnock's *I am, I am* which set an extract of Tentsmuir VII by Rachael Boast and features Fraser's pure-as-white soprano voice placed like a jewel amidst gentle Feldmanesque chords and textures. The material, initially, has a striking beauty to it but whether it's beautiful enough to sustain the sixteen-minute duration is another question. Very little develops on from this initial template and it is worth pondering whether or not this constitutes artistic bravery in having an unwavering faith in the strength of one's own material or risk aversion, out of fear of what might happen if more of the world is let in.

### 6.30pm: Fergus Johnston – *Sinfonia for String Octet and Electronics*

In his programme notes and introduction to this piece, Fergus Johnston talked about how he conceived his *Sinfonia* as 'a memorial wall in sound' dedicated to remembering the children who died over a thirty-six year period between 1925 and 1960 in the Bon Secours Home in Tuam, Co. Galway, and the Bethany Home in Dublin. To this end, the piece based its material on the derivation of pitch content from all 1,023 cyphered names of the children who died in these homes through various causes of neglect and abuse.

In terms of structure, the piece was fairly straightforward in that it consisted of a series of gestures from different string combinations of the octet separated by pauses where that material was diffused through speakers distributed around the audience. The gestures were generally contrapuntal in nature with jagged angular lines piled on top of each other.

The major drawback, however, was that none of the material showed any evidence of employing compositional instinct as to what might potentially be good or more interesting. Much of it had a random character that gave the impression that the composer had employed his pitch generation processes automatically without any active intervention into the material itself, resulting in a fairly monochrome soundworld. This made it incapable of yielding up any expressive qualities appropriate to this kind of subject matter. It should be noted that the piece seemed to suffer from a technical glitch with a microphone which surely lessened the intended impact but even still, it is doubtful that if the microphone had behaved itself, it would have made enough of a difference to create a more positive result.

On a more general note, surely the most effective way to address themes of injustice and tragedy in an artistic way lies somewhere in the middle ground between the complete abstraction of Johnston's octet and the bare presentation of the facts that characterised some of the pieces in Úna Monaghan's *Aonaracht*?

### 8pm: Daniel Bjarnason – *Songs*

The Crash Ensemble's first performance of the festival opened with Donnacha Dennehy's wonderfully intricate *Canons and Overtones*, a work which the [Journal of Music reviewed](#) back in 2017. The main focus of the concert was on the songs of the Icelandic composer and conductor Daniel Bjarnason sung by Swedish vocalist Mariam Wallentin. These included *Larkin* (2010) and the world premiere of *Songs*, settings of texts by Canadian writer Royce Vavrek.

For me, this was one of the standout concerts of the festival, as Bjarnason's musical language drifted seamlessly between jazz and trip rock without ever quite settling in any style definitively. His writing for each member of the ensemble was intricate and resulted in a backing texture of constantly shifting colours and complexity that

perfectly intertwined with Wallentin's sultry, soulful singing.

#### **9pm: Diatribe Stage 2 – Lina Andonovska, *A Way A Lone A Last***

The second late-evening concert was dedicated to the launch of Lina Andonovska's *A Way A Lone A Last*. She was joined for the occasion by the American flautist Claire Chase who opened the concert with pieces by Marcos Balter, Mario Diaz de Leon and Phyllis Chen that demonstrated a virtuosity of mind-bending proportions

Any normal human being would have been petrified to set foot on stage after such hair-raising wizardry but Andonovska seemed to revel in such illustrious company and joined Chase in a duo for Diaz de Leon's *Altar of Two Serpents* for two alto flutes, a testing virtuosic contest requiring intense concentration to navigate some intricately woven patterns and back and forth dialogue.

The latter part of the concert moved away from flute athletics to focus exclusively on the five compositions contained on the album by Judith Ring, Nick Roth, Barry O'Halpin and Donnacha Dennehy. Of these, the pieces which made the greatest impression on me were Dennehy's *Bridget* in which Andonovska's flute playing was interlocked with a multi-tracked tape of catchy melodic flute patterns and shimmering repeated notes while the dramatic arc of Ring's lung-busting *A Breath of Fresh Air* was endlessly inventive in its rhythmic patterns and extended flute sounds.

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#### **Day 3: Saturday 29 February**

##### **10am: Totally Made up Orchestra featuring Tonnta (performance at 1pm)**

The Totally Made Up Orchestra is one of the regular fixtures of New Music Dublin bringing together musicians of all ages and abilities in the spontaneous creation of a piece of new music. Directed by the eccentric Brian Irvine, the participants meet in the morning and collaboratively work out ideas that are integrated into a performance two hours later. In this year's performance, Irvine took up his regular position with a flipchart facing away from the audience, cuing the musicians by holding up number cards.

Although I wasn't counting, the piece traversed through well over a dozen different textures incorporating theatrical sections, text, solo parts, quotations from 'Bohemian Rhapsody' and textures ranging from the frenzied to the serene. For a scratch orchestra, the group managed to impressively memorise the material associated with the various cues and transition nicely from one to the next.

It is heartening to see young musicians in particular reveling in the freedom of sound completely unfazed by the anarchic nature of some of their textures. Once again, this was another demonstration of Irvine's unmatched ability to inspire people to engage with new music and ignite a curiosity that will hopefully extend beyond this morning and afternoon session at New Music Dublin.

##### **2pm: Kevin O'Connell Portrait**

This portrait concert by Northern Ireland's Hard Rain Soloist Ensemble (under conductor Sinead Hayes) featured the work of Kevin O'Connell, an established composer and composition teacher. Focusing on his chamber works and pieces for solo instruments, the concert gave an overview of O'Connell's musical style. Prefaced with enlightening introductions by the composer the pieces demonstrated the seemingly visual way in which O'Connell conceives his music as constructed from lines, shards, fragments and textures of different densities. It is an abstract sound however and the lines don't always escape from a familiar new music rhetoric consisting of asymmetric bursts of fast notes leading to ecstatic long notes.

The most attractive piece was his mini-song cycle of Latin American poems, *Aves de Paso*, in which members of the Hard Rain Soloist Ensemble were joined by soprano Sylvia O'Brien. In these songs structural concerns seemed to give way to a much freer sense of expression and the first song in the cycle – a setting of the poem 'Rondel' by Manuel Gonzales – was especially striking in its constant return to two beautifully spaced chords on the piano between the soaring vocal lines sung with full commitment by O'Brien.

##### **4pm: Diatribe Stage 3 – Benjamin Dwyer, *What is the Word***

The third of the Diatribe concerts was dedicated to Benjamin Dwyer's latest CD *What is the Word* that was being launched at the festival on the Diatribe label. Alongside works by Barry Guy and György Kurtág, the concert included the composer's *six residua (after Beckett)* for baroque violin, one of his *five disjecta (after Beckett)* for prepared guitar, as well as the work that is the centerpiece of the album: *what is the word (trilogy with interludes)* for voice, baroque violin, guitar and double bass.

Inspired by Beckett's lifelong attempt to penetrate the surface of language, Dwyer describes *What is the word* as 'a musical meditation on the relationship of sound to linguistic structures'. Using lines from Beckett's *Neither, Worstward Ho* and *What is the Word*, Dwyer states in his programme notes that his quest is not to 'interpret' these texts, but to follow the great writer in his quest to explore the noumenal space behind Beckett's words. The resultant music was certainly abstract, avoiding any conventional musical signifiers in favour of a brittle sound world of whispering harmonics and extended techniques buttressed by deep, often industrial sounds from the double bass. And yet the music is full of colour and no shortage of drama, pushing Beckett's words in productive directions. In terms of ambition, Dwyer's work was one of the most convincing in the entire festival and promises to reveal more layers on repeated listening which will surely reward those who stumped up the ten euros for the CD.

##### **5.15pm The Journal of Music 20th Birthday: Discussion Event**

Marking twenty years of publication, the Journal of Music held a discussion event during New Music Dublin titled *'The Next Twenty Years of New Music in Ireland: What Do We Need to Do?'*. Panellists included Benjamin Dwyer, Úna Monaghan, Lina Andonovska and Adrian Smith, and the discussion was chaired by Toner Quinn. This event was recorded and will be issued as a podcast in the coming weeks. Visit [journalofmusic.com/podcasts](http://journalofmusic.com/podcasts).

##### **7.30pm: RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra – Cleary, O'Leary, Guðmundsson**

The RTÉ NSO occupied the headline slot on Saturday evening with performances of works by Siobhán Cleary, Jane O'Leary and the Icelandic composer Hugi Guðmundsson.

Cleary's *Hum!* is a musical theatre piece for two actors (Ciaran McCauley and John Carty) and string orchestra in which the dialogue is limited to just two syllables: 'Ho!' and 'Hum!' It begins with one of the actors seated at the front of the orchestra repeating the syllable 'Hum!' until the second, unseen offstage, begins to echo the first. The dialogue alternates between the curious and playful before a string interlude consisting of rising scale figures leads to the second actor's entrance on stage. The Ho/Hum dialogue begins again, at first politely, but soon descends into confrontation between the two leading to a shouting match where the two square up to each other setting off more jagged scale figures in the orchestra. As if to underscore the tragedy of their mutual inability to understand each other, the piece ended with an expressive elegy. If the theatrical aspect of the piece wasn't really any more sophisticated than a student drama group exercise, the elegy at the end was a first-class piece of contrapuntal neo-romantic string writing that was worth the wait.

For the central item on the programme, the Ligeti quartet joined the RTÉ NSO for the world premiere of Jane O'Leary's *Triptych* for string quartet and symphony orchestra. In three movements, the piece was an exploration of glistening, metallic orchestral sonorities each of which lingered for a few seconds before melting into the next. There was little sense of narrative connecting the various textures and it remained an exploration of ways of projecting the individual timbres of the string quartet onto an orchestral canvas. That these never lost interest demonstrated the subtleties of O'Leary's sensitive ear and refined sense of orchestration.

The final piece of the concert was Hugi Guðmundsson's *Box* which featured Andreas Borregaard on accordion and barrel organ. As the title would suggest the piece was an exploration of 'box instrument' sonorities and it opened with an orchestral imitation of the whooshing sound of an accordion's bellows. In other areas of the piece, different sections of the orchestra would replicate characteristic accordion sounds first played by the soloist. The barrel organ had three solo sections evenly spaced across the work in which a sweet, simple tune – typical of the instrument – was deconstructed. While the sounds themselves weren't uninteresting, the different sections of the piece didn't seem to add up as a coherent structure and the piece felt incomplete.

### 9pm: Bang on a Can All-Stars

The New York based Bang on a Can All-Stars are a firm favorite amongst Irish new music audiences and this concert presented the Irish premiere of works by Julia Wolfe, David Lang, Philip Glass and Steve Martland that are representative of the group's repertoire and sound.

Of the four pieces, the most interesting was by Martland who is easily the least well known of the composers featured, having prematurely passed away in 2013. His *Horses of Instruction* is a riff-laden powerhouse of a piece containing a serious amount of catchy figures that change rapidly from one to the next. Over its fifteen-minute duration it contained an astonishing variety and accumulated an exhilarating momentum that formed a thrilling conclusion to this concert.

### 10pm: Diatribe Stage 4 – Redivider / Guillaume Orti + Stephane Payen Duo / BABS

Unfortunately I couldn't make the later concert that evening but *Journal of Music* contributor [James Camien McGuiggan](#) did and he provided the following account:

*Saturday night's late-night concert showcased some new releases by experimental musicians on the Diatribe label.*

*First up was BABS, an improvising trio of bass clarinet (James Allsopp), double bass (Olie Brice) and electronics (Alex Bonney) playing an extended improvisation based on their new EP Microbes. It is hard to say why this was so good – it was the sort of free jazz that pushes at the limits of what we can conceptualise, with gestures, lines and interplays between the instruments barely recognisable as such, and sounds at the edge of our ability to find beautiful. When it works, it's difficult to articulate why beyond the fact that the performers seem to have exquisite taste and synergy. Not that it was all esoteric: there was a clear structure to the set, and Bonney's increasingly dominant soundscape – like an ocean in which Allsop was its fish, and Brice the seabed – was wonderfully lush.*

*Through a surprisingly effective gimmick, at the end of BABS' set we heard the two saxophones through the side door of the concert room as the twin alto saxophones of Guillaume Orti and Stéphane Payen entered; after a short improvisation of all five musicians, BABS left the stage, and the Orti–Payen Duo played their set. The Duo's performance here was at the highest level, but I found the music itself underwhelming, lacking in musical logic – at one point there was an extended passage of piercingly loud close harmonies in the upper register, but it was not earned, and so was only irritating. The music was mostly if not all scored, and mainly written by Orti and Payen, judging by the sheets left on the stage.*

*Through another improvised segue, Orti–Payen gave way to the final act, Irish jazz quartet ReDiViDeR with Matthew Jacobson on drums, Nick Roth on alto sax, Col O'Hara on trombone and Derek Whyte on bass, who played from their new album Mere Nation while being very free with the material. The set opened with some atmospheric free jazz, slowly bringing the audience back down to earth from the abstract heights of Orti–Payen's set into a world of electric bass and drums. I thought that I knew what to expect from the set – free improvisation throughout – so when, entirely unpredicted but perfectly prepared, the beat dropped, it was an unspeakably release. ReDiViDeR's breadth was remarkable: all four players could with equal musicality play the subtlest free-jazz soundscapes as well as expressive solos and explosive, complex grooves. I picked up a copy of Mere Nation, but I didn't find the same intensity in it. This is disappointing, but not surprising – for this sort of jazz, live and studio performance are very different arts. The only thing to do is see them live again, as often as possible.*

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### Day 4: Sunday 1 March

#### 11am: Work in Progress – New Music for Voice and Flutes

After the morning New Music Dublin yoga session, Sunday began with a session exploring a project currently in the works titled GAIA for flautist Ruth Morley and vocalist Laura Bowler. The duo performed snippets of the project by the commissioned composers: Deirdre McKay, Carmel Smickersgill and Bowler herself. As a starting point, the subject of nature and climate change were chosen as a linking theme and the results of this endeavour should be ready for performance at next year's festival. During the session, audience members were invited to make suggestions on what did or didn't work in a particular piece. While we'll have to wait to hear the final results, the piece that seemed particularly promising was McKay's setting of a bizarre speech by Donald Trump on the ineffectiveness of wind farms. Normally such a choice would be fraught with dangers but McKay set Trump's words to a beautiful, floating vocal line that its juxtaposition with such a nonsense speech had an unexpectedly startling effect that made the quixotic nature of the president's words come all the more apparent.

#### 12pm: We are the Music Makers!

After being one of the undisputed hits of last year's festival, the concert by RTÉ's two youth choirs, RTÉ Cór na nÓg and RTÉ Cór Linn, was a much-anticipated fixture. The concert included two world premieres – Seán Doherty's setting of poet Stephen James Smith's *We Must Create* and *A Lullaby* by Ferdia Ó Cairbre who, although still a teenager, is by now a veteran participant of the festival.

In response to the general idea of creativity, Doherty's piece included references to everything from Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Child* to Dr Dre to Handel's *Messiah*, all connected through a recurring refrain to the line 'We Must Create' from Smith's poem. Ó Cairbre's uplifting *A Lullaby* revealed an excellent feel for the choral genre in its examination of the joys of music and makes him one to watch in the future.

#### 1.30pm: Crash Ensemble – Free State 12

The Crash Ensemble's annual Free State concert of new works is now in its twelfth year. It continues to present new pieces by composers who respond to an open call for works and receive mentoring from an established Irish composer. This year that mentor was Ed Bennett whose own work [Song of the Books](#) (1st mvnt) opened the concert.

While this piece takes as its starting point material from the Irish traditional song 'Amhrán na Leabhar', very little of anything traditional was detectable in the final result which was defined by a sustained wall of sound over which the cello carved out a high-tension solo sliding back and forth between two pitches. The impressive thing about the piece was the complexity of the overall texture which seemed to be both static and in constant motion at the same time through a mixture of sustained pitches in some parts and continual surface activity in others. Bursts of pulsations in the latter section of the piece gave it a muscular finish.

Daniel McDermott's *Density* may have been one of the few pieces in the festival to remain stubbornly in 4/4 time for most of its duration. The main driver of the piece was a catchy riff on the piano over which various layers were overlaid, ranging from music-box percussion to more abrasive string figures. The music veered off on avenues from the main figure resulting in a more unpredictable surface and although a chaotic percussive intervention towards the end threatened to knock it off balance, the main riff returned leading to a very perfunctory finish.

[Matthew Whiteside](#)'s *Night Thoughts* built gradually from an alternating major second on the viola that was microtonally inflected. This was joined by the other strings with similar material and gathered into tangled knots. While these knots alternately thickened and thinned, the piece never strayed away from the material it started out with and the unrelenting focus did yield some interesting results.

Adam McCartney described his piece *The Hollow Earth* as a constant shifting 'between sounds in the foreground and sounds in the background'. Repeated gestures of sustained pitches and recurring melodic figures gently overlapped each other with a space between each repetition allowing the material to resonate for a moment. The piece succeeded in its goal with different lines coming forth and then receding into the background producing an ever-changing surface. The meditative nature of the piece was such that one could easily imagine it being extended into a much longer composition.

*Form and Fabric* by New York-based composer Inti Figgis-Vizueta is an exploration of collective improvisation where the musicians are provided with flexible lead-sheets. The composer herself conducted this performance which opened with beautiful sustained tones that swelled into a tumultuous ball of loud noise. The piece passed through several more textures, all quite different, but the impressive thing was the smoothness with which these transitions were conducted.

Amanda Feery's star is seemingly on the rise, and this piece inspired by Kate Bush's song 'Hounds of Love' demonstrated an appetite for risk that set it apart from the other works on the programme. It opened with some fantasia piano figurations with the ensemble entering soon thereafter, painting over the piano part with sliding glissandi and microtonal sonorities. As the piano part thinned out, the harmonic soundworld became a fascinating mix of 80s synth music and spectralism. More percussion and a gradual upward glissando in the strings led into the piece's main riff based on the beat of Bush's song. If there was one issue, it was that this riff seemed to stall slightly and seemed very heavy on percussion and light on melodic filler; however, this could have been a balancing issue. A percussion-led climax

dissipated into an elegiac coda in which fragments of the song lingered plaintively. These kinds of pieces based on pop music don't often work, but this one did and it had a moving nostalgia that made it, along with Bennett's *Song of the Books*, the strongest pieces in the concert.

### 3pm: Diatribe Stage 5 – Xenia Pestova Bennett, *Atomic Legacies*

The final Diatribe concert was dedicated to the release of a vinyl edition of pianist and composer Xenia Pestova Bennett's *Atomic Legacies*. The record features works she composed using the magnetic resonator piano, an instrument that involves a standard piano being transformed by having electromagnets installed above the strings, allowing the creation of new sounds including pitch bends, long sustain, harmonics and a range of otherworldly timbres.

In the first part of the concert, Pestova Bennett performed three selections – 'Plutonium', 'Radon' and 'Actinium' – from her larger multi-movement work *Glowing Radioactive Elements*. The first piece 'Plutonium' began similarly to the opening of Grisey's *Partiels* with a low repeated sonority that had overtones swirling upward but it soon became much more mobile and developed into a harmonically rich texture generated by rapid two-handed tremolandi. The following two movements were much shorter and the piece finished nicely by softening into an ethereal halo as it rocked back and forth between two spectral sonorities.

In the latter half of the concert Pestova Bennett was joined by the Ligeti Quartet for a performance of *Atomic Legacies*, the title work from the album. The piece began by gradually building up into a buzzing microtonal wall of sound. This was followed by a section based on her own 'Actinium', then a more raucous section of filigree scratching and whispery noises before the piece ended poignantly with a quotation of Haydn's 'Sun' string quartet, Op. 20, No. 1, which sounded as if it was being transmitted from a distant planet.

### 4pm: CMC Amplify podcast

The Contemporary Music Centre presented a public interview with Kevin O'Connell in the Kevin Barry room, in conversation with Jonathan Grimes, and a panel discussion on diversity with contributions from New Music Dublin director John Harris, composer Amanda Feery, Eve O'Donnell of National Sawdust in the USA, and David Pay of Music on Main in Vancouver, chaired by Evonne Ferguson. These sessions were recorded and will be issued by CMC as a podcast.

Visit [www.cmc.ie/amplify](http://www.cmc.ie/amplify).

### 6pm: I Will Sing Away the Despair of the Old Universe

The penultimate concert of the festival took place in the Pepper Canister Church with Chamber Choir Ireland performing a programme of international choral repertoire. Encouragingly, the two standout pieces in this concert were by the two composers who had been commissioned to write works especially for the festival: Serbian composer Jug K. Marković and Aftab Darvishi from Iran.

The swirling glissando lines intermingled with ostinato fragments created a distinctive soundworld for Marković's settings of lines from five early twentieth century Serbian poets while the affecting melancholy of Darvishi's *Without Words* – a setting of Emily Dickinson's "Hope" is the thing with feathers' – perfectly matched the tone of the poem. On the other hand, Matthew Whittall's *ad puram annihilationem meam* was a tedious and loose work and the barrage of gimmicks – wine glasses, scrunching up the score, extended vocal techniques – couldn't take away from the ordinariness of the vocal writing which was based on plainchant with an extended middle section punctuated by fairly clichéd dissonances.

### 8pm: RTÉ Concert Orchestra & Bang on a Can All-Stars – Gerald Barry, Julia Wolfe

The final concert of New Music Dublin saw the RTÉ Concert Orchestra conducted by Ilan Volkov join forces with the Bang on a Can All-Stars in a performance of Julia Wolfe's *Flower Power* and Gerald Barry's *Viola Concerto* written for violist Lawrence Power.

Wolfe's *Flower Power* was inspired by the political and creative maelstrom of the late-1960s and was accompanied by images associated with that era projected onto a screen above the orchestra. The piece was led off by the Bang on a Can ensemble in a drone-based texture with looping glissandos gradually infiltrating all the parts. A spikier riff-laden passage followed before these were eventually flattened out into a mellower section featuring vaguely bluesy licks on the guitar. Several more sections rise and fall before the piece reaches its hallucinogenic climax when an upward series of parallel major chords reach their tonic destination accompanied by iconic images from the 1960s. A more gentle, drawn-out final crescendo that built upward from a double bass solo brought the piece to its conclusion. While the playing of the ensemble had a wonderful quasi-improvisational freedom, the piece somehow managed to maintain a forceful sense of direction and the tension never wavered.

Barry's concerto for viola is, if anything, more of an anti-concerto and doesn't deliver any of the virtuosic writing one would generally expect of the concertante format. An earlier performance of this work was [reviewed in the Journal of Music](#) last May and the only difference to note between that performance and this one was that the soloist Lawrence Power presented a very different version of himself and seemed to grow into the role, projecting a much more commanding persona than the stropy student demeanor of his Barbican performance. Either way, he has made the piece his own and fully gets the essence of what is ultimately a very humorous and joyous piece.

### National Concert Hall spaces: Big Mistake / Postal Notes / Grey Area

During last year's New Music Dublin, various spaces in the NCH were given over to three sound art installations and it was great to see this strain of the festival being continued as they were a constant source of fascination for punters milling around the venue between concerts.

The first of these was encountered in the foyer where Niall O'Byrne and Sam Curtin's film *Grey Area* featuring an original score by Sam Perkin was on constant loop. A more detailed review of this film, which follows the path of a lone skateboarder skating through Dublin, appeared in the [Journal of Music](#) following a screening last April.

The second work was an installation created by the Totally Made Up Orchestra in association with Dumbworld, the interdisciplinary arts production company based in Belfast and directed by Brian Irvine and John McIluff. For this project the members of the orchestra were each given a piece of paper containing instructions that they had to musically interpret on their own. Projected images of each of the players were beamed onto the walls outside the Kevin Barry Room and one could listen to the collective mass of sounds that resulted from these efforts on headphones.

Off the corridor leading down to Room 103 was an installation curated by the vocal ensemble Tonnta in which members of the Irish Composers Collective were invited to submit postcard pieces that were hung from the ceiling. During three pop-up performances scheduled throughout the festival, participants were invited to have the works sung back to them by the members of Tonnta.

### Conclusion

So how did New Music Dublin 2020 compare to last year's event? In many ways it seemed to further the argument that the template established by John Harris in last year's festival is just what Ireland needs at the moment. Previous festivals – even moderately successful ones like the RTÉ Living Music Festival – were generally curated by composers who, despite their best intentions, inevitably ended up imposing their own personal stamp on the festival. While a particular festival might have strongly appealed to one set of musical tastes, it inevitably alienated another, thus threatening the long-term viability of the event from year to year. Harris' approach has been to include everybody – from acts as diverse as RTÉ Cór na nÓg to Diatribe – and to take a hands-off approach, allowing the artists themselves to define their own separate spheres, thus empowering them to make the space their own.

Can there be improvements? Certainly. There is a definite need to branch out from the comfort zone of the concert hall and investigate some of the grittier venues around the city, and, while having everything packed into four days does facilitate logistics and people coming from a distance, it raises all sorts of stamina issues – as this weary writer can attest – as most people are unlikely to attend more than two or three concerts per day. Having the festival spread out over a week and in a greater variety of venues might result in a better overall attendance. Also, RTÉ's orchestral contribution was predictably minimal with one concert each for the NSO and Concert orchestras but no big commissions like the [Walshe and Fennessy premieres of last year](#).

Nevertheless, audience numbers seemed up this year. Both of the orchestral concerts in the main hall were at least two-thirds full in the stalls while many of the smaller gigs were sold out and some of the Diatribe gigs even had to turn people away. Overall the festival seems in good health and we can look forward to next year's event with confidence and even greater expectations.

Visit [www.newmusicdublin.ie](http://www.newmusicdublin.ie)

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