

Review

Music

Modern beauty from Pharos

I CONFESS to harbouring a slight prejudice against contemporary music – no recognisable melody or rhythm, impossible to understand without a PhD in musicology... the musical equivalent of conceptual art. So, on Thursday evening I ventured along to the Shoe Factory in old Nicosia to educate myself and find out what it is all about.

What I discovered was a revelation: modern music can be exciting, beautiful, fun and moving, when cleverly programmed and performed by world-class artists. The artistic directors of the festival have carefully constructed each evening so that the pieces relate to each other musically and thematically. Thursday's repertoire explored both post-war rejections of traditional forms as well as their re-recognition, with works by Webern, Boulez, Berg, Kurtág, Si-maku and Bartók for violin, clarinet and piano.

To unfamiliar ears, the most accessible works were Anton Webern's *4 pieces for violin and piano, op.7* and Alban Berg's *4 pieces for clarinet and piano, op.5*. The Webern pieces are short, sparse, delicate and atmospheric. Berg's *4 pieces*, written within the 12-tone system, are among the most significant works for clarinet written in the 20th century, introducing many technical innovations but also exploring the clarinet's expressive possibilities. Both works were superbly performed by violinist Peter Sheppard Skaerved, clarinetist Roger Heaton and pianist Aaron Shorr.

Pierre Boulez's *Domaines* for solo clarinet (premiered in 1968) was another example of serialism. As Evis Sammoutis explains in his excellent programme

notes, in this particular work "the strict serial thinking and formalisation somehow give unexpected results, at times sounding almost improvisatory." Roger Heaton gave a riveting performance, showing his technical mastery and consummate musicianship. György Kurtág's (b. 1926) *Hommage à Robert Schumann, op.15d* formed a link between eras, looking both to the future and acknowledging the past. It is a testament to Kurtág's esteem of Schumann and shares the instrumentation and mood with the latter's *Märchenerzählungen* (Fairy Tale Stories). Thomas Simaku's (b. 1958) work *Duo sotto voci* for violin solo was the only work of the evening that left me cold. It offered some interesting sound-effects inspired by Greek and Albanian folk music, but, despite an energetic performance by Sheppard Skaerved, for whom the piece was composed in 2003, failed to convince.

The main piece of the evening was Bartók's *Contrasts* (1938) – a wonderful example of the composer's individual style incorporating folk and jazz influences. This is a highly demanding work, an amazing feast of rhythms, meters and melodies, and altogether sheer fun to listen to. The three artists immersed themselves in the music body and soul, and they did it with enormous brilliance and gusto. A rousing finale to a superb evening.

A concert of this calibre would be a rare treat anywhere in the world, let alone in Cyprus. I came away feeling enriched and enlightened.

International Contemporary Music Festival
Pharos Arts Foundation presents music
from the 20th and 21st centuries by avant-
garde composers from all over the world.
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