

FIRST PERFORMANCES

eavesdropping, Café Oto, London, 21–24 March 2024.

I was happy to be reviewing *eavesdropping* 2024 – it gave me the impetus to attend most of the festival, which I hadn't managed in prior years. Letting the festival take over my weekend led me to interact with its curatorial and conceptual arc, rather than seeing a few events and experiencing them separately. This immersion was useful, given that I didn't love a significant amount of what I experienced – but considering it all in context made me think beyond straightforward dismissal of a gig I didn't enjoy or a talk I didn't find engaging. Rather, I was challenged to consider their places in a curation with a distinct perspective and agenda.

eavesdropping is a festival of experimental music, platforming solo performances by women and non-binary people. It also has an accompanying forum of short presentations, 'provocations' and round tables, on a new theme each year – this year's theme was 'experiments in failure'. *eavesdropping* was established by Artistic Director Juliet Fraser in 2017, and is described on its own website as 'a riotous four-day deep-dive into new sounds and fresh thinking', while also establishing its intellectual and political framing by citing its motivation as 'intersectional feminism' and its model as 'tentacular' (the latter in reference to Donna Haraway, one assumes).

Each evening concert was a double bill, platforming two solo sets. One of the things I really admire about *eavesdropping* is its impressive programming breadth. It is testament to the team's knowledge of who is out there making music, as well as their commitment to artistic diversity, that the line-up this year extends so broadly in terms of genre, form, medium and musical tradition. As well as this, three of the eight artists reside in mainland Europe: it is commendable that the festival maintains an international outlook, despite what one can assume are mounting logistical and financial barriers year on year. It is a real treat to be presented with such a wide range of new music, and to reliably leave the festival with new artists on my radar.

Of particular note this year for me were Farida Amadou and Crystabel Riley. Riley is a

captivating performer to watch; she approached her unconventional drum kit (no cymbals – instead, a selection of seven snares and toms) with nonchalance, beginning her set using tiny microphones to capture resonance, punctuating that resonance with brief, languid drum motifs. By halfway through the set, she was circling the drums, twirling her sticks with dancery fluidity; by the end, she was attacking the kit with abandon. Amadou's set was more opaque, yet the way it began – with an extended passage of hypnotic, looping lap-bass – was completely arresting. Hitting the instrument with her hands and a drumstick, as well as tying bells around her ankles later in the set, she created a unique and mesmerising wall of sound, completely disorientating my assumptions about solo bass playing. Both artists clearly have a deep relationship with their instruments and their improvisation practice, and as an audience member one can't help but be spellbound.

Riley's set, the final event of the festival, was also one half of my favourite overall concert, being programmed alongside Dafne Vincente-Sandoval's fragile, droning experiments with the body of her bassoon. Though the two sets were very different in aesthetic, I liked that they had a connecting thread – of experimenting with resonance, with the hollow bodies of instruments. I assume that this thread was unintended, though – *eavesdropping* (as far as I understand) has a programming ethos of placing artists alongside each other with deliberate non-consideration for the dramaturgy they create. On Sunday, this worked just fine, but on other evenings less so.

On Saturday, Anna Dennis presented works of the Western canon in unorthodox ways, as well as sharing new songs created following the rubric of a children's game. Though obviously a gifted singer with playful ideas, on this occasion Dennis' offering fell flat. The premise of inviting an audience to see a very different – experimenting, vulnerable – side to an artist they have probably only come across otherwise on the opera stage could, of course, be interesting. However, especially when placed alongside the assurance and depth of Amadou's entirely improvised set, much of Dennis' offering felt

misjudged. Friday evening was ultimately another unfulfilling double bill. Ellie Wilson's warmly chatty presentation of her experimental electronic folk songs was such a non-sequitur from Sandra Kazlauskaitė's meandering, opaque sample-based improvisations that, rather than creating an interesting double bill, both artists' works were rendered somewhat strange.

eavesdropping's forum took place on Saturday and Sunday, during the day. My highlights from the forum came in the form of presentations of methodology-in-action, from Lainie Fefferman, and Hester Dart and Patricia Auchterlonie. Both artists engaged with extra-human technologies, Fefferman coding a site to create a platform for the audience's phones to be utilised in performance, and Dart and Auchterlonie presenting a delicate, crooned duologue while weaving strips of fabric on an arboreal hand-crafted loom. Both sharings had a joyful openness – it was a pleasure to learn more about these artists' work, which I hope to encounter again. It felt a shame, then, to have these sharings contrasted sharply by other moments which felt less engaging or committed. An especially frustrating segment was a panel on the future of opera, which struggled to draw out much comment of substance from its members.

Perhaps the forum should be commended for its inclusivity and supportive atmosphere, which allows a range of thinking to have a public outing. However, I was left with the uncomfortable sensation that, rather than being inclusive, presenting such a mixed array of thinking jeopardises the reception, the legibility, of the better sessions. I wonder if this is a problem of framing; it is a bit unclear what the forum wants to be, sitting somewhere on a spectrum from open discussion to conference. I suspect that the recently refreshed labelling of 'forum' (from 'symposium') might be an attempt to pull towards the former, this shift in framing notwithstanding, I wonder whether a somewhat tightened curatorial lens might make this element of the festival more convincing.

It feels important to reflect on the forum's theme this year – 'experiments in failure'. It feels ironic that for me much of it failed. Or is that the point? The theme at the very least creates a distinct critical lens for the forum's reception and assessment – it challenges me to be generous towards each talk, and think more broadly about what could be generative about 'failure' in this context. At the same time, I don't think some of the forum's weaker content can be explained as an 'experiment in failure' – this feels intellectually insincere and would do

a disservice to those whose sharing was thoughtful and committed. I wonder whether the generative reflections to be had, then, are about failure of reception: about who the forum's intended audience, and community, is, and – if it includes me – why I struggled so much to enjoy it.

According to a few other eavesdroppers, I missed the best of the festival – I heard excellent things about Mariá Portugal on the opening night, as well as about the forum's Saturday morning sessions. I've since been able to catch up with much of what I missed via eavesdropping's YouTube, an excellent resource, but this obviously doesn't make up for not being able to catch it live and in context. Crucially, this speaks to the nature of an event such as this, straddling the worlds of concert, festival and conference, taking place in the middle of London. I might be wrong, but I expect that many people – aside from eavesdropping's participants and most dedicated fans – will have gone to only one eavesdropping event, perhaps motivated by seeing a particular artist. It is in this context that I worry about eavesdropping's perspective being lost, and about some of its artists being short-changed by billings which did their work no favours. Without an engagement with the conceptual curation of eavesdropping – which audience members are by no means guaranteed or expected to have – I worry that some artists' contributions may have felt ill conceived.

Without a doubt, I find eavesdropping's aims to be commendable – and as an intellectual exercise, I found this year's iteration to be something of a success, if obliquely. eavesdropping is clearly very committed to diversity, inclusion, work-in-progress – as well as to creative vulnerability, to some notion of the 'art of failure'. However, I fear that as a result of the rejection of conventional programming, some audience members might have simply been turned off from the work of certain artists – I feel that I was. Much as experimentation is good, double bills are also done the way they are for a reason. The context and dramaturgy of a concert are important, and throwing these out completely risks leaving audiences out in the cold – especially more casual ones. Ultimately, I wonder whether this curatorial choice fails in its duty of care to all its artists – and whether this is a kind of failure that shouldn't be experimented with?

Experimental, politically motivated curation represented by festivals such as eavesdropping is important, and I want to see it interrogated further. As an individual with an intellectual and artistic stake, I will, I'm sure, return in

2025 to see more double bills and forum contributions. I hope other audience members will also persevere through the sometimes frustrating way that these are programmed, to stay with the important questions eavesdropping asks at its heart – and, ultimately, to be introduced to some brilliant new music.

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Joseph Vella, *Valeriana: The Titan's Rock*, Teatru Astra, Victoria, May 2024.

I will begin this review with a brief précis of Maltese and Gozitan operatic culture for the benefit of those unfamiliar with it – Maltese and Gozitans can skip to the next paragraph. Non-locals will notice that I have already made a distinction here that Maltese politicians are careful to make when speaking broadly and inclusively to their constituents: ‘Maltese and Gozitans’. Gozo is a small, hilly, trapezoidal island north of Malta, itself a small, but comparatively larger, island. It has a distinct culture, cuisine and dialect – and, with a population of around 40,000, it has two separate opera houses within roughly 50 metres of each other. I raise this point because Joseph Vella, the composer of the opera *Valeriana*, was a Gozitan composer, and it was at one of these two Gozitan opera houses – Teatru Astra – where he worked and where his final work was posthumously premièred. Vella was one of the two titans of twentieth-century Maltese (and Gozitan) music, alongside Charles Camilleri, with whom he shared a pronounced professional rivalry. Both Camilleri and Vella have a stature that make them nearly metonymic with Maltese music, which is problematic both for their music and for Malta. Like many European territories on the receiving end of imperial designs, Malta's emergence as a nation-state occurred rather late, and, as a consequence, its musical discourses are sometimes self-consciously frozen in the romantic nationalism of the mid to late nineteenth century. This is a shame, because very many Maltese musicians are short-changed by the nationalist tone-poem pigeonhole. Both Camilleri and Vella's most internationally successful works involve some sort of symbolic national link to Malta, through the keywords ‘Malta’, ‘Maltese’ or, most forbiddingly, ‘Mediterranean’, but their best works are strikingly original and almost impossible to pin down in either time or place (Camilleri's ‘New

Idea’ symphony, Vella's *Jeux*). Far from being nationally limited, influences on Maltese music have been hugely eclectic (a favourite adjective of Maltese aesthetics generally), taking odds and ends of North African and European music and running with them towards unforeseeable ends. Joseph Vella, for example, was fundamentally influenced by the compositional methods devised by Paul Hindemith late in his life, wherein a new systematic and binding system of tonality is arrived at through methods that are not strictly tonal.

The tension between these two complex antipodes – on the one hand, the obligatory, tried and tested ‘Malta/Mediterranean/Little Italy’ brand, on the other, the contingencies of a unique personal style – is what makes *Valeriana* such a fascinating, wonderful and very fun opera. Musically, its model appears to be Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*: the transitions before and after scenes are the structurally significant musical set pieces, with the scenic music itself largely confined to an accompanying role. Dramatically, it is verismo – a realistic ‘slice of life’ narrative with ‘ordinary’ characters in a defined historical setting. The setting here is the Fascist era on Valeriana, a fictional island off the coast of Sicily, which might potentially be an allegory but is not, at least on a diegetic level, an allegory for Malta, which is repeatedly mentioned in the libretto as holding out against Fascist aggression. The island is ruled with an iron fist by Cirilo, a booming baritone baddie, and his blackshirts. Token resistance is offered by Rosario, a Maltese fisherman, and a kindly figure known as Il Professore. Over the course of four acts word gets out that Italy has lost the war and Mussolini has been violently deposed, leading to a reversal of fortune for the characters – Cirillo becomes a fugitive while Rosario and Il Professore help with the rebuilding of civil society. Eventually Il Professore convinces Cirillo as ‘a gesture of goodwill’ to clean out the mines he had laid on the island's beaches. As he is ostensibly defusing the last mine, Cirillo instead detonates it, killing himself, which is how the opera ends. Good: it is always nice when an opera ends with a bang.

There are occasional pointed anachronisms in the libretto. In an extended aria, Cirillo laments that the locals do not have the imagination to appreciate his vision of the island as a holiday destination for Fascist officials – a landscape of ‘villas along the cliff edge... luxury yachts’. While promotional material for the opera is at pains to connect Cirillo's speech to the historical fascist pleasure island of Capri, it is pretty clear