



A survey of the city's experimental scenes during **Berlin's Month of Contemporary Music** is full of surprises. By **Peter Margasak**

A Month Of Contemporary Music

Various locations, Berlin, Germany

The breadth and depth of contemporary music in Berlin, fuelled in part by a thriving expat community, is hardly a secret. Locals are surrounded by all stripes of sonic experimentation, whether electronic excursions, adventurous chamber ensembles, or freely improvised music – with many stops in between. In 2017, Initiative Neue Musik Berlin – an invaluable advocacy organisation run by composers, musicians, academics and administrators – launched A Month Of Contemporary Music, a concentrated survey to provide a kind of critical mass to adventurous musical activity in the city. The calendar of events each September isn't really different from any other month in Berlin, but by curating a slate of performances, installations and discussions, with events in hallowed concert halls and gritty underground spaces, with a deliberately expansive aesthetic framework, the project does a nice job of highlighting the sheer variety and quality of contemporary music in the city.

After the pandemic limited the 2020 edition of the event, it has come roaring back to life in 2021 in spite of ongoing restrictions and safety protocols. A somewhat random sampling of events taking place between Friday 27 August and Wednesday 1 September illustrates just how abundant and diverse Berlin's sonic riches are. The longrunning series Labor Sonor presents "Translating Spaces" in several locations in the Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood, and while its goal of exploring how a physical space impacts our perception of a performance or installation falls short, I'm still thinking about *Reverse Side*, a video installation by Joanna Baillie presented at Ballhaus Ost. The composer seeks to explore the notion of the "other side" of an artwork, offering both a front and back experience of a long shot video of a shimmering lake. For more than half of its 15 minutes, both halves of the video are identical, with the same sound mix on each of the screen, which viewers could circumnavigate. But shortly after a duck glides

across the bottom half of the screen things get quite and unexpectedly Lynchian. The screen goes black and the "other side" of the video becomes black and white and pixilated, a glitched out abstraction, while the front side retains its natural colour if not its representational clarity. At the same time the sonics diverge, leaving largely environmental sounds intact on one side of the room, while the other dissolves into chopped-up, garbled noise.

A performance by Gerhard Eckel and Ludvig Elblaus's Utrumque duo explores the festival concept with two simultaneous iterations of *St Elisabeth Song Cycle*, as an electronically activated snare drum, double bass, mic and loudspeaker each sound in two adjacent buildings on the grounds of the Villa Elisabeth. While some of the sounds from each space feed into the other, the environment itself really makes a significant difference. The performance in the church benefits from a light-soaked roomy atmosphere and greater sonic resonance, while the one in the nearby hall feels more dusky and dry.

On 28 September the nomadic presenting organisation Kiezsalon, which typically offers an eclectic mix of artists intended to expose new sounds to its audience, hosts a concert within the stunning confines of an old 3000 square metre turbine hall of a shuttered energy company, now operating as MaHalla. Covid restrictions prevent the superb Malian guitar band Amanar from playing, so the shape-shifting Polish clarinetist and producer Wacław Zimpel steps in at the last minute. His performance builds from patient melodic lines sweetly articulated on bass clarinet, which he transforms in real time into lush ambient layers of sound. While the set is meticulously organised, with an organic flow between ever-shifting uninterrupted passages, the sound itself feels neutered. Zimpel plays a chill ambient set that nicely fills the massive space with aqueous textures and meditative licks, but compared with his more rigorous improvised music or collaborations with other musicians from around the world, it all seems tame.

Thomas Ankersmit also tailors his set for the occasion, bypassing his psychoacoustic experiments inspired by the likes of Maryanne Amacher or Dick Raaijmakers, to serve up something more ambient while retaining his quicksilver mastery of the Serge Modular Synthesizer. The piece is gorgeous and visceral, balancing tonal bite with supernovas of sound, and deploying a grasp of dynamics and scale to fill the space with something worthy of its sheer grandeur.

The three day Aggregate Festival is a local manifestation of an ongoing European endeavour by Gamut Inc, the duo of Marion Wörle and Maciej Śledziecki, who present works that take advantage of the infinite possibilities of computer-driven pipe organ music. The opening concert features new MIDI transcriptions of Conlon Nancarrow's piano roll compositions – an obvious antecedent to what Aggregate seems to do with organ music – but most of the performances feature pieces by musicians who don't routinely work with the instrument. One exception is a mind-bending work at Auenkirche by the Norwegian composer and organist Nils Henrik Asheim, who deftly exploits the hyperorgan's superhuman potential in *Lost And Found Loops I*, whether using pure attack with no sustain to produce clacking sounds suggesting rain falling upon a tin roof, or unleashing maniacal calliope-like melodies that wobble like a warped record. A piece by Phillip Sollmann and Konrad Sprenger opens with a density-shifting drone, as tones are added and subtracted from the mass as the sounds floated into ambient drift, but following a starburst swell those sounds recede, unveiling an already present tintinnabulation of bell-like clanging.

Unfortunately, pieces by Jessica Ekomane and Seth Horvitz (aka Rose) settle into more predictable masses of thunderous sound, swirling drones, flickering arpeggios, shifting tempos and frequent exercises in accretion and deduction. Yet the festival, like a microcosm of the month-long endeavour, enjoys the space and time to dig in and explore. It happens in Berlin all of the time. □

Christoph Vey