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Reviews

A selection of reviews by *Irish Times* writers.

Kilkenny Arts Festival

Various venues, Kilkenny

By Martin Adams

Kilkenny Arts Festival has continued its record of putting on strong programmes of classical music. If the five concerts I attended were typical, then this year's festival was among the best, for these high-quality events included several musicians who had been playing throughout the week.

The programme curator, Ireland's violin supremo Catherine Leonard, devised a strong line-up of lunchtime and evening concerts that explored the combinatorial possibilities offered by string quartet (the Carducci Quartet), piano (Julius Drake until Tuesday, and Leon McCawley thereafter), oboe (Nicholas Daniel), plus an extra violin (Leonard herself), viola (Jennifer Stumm) and cello (Ani Aznavoorian). The festival's opening concert was given by the Ulster Orchestra; and there was an evening vocal recital by soprano Ailish Tynan and Julius Drake, a lunchtime piano recital by Michael McHale, an afternoon concert by composer and vocalist Jennifer Walshe, and a programme of music from the French Baroque by Ensemble Wanda Landowska.

On Thursday night, the leader of this four-strong, Paris-based ensemble, Sébastien Marq, plus harpsichordist Raphaël Collignon, bass violist Emmanuel Balssa and soprano Elizabeth Dobbin, presented 17th- and 18th-century music from the French and Dutch Baroque. The latter was represented by some of the player-composer Jacob van Eyck's recorder variations, several being on the French airs de cours and airs à boire heard in this programme. Such specialist repertoire, including Montéclair's cantata *Ariane et Bacchus*, needs performers immersed in an aesthetic world that is utterly distinctive and is unforgiving of stylistic uncertainty. Immersed they certainly were, and held everyone's attention throughout a high-class example of thoughtful programming and sensitive virtuosity.

On Friday night, pianist Leon McCawley explored the Classical and Romantic concepts of fantasia, via five works by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Schumann. The precision at which he excels was not at all at odds with the improvisational freedom essential to pieces such as Beethoven's Sonata in E flat Op 27 No 1 *Quasi una fantasia* and Chopin's F minor Fantasia. McCawley's deep understanding of the relationship between detail and large-scale design helped make his account of Schumann's Op 17 Fantasia in C especially powerful, full of insight into the inner aspects of a composer who, according to the 19th-century critic Richard Pohl, was always writing "inside himself". Precision and intelligent musicality were also hallmarks of the lunchtime recital given by the young Northern Ireland pianist Michael McHale. His demanding programme featured Mozart's Sonata in C minor K457, and one of Liszt's most ambitious fantasy-style works, the *Dante Sonata*. He also presented two 20th-century pieces, Ian Wilson's lyrical-and-evocative *For Eileen, after rain* (1995) and Barber's neat exploration of American musical styles, *Excursions* (1942-44). McHale's virtuosity is not yet fully fledged, but his natural musicality, stylistic awareness, and easy authority at the keyboard are indicators of a secure and expansive future.

I would have liked to see the festival include a little more truly contemporary music; though I also applaud the tendency to roll works such as the Wilson, and Kurtág's *Six Moments Musicaux* (2005), into programmes of more standard fare, rather than ghettoise them into

specialist slots. The one inevitable exception to that rule was the Friday-afternoon concert by Jennifer Walshe.

That was a memorable event, held in the same room of Rothe House that housed the Contemporary Music Centre's striking exhibition *The Art of Sound*. That exhibition featured evocative photographs of Irish composers, by Eugene Langan, extracts of their scores, and an audio-guide.

Walshe's programme, titled *Notations*, treated us to a rollercoaster spoken survey of the history and methods of notation, ranging from ancient Greece to present-day graphic concepts. She's a communicator, whose abilities as a vocaliser can make sense of such wild shores as Kurt Schwitters's sound poem *Ursonate* (1922-3). Playing the ukelele as she sang, she also gave the premiere of Ukeoirn O'Connor's *Three Songs* (commissioned by South Dublin County Council's In Context 3 programme), and the programme included her own Nature Data and G.L.O.R.I. Startling, absorbing stuff.

Like all the evening concerts, the closing one took place in the fine acoustic of St Canice's Cathedral. It brought together musicians from three of the four countries represented during the week - Ireland, Britain and the US - to play Schubert's Piano Trio in E flat D929 and Brahms's Sextet in B flat, Op 19. Both pieces were beautifully played; and given the international cast of players, it was hard to imagine a better way to finish than the Brahms. The Carducci Quartet, supplemented by Ani Aznavoorian (cello) and Jennifer Stumm (viola), relished everything this extraordinary piece offers.

It was typical of all the concerts I heard that, while the pleasures of music making were always evident, just as much pleasure was taken in playing with the discipline that such high-quality music deserves.

Aidan Dunne reviews Kilkenny Arts Festival visual art on Thursday

Fay Claassen

JJ Smyth's, Dublin

By Ray Comiskey

Having given what was, by all accounts, a well-received concert at Kilkenny Arts Festival, the Dutch jazz singer Fay Claassen arrived in Dublin hoping to repeat that success at the weekend. She did.

She's described as a singer of standards and it's true; with a light but smoky voice and an easy, swinging way of phrasing, that world comes naturally to her and there's nothing forced about her affinity with that material. But it's only part of the truth, because there is more to her than that.

The concert included *Pensativa*, a bossa by the West Coast pianist Clare Fischer, a setting of one of Shakespeare's sonnets, the old Gerry Mulligan Quartet piece *Line For Lyons*, Betty Carter's witty *Please Do Something* and Paquito D'Rivera's tricky *The Lady and the Vagabond*. All asked questions in different ways.

With the exception of the Shakespearean piece, where the lyrics were delivered with less than clarity, they were answered with considerable aplomb. To impress like that when her voice was clearly not at its best - there was roughness and occasional insecurity at both extremes of her register - is one measure of her quality.

Another indication of her innate and considerable musicality was the way she dealt with the booby-trapped world of scat singing, or improvised wordless vocals. Phrasing like a jazz instrumentalist, she's quite simply one of the best around at this; she was rigorous and inventive, with not a hint of self-indulgence. There was fine support from the accompanying quartet. The German tenor saxophonist Paul Heller, from the great WDR Big Band in Cologne, was a master of the musical *le mot juste* who delivered precisely what was needed in each context; their interaction was one of the more rewarding elements of the night.

Equally adept support came from the fine Italian pianist Francesco Turrisi, bassist Damian

Evans and drummer Kevin Brady in a context where there was a balance between the arranged and the improvised that served both well. As for the standards, she saved the best for the second set, which was graced with particularly fine performances of *The Touch Of Your Lips* and *Lover Man* .

Sharon Shannon Band, Mundy

Beo Celtic Music Festival, NCH

By Siobhán Long

The tsunami of impeccable, newly minted tunes would have had a dozen lesser musicians dining out for years. Sharon Shannon has hit another creative peak as far as her compositions go, mining the deeper seams of her tradition in cahoots with guitarist Jim Murray to unearth the startlingly playful *Neckbelly* , and later ricocheting headlong into the freewheeling Libertango, her appetite for grace and danger as voracious as ever.

Gerry O'Connor adds a gorgeous complexity to the mix, as he manages to leave more space between his notes than any other player of the banjo on these islands. His fiddle traced routes over, under and through Shannon's accordion, underscoring here, echoing there, and often conjuring shapes that fit with jigsaw-like ease with Shannon's melody lines. Shannon's own rhythmic sensibilities are as densely convoluted as those of a wizened jazz master, as she stretches and bends the boundaries of the tradition to sometimes spectacular effect. The pair teamed up with Shannon's sister, Mary, to launch into the gorgeous bluegrass of *The Bag Of Cats*, choosing a trio of fiddles to burrow deep into the belly of the tune.

All the more a pity then to see her sinking such musical beauty in the depths of a mix that's muddy and leaden. James Delany's keyboards and Richie Buckley's sax are in themselves things of rare beauty, but in their current guise, they serve merely to distract from the inherent splendour of the tunes. Richie Buckley at one stage segued into *The Beatles's Here, There And Everywhere* , as if to underline the attention deficit of the enterprise.

It was difficult to understand Mundy's contribution too. As he swung through his own singalong repertoire from *Mexico to Love And Confusion* and *July* , Shannon's accompaniment was a mere shadow in the wings, repeatedly overwhelmed by the effervescence of the guitar and rhythm sections.

Shannon is a veritable Gandhi of her time. Attracting a huge following of both punters and musicians, she surrounds herself with so much sound that she sacrifices her genius at an altar that's overcrowded, unfocused and, ultimately, forgettable. Dónal Lunny's arrival did much to inject some focus to the night's proceedings, but this was still another crowd-pleasing ragbag of a performance, its substance languishing deep beneath the veneer of style that keeps everyone cosily foot-tapping in unison.

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