

# Tempo

<http://journals.cambridge.org/TEM>

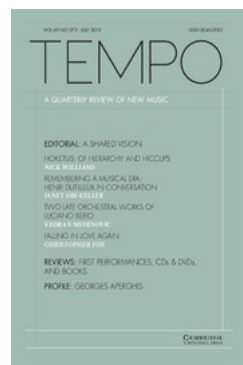
Additional services for **Tempo**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Borealis Festival, 11–15 March 2015

Travis Just

Tempo / Volume 69 / Issue 273 / July 2015, pp 38 - 40

DOI: 10.1017/S0040298215000145, Published online: 02 July 2015

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0040298215000145](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0040298215000145)

### How to cite this article:

Travis Just (2015). Borealis Festival, 11–15 March 2015. Tempo, 69, pp 38–40 doi:10.1017/S0040298215000145

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

the mezzo Jane Henschel an imperious, pompous Queen of Hearts. The BBC Singers tackled their testing choral parts with their usual unflapability, and the lads of the Tiffin Boys' Choir seemed to enjoy their appearance as a chorus of pink mice (drawing an I've-just-seen-a-kitten 'aw' from the audience). Outshining them all was the BBC Symphony Orchestra, alert to every detail of this pullulating score in an exhilarating display of corporate virtuosity.

It's a crying shame that there weren't any cameras in the hall, since it would have made terrific television, helped amortise what must have been a hugely expensive undertaking, and allowed a few million more to share what those of us who were there knew was a special experience.

Martin Anderson

---

#### Borealis Festival, 11–15 March 2015

At a seminar on Monday morning, when everything was over at Borealis, Christian Wolff said (I'm paraphrasing), 'it was easier in the '50s. If you did anything besides follow Stravinsky or Schoenberg, you were beyond the pale. Composers starting now, I don't know what you should do. Everything has been done'.

What should we do, indeed, we composers, musicians, festivals? Borealis Festival in Bergen, Norway, handles this issue by wisely sidestepping it. They know that answering this question is a trap. 'Opera/Sound Art/Theory/Some 70- (or 40-) Year-Old French Dude at the Sorbonne/Silence/Performance is The Future!' – that is going nowhere. Instead, Borealis throws styles, structures and strategies together in a box based on diverse interest rather than programmatic dogma. The result works. It's like the bar on the corner where all the artists end up together. But it isn't by chance; these artists were selected to highlight the range of musical possibility. That's the great hope anyway, and surely the best way forward now that we must be done with the pointless old polemics.

This year Borealis features a new artistic director, former BBC Radio producer Peter Meanwell. The festival opened dramatically at Sentralbadet, a massive, now-defunct municipal pool with a beautiful, arching ceiling and floor-to-ceiling windows facing out over the harbour. Former artistic director Alwynne Pritchard presented *Homing* (2015), a music-theatre work for movement, electronics and voice. Her dramatic sensibilities are effective, and the sonic

landscape boomed through the surprisingly wonderful acoustics of the pool as a movement ensemble gathered, scattered and meandered in the now-drained deep end. Her work set the tone for the variety of music and performance that was to come during the rest of the weekend. Cellist Oliver Coates pumped a nice bit of cello-plus-fx-pedal psychedelia into the cavernous space, scaling his sound well to the room.

On the other side of town, the installation *floe/flow* (2015) by Tomoko Sauvage, a Japanese musician/sound artist based in Paris, featured suspended blocks of ice dripping into amplified bowls, producing soft ringing tones around the Lydgalleriet. This was a pretty work, which operated within the space between physicality-of-object and musical structure. Her elegant solo performance on electronics and manipulated, amplified water and ice at the opening added a texture and layer that would have been welcome throughout the duration of the installation.

Friday afternoon found students from the Griegakademiet scattered in the pews of an old church to give an enjoyable reading of Howard Skempton's open score piece from 1971, *May Pole*, followed by Magnar Åm's *visst går det rundt for en einebærbusk* (1994), a large ensemble piece featuring a lush, Gil Evans-esque trumpet part. A graceful, lyrical solo piano work titled *Soccorsi* (2007) by the recently deceased Morten Eide Pedersen rounded out the programme.

Bergen-based BIT20 Ensemble's presentation of Johannes Kreidler's *Living in a Box* (2010) was the weekend's dose of 'hardcore' notated music. I notice that, these days, there is a tendency to highlight the conceptual-rhetorical frame around this kind of piece via pre-concert talks or theory-laden programme notes. This extra-musicality is, of course, an area of intense interest in many circles out there (and here at Borealis) but, when the talking ends and the baton drops, the music is pretty familiar as complexist modernism with some post-exotica flourishes. The high degree of compositional and technical execution provides a unique opportunity and angle for negotiating these conceptual issues but, in the end, the opportunity was not quite seized here. There seems to be a disconnection between the language used to describe the thing and the reality of the thing itself.

Kelly Jayne Jones and Pascal Nichols, the Manchester-based duo part wild horses mane on both sides (pwhmobs), were augmented this night by the addition of saxophonist Sam Andreae. The show began with a loud, long,

deep rumble coming from speakers placed in the entryway to the venue. After a while, the performers entered, one by one, and began to play on percussion, saxophone, objects (all also amplified) and electronic devices; with tiny gestures and acres of space between, they proceeded to tap, scrape, process, cassette-loop and summon a landscape of patient, effective aridity. There were connections to the slow, soft improv of the last 15 years or so, but pwhmobs avoided stale strategies and took a meaningful step beyond. Instead of settling into a stylistic cul-de-sac, they freely picked up and dropped methods and approaches, while producing a performative tension that itself was the connecting tissue of the set. Kelly Jayne Jones ended the performance by obsessively grating amplified stones. This was presented simply as an action though, something to fill a space of time that may or may not be arbitrary. It worked.

When Sons of Kemet, here consisting of saxophonist/leader Shabaka Hutchings, tubist Theon Cross, and drummers Seb Rochford and Tom Skinner, took the stage, I immediately thought of Arthur Blythe's early trio, or Henry Threadgill's Very Very Circus; both clear forerunners of this instrumentation. But it was quickly evident that this band is entirely its own thing. They are relentless in their foregrounding of rhythm. Solos don't exist, ornaments don't exist, just incessant driving percussive figures. Fela Kuti is an obvious comparison, though Thomas Mapfumo might be closer to the mark, but Sons of Kemet are focussed on nothing but the pulse in a way that would make a minimalist blush. The microphone disappeared down the bell of the saxophone and the already multifaceted sonic picture was further expanded. This turned out to be one of the most effortlessly, conceptually complex events of the weekend, pulled off with a high level of energy and execution.

Walking into A. Typist's performance, the audience was presented with a table covered in old typewriters, a single snare drum covered with basic motors and wires, and small LED lights all over the place. The three performers, South Korean sound artists Ryu Hankil, Kim Taeyong and lo wie, entered and casually began to shuffle slowly through small stacks of paper. As they started typing, the motors kicked in, generating neo-breakbeat figures on the snare and metallic, mechanical clanks and loops, and the LEDs began to blink, flare and fade, altered by the continuing keystrokes of the ensemble. Single words and phrases were occasionally muttered, subtle timbral alterations were made by

damping a struck surface with a piece of wood or tilting a motor to speed up the snare clatter. What resulted was a complex, directionless system of obsolete machines and broken language. The initial presentation of bored office workers receded into an analogue to David Tudor's homebrew circuits, where chaotic systems overlap and process generates an endless piece, consistent in its components and infinitely variable in its becoming.

Lina Lapelyte's *Candy Shop – the Circus* (2015 version) presented us with seven women in oversized sportcoats, each mic'd up and humming sweetly with an auxiliary instrument close at hand. On the video screen was another group of women in street dress, sitting in a blank white room gazing out intently at the audience. Accompanying themselves with post-indie keyboard or zither or accordion, the women onstage begin to sweetly sing hip-hop lyrics from the last 30 years: 'get ya brain sprayed on the pave, in front of the rave, No reason, other than niggas is frustrated'. In a similar strategy to that employed by A. Typist (but radically different in its theatrical environment), large-scale elements are added, subtracted and reshaped, constantly reframing the work: a male choir appears and engages the women onstage in comical, but somehow poignant, pseudo-dialogue; a drum corps of local Bergen boys materialises from a hidden staircase only to be drowned out by a young woman on drumset apparently channelling John Bonham; noisy electronic free-for-alls overwhelm sing-song passages. *Candy Shop* offers a recontextualisation and inherent critique of misogynistic old rap lyrics, to be sure, but there is much more: a highlighting of the pathos and sadness and powerlessness that shoots through hip-hop is presented with an acute sense of theatrical form and its intersection with musical structure.

Lucy Railton and Russell Haswell wrapped up Saturday night with a performance resulting from a recent residency in the deep north of Norway, near the Russian border. A film of Northern landscapes is projected, shuddering noise and deep cello bowings are produced ... but the whole never seems to coalesce or disintegrate in quite the right way. Individual sounds and passages have their moments – both artists are obviously sensitive and capable in their respective sound-worlds – but the film feels decorative and there is a whiff of a macho pose about the noise that feels regressive. 'Loud' can be fantastic as a parameter, but to what end here?

On Sunday afternoon, composer/pianists Else Olsen S. and Christian Wolff led us through a

'Concert Circus', a three-hour marathon of classics from the (mostly) American experimental compositional canon (Christian Wolff, Pauline Oliveros, John Cage, Earle Browne and Cornelius Cardew featured) which closed the festival. While this is well-travelled territory, the ensemble's presentation and performance was remarkably sensitive, disciplined and effective.

The premiere of Christian Wolff's *Brooklyn* (2015) was an excellent representation of his recent work that synthesises the development of his *Exercises* (1973–present) series with the flexible approach to notation that is a current hallmark of his music. His music doesn't shock (did it ever? was it ever meant to?), but it is music composition in its purest and oldest sense, addressing issues of material, structure, idiosyncrasy and invention.

The easy-going atmosphere during this last afternoon derived perhaps from final-day festival exhaustion, or perhaps from the sudden influx of a new audience: the festival issued an invitation

to 'bring your kids', and the little ones came out in force, by the dozens, and rose to the occasion. (It was my two-year old son's first-ever concert – a Christian Wolff premiere!) A charming, popcorn-popping presentation of Oliveros's *Dissolving your ear plugs* (2006) performed simultaneously with Else Olsen S.'s own lovely *Lotto* (2010) was a particularly special moment.

And then it was all over. And what did we learn? How can we respond to Christian Wolff's challenge at this point in the evolution of experimental and contemporary music? What is the way forward in the face of all these diverse aesthetic strategies? Borealis seems to posit a radical embrace of this variety: a rejection of cheap divisions and distracting, small-bore arguments in favour of an active engagement with contradictory and multifaceted musical approaches. What shall we do? Stay interesting, stay productive, stay awake.

Travis Just