

and pianist Joseph Houston begun to play Wolff's indeterminate classic *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (1964) than I was reminded of John Cage:

One day when the windows were open, Christian Wolff played one of his pieces at the piano. Sounds of traffic, boat horns ... were more easily heard than the piano sounds themselves. Afterward, someone asked Christian Wolff to play the piece again with the windows closed. Christian Wolff said ... it wasn't really necessary, since the sounds of the environment were in no sense an interruption of those of the music.

Although that story has been part of the experimental music gospel since the 1950s, when Cage first used it in his *Indeterminacy* collection, there is remarkably little music in which the sounds of the environment are not interruptions. *For 1, 2 or 3 People* is such a piece because its score does not delineate a series of musical events but instead represents a field of potential sound-making activities. Like all the music Wolff wrote between 1956 and 1968, *For 1, 2 or 3 People* proposes a new relationship between notation, performance and sound: what we hear is never more than a part of all the possible sounds that the interaction of musicians and score might yield. In a packed Café Oto on 3 May, the apparently arbitrary nature of these resultant sounds was perfectly complemented by the local environment – traffic, fridges, people, doors – and the beautifully understated performance enabled us to listen to them all. They did their work, and we heard it, as best we could.

But the main event was a new Wolff piece, commissioned by Orzabayeva and Houston. *Wade in the Water* is a violin and piano duo, ostensibly much more straightforward than *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, yet, for me at least, far harder to understand. Initially the juxtaposition between the two pieces seemed helpful. In *For 1, 2 or 3 People* one listens to a series of individual sounds and quickly hears that although the two players are coordinating with one another to produce the sounds there is no significant aural relationship between them. In *Wade in the Water* the single events have become phrases, periods of continuous musical action usually characterised by some recurrent feature – a rhythm, octave unisons, contrary motion – and linear relationships between phrases again seem not to be important.

So why, if the music now sounds much more like 'music', is it hard to understand? Perhaps it has something to do with that very 'music'-ness. If Kammer Klang had provided a printed programme I didn't see it, and Orzabayeva and Houston didn't offer any sort of verbal

introduction. But what could they have said? Of *For 1, 2 or 3 People* there is lots to say about the score, but very little that would actually add to what can be heard in the music. The same seemed to be true of *Wade in the Water*: I heard what happened, I was delighted by the unshowy assurance of the performance, and I was bemused by the profligate way in which Wolff invented and then discarded one beguiling duo sonority after another.

Later, intrigued by the title, I did some research. Wolff has been using folk melodies to make his music since the 1970s and the new work is based on the Negro spiritual 'Wade in the water'. Like most of the tunes Wolff chooses, it has political significance, in this case strong connections to the Underground Railroad, the network of sympathisers who helped African-Americans flee slavery. 'Wade in the water/Wade in the water, children/Wade in the water/God's gonna trouble the water': it's a song which trusts in redemption, that God will part the sea to let the Israelites through, 'the children that Moses led'.

Would it have helped if I had known that before I heard Wolff's new piece? Perhaps not, because there is nothing in Wolff's music that draws attention to its source material; indeed, the fragmentary succession of events in *Wade in the Water* is at odds with the determination of 'Wade in the water'. And perhaps that's where the difference lies: there is nothing of significance beneath the surface of *For 1, 2 or 3 People* and so the sounds can be themselves; the 'music'-ness of *Wade in the Water*, even in as unrheterical a performance as this perfectly realised premiere, suggests that there might be more to discover, but resolutely refuses to reveal what that is.

Christopher Fox

Philip Venables *4.48 Psychosis*, Royal Opera House at Lyric Hammersmith, London; **Liza Lim** *Tree of Codes*, Musikfabrik, Cologne Opera, Cologne

As the first Doctoral Composer-in-Residence of the Royal Opera House and Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Philip Venables has – some might say bravely – chosen to adapt *4.48 Psychosis*, the last play by the late British playwright Sarah Kane. Brave for several reasons. Kane's work is renowned for its naked, sometimes brutal, expression and themes, and the nihilism and violence of her plays have caused critical uproar in the past. Moreover, her estate has until now been understandably protective

of her legacy; Venables's opera, premiered in May, is the first adaptation they have permitted, and came with instructions to remain as true as possible to the text.

Venables has certainly done that, making only very minor cuts to Kane's 35-page script, and keeping the rest unchanged. Theatrically this is a smart move. Kane's blistering, autobiographically informed account of the descent through depression and psychosis ultimately to suicide is leavened by the wit and fierce humanity of her words. Without them, the play would just be an empty howl.

However, although Kane's script makes for a short play, it is a long libretto. It is also a difficult one: Kane provides no cast list and no directions (apart from the occasional 'silence'), and none of the lines is assigned to any particular character. It is, therefore, an extremely open work. In previous works such as *The Revenge of Miguel Cotto* (2012), with the poet Steven J. Fowler, his settings of Simon Howard's poetry (*numbers 76–80* and *numbers 91–95*, both 2011), and his two previous operas, *Unleashed*, 2012, and *The Schmirz*, 2013, Venables has shown himself to be a remarkable composer for words. It is therefore little surprise to see him tackle the challenges of 4.48 *Psychosis* in several imaginative ways, while remaining entirely respectful of the text itself.

As with most productions of the play, Venables has divided the text between multiple voices; in this case, six singers. They aren't equal parts, however: Gweneth-Ann Rand is clearly the lead, and in general the other five represent different facets of the main character (or voices in her head). All six are dressed in the same loose, dull grey clothes, and adopt similar positions around the stage. Kane's text includes four passages of dialogue that may be read as wholly internal, or as taking place with a psychiatrist; in the opera they are presented as external. The doctor (an excellent Lucy Schauer) even has her own, brief, aria – an isolated moment that provides some relief to the intense single-character focus. Again, this is in Kane's text but required an interpretive decision to bring it out.

More significant is Venables's use of a range of musical styles and idioms to articulate the different modes of address (interior monologue, dialogue, direct address, etc.) that Kane's play seems to contain; when read it is still, unmistakably, a drama. Here Venables proved himself the ideal composer, his score jumping easily from robotic minimalism to waiting room muzak to Purcellian lament, each change giving further shape to the play's drama. Spliced together

with hard edits, they gave a strong narrative shape to a script often described as fluid. Nor were his stylistic choices pure caprice: the Dido-esque *passacaglia* of 'Find me / free me / from this / corrosive doubt / futile despair', a strikingly beautiful moment, given to Clare Presland, foreshadows the play's own slide into Elizabethan sermonising later on. Some compositional decisions – projecting lines on the back of the stage, for example – were also made to help get through the amount of text. The best moments were the scenes with the doctor. Here, Kane's pitch-black humour is essential, and timing is everything. Brilliantly, Venables silences all the voices at this point, leaving the projected text to be ventriloquised by two percussionists.

Not everything was a success. Having all six bodies on stage all the time obscured the contour of Kane's alternations between mental chaos and single-voiced clarity; the parts for Jennifer Davis, Susanna Hurrell and Emily Edmonds (apart from one passage of really nasty, over-the-shoulder malevolence) were mostly unmemorable. And something really should have been worked out for everyone on stage to do during the sections when the percussion took up the text. Nevertheless, I cannot recall having been as powerfully moved by an opera as this, much of it watched with my hand clasped over my mouth. Kane's play was the star, but Venables's opera did it justice.

Whereas Venables has composed a sort of musicalised theatre, in which the music is frequently allowed to do just enough to convey the text, Liza Lim's fourth opera, *Tree of Codes*, premiered at Cologne Opera in April, is more like theatricalised music. It is based upon Jonathan Safran Foer's 2010 novel of the same title. That itself is based on *The Street of Crocodiles*, a collection of short stories by the pre-war Polish author Bruno Schulz. Having herself written a piece based on *The Street of Crocodiles* in 1995, it was natural that Lim should turn to Safran Foer's book.

Written for Cologne-based ensemble Musikfabrik, with whom Lim has worked closely in recent years (an earlier outcome being 2011's *Tongue of the Invisible*), the full title of Lim's new work is *Tree of Codes: 'cut-outs in time', an opera*. In Safran Foer's book die-cutting is used to remove words from the text and open holes through which parts of the pages beneath can be seen. Lim's opera develops this conceit into a world full of holes that enable passage between states and realities, and the creation of hybrid forms in between. Just as Safran Foer's book is

as much sculpture as fiction, as much one author's text as another's, so Lim's piece is as much music as theatre.

The stage is populated by beings who are part human and part bird, plant or insect. Dressed in white coats and personal protective equipment, the members of Musikfabrik circulate among tables and workstations on which sit strange objects – a giant bird's head; a mask made up of half a dozen faces; unfamiliar-looking musical instruments. A tramp appears to be conducting. The brilliantly versatile clarinetist Carl Rosman, playing the part of the Mutant Bird, performs as both singer and instrumentalist. The brass players play with double-belled instruments, and the ensemble includes a Stroh viola, a visual-aural hybrid of brass and strings.

Lim's libretto (with dramaturgy by Claire de Ribaupierre) combines elements from both Safran Foer and Schulz with extracts from Goethe and Foucault. It tells of the psychological transformation of a son into his father, as well as of realms between life and death, and between human, animal and vegetable. The Father (a silent part played by Yael Rion) is a scientist, obsessed with birds and creating mutant forms of them. He is already dead but, unbeknownst to him, the laboratory workers have turned time back to give him one last day, during which the Son (Christian Miedl) contends with his obscure, almost mystical legacy. Meanwhile, a storm has vivified a hybrid tree-human (Anne Delahaye), who seduces first the Son and then the Father, and later transmutes into the laboratory worker, Adela (Emily Hindrichs), who created her. When she offers the Father the bird's head mask, he accepts it willingly, but it kills him. At the end, it is the Son himself who must wear it.

Many of the themes – masks, anthropomorphic transformations, instruments as proxies for the voice/prosthetics for the body – have been developed in Lim's work over the last decade or so. However, *Tree of Codes* not only brings these together in a fantastical piece of storytelling, but also draws out new depths and dimensions. The score contains some of her most lyrical work: Adela's fairytale retelling of the Father's bird-obsession; the Father's funeral procession; the closing a cappella chorus, sung by all 17 instrumentalists. A radiance that is usually just beneath her music's busy surface has been set free. Everything seems to grow out of itself, like buds within flower buds. In comparison to Venables's stark, one-directional arrow, Lim offers an arborescent profusion of images and sensation. Yet despite the sensory overload,

one's lasting impression of *Tree of Codes* is of a coherence that gradually emerges and is, ultimately, sustained over 90 complex, multi-layered minutes.

The brilliance of Lim's music was matched in the costumes, scenography and even lighting, led by Massimo Furlan's design. (Only a series of video projections on the back wall seemed to add little.) Among the particularly notable contributions were Julie Monot's masks, especially her disconcerting many-faced latex construction worn by the Son as he grapples with the psychological legacy of his father. Rion's non-vocal performance as the Father, too: an actor of extraordinary appearance, perfectly cast, he delivered a risk-filled, highly exposing performance with absolute commitment. Musikfabrik, who have become specialists in contemporary music theatre, excelled not only as players, but also singers, actors and even stagehands; Marco Blaauw (trumpet), Axel Porath (Stroh viola), Lorelei Dowling (bassoon) and Dirk Rothbrust (percussion) delivered some of the most striking solo passages.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Borealis Festival, Bergen

It wouldn't be the worst idea if Anthony Braxton's *Composition No. 58* were used to kick off every music festival. In any event, it's hard to think of a fanfare more fitting for the common fan, whether of classical, jazz or experimental rock. It could, for example, quite easily be followed by a piece of Mauricio Kagel's instrumental theatre or a parade by the Sun Ra Arkestra or the precisely played experimental excursions of the Brooklyn avant-rock outfit Zs.

Braxton's magnificently sinuous marching band music opened the eleventh Borealis Festival (running 9–13 March 2016), played by the Sjøforsvarets musikkorps brass band with fantastic precision. As soon as it ended, before the sound of the military horns could decay in the raw, resonant room, car horns could be heard outside and a garage door was loudly opened to reveal four minivans with their lights on, looking as if they were about to run us over. It turned out to be members of the New York composer/performer collective Ensemble Pamplemousse performing *Motet for 4 Car Horns* (2006) by ensemble member David Broome, the players positioned, a bit menacingly, in the driveway with the composer conducting.