

Festive preparations

Occupy the Pianos promises a plethora of modern and contemporary piano music when it returns to London this September. *Graham Lock* introduces the festival's adventurous, playful and though-provoking programme

‘Just changing the type of screw you use can alter the sound completely,’ says Rolf Hind, a hint of anticipation in his voice. He’s talking about preparing the piano for John Cage’s classic *Sonatas and Interludes*, which he’ll be playing at the forthcoming Occupy the Pianos festival. ‘Half the fun for the performer is the preparation, trying out different sounds,’ says Hind. ‘The prepared piano is really very fragile; its sounds can be so delicate.’

Prepared pianos provide a major strand in this year’s festival at St John’s Smith Square in London, which cherry-picks from the last 100 years of cutting-edge piano music. Piano duos represent another strand, with Steve Martland’s *Drill* and Rebecca Saunders’ *Choler*, providing raw, visceral excitement, alongside more playful pieces by Kurtág and Ligeti. The weekend also offers modern dance, a tribute to Nobel prize-winning poet Tomas Tranströmer, and ‘Queer Pitch’, a concert devoted to works by gay composers, with a panel discussion as to the pros and cons of this kind of programming.

Hind, one of contemporary music’s leading pianist-composers, is again curating the event and has tempted back many of the rising piano stars who helped to make last year’s inaugural festival a triumph of collaborative enterprise: Antoine François, Robin Green, Zubin Kanga, Eliza McCarthy and Siwan Rhys will all be there. McCarthy, for one, is



Pianist, composer and festival director Rolf Hind

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delighted to be back. ‘It’s great to play with other pianists,’ she says, ‘yet it happens so rarely.’ This year, she adds, ‘there’s even more happening, like Adam Tandler coming over from the States’. Tandler, who’s an acclaimed author (try his blog www.dissonantstates.com) as well as an outstanding young pianist, is one of

the festival’s guest artists, as are mezzo-soprano Loré Lixenberg, who’ll be singing *Pierrot Lunaire*, and dancer/choreographer Jonathan Goddard.

The prepared piano first appears in the opening concert, part of the extraordinary line-up of piano (four hands), prepared piano, honky-tonk and celesta for Karl Aage

FESTIVAL PREVIEW



Festival guest artist
Adam Tendler

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Motion and Five Encores to Dynamic Motion – extremely virtuosic early studies that Tendler describes as ‘still jaw-dropping, hair-raising and far-reaching’. The recital’s main item is Aaron Copland’s *Piano Fantasy*, ‘the apotheosis of his interest in serialist practices’, according to Tendler, who admits that initially ‘I never knew how to feel about it’. Now he believes it’s a masterpiece, ‘subtle and emotionally intense, exploring psychological territory that few works even dare to approach’. He sees it as intensely personal, ‘a confession,

alternately furious, tender, melancholic’. Towards the end, ‘the tonality becomes hazy, the melodic content is blurred – everything turns inward’. These passages, he suggests, ‘seem to anticipate and mirror the sonorities and dynamics of Morton Feldman’.

Coincidentally, Tendler’s other festival appearance will be performing Feldman’s last work for solo piano, the beautiful and serene *Palais de Mari*, in a concert shared with Eliza McCarthy and John Adams’ *Phrygian Gates*. It’s a favourite piece of hers, not least because when she played it for Adams six years ago at the Guildhall, she famously reduced him to tears. ‘He gave a talk beforehand and said he didn’t like it anymore, he thought it was naive. I played it right after that, and at the end he came up and gave me a big hug. He had tears in his eyes and he told me he liked it again! So now I feel like it’s my piece.’

IF FELDMAN AND ADAMS represent alternative versions of a minimalist music, Julius Eastman’s *Gay Guerrilla*, centre-piece of the Queer Pitch concert, is something else again – a propulsive 30-minute dance for four pianos, during which a Lutheran hymn gradually rises from the overlapping textures. Eastman, as a gay African American, faced a double whammy of prejudice, which doubtless contributed to

his tragic death in 1990: he was homeless, destitute and only 50 years old. Though long neglected, his music – and his innovatory role in the development of minimalism – is now being reassessed. ‘He’s not at the simple end of minimalism, like early Steve Reich,’ says Hind, ‘nor at the smooth end, where John Adams is. His music has its own character, with an improvisatory feel and a hint of disco mixed in with high seriousness, even religious fervour. You could almost call it camp.’

The Queer Pitch concert will also encompass pieces by Michael Finnissy, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros and Claude Vivier, plus David Del Tredici’s Lewis Carroll-inspired *Virtuoso Alice*. ‘It’s very pseudo-Liszt or Rachmaninov, incredibly flamboyant,’ says McCarthy, who’ll be playing it. ‘I describe it as like swimming through chocolate mousse.’ This gooey neo-Romanticism is surely an odd choice for a pianist who gave up the standard repertoire to explore new music? ‘No, it’ll be fun to play,’ she insists. ‘It’ll be nice to hark back to my training and show off all those virtuoso flourishes I used to practise.’

Well-prepared pianos *and* well-prepared pianists! This festival has it all.

Occupy the Pianos takes place at St John’s Smith Square, London, 11 to 13 September

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Rasmussen’s *Genklang (Echo)*. The honky-tonk is also ‘prepared’ in the sense that it’s deliberately mistuned to approximate the discordant jangling of an old bar-room upright. McCarthy will be honky-tonking on the night: ‘I’ve played plenty of terrible pianos,’ she laughs, ‘but they haven’t been honky-tonk on purpose. This will be fun!’ Hind agrees, noting that *Genklang* ‘really messes with established pieces by Mozart and Mahler, which get distorted as they’re echoed through stranger and stranger sounds – like a hall-of-mirrors effect.’

Hind also employs ‘lots of preparations’ for his own *Das Unenthüllte (The Unrevealed)*, a piano/violin duo that, with *Pierrot Lunaire*, closes the festival with an evening of ‘nightmarish cabaret’. Inspired by Theodore Roszak’s conspiracy thriller *Flicker*, about a religious cult trying to hasten the apocalypse, *Das (or Die)*, it can be either singular or plural) *Unenthüllte* comprises a spine-tingling array of creepy timbres that Hind characterises as ‘darkly cartoonish’, and then clarifies as ‘disturbing, exaggerated, expressionistic. George Grosz rather than *The Simpsons*.’

Adam Tendler’s solo recital takes in excerpts from another Cage work for prepared piano, the fiendishly difficult 34’46.776 (composed for David Tudor). It also includes two Henry Cowell pieces for string piano, plus his aptly-titled *Dynamic*