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Louth Contemporary Music Society: Echoes review – Astonishing musicianship brings Bernhard Lang’s iridescent microtonal worlds to life

Alph Guitar Quartet are a highlight of this year’s Dundalk festival



Echoes: the astonishing Alph Guitar Quartet. Photograph: Andreas Brehmer

Michael Dervan

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Louth Contemporary Music Society: Echoes

Various venues, Dundalk

★★★★☆

What comes to mind when you think of echoes? The sound of your reverberating across a valley? The lingering, soupy effect of any loud music fading in a cathedral? The repetitions of minimalism? Acts of homage, maybe Ravel’s piano pieces “in the manner of” Borodin and Chabrier? Schumann referencing Chopin in his Carnival? The large canon of pieces reviving or reworking the styles of earlier periods?

The main focus of [Louth Contemporary Music Society’s](#) Echoes festival is the work of the Austrian composer [Bernhard Lang](#) (born 1957), who studied philosophy and literature as well as music, has worked as an improviser and jazz-band arranger, and has a special interest in electronics and microtonal music.

He is a perfect fit for the festival’s theme. His Differenz/Wiederholung (Difference/Repetition) series was prompted by an interest in looping and the work of turntable artists. The eighth work in the series, now more than 20 years old, is for “orchestral loops” and two turntable soloists. “I found the idea of erratic, asymmetrical loops simply fascinating,” he wrote, “especially those which emerged when the needle jumped, or the jittering of a broken CD player.”

The Dundalk festival has no orchestra, so the concerts feature three works on a much smaller scale. The first, Game 8-4-8 “Silver Light”, a piece for which there is no score, just individual parts, is for amplified guitar quartet, the altogether astonishing [Alph Guitar Quartet](#). The composer references the mobiles of the Polish composer Roman Haubenstock-Ramati and the American composer Christian Wolff, whose music has been described as “an open invitation all the time”.

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For Silver Light, think of rules that produce unpredictable outcomes. But think of those outcomes as being a microtonal fantasy world in which individual notes and unusual timbres can brush off each other to produce tensions and shadings that sound entirely new.

The music has something of the fascination of a distorting mirror, or perhaps the reflections from a pile of shards from a distorting mirror. Nothing is quite what it seems to be.



Echoes: Daisy Press. Photograph: Mark Grochowski

The Cold Trip, Part 1, is a “meta-composition” based on Schubert’s song cycle Winterreise. Or, rather, one based on the composer’s lingering memories of Winterreise.

This approach echoes the Argentinian composer Mauricio Kagel’s 1982 score for Un Chien Andalou, the surreal film, from 1928, by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. At a lecture he gave in Dublin, Kagel explained that he binge-watched the film more than a dozen times and then, without referencing it any further, wrote his music for it.

The Cold Trip, Part 1, is obsessive and repetitive yet also highly selective, as if it’s the work of someone who is having difficulty exorcising earworms that came from Schubert. The singer in this work, the American soprano [Daisy Press](#), moves freely between sometimes sensational acrobatics and deeply penetrating plaintiveness.



Echoes: Daan Vandewalle performing at St Nicholas’s Church, in Dundalk. Photograph: Tim Shearwood

Lang’s [Monadewalle XXXVI](#), inspired by Chopin’s 12 Etudes, Op 10, were written for the Belgian pianist [Daan Vandewalle](#), whose finger fluency might be compared to a roadrunner running along at cartoon speed.

These pieces have been reworked before, most notably in the 53 studies by Leopold Godowsky, though Godowsky, one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century, doesn’t ever go remotely near the loops of Lang’s remix. Even with Vandewalle’s wizardry, the piece seems somehow black and white after the iridescent microtonal worlds of the other two works.



Echoes: Chamber Choir Ireland. Photograph: Ruth Medtjer

The highlight of the rest of the festival comes from the Swiss-born Austrian composer Beat Furrer (born 1954). Enigmas, written for youth choir and splendidly performed by [Chamber Choir Ireland](#) under Nils Schweckendiek, sets texts by Leonardo da Vinci using avant-garde techniques with more than a smattering of romanticism.

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