

## ARTS

# The house that Rach built

Fast cars, minimalist design and en suite bathrooms:  
Richard Bratby visits the composer's starkly modern Swiss home

The train from Zurich to Lucerne tips you out right by the lakeside, practically on the steamboat piers. A white paddle-steamer takes you out of the city, past leafy slopes and expensive-looking mansions. Tribschen, where Wagner wrote the 'Siegfried Idyll', slides away to the right as you head out across the main arm of the lake. At the foot of Mount Rigi, shortly before the steamer makes its whistle-stop at the lakeside village of Hertenstein, is a promontory where – if the sun is coming from the west – a yellow-coloured cube shines among the trees. This is the house that Sergei Rachmaninoff built between 1931 and 1934: Villa Senar, his last attempt to make a home outside Russia in Europe.

It isn't what you expect; at least, not if your idea of Rachmaninoff is shaped by the lushness of his music. You approach Villa Senar (the name comes from the first two letters of his and his wife Natalia's names and the r of Rachmaninoff) along a curving driveway through a miniature arboretum. Every tree was chosen and placed by the composer; a lilac hangs over the path and if you know Rachmaninoff's songs, that'll prompt a smile of recognition. But the house at the end of this romantic vista is starkly modernist: a low, flat-roofed assemblage of right angles and plate glass whose ochre walls can't disguise the influence of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier. In fact, it was designed by local architects, but the specification was Rachmaninoff's, right down to the sole ornament – the initials SR in slim deco lettering on the front door. Other Tsarist emigrés recreated little Petersburgs of velvet plush and bubbling samovars. Rachmaninoff – a man routinely described as 'a ghost' in his own lifetime – built himself a sleek new machine for living.

Perhaps it shouldn't come as such a jolt. Since his death (1943, in Beverly Hills) we've had eight decades to get past the outdated critical orthodoxy – expressed most notoriously in the 1954 *Grove's Dictionary of Music* – that 'he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all'. Rachmaninoff's response to his time is audible to anyone

with ears to hear. Listen to the opening of the Piano Concerto No. 3, composed in 1909 when he was still the squire of a country estate south of Moscow. The orchestra is soft and dark, the piano's melody rolls endlessly away to the horizon. Then try 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini', the first work he wrote entirely at Villa Senar in the summer of 1934. By now his career was an unending cycle of concert tours by sleeper-train and liner. The 'Rhapsody' is brusque, hard-edged: assembled from fleeting episodes, glimpsed and left behind at often breathless speed. It's music of clean lines and glinting chrome.

It turns out that Rachmaninoff was always a bit of a speed demon. A new book by Fiona Maddocks, *Goodbye Russia: Rachmaninoff in Exile* digs beneath his public persona as the last of the Romantic keyboard lions, detailing his enthusiasm for Art Tatum and American automobiles (Packards seem to have been a particular favourite). It's a myth that he travelled with his own piano, but he regu-

*After concerts in Paris he would  
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speed records back to Lucerne*

larly shipped his latest car across the Atlantic, and after concerts in Paris he'd oust his chauffeur and set speed records on the road down to Switzerland. The boathouse at Villa Senar housed a high-powered motor launch, in which he would race the lake steamers. His London agent Robert Ibbs had a go at the wheel and nearly drowned them both. 'Don't say anything to Natalia,' said Rachmaninoff after a capsizing was narrowly averted. 'She won't let me go boating any more.'

Composer anniversaries are a gift to unimaginative concert planners, but they have their uses: and in this double anniversary year (150 years since his birth, and 80 since his death) it does feel like our perception of Rachmaninoff is evolving. There's been an overdue reckoning with his time in exile, and with the disarming truth that the composer of the Piano Concerto No. 2 was also recognisably a man of our own

time, with a taste for fast cars, minimalist design and en suite bathrooms. It's no bad thing. Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3 was completed at Villa Senar in 1936: a glowing, bittersweet musical memoir that somehow fuses jazz-age ebullience with the melancholy (faded, but still potent) of a lost Russia. Fifteen years ago it was difficult to find a conductor who wanted to perform it. Now you can take your pick: Rattle, Jurowski, Hindoyan, Nelsons, Wilson – they're all doing the Third.

In Lucerne, where the city's Festival has been building to the anniversary year for a while now, Riccardo Chailly conducted the symphony with the Festival's own super-orchestra shortly before Covid. You sense that after decades under the spell of the other genius-in-residence (the one at Tribschen) both Festival and city have finally taken ownership of the composer across the water. There's an exhibition, *Rachmaninoff in Luzern*, at the city's Hans Erni Museum. 'Composed in Hertenstein,' noted the programme book, proudly, when pianist Beatrice Rana, conductor Andres Orozco-Estrada and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra performed this year's homage: a glistening, thrillingly physical account of the 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini', played with the accelerator pressed very much to the floor.

A homecoming? Yes, and no: this music belongs here. Fiona Maddocks points out that Rachmaninoff was in the audience at the opening concert of the very first Lucerne Festival in August 1938. Framed on the wall at Villa Senar is a poster for another Lucerne Festival concert on 11 August 1939, this time with Rachmaninoff as soloist.

A few days later, as war loomed, he left Villa Senar – and Europe – forever. The Swiss Army requisitioned his speedboat and the house eventually went to his grandson Alexandre, who painted it white and died in 2012, leaving a nightmarish legal mess. At one point it was reported that Vladimir Putin wanted to buy the villa for Russia.

'That was mostly a rumour,' says Andrea Loetscher, managing and artistic director of the Serge Rachmaninoff Foundation,



*Sergei Rachmaninoff at the Steinway piano that you can still see – and if you ask politely, play – in the Villa Senar, built to his specifications between 1931-34*

which now runs Villa Senar. In one respect, Lucerne certainly has taken ownership: the Canton of Lucerne bought the house last year and registered it as a historic monument. It's been open to the public since April, and the foundation is beginning the delicate work of conserving its contents while trying, as far as is practical, to preserve its aura – the sense that Rachmaninoff has only just left.

The plan is to host concerts, talks and masterclasses with small audiences in the villa's music room; to try and impart something of the spirit of the place and bring the man to a new generation. It's a noble ambition, and Rachmaninoff's music is so beloved – his presence at Villa Senar still so potent – that it's possible to believe the plan might succeed. Yuja Wang, Lukas Geniusas and Daniil Trifonov have already participated.

Meanwhile you can see Rachmaninoff's piles of sheet music, his monogrammed bath

towels, his desktop calculating machine (he was always an early-adopter) and his framed photographs of friends from the world he lost – Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Chaliapin – as well as the life he remade in exile. Stein-

*At one point it was reported  
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way & Sons sent him a grand piano for his 60th birthday: it's still here, and in good condition. Ask politely and you might even get to play a chord.

And scattered throughout the chic, airy rooms are personal objects that soften the cubist austerity and hint at a private man that his vast global public rarely saw. Stravinsky called Rachmaninoff 'a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl', and his official portraits rarely

show a smile. But on his composing desk – turned so that only he could see them – there are different photos, unfamiliar ones. Rachmaninoff holding a grandson and a teddy bear, pulling a funny face for the little boy; Sergei and Natalia together, looking tired, but each with an expression of unforced warmth. The atmosphere of a place is a fragile thing, but for a few years in the 1930s it seems that the exiled master really did find some sort of peace among his trees and his loved ones on the shores of Lake Lucerne. 'These are not exhibits,' says Loetscher. 'This is not a museum. We want to welcome people into Rachmaninoff's home.'

*The 2023 Lucerne Festival runs until 10 September. Rachmaninoff in Luzern is at the Hans Erni Museum until 14 January 2024. Villa Senar is open for special events all year round.*

## Theatre

## Germ of an idea

Lloyd Evans

**Dr Semmelweis**

Harold Pinter Theatre, until 7 October

**Dumbledore is So Gay**

Southwark Playhouse, until 23 September

Bleach and germs are the central themes of *Dr Semmelweis*, written by Mark Rylance and Stephen Brown. The opening scene, set in the 1860s, presents the harmless old doctor as a charming oddball who adores playing chess with his happy, clever wife. This is code: Semmelweis is an intellectual and a feminist whom it's safe to like.

We flip back to 1837 and meet Semmelweis as a student at a Viennese maternity hospital where the male doctors kill three times as many patients as the female nurses. How come? Well, the males sport filthy aprons spattered with their victims' blood while the nurses wear freshly laundered habits. So the high mortality rate is caused by germs. And germs can be treated with bleach.

Of course the audience knows this already but it takes 80 long minutes for the characters to catch up with 19th-century science. En route, the show delivers a series of distractions and delaying mechanisms which clutter

*Mark Rylance dodders and potters about like a forgetful janitor trying to find his way to the broom cupboard*

the stage and try to disguise the script's dramatic inertia and psychological blandness.

In one overloaded scene, a mime artist conducts an autopsy while a handful of clueless doctors pore over his every move. Meanwhile a quartet of string players grind out some Schubert while a troupe of ballerinas in diaphanous cladding mimic the horrors of childbirth through the medium of expressive dance.

At the same time, a lot of beds are being trundled around with their mattresses occupied by doomed mothers screaming blue murder as they give birth to dead babies. There's so much to watch here and so little to care about.

The surfeit of effects makes the production look like the graduation show at a drama school where the students display their skills in acting, mime, dance, musicianship and public recital. Virtually everything in Tom Morris's production lacks originality. A ballet display is illuminated in blue and gold – the lazy choice of every half-asleep designer.

The only interesting character, apart from Semmelweis, is a wise auld Oirish midwife who knows the darkest secrets of the hospital

but who dares not breathe a word to anyone. The stage is fitted with a twirling mechanism ('a revolve' as it's known), which is used to lend an air of dynamism to static, wordy scenes. Sadly, the 'revolve' always seems to emphasise the vice it seeks to conceal.

The crowning platitude is the presence of Rylance in the title role. He bumbles, frowns, hesitates, backtracks, stammers and stutters through his lines, and generally dodders and potters about like a forgetful janitor trying to find his way to the broom cupboard. Rylance is great on stage but his greatness never varies. It seems a shame to criticise this well-intentioned and attractive-looking history lesson but seriously, lads? Give us a show, not an episode of *Play School*.

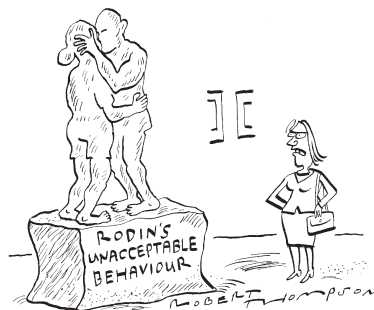
*Dumbledore Is So Gay* is a propaganda piece aimed at homophobes (even though they form a tiny fraction of the play-going public). The show follows the tribulations of Jack, a homosexual, who grew up in a bigoted London suburb. He hated hearing the word 'gay' used as a slur in the playground and he bridled at the rhetoric of his subnormal parents who were so dim they couldn't differentiate 'pronouns' from 'proteins'.

In his neighbourhood, apparently, it was normal for the homes of suspected queens to be attacked with missiles. When Jack found a soul mate, Ollie, they kept their affair hidden in case Ollie's gay-bashing brother beat them both to death. The levels of prejudice appear to belong to the 1950s but the play is set in 2012. Were things really this bad a decade ago? Jack took refuge in London's gay scene but he quickly learned that spiked drinks and unwanted assaults on the dance floor were commonplace.

At every turn, he and Ollie suffered abuse and humiliation. Their female friends fared no better. A straight girl, Gemma, rejected marriage because she considered it a form of captivity. 'Having his babies and feeding him till he dies,' was her summary of life as a wife and mother. Who on earth taught her to speak fluent doormat like that?

Part of the blame lies with their teachers who encouraged them to believe that 'the most important thing is who you are'. Like virtually every school initiative, the gender studies programme isn't intended to expand the horizons of the pupil but to lighten the workload of the staff.

Teaching children to study 'who you



are' reduces the lesson to a set of subjective impressions which, of course, can never be incorrect. All members of every class become star pupils. And there's no homework to mark which leaves extra time for the teachers to study think-pieces in the *Guardian* about the war on learning.

## Exhibitions

## Master of all trades

Claudia Massie

**Grayson Perry: Smash Hits; When the Apple Ripens: Peter Howson at 65, a Retrospective; Andrew Cranston: Never a Joiner; Jesse Jones: The Tower**

Various venues, Edinburgh

The busiest show in Edinburgh must be *Grayson Perry: Smash Hits* which, a month into its run, still has people queuing at 10 a.m. His original title, *National Treasure*, was rejected because 'national' is a politically loaded term in Scotland. But Perry's lens is resolutely fixed on England and Englishness. Seen from a Scottish perspective, this riot of rococo folkishness is familiar and exotic.

The exuberant exhibition, which is curated by the National Galleries of Scotland but showing at the Royal Scottish Academy

*Grayson Perry is the greatest artist chronicler of our times, with an omnificent style that's all substance*

and ends on 12 November, slaps the viewer around the face with its huge narrative tapestries, prints and pots. It gallops thematically through four decades, weaving Perry's own origin tale with the story of England: high and low, rich and poor, ancient and modern. In his beautiful, queasy, messed-up country, Richard Dadd and William Hogarth are reborn to share tales of tax evaders, divine teddy bears and hollow social-media warriors. The colour etching, 'Our Town' (2022), maps the 'emotional geography' of modern England, sketching a dispiriting fantasy land where drinkers choose between 'The Selfie and Socialist' or 'Style over Substance' pubs before retreating to their homes in 'Extremis', 'Apathy', 'Awks' or 'Identaria'. Little England sits beside a blue river called 'Smug', in which meaningless modern terms drift by: 'Mainstream Media', 'Gone Viral', 'Facepalm'. Presenting the town from the oblique, bird's-eye angle of an 18th-century map, Perry skewers a 21st-century state of mind with all-seeing grace.

Endlessly inventive and, as he puts it, forever 'learning on the job', he is a jack of all trades and a master of them all too, constantly discovering new ways to enrich his



'Sponsored by You', 2019, by Grayson Perry

ever-expanding vision of England. He's the greatest artist chronicler of our times, with an omnificent style that's all substance.

Scotland has no such chronicler. Instead we have Peter Howson, enjoying his own retrospective across three floors of the City Art Centre (until 1 October). Where the relentlessly curious Perry observes, invents, teases and pokes fun at himself and us all, Howson bludgeons with a facsimile of anguish. Famously tortured, he allows his misery to rage off the palette in a parade of interchangeable men, all massive and cross. The meme starts early with 'The Lowland Hero Spurns the Cynics' (1985), a Scott's Porridge Oats guy in a huff. Jesus, dossier, Jekyll, Hyde: they're the same man and the man is Howson. He never wears his distress lightly.

The highlight of the show is the room of war paintings from Bosnia where Howson locates a human touch, expressed in looser, more urgent painting. 'Zenica' (1994), a quick study of a man's face, could be Munch. 'Frontier' (1996) has a sunlit symbolist quality, and then you spot the corpse hanging from the tree. These works are stranger, less Howsony. In the post-Bosnia years, he spirals back into himself, pouring out contorted, chiaroscuro oils and, more recently, febrile

doodles in ink. A self-portrait stares sourly at the viewer. 'I was in a black mood,' explains Howson. No kidding.

Andrew Cranston, exhibiting at Ingleby Gallery until 16 September, paints figments of landscapes, interiors and scatterings of objects that magic up a barely sketched narrative. In contrast to Howson, thundering his chaotic vision across the canvas, Cranston gives us ambiguous, fragmentary hints. Are

*Famously tortured, Howson allows his misery to rage off the palette. He never wears his distress lightly*

those jars of frogspawn lined up on the shelf, behind the circle of empty chairs, in 'Classroom' (2023)? Why? There are no gallery notes to tell you. Make up your own mind.

In 'Why Have you Stopped Here?' (2023), daubs of distemper pixelate the tiles of a fishpond beneath hovering carp and goldfish. It's a shimmering memory of the fish that once welcomed visitors to the National Museum of Scotland, shot through with the hazy melancholy of a child's-eye view remembered. 'Questions of Travel' (2023) is another museum echo. A boy, seen from behind, is stand-

ing in a darkened room, staring at a model ship within an illuminated vitrine. The ship beams like a sacred relic. Cranston leaves space for us to fill in the rest of the story.

'The Tower' (2022-3), Jesse Jones's video, sound and performance piece at the Talbot Rice Gallery until 30 September, is another show that exists in a world before memory and allows us to do the imagining. It's a disconcerting space, pitch black, apart from two narrow, floor-to-ceiling screens and occasional spotlights, picking out far away objects. A hunched figure in the foreground could be a sculpture or a fellow viewer, impossible to tell for a while. Disorientating choral sounds batter the space from all sides. On the screens, mystical women keen, lament and chant. It's hard to know what's going on but the room feels fraught with ritual, threat and accusation. The programme tells us 'The Tower' is about 'the female imaginary', an exploration of medieval devotional witches. The notes are barely penetrable, unlike Grayson Perry's refreshingly frank self-written descriptions, but the work doesn't need to be spelled out. The narrative may be hazy but, like all the best art in Edinburgh this year, the atavistic sensations are very real.



*Depardieu's Maigret looks exhausted and shifts himself awkwardly like a sad old circus bear but he's also tremendously charismatic*

## Cinema

### Crimes of Paris

Deborah Ross

#### Maigret

15, Selected cities

Georges Simenon's lugubrious detective Maigret has appeared in umpteen screen adaptations and dozens of actors have played him. Now it's Gérard Depardieu's turn. Depardieu's Maigret isn't, in fact, quite how I imagined Maigret. He's bulkier than the one in my head; moves more clumsily, like a sad circus bear. And I never saw him with that nose – but then who would? Yet he may be the best so far, despite the likes of Jean Gabin, Charles Laughton, Richard Harris and Michael Gambon having had a go.

This is adapted from *Maigret and the Dead Girl* (1954) and is directed by Patrice Leconte. It is minimal and melancholic, beset by the gloominess (I don't think any light-bulb runs to more than five watts) that also has the great detective in its hold. Maigret looks exhausted and shifts himself awkwardly, like that sad old circus bear or Pavarotti in his later years. It's as if the seediness

of night-time Paris has seeped into his very bones, plus he is becoming short of breath and must give up his beloved pipe, his doctor tells him. Poor Maigret.

He has even lost his appetite so there are no lunch trips to the local bistro for soupe à l'oignon or blanquette de veau which is a pity, as the meals people eat in films are always fascinating to me, and when I read the books as a teenager the food had me spellbound. (What? No Findus crispy pancakes?) Maigret's not a modern fictional detective, thankfully, so he does not have PTSD, flash-

*Maigret does not have PTSD, flashbacks or a wife who's on his case for not getting home for dinner*

backs, or a wife who's on his case for not getting home in time for dinner. Maigret does endlessly phone Mme Maigret (Anne Loiret) to say he won't be home for dinner and she is always perfectly lovely about it.

A body drops at the outset, of course. It's that of a young woman, around 20 years old, stabbed multiple times, and left in the street. There are no witnesses. She does not carry anything that might identify her. The only clue is the label in her evening dress. The plot

will involve a ghastly, entitled couple, Jeanine and Laurent (Mélanie Bernier and Pierre Moure), Laurent's snobbish mother (Aurore Clément), and the young women who arrive in Paris from the country hoping to make it big but are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Maigret is horrified by what happens to these women, and there is a personal affinity which is never addressed directly. Maigret fans will know, but it doesn't matter if you don't. You will feel it, witness his tenderness, understand why.

It's a fairly unspectacular plot, actually, and there is no real suspense, but with Maigret, the plot is never the point. Who did what, when, is always less interesting than Maigret himself and the characters he encounters along the way. He doesn't so much solve a case as observe it while human nature reveals itself, even if he does have the odd Poirot moment: 'Madame, I see you are left-handed...' He watches. He waits. He is pensive. He is not blankly sullen, which is where so many actors go wrong.

Depardieu captures all this. He is a tremendously charismatic presence, and it's that presence we're here for, rather than the denouement, which I can barely remember. He also communicates that which isn't said. We know just by the way he takes a first

stair he's not looking forward to climbing all six flights.

Was it wise to cast Depardieu in a tale that involves sexual consent, when there are allegations of sexual misconduct against him? I don't know. I'll leave that one with you.

## Radio & podcasts

### Vampire diaries

Daisy Dunn

#### The Immortals; This Cultural Life

BBC Radio 4

*The Immortals*, which begins on Radio 4 this week, is not for the faint-hearted. While it professes to be about the human quest for longevity and the elusive 'cure' for getting older, it focuses largely upon the transferral of blood plasma from healthy young people to reluctantly ageing people, or, as anyone with good sense might put it, the desperate descent from vanity to vampirism.

I was on the verge of switching over to something more anodyne when a 46-year-old tech entrepreneur began talking about being injected with plasma from his 17-year-old son. Bryan Johnson, who sold his company to PayPal for \$800 million in 2013, does not even sound as if he is trying to shock when he explains: 'I of course have the best intentions for my son for his health and wellness, but I have never paid as close attention to what he's eating than prior to this plasma

*Silicon Valley hotshots view death as just another hurdle that might be overcome with the right investment*

phase, because that's going into my body, so he was a proxy for my own existence.'

I could not tune out at this point; nor when Johnson went on to reveal that he had given some of his own blood plasma to his elderly father. If ever there is a basis for a new Francis Ford Coppola film, I thought, here it is. Since the programme was recorded, Johnson has tweeted that he is discontinuing his own treatment, with 'no benefits detected'.

The presenter of the ten-part series, Aleks Krotoski, a technology reporter and psychologist, pre-empts her listeners' reaction at almost every turn but somehow manages to avoid sounding too squeamish. Most of the people she is concerned with are Silicon Valley hotshots who view death as just another hurdle that might be overcome with the right investment and data. Johnson is certainly not alone in turning to algorithms, 'caloric restriction' (that's dieting to you and me) and young blood in his mission 'to live a large number of tomorrows'. His annual outlay of \$2 million towards this goal arguably isn't the biggest price he pays.

The series makes for uncomfortable but compelling listening. If the discussions of early experiments on mice tissue begin to pall fairly quickly, the human stories consistently draw you back. Following conversations with the anything-is-possible billionaires, it is sobering to hear a young journalist from *New Scientist* justify to herself – and to us – her plans to undergo plasma treatment in a bid to feel less 'broken' following the birth of her twins.

A willingness to contemplate a process aimed at extending life, when desperation might more easily prompt thoughts of the reverse, feels somehow salutary. A thirst for blood perhaps needn't always be a matter of the ego.

The life well lived is the perennial theme of *This Cultural Life*. Unlike *Last Word*, Radio 4's flagship obituary programme, or *Great Lives* for that matter, its subjects are still alive and throbbing with plasma and therefore able to recount their own stories. As biographical radio programmes go, it is hard to beat for the quality of its guests and questions; host John Wilson is simply superb.

The way he won the confidence of his latest interviewee, the French-Moroccan novelist Leïla Slimani, was particularly impressive. Slimani had been describing with much candour the imprisonment of her late father, a former government minister falsely convicted of fraud, and the impact this had upon her childhood. Her desire to write, she explained, developed out of a desire for revenge. Her father was cleared of all charges six years after his death.

Slimani's determination to clear her family name and the association between it and 'prison' is understandable enough. But with some careful prompting from Wilson, she also reasoned that she was, 'in a way', grateful that her father was dead, since his death freed her to write the sort of provocative fiction for which she's now celebrated. It was fascinating to hear her express, always beautifully, her doubts over whether she could have written *Adèle*, a novel about sexual addiction, with her father's eyes still upon her.

*This Cultural Life* is rarely more interesting than in the extended minutes it devotes to its guests' early years. There's no therapising, just reflection. I was struck, for example, by filmmaker Sally Potter's cautiousness in describing her childhood as either 'happy' or 'relentlessly unhappy' in a recent episode, and by Melvyn Bragg's confession that his first memories are literally enveloped in darkness thanks to the wartime blackout blinds. His flashbacks included pieces of laundry dangling outside his Cumbrian council house each Monday like 'ghostly figures', as if to illuminate the way.

Whether an immortal could frame their life story as poetically as this remains to be seen.

## Pop

### Strange folk

Graeme Thomson

#### Lankum

The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

#### Mariza

Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

In a few days, Lankum will most likely win the 2023 Mercury Music Prize for their fourth album *False Lankum* – but don't let that put you off.

Increasingly, the Irish quartet feel like they belong to the lineage of artists who have wreaked radical and lasting change upon British and Irish folk traditions, from Davey Graham, Fairport Convention and Pentangle to Steeleye Span, the Pogues and Lau. The kind of artists who burrow deep into the forest of tradition in order to plant dynamite within the heartwood.

Appearing at the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF), Lankum played a set spilling over with invention, irreverence and attraction. Four chairs lined the front of the stage, all but obscured by a sea of exotic instruments – pump organs, pipes, acoustic guitars, accordions, a hurdy-gurdy; the kinds of instruments musicians strap themselves into and then hang on to for dear life. There was sawing and droning and whirring and creaking; at times, we might have been below deck

*At times, we might have been below deck on a ship heading for Ellis Island*

on a ship heading for Ellis Island. They also had a very big drum, which touring member John Dermody sometimes deployed with the brutal efficiency of a contract killer, at other times evoking the driving narcotic pulse of the Velvet Underground.

Lankum go long. It can take several minutes for a piece of music to emerge from the mists to gather a head of steam, before gaining the kind of momentum which isn't easily brought to heel. Several songs lasted more than ten minutes, during which once familiar landmarks in the traditional ecosystem were pulled up by the roots. They turned 'The Wild Rover' into something not so much wild as feral, a funereal, drone-scarred exercise in drama and dynamics. 'Rocky Road to Dublin' was severely traumatised, the torrential flow of words eliding into something chilling and almost ambient, all squeaks and ominous aural shadows. I found myself scribbling 'Jaws Theme' next to 'Brian Eno' next to 'Tom Waits mad parade music'.

The vocals were shared around. Radie Peat has a voice like sharpened steel; it could slice through glass without leav-

ing a mark. Her vocal on the showstopping 'Go Dig My Grave' was spectral. It is a desperate tale, and the music matched it. Shortly before the tensile drone became almost unbearable, the drums entered like an explosion and the song rose to a frenzied atmospheric climax.

Daragh Lynch has a softer touch than Peat. His lilting voice and song-based approach brought the music closer to the troubadour tradition. For Lankum aren't merely concerned with radical reinterpretation; they have original songs, too. 'The Young People' and 'Cold Old Fire' are despatches from modern Ireland's struggles with suicide, addiction, poverty and historical legacy, and they already feel like part of the canon. These are sad songs, pulled from the quotidian life, the choruses delivered in a tumble of harmony. 'We always sing, even when we're losing,' was the opening line of 'Cold Old Fire', which set alight the very lineage Lankum lean on.

There was no room for cheap sentiment. To underscore the point, Lynch made a fine fist of Cyril Tawney's bleak 'On a Monday Morning', while his brother Ian Lynch sang 'The New York Trader', which drove

*When she sang unamplified,  
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through on a murderous single note. Though the song identifies the USA in the traditional fashion as 'Amer-ee-kay', nothing about Lankum feels nostalgic or sepia-tinged. This is folk, *Peaky Blinders* style.

Portuguese singer Mariza is a global superstar of fado music, and she evidently has few qualms about living up to her billing. Every inch the diva in a sparkly silver number, her slick EIF show at the Festival Theatre featured plenty of imperious chatter. At one point she implored us all to sign up to her Instagram account so she could gain more followers than Cristiano Ronaldo.

Her inspirational pep talks might have been a little lightweight, but her voice was wrought from the hard, heavy stuff. Backed by a fine five-piece band playing accordion, acoustic guitar, Portuguese guitar, bass and drums, Mariza delivered fado-deluxe, a good deal more sleek and well-set than the sounds one might hear in the harbour bars of Lisbon, incorporating elements of Brazilian jazz, soul, blues and gospel.

Yet when she placed the microphone in her lap to sing unamplified, the raw sorrow at the heart of the music was there for all to hear. Presented as a tribute to the original Queen of Fado, Amalia Rodrigues, 'Lagrima' was particularly affecting. Mariza's may be a more serene interrogation of traditional music than the one Lankum are currently undertaking, but it is no less assured.

## Enigma variations

Angus Colwell

### Aphex Twin

Field Day, Victoria Park, London

Forty per cent of London is green space. And what we do with all that grass – all that potential – is pave it with music festivals. This year, Hyde Park hosted Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen. Gunnersbury Park had Boygenius. Finsbury Park welcomed Pulp and Travis Scott. Field Day is a staple of the season. Always falling on a Saturday in late August, the day is wholly reserved for electronic music.

Reams of twentysomethings make the pilgrimage: set off from wherever, change at Bank, District Line to Mile End, 15-minute walk, enter, set aside £7.50 for a can of warm Red Stripe. Everything is very clean: the organisers don't want Woodstock. The first thing you see upon entry is a stand to buy Alpine's MusicSafe Pro High Fidelity Earplugs. Of all the carefully curated food stalls, the queues outside Vegan Fried Chicken were the longest. Gone are nights in sticky tents in Donington and Thin Lizzy-induced tinnitus. Welcome wellbeing zones, organic gyros stalls and central London noise curfews. There's a Field Day uniform: white vests and pearly necklaces for men; low-slung cargo pants and Doc Martens for women. Girls dress like boys, and boys dress like girls.

Aphex Twin – the headliner – is really called Richard D. James. He's a DJ and electronic producer, has been making music for almost 40 years and I love him. So do Daft Punk, Steve Reich and Thom Yorke. He's why I'm here. His first album, *Selected Ambient Works 85-92*, is the only work of music that's ever convinced me that synaesthesia might not be baloney. His songs conjure up specific images in my head, always the same: 'Tha' is a municipal swimming pool, '#3' a pair of eagles circling over an empty dessert, and 'QKThr' a lonesome hotel concierge shuffling bags.

It's the music of the 'non-place', the soundtrack for impersonality. His music exists in an uncanny valley; not quite elevator music, not quite royalty-free – slightly too weird for that – but dancing on the edge. Songs such as 'aisatsana [102]' and 'Alberto Balsalm' are the soundtrack for a popular genre of TikTok – videos that mesh together unrelated clips of tranquil loneliness: a dark road at night, a hotel corridor. People love them and repost them and find them relatable. His songs have become the soundscape for an ennui that people want to share.

It's a cliché to say Aphex Twin is an enigma. But yes, Aphex Twin is an enigma. He doesn't own a phone, he drives a 1950s armoured car fitted with a machine gun, and he lets out little emotion. In the early

2000s, Richard was asked if he would tour with Radiohead after the band said he was their biggest influence for *Kid A*. 'I wouldn't play with them since I don't like them', he replied. This gig was his comeback performance after a four-year break. A quite staggering number of people flocked to the East Stage: there was little room to dance.

Not that anyone could if they wanted to. Not a hint of a hit all night long. He ditched the muzak. It was an attack, not a gig: stop-start blares, schizophrenic synths, artillery-fire drums with not a hint of structure, all set to contracting and expanding wild bright lights. I should have got the Alpine Music-Safe Pro High Fidelity Earplugs. A 50-quid, hour-and-a-bit troll. The audience, some of the Russell Group's finest, ached to get it. 'Like, it's amazing,' a guy behind me lied. 'He's pushing the boundary of what is sound and what is music!' I think I saw him in the queue for vegan chicken earlier.

Ten minutes before the end, me and my friend cracked. 'Shall we go?' We scuttled away on the District line, and I imagined Aphex Twin coming offstage, laughing.

## Classical music

### A performance with teeth

Richard Bratby

### The Threepenny Opera

Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

### Oslo Philharmonic/Makela

Usher Hall, Edinburgh

It's the Edinburgh International Festival, and Barrie's back in town. Once, Edinburgh was pretty much the only place that you could see Barrie Kosky directing in the UK; there was a satisfyingly transgressive thrill about an opera director whose priorities were so self-evidently about the whole art form that he'd happily stage Monteverdi as a tango-powered revue. In recent years, Baz the Knife has supplied increasingly rare moments of discovery amid the EIF's all-you-can-eat buffet of touring orchestras and reheated prestige productions. But he's not the rare bird he was. In fact, with a *Carmen* rep at Covent Garden and a new London *Rheingold* coming soon after his *Dialogues des Carmélites* at Glyndebourne and the Proms, he's starting to look like a fixture.

No complaints here. Few directors possess Kosky's animal instinct for making music serve drama and this brief run of *The Threepenny Opera* felt like a true Festival event. The performers were the Berliner Ensemble and I arrived with a head full of preconceptions: grainy footage of *Mother Courage*, guttural voices croaking out agit-prop. In fact we saw a group of multi-tasking performers who played off each other with



*A true Festival event: London as a Tetris-like climbing frame in Barrie Kosky's production of *The Threepenny Opera**

unforced, virtuosic agility. Kosky excels with ensembles. As intendant of Berlin's Komische Oper, he built a company to revive the city's interwar jazz-operetta tradition, remaking shows by Oscar Straus and Paul Abraham as punchy, high-kicking spectacles. Apparently ENO asked him to bring one to the Coliseum. He declined: the style was so rooted in that place and those performers that it simply wouldn't transplant.

Anyhow, in Edinburgh a glitter curtain shimmered and a pale face goggled through into the spotlight and began to sing. 'Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne...' already it was all there: the sleazy glamour, playfulness and lilting cynicism of Weill and Brecht's predatory earworm. The set, too – by Rebecca Ringst – was cleverer than it looked. The city (it still comes as a jolt that it's supposed to be London) was sketched as a Tetris-like climbing frame and the cast clambered around the metalwork or chased each other in parkour-like action. In Kosky's conception, it's the performers who provide the show's dark glitter. In 'Pollys Abschiedslied' the backdrop flushed yellow and the characters moved about their frames in silhouette; a moment of beauty wholly stripped of sentimentality.

But of course, Kosky knows exactly what this company can do, and you could hear that Berlin operetta tradition in the singing. The cast had sufficient classical training to sus-

tain (and even, when necessary, sweeten) their musical lines but without any hang-ups about making vocal colour serve character, snarling, hissing and shouting as required. Cynthia Micas's Polly was a precious little madam in a party dress; Bettina Hoppe (Jenny) had tenderness as well as bite, and Tilo Nest played Peachum as a big, murderous teddy bear.

It's Mackie Messer's show, though, and Gabriel Schneider really was the psychopath as rockstar – a voice of equal parts aftershave and venom coupled to a pale, wiry physicality that made his final hanging as funny as it

*A group of multi-tasking performers played off each other with unforced, virtuosic agility*

was macabre. We're all complicit, of course, and why wouldn't we be when the band was kicking up such a storm? A stripped-down jazz combo was directed from piano and seedy-sounding harmonium by Adam Benzwi: one of Kosky's regular operetta collaborators. They played the socks off Weill's score – cutting loose, improvising, making the whole thing swing. Raw entertainment, in other words. Kosky understands his material well enough to know the real danger comes when you're having the most fun.

It'd be hard to top that, and the EIF didn't try: this was the closest the 2023 Festival came to presenting a fully-staged opera. It's the first year under the direction of Nicola Benedetti and possibly – like many classical musicians – she shares the misconception that concert performances of opera are an adequate substitute.

But the touring orchestra list remains healthy and the following night we heard the Oslo Philharmonic play the epilogue from Rolf Gupta's *Earth's Song* (a sort of wrong-note *Lohengrin* prelude with four bass drums) plus Sibelius's Seventh and Mahler's Fourth.

The orchestra sounds lovely – concentrated sweetness in the upper strings; brilliant, transparent woodwind, and a way of swaying together (or in the Mahler, practically swooning) that was wholly seductive. It's currently under the direction of the 27-year-old Klaus Makela, and I wanted to enjoy his interpretations if only to avoid the cliché of suggesting that a much-praised (and clearly gifted) young star really ain't all that. The Mahler – music that can get by on colour, effects and the thrill of the moment – was certainly vivid enough. But with Sibelius there's nowhere to hide. On the evidence of this skin-deep, episodic reading Makela isn't ready to perform this repertoire in front of an international audience.