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London Contemporary Music Festival attempted to "reinvent the orchestra", plus the best of December 2018's classical concerts

London Contemporary Music Festival/Ambika 3 ★★☆☆☆

For its penultimate night, the achingly left-field LCMF decided it was going to "reinvent the orchestra", with a hugely ambitious programme including seven premieres. The focus was on exploring new ways for musicians to relate to each other, without a conductor, without music, and even - in the case Claudia Molitor's and Joseph Kohlmaier's "Die Gedanken sind Frei" (Thoughts are Free) - without instruments. Here the twenty or so musicians were armed only with their voices, plus a shovel and some stiff brushes. What they offered was a "happening," in which they moved a pile of earth from one corner of the dark underground cavern of Ambika 3 to another, one shovelful at a time, singing a single random note as they went. Later in the concert they repeated the piece, by carrying it all back again.

It was hard to know what was being symbolised. The Myth of Sisyphus? The Dignity of Labour? Getting close to the soil? And yet it was curiously affecting, especially when - in the second performance - they burst into the old German socialist song "Die Gedanken Sind Frei".

At the opposite pole were a couple of more conventional pieces with players in front of music stands playing notes, but these were actually the least interesting. Chaya Czernowin's orchestral piece Day One: One the Face of the Deep seemed a paralyzingly literal rendition of Day One of Creation, all grinding rocks and explosions, and the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc for ten cellos by pioneer black American composer Julius Eastman seemed ill-focused harmonically and over-extended.

Much more engaging were the pieces that used the considerable improvising and histrionic talents of the ensembles, including the newly-formed LCMF Orchestra, Apartment House, and An assembly. Elaine Mitchener's witty and precise Breadthbreath was scored for improvising musicians who'd inveigled themselves amongst us in the dark, while our attention was elsewhere. One suddenly became aware of them, playing tiny sounds which gathered heft and shape, and then faded as the players packed up their instruments and left - a sort of "Haydn Farewell Symphony" for the 21st century.

Much more ambitious was Neil Luck's multi-media spectacular Regretfully Yours, Ongoing. It was a satire on the way consumerism veils the messy realities of our fallible bodies and minds, climaxing in a parody of an "anthemic" song with a parodically obscure text, complete with Eric-Clapton-ish guitar and swooning strings. New music is rarely so entertaining, or so hard-hitting.

The London Contemporary Music Festival (http://lcmf.co.uk/) ends on 16 December at Ambika 3, Marylebone Road London

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