

Bozzini Quartet, Huddersfield Festival, review

The Bozzini Quartet's performance at Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music was engrossing but limited, writes Ivan Hewett.

★★★★



The Bozzini Quartet performed at Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music. Photo: Michael Slobodian

By Ivan Hewett

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Visiting the Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music is a like a trip to a classical music Twilight Zone. Nothing is what it seems; music becomes noise and vice versa; familiar instruments are made to seem unearthly and strange. Seated in those darkened spaces, all kinds of feelings flood over one: curiosity and even delight when things seem to be going well, disquiet and boredom when they're not.

Underlying the shuttlecock of feelings is an uncertainty about what "going well" and "going badly" actually mean in this topsy-turvy world. On Thursday night, one of the world's great new-music quartets, the Canadian Bozzini Quartet, submitted with every sign of grace and good humour to having their venerable medium totally deconstructed. In the 2nd String Quartet by young Danish composer Simon Steen-Anderson the instruments' strings were muffled, and specially modified

roughened bows supplied with contact microphones were used to scrape the strings rhythmically. The weird crackles and hoarse growls that resulted were given a naively rhythmicised pungency by Steen-Anderson.

It was engrossing in its way, but once you'd grasped the rules of the game it seemed limited. Much the same could be said of Christopher Fox's *Chambre privée*. This was based on the conceit that the entire string quartet tradition had been wiped out, and the four players were trying, with agonised tentativeness, to work out what a string quartet might be. Through the fragile, wispy, mistuned chords memories of the lost tradition seemed to loom, though one could never be sure. *Gagaku Variations* for quartet and accordion by the Festival's resident composer Maja Ratkje was less perfectly self-contained, but for that reason more winning. One felt the composer struggling to capture the strange beauty of the ancient Japanese orchestral tradition of *Gagaku*, while keeping her distance.

Then it was time for a brisk walk through the driving rain to the post-industrial space of Bates Mill, for a late-night encounter between cool, severe abstraction and rude avant-rock energy. Here the graphic scores of Austrian composer Peter Ablinger were the source material. Their assemblages of geometric shapes on a white background invite a cool, aloof rendition, but the three players of Dutch avant-rock group *The Julie Mittens* and clarinettist Gareth Davies flung them out with huge energy and ear-splitting volume.

The playing was impressive, but the slapdash *mise-en-scène* with its trailing wires certainly wasn't. Bottled-up energy needs a tight theatrical frame to work its effect.

The Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music continues until Nov 25. Details: 01484 430528; hcmf.co.uk



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