

You Won't Believe Your Ears

These days, it seems, we're not to be trusted with absorbing information through only one channel. Everything is mixed up, multi-media, multi-reactive. A tendency that might stem from theories of 'individual learning preferences'. We can't risk leaving anyone out of anything; and so a generation brought up as guinea pigs for such theories are now set loose on the world with their short-attention-span, creative-flexibility at full throttle.

Whether it is classical music, pop or poetry, art forms that once existed to give the reflexology treatment to our auditory senses now demand that we keep our eyes open too. And the question is, for our over-rich, visually-sophisticated world – is it a fair competition?

At The Roundhouse, Camden, the Catalan band Ojos de Brujo gave an energetic demonstration of the trend. On the night, the band was an eleven-piecer, but on other occasions it could be more, could be less. Indeed, for this concert there should have been two other musicians – one from Asian Dub Foundation, the other the Cuban Carlos Sarduy – who for assorted reasons of accident and bureaucracy had to cry off. When these absences were announced the lead singer Marina called the absent musicians "brothers of the band" and this, in a sense, sums up the foundation and philosophy of Ojos de Brujo.

Described as playing "nomadic, racially-mixed music crossing the streets of the cities of the world", the influences and rhythms are flamenco, gipsy, Cuban, beatbox, tanguillo, bulerías, rumba, dub and hindi sounds. There's a similarly ecumenical root to the composition of the band itself, from the core members who were the genesis of Ojos de Brujo around the mid 90s, to the guests, fellows, 'brothers', who periodically join to add new notes to the gigs and the albums. Less a single decision to create a band, Ojos de Brujo was a slow coalescing of experienced musicians from their wide genres: Ramón Giménez, a Barcelona guitarist rooted in classic soul, rumba, and flamenco who took a tour through hip-hop, break-dancing, scratch and funk; Marina "la Canillas", from Valencia, who sings, composes and raps from her basis in flamenco, cajón and 'palmas'. Xavi Turull brings cajón, tabla, conga and his importance in the flamenco world. He lived in England till he was eight, took the classical inheritance of his family to India to learn tabla and tabil, then home to Spain via China and Cuba, picking up more musical collaborators along the way.

Then there is DJ Panko, also from Barcelona, who graduated from bongos and drums to his current international renown as an electronic artist of the ethnic music fusion. And Paco Lomeña from Malaga, Maxwell Wright from Formentera, Carlos Sarduy from Cuba and all the others.

The band have a hot-housing, communal attitude to their work and life. Since 2002 they have departed from standard music industry structures and given themselves the freedom – and the terrors – of organising all their own production, publicity and tours. They work as a collective, practically as a family, each contributing but each also having the freedom to follow their own creative projects. A current concern of Giménez, considered the father of the band, is to ensure each member has a home studio in which to keep their own musical progression vital. The band members listen to and learn from each other, and create new fusions along the way.

It is when this broad church is extended to other forms of artistic output that their offering becomes almost too kaleidoscopic. Singer Marina is credited with setting the graphic aesthetic of the band, along with much of its political and social voice, and in the live show the band is backed by images on a screen above. Each song carried a different graphic theme or style, as each had been created by a different artist, working to the lyrics of the song and what the words suggest to them. The ever-expanding band of Ojos de Brujo collaborators takes in illustrators from Barcelona, Washington, Caracas, Granada, Toronto, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Milan, Zaragoza, Toulouse, Santa Fe, Brighton, London, Chesapeake. Textures and colours are played with; and the styles leap from manga by Gislene Mayumi Matsui for the song *Respira* to delicately painted images layered like memories by El Nino de la Pinturas for *No Somos Máquinas*. Or the wooden clockwork *Bailores* of Riki Blanco to the raw, ink-and-watercolour scratchings of a teenage girl in an urban nightmare of THA's *Corre, Lola, Corre*.

But 'backed by' is too faint. During most of the concert, the drawings that flashed, morphed or merged across the screen were a much stronger presence than any of the eleven people taking their turns in the spotlights below. When viewed from the perspective-challenged seats of Level 2 of The Roundhouse, the metal bracing pillars of the original structure intersected the sightlines and

forced the spectator to dodge left and right to follow the subject of interest. Such was the fascination of the films that I found myself willingly submitting to the gymnastics.

Only twice did the chosen graphics – once a bland photographic backing of sunsets and water, the other an equally simplified swirl of circles and spirals reminiscent of a Spirograph offering – cause me to yearn for the infinitely more sophisticated lighting arrangements that accompanied the *Steve Reich: Desert Music* concert staged by the London Symphony Orchestra in 2006, part of the *Phases* season at the Barbican to mark the composer's seventieth birthday.

Reich had studied geographically wide-spread musical traditions in coming up with his distinctive voice, sampling and weaving them as consciously as the Ojos de Brujo musicians might. In his case he produced a fully blended whole rather than one in which these traditions can be separately identified and named. Bach, Stravinsky or jazz; Balinese gamelan or Ghanaian drumming; Baroque classics – Reich saw at the heart of all of them a "pulse", and he took it as his mission to reintroduce pulse to the world of western composition. The hypnotic results, sometimes combined with sampled words, created an entirely new artistic effect, hard to listen to if listening is all you are doing; but best experienced, the pulsing of the noise merging with the pulsing of the air and the audience's mesmerised breath in the auditorium.

It was new ground for the LSO to create in a full concert hall a performance mixing the sounds of Reich's *The Desert Music* from 1982–3 with video interpretation created live on the night by D-Fuse and projected onto a backing screen behind the orchestra.

Reich's fundamental technique principle in composition is musical repetition, and in *The Desert Music* an arc is formed that rises and then falls in a mirroring repetition of its own early stages. The tempo of the successive movements reveals this: Fast / Moderate / Slow – Moderate – Slow / Moderate / Fast. The matching tempos and harmonics, in some places the matching sections of sampled poems from William Carlos Williams' collection of the same name, were echoed in the visuals that mirrored the music's pulses, repetitions and overall arc structure. The pumping lights that crossed the screen, dividing left from right, upper section from lower, and reversing direction as the arc of the music unwound, recalled a *Vision On* offering from somewhere in the 1970s.

Founded by Michael Faulkner in the mid-1990s, D-Fuse are artists and designers fascinated by the interface between sounds and images. They have collaborated with musicians such as Scanner and Leftfield, Steve Reich and the Italian ensemble Alter Ego. Language-free, their work crosses international boundaries, showing at festivals around the globe.

The same phenomenon of juxtaposing sound with image can be spotted in the burgeoning portfolio of performance poet Suzanne Andrade. A striking figure in sleek back clothes with jet hair bobbed around a china white face, in her own person Andrade jolts the senses through the contrast of vision and sound. This is Tim Burton horror presented in a crystalline voice worthy only of the highest royalty. Set to a backing of music and projections of hand-drawn animations and old photos, her poems debunk suburban pleasantness, each a funny as well as shocking story. Her impact relies also on the parallel graphics provided by animator Paul Barritt.

Julie projects a small, fat girl-child drawn in pencil and holding a candle. She rejoices in lines of poetry the likes of "A toy plastic syringe sticking out of her leg: little Julie's playing homeless again." Meanwhile in *The Clap*, "On the day that all the housewives caught the clap... The animals and children took to the streets, family photos face down." is spoken in that stately voice to a backing of faded photos of lower middle-class suburban bungalows and villas, all faded blue and dirty yellow. Neat lawns and alpine rockeries, the occasional net curtain.

But the danger in utilising this technique of merging images with your major audio vehicle are distraction, a loss of intensity, a loss of concentration. Andrade's performance worked well for the first 3 or 4 pieces but ultimately she was repetitive. The visuals took over and became inseparable from the poems, so even though alone neither the poems nor the cartoons might have bored, together their residue was a monotone. Such a technique must be applied very well to succeed.

For Ojos de Brujo, the excellence and variety of the graphic images and the range of musical sources served to enrich the experience of the evening, yet coloured it too brightly. The images outweighed the music; were so exciting, fast changing, hypnotic, that it was hard to remember there was a living, breathing band on stage, even when, at times, live footage of the musicians was overlaid with the animations.

Perhaps the London Symphony Orchestra and D-Fuse got it right? In *The Desert Music*, they achieved a perfect enhancing of the music through the visual stimulus that exactly matched and followed the music. That the music was made visible in a direct relational way to the image, while that image carried no meaning outside its relation to the music, meant the two elements truly fused, becoming a single, enveloping experience for those present.

It is here that audio can meet visual in the creation of a larger whole. Performers who chose a less united route into multi-mediating their shows should consider carefully whether they will simply reinstate the domination of our eyes rather than our ears.

www.ojosdebrujo.com

www.lso.co.uk/
www.dfuse.com

www.suzanneandrade.com
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