

REVIEWS

MUSIC

INSTAL 06
THE ARCHES, GLASGOW
★★★★★

THE introduction to this year's programme brochure for Instal, Glasgow's annual weekend showcase of experimental and underground music, insists that "it's not a festival with anything to do with connoisseurship or elitism". For the uninitiated, however, the reality is rather different.

To begin with, any remotely conventional understanding of "music" - defined in my dictionary as "the art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty of form, harmony and expression of emotion" - needs to be checked at the door. This, in itself, is not necessarily a bad thing, of course. Anything calling itself "experimental" or

"underground" is intrinsically at odds with convention, while quibbles about musicality are also sidestepped by the alternative term "noise art".

There's plenty of scope for challenge, too, in the phrase "beauty of form", which in turn is arguably no prerequisite for "expression of emotion".

Whatever you choose to call it, the sector of sonic creation and performance that Instal inhabits is a broad if uniformly unorthodox church, ranging from the outer reaches of free jazz to esoteric electro-acoustic experimentation, extremities of death-metal rock, and aurally-based conceptual art. It is evidently also highly debatable territory, with even apparently basic terms like "new" and "experimental" being open to question, given the 50-year history of such practice, traceable back to Cage and Stockhausen.

Be all that as it may, this year's sixth Instal programme couldn't be faulted for its diversity. Even in the field of

free improvisation, for instance, approaches varied from the wild sax/drums duelling of US twosome Steve Baczkowski and Ravi Padmanabha to the rarefied, obliquely evocative dialogue between Japan's Kiyoharu Kuwayama on cello and Rina Kijima on violin. The violin, this time in digitally modified form, also featured in Tony Conrad's pairing with Keiki Haino, the latter switching between guitar, synthesiser and extraordinary multi-octave vocals. The deafening sonic stramash that ensued certainly scored high for visceral force, the violence of its assault offset by moments of undeniable grandeur. Kuwayama, meanwhile, also delivered a solo performance entitled *Lethe*, in which he applied blocks of dry ice to heated stainless steel surfaces, amplifying the vibrations created.

This last piece exemplified a difficulty shared by several Instal acts, also including Lee Paterson's micro-manipulations of assorted objects on a tabletop and Tetsuya Umeda's customised rotary fans. Even where the work seemed conceptually interesting - in Kuwayama's case, translating the physical opposition between extreme heat and cold into sound - the actual results often proved unenlightening, or tedious, or both.

Elsewhere, Arrington de Dioniso's "shamanic" outpourings, via voice and bass clarinet, combined Asian throat-singing and human beat-box techniques to no obvious additional advantage.

It must be said that a majority in the audience seemed already au fait with the "noise art" scene, and gave every appearance of enjoying themselves immensely. For the interested newcomer, however, the aforementioned programme brochure offered precious little help in terms of history, context, theoretical background or clues as to the artists' intended purpose, with the result that much of the fare on offer elicited nothing but frustrated bafflement.

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20/01/11

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