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Glasgow's Radiophrenic Workshops

By

Kieran Curran

Glasgow's Radiophrenia music and sound festival evokes a public broadcast modernism – but also risks being trapped inside an experimental ghetto.

Taking place largely on a simultaneous live audio stream and FM radio transmission, Glasgow's *Radiophrenia* festival ran from 7-20 February, coming direct from its headquarters at the Centre for Contemporary Arts on Sauchiehall Street. In contrast to the restricted, broadcast-only 2020 edition, *Radiophrenia's* latest iteration—subtitled 'The Light At The End Of The Dial'—had a refreshing number of live-to-air performances scheduled, albeit with some inevitable Covid-based cancellations. The array of work being transmitted was broad, with the vast feat of programming in and of itself impressive.

What is the appeal of contemporary sound work and spoken word experiment? To me, it's twofold: first, with a preponderance of postgraduate studies on sound, institutionally legitimating an expanded view of what art is, academia is finding new fields to colonise. Second, this work speaks to an aesthetic founded on—often oblique, sometimes less abstract—responses to the bewildering range of stimuli that we are exposed to in modern life. This has of course been further facilitated by the opportunities offered by digital technology. Both of these tendencies bear interesting results, but I've never read such a volume of personal statements in the context of a music festival before. These are of a pretty variable quality (as you can see for yourself here).

But given the absence of a centralised media apparatus in the mass customised landscape we currently inhabit, how can events like *Radiophrenia* break through to an audience not already interested in this? In imagined nostalgia, I thought of the BBC's Radio Ballads, or Glenn Gould's work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation—could the surprise and impact of this work be matched in the present? The festival at least tries to wrestle with this by broadcasting on 87.9FM, opening up the possibility of random, curious, and accidental listeners, left of the dial.

At its best, the sprawling programme gave the listener a sense of unabashed joy in the expressive possibilities of sound itself, and of freely experimenting with it. Sourced from conventional musical instruments alongside field recordings and layered noise, Keith De Mendonca's London Punch at times evoked Gould, with field recordings of mulchy stomps mixed with narrative references to Samuel Pepys, Punch and Judy, as well as 1960s anti-war chants. *Hollyhock Walls* by St. Petersburg-based Something North was a similarly eclectic

but more musical piece, with choral song, organ, with the use of found sounds throughout. Other pieces highlighted a more conceptual, yet still enjoyable approach—particularly in the work of Glasgow’s incredibly prolific [Helena Celle](#), or Laurie Pitt’s AI inspired pieces. A vein of proud absurdism ran throughout the event—in a soporific sense in Timothea Armour’s avant-radio play *East Lothian Gothic*, with a more abrasive approach found in Eggblood and DiscountGnostic’s amazingly titled *The Stephenage mambo meets Patrick Zabé in an elevator at the alter (sic) of the Cyril Boggis A. Spare Commode*.

Other pieces were ambient and wryly meditative (Siobhain Ma and Rhiannon Walsh’s ‘Journey Through the Auricle’), non-sequitur ‘sprechgesang’ combined with glitch-inflected field recording ([Human Heads’ *In The Afternoon*](#)), traffic sounds and transport drones (Babu Eshwar Prasad’s *On The Road*), and spectral minimalism ([Francis Heery’s *Moon Phases*](#)).

I only caught one of the ‘Live To Air Performances’ at CCA. With one act forced to withdraw due to Covid, the triple became a double bill. Teresa Cos and Tom White performed an improvised score of wide-ranging scope (looped harmonica and drums, pitch-shifted vocals, tape manipulation, and much more besides) to video footage shot from the passenger seat of a car zooming through Glasgow at night. At times exciting and engaging, the work sprawled a little too long in a live context. By contrast, headlining artist [Alice Kemp](#) gave a magnetic, precise performance dressed in seventeenth-century pilgrim-esque attire, integrating pre-recorded sounds overlaid with meticulously employed object sounds and faint, near imperceptible vocals.

It’s worth noting that among these positives, there are certain aesthetic moves that recur—the condenser-captured sound of walking itself, the use of contact mic-ed objects, alternately whimsical or stern narrative voices, microphone thuds—showing the evolving clichés that come with new forms. More irksome was some rather portentous work, seeming to lie back on the implicit cultural gravitas of sound art. Alias Domaine’s *Being on this boat is not revenge* is a good example of this, wedding a well-intentioned but heavy-handed satire of British imperialism aboard a Cunard liner with the air of a particularly self-satisfied Radio 4 afternoon play. Likewise, [Julia Carolin Kothe](#)’s work anatomised social media-rooted angst in a fashion that ultimately felt safe and banal. More successful, by contrast, were pieces that were closer to straight-ahead documentary, like [Thomas Glasser](#)’s *After The Beep*—a fascinating piece based on found sounds from charity shop-bought answering machine tapes—and, in particular, [Trevor Pitt](#)’s *The Great Barnfield Rambles*, based on the autodidact conceptual artist Fred Barnfield. Thankfully, *Radiophrenia* also had an undercurrent of explicitly politicised work—for instance, Virginia Hutchinson’s *Stories of Radical Landownership in North Lewis*, and John Hughes & Sissy Christopolou’s *The 21st century British Slavery Convention*.

I’m curious also how work like this sits alongside sound art that persists outwith institutional contexts like Glasgow’s CCA. I want this kind of work to be enjoyed as sound, as music, exposed to those not already in the know. DIY noise promoters deliver like this in a less rarefied manner—Scotland is well served in this respect, with the likes of [Giant Tank](#) and [Braw Gigs](#) at the fore. *Radiophrenia*’s preponderance of cospasta-like artist’s statements to me seems alienating; it’s a convention of course, but a convention that leans towards a status conscious mystification. Why is this done? Who is it for? Who are we trying to impress? I’d like to see a more democratic public sphere emerge, where expressive sound

work is not so confined to officially sanctioned cultural spaces.

About the Author

Kieran Curran is a writer and musician living in Edinburgh, Scotland.