

Noh Reimagined

Kings Place, London, UK

Japanese classical Noh theatre has proved stubbornly resistant to evolution, while any notion of artistic revolution is apparently alien to those purists invested in preserving a core repertoire of 240 set-piece plays and performance traditions that stretch back 500 years. Noh Reimagined, therefore, could be read as an act of provocation. This weekend festival was anchored around nohkan flute wizard Yukihiro Isso and his company of drummers and actors, and the extracts they served up from popular Noh plays demonstrated how radically our ears require rewiring to hear concepts of harmony and structure that have absolutely no points of connection to Western convention.

Following an opening concert by Isso's own group, the flautist and his three drummers – Mitsuhiro Kakihara (hip drum), Tatsushi Narita (shoulder drum) and Yoshitani Kiyoshi (stick drum) – returned

for an improvised set with Evan Parker; the next night traditional pieces were juxtaposed alongside new works for Noh ensemble by the British composers Andrew Thomas and Nick Morrish Rarity. But my assumption that these attempts at cultural crossover represented the reimagining was soon overturned. When you hear traditional ensembles perform in Japan, a knowledgeable Japanese gentleman informed me, the degree to which Isso has intensified and sped up these traditionally slow paced rituals becomes clear – raising the intriguing possibility that he is Noh's Charlie Parker, its Ornette Coleman even.

An encounter with Isso and Mitsuhiro Kakihara earlier this year at Cafe Oto, when they were working towards finding common terrain with improvisors John Edwards (bass) and Roger Turner (drums), opened my ears to Noh – but nothing prepares you for the stark, chiselled beauty of the thing itself. Hall One at Kings Place might radiate all the

charm of a school assembly hall, but the musicians soon enough owned the space. Entering by way of a ritualised procession and kneeling with rock-ribbed straight backs, their faces rigid with perspicacious concentration, sounds elbowed their way into the room: flute notes shrill enough to bore holes through concrete, intricate percussion figurations and allied vocalisations that left you marvelling at the capacity of three musicians to generate such a canopy of ever changeable sound.

Glancing at my programme book – which is packed with explanations like “the nohkan flute [in the traditional piece *Mai-iri Dojoji*] plays a four-phrase repeating pattern, with each phrase being eight beats long” – a paradox became clear, although one not unique to Noh: the rigid formal organisation of the music serves up structurally labyrinthine permutations of line that override their basis in logic, especially at the pace Isso delivers them. Other mysteries

accumulated. The drummers set patterns that were independent of each other and Isso, patterns which would invariably reconfigure themselves just as the play of strong against weak beats threatened to coalesce into routine. Each note gradually filled an ornate structure, each sound another piece slotted into an emerging jigsaw.

Elsewhere, the thready ribbons of Isso's salamander flute lines at first gambolled against Evan Parker's swivelling soprano saxophone arpeggiations. But when Parker subsequently unravelled a descending line that Sonny Rollins would have been proud to call his own on tenor saxophone, that unity of voice dissipated. Isso's drummers mapped out time – 500 years' worth to be exact – and Parker fastened around their rhythmic contours, savagely tongued and slapped notes repurposing these ancient leylines as malleable sound.

Philip Clark