

to fight for her own life, and – with a little help from her friends – to win.

JOYCE MCMILLAN

MUSIC

Scottish Ensemble: We are in Time

Perth Theatre

☆☆☆

THERE'S no faulting the ambition of the Scottish Ensemble in its opera/cantata/theatre show *We are in Time*. Nor the ambition of its collaborators, writer Pamela Carter, director Stewart Laing and composer Valgeir Sigurðsson.

It's a big, bold and thoroughly beguiling show, but in the end its melding of forms proves problematic – not so much in the coming together of music, theatre and text itself, but more in the contrasting performance styles they embody.

It's the story of a heart transplant, of one life ending and another – miraculously – continuing, and while the technological and even bureaucratic details of Carter's text, delivered with cool patience by narrator Alison O'Donnell, take on a hypnotically incan-

tatory, ritualistic quality, they also tend to overshadow the intense human dramas of death and rebirth.

It's a masterstroke to bring together two contrasting voices – the disarmingly pure Jodie Landau and the operatic mezzo of Ruby Philogene – as heart donor and recipient, and Sigurðsson provides memorable material for both of them, amid his pulsing, slow-moving soundscapes. The mood, however, remains contemplative throughout, and the pacing resolutely leisurely, even in more urgent sections such as the one concerning the heart's flight from one hospital to another.

Laing's staging is appropriately elegant, even clinical, with chapter titles on a sliding monitor and gently glowing hospital beds, but it feels rather at odds, too, with the musicians' mechanics of shifting iPad music stands and conducting and cueing each other, and, perhaps inevitably, the musicians' acting skills are less convincing than those of the work's three soloists.

It's a hugely impressive achievement, nonetheless, but perhaps like a good stew, its various different ingredients need time to blend and settle into an overall flavour.

DAVID KETTLE