

Sounds fantastic as northern festival balances the genres

MUSIC

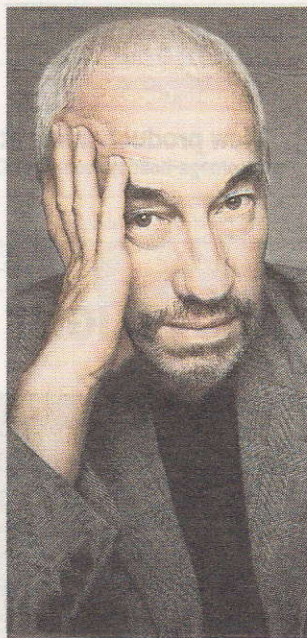
Sound Festival

Aberdeen

You've got to hand it to Aberdeen's sound festival. It's a fine balancing act: celebrating new sounds whatever the genre (with classical, jazz, electronica and more all getting a look-in this year); finding a compelling theme for intensive exploration (this year, string quartets); and, crucially, casting its net wide to Europe and beyond to invite in some of the world's top contemporary music names. Sound pulls it off brilliantly, though – and this year's festival was nothing if not outward-looking.

All the way to Canada, for instance, for the opening concert in the festival's big string quartet weekend, on Friday afternoon. New music specialists the Bozzini Quartet had jetted in for nothing less than a history of the 20th- and 21st-century string quartet in lecture/recital *Traces* (★★★★) – although the lecture side could have done with more polish and substance to make it truly enlightening, and for it to match the flair and fantasy of their remarkably vivid performances. Their Stravinsky *Three Pieces from way back in 1914*, for instance, sounded as fresh and raw as if its ink were still wet.

The Bozzinis returned that evening, however, for an astonishing concert (★★★★★) that challenged the whole way we perceive music. Three “deep listening” works – by Scelsi, Alvin Lucier and Swiss composer Jürg Frey – might have tried the patience in conven-



↑ Simon Callow wonderfully over the top in *Der Tribune*

tional terms, but immerse yourself in their minute inflections of pitch and bizarre acoustic effects, and a whole universe of subtleties emerged. It was quite simply a revelation, a cleansing of the ears, and played with matchless conviction and immaculate technique.

All change, though, for Saturday's lunchtime concert from the UK-based Sacconi Quartet and harpist Ruth Wall (★★★★★), which included the world premiere of a sound-commissioned, bracingly energetic new work from UK post-minimalist Graham Fitkin. *Recur* for string quartet and harp was a gem of a piece, sparkling with plucked textures, its four-note earworm of a tune cast in endlessly inventive new contexts, funky and foot-tapping yet also

full of piquant emotion, and it got a crisp, bright, thoroughly assured premiere performance.

Over to France for the Tana Quartet (★★★★), and an early-evening recital of unashamedly complex music for strings and electronics. David Hudry's propulsive *Anamorphosis*, getting its first ever performance, sampled an already complex acoustic quartet and played its sounds across six surround-sound speakers in warped electronic reimaginings, but the Tanas ensured it was as visceral as it was cerebral.

The festival's impeccable international credentials came most clearly to the fore in Saturday's galvanising closing concert (★★★★★), in which Scotland's Red Note Ensemble was joined by groups from Belgium and Norway for three overtly political pieces. The *F Scale*, a sound festival commission from Glasgow-based composer John de Simone, was strikingly colourful in its setting of texts from a post-war US test for fascist sympathies, but paled against the concert's other two offerings. Actor Simon Callow gave a wonderfully over-the-top, stentorian performance in Kagel's *Der Tribune*, a music-theatre satire on political demagoguery, and the three ensembles closed with a blisteringly visceral account of the budget-eating dissonances of Louis Andriessen's notorious *De Staat*. It proved a fittingly powerful, provocative and confident, internationally focused conclusion to sound's thrillingly ambitious weekend.

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