

Wysing Music Festival

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by Colin Perry



I spent the weekend in the genteel countryside outside Cambridge, listening to a fusillade of blistering industrial noise, otherworldly drones and old 78-inch recordings of birdsong and blizzards. Wysing's annual music festival is a transportive affair. For those of us who bussed down from London to the bucolic campus-like contemporary arts venue, this was quite literally the case. But the festival was also gloriously disjunctive in and of its self. Headliners included the likes of Venetian Snares, Cut Hands, Russell Haswell and Luke Abbott, placing the whole experience within the realm of techno, IDM, breakcore or any other difficult-to-dance-to sub-genre of electronic music – as well as more easy-going guitar-based music and performances. Inside the 'stages' (a variety of buildings normally used for exhibitions and conferences), you could have been in a club in Williamsburg, Hackney or East Berlin. Outside, you could bathe in the sunshine, watch grasshoppers in the field and spot birds flittering amongst the trees.

Attended by around 450 people, the festival was a deliberately marginal affair – it was almost uncompromisingly for noise junkies and fans of 'sounds' rather than pop melodies. This is Wysing's fourth annual festival, and its format has loosened considerably over the years – conceived by Donna Lynas

(Wysing's Director) and artist Andy Holden, the first edition rigorously stuck to the idea of presenting artist-musicians only. This year's event was vaguely themed (it was titled 'Space Time: Convention T'), and featured both artist-musicians and more straightforward bands (including local groups Hollow Mountain, Forest and Tape Runs Out). The festival was also marked by careful attention to running order, duration and sound quality: the sound systems were all impressively clear and a joy to listen to. Three stages were used for a rotating array of musical performances: the Gallery Stage presented most of the headline acts, while smaller sets were played on the Amphis and Black Box stages. There was also: a marquee with artists' printed material and other publications from Aid and Abet, Sara MacKillop, Banner Repeater and others; a collaborative sculpture *This This Monster This Things* by Giorgio Sadotti and others; and a rather elusive set of 'conversations' organized in conjunction with Royal College of Art curating students.



Ryan Jordan

For me, the highlight of the festival was not the headliners – I saw Haswell, but had to leave before Venetian Snares were due on. The most thrilling experience on the main stage was Ryan Jordan. Recently graduated from Goldsmiths with an MFA in Computational Studio Arts, Jordan's own website states that he is interested in 'experiments in derelict electronics, possession trance, retro-death-telegraphy and hylozoistic neural computation'. The performance was simple, theatrical and utterly terrifying. At first, the room was silent, and Jordan had filled the stage-end of the room with smoke. Three strobes were positioned faced the audience; as they started to pulse, they activated light-sensitive circuits (hand-built by Jordan), which triggered electronic sounds. As the lights flashed more intensely, the music escalated until the space was filled with a throbbing white light and an excruciating noise. It was like being in a cloud of sheet lightning. I couldn't stop grinning.



Keren Cytter, Maria & the Mirrors (Keira Fox) and Vindicatrix (David Aird)

Other performances on the Gallery Stage were more familiar – and somehow less thrilling. Nochexxx played a DJ set that was worthy of the pioneers of early 1990s Warp pioneers (think of an updated version of the Hypnotist, LFO or Aphex Twin). But it was one of the few programming bloopers – he played far too early, at 2pm. A performance/video/sound event by artist Keren Cytter, Maria & the Mirrors (Keira Fox) and Vindicatrix (David Aird) was simply unbearable. I have previously written about Cytter – I find her video work largely pretentious, sub-Brechtian self-indulgence, and more of the same was evident here. Of course, others clearly love her video works. But a few quick vox pops afterwards indicated that many others found the piece fairly difficult to like. (Vindicatrix thankfully later played an enjoyable DJ set at the smaller Amphis Stage.) Later on, again on the main stage, Haswell played a deeply disappointing set of stops, starts and half-formed sonic attacks, to an only half-filled room.



Das Hund (Jennifer Lewandowski and Sam Levack)

The Black Box Stage was in a building normally used for art talks and business conferences. I missed the presentation of the latest low-tech computer system developed by Cambridge-based Raspberry Pi, but caught some of Das Hund (Jennifer Lewandowski and Sam Levack) doing their Exploding Plastic Inevitable routine; and the rather brilliant performance by Plastique Fantastique (Simon O'Sullivan, David Burroughs and others). The latter is something of a piss-take of performance art: O'Sullivan, covered in honey and glitter intones an absurdist manifesto-cum-messianic-diatribes while a band of masked musicians drum out a vaguely tribal beat, and a video projection a Lycra-clad man and woman run through a get-fit dance routine.



Margarita Gluzberg

The Amphis Stage proved a real success, and something of an antidote to the knob-twiddling male excesses in the main stage. I arrived at Wysing in time to enjoy Margarita Gluzberg's performance on the Amphis Stage (a semi-permanent pavilion in Wysing's grounds made of scrap wood). The London-based artist had arranged a number of old record players inside the pavilion, and her performance was a simple ambulatory task of changing records and returning the needle to the groove. After Gluzberg was Manuela Barczewski, an artist-musician who played an enjoyable, meditative set on a slate grey guitar using a slide. Following her was local hazy rock band Forest – four young men on guitars and another on drums – who delivered an impressively assured performance, despite looking somewhat shocked to find themselves playing to a largely alien art scene.

The most memorable use of this intimate space was by Edwin Burdis, who presented a performance and sound piece in which a teenage boy sat at a TV monitor playing a ultra-violent computer game (I wish I could identify it – but I'm simply too old and gaming-illiterate). Burdis lounged on the other side of the table on which the monitor sat, dressed in an apron: a minimal get-up suggestive of a middle-class father in his kitchen. Very little action took place, but the soundtrack did the leg-work: shrill sounds of slaying from the computer game mixed with samples from a TV cooking show in which the narrator exclaims with increasing insistence that, 'that is an indulgent, opulent, absolute delight; that's beautiful; this is magnificent!'. By the end of the performance, we were similarly convinced that what we had just witnessed was 'magnificent'.

About the author



Colin Perry is a writer based in London, UK.

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