

Reviews

MUSIC

The Scottish Ensemble with Aidan O'Rourke and Kit Downes

Assembly Roxy, Edinburgh

★★★★

SELDOM a group to play it safe with a conventional classical gig, the Scottish Ensemble collaborated for its short Elemental tour with trad violinist and composer Aidan O'Rourke and jazz keyboardist Kit Downes, in programmes that collided together uncompromising, somewhat monumental modernism with far more tender, thoughtful contributions from the two guest musicians. It made for a fascinating, if sometimes slightly jarring, combination of styles – and, it has to be said, quite a lot of stage-shifting between pieces.

O'Rourke and Downes's selection from their double album 365 were fresh and supple, the violinist drifting nimbly in and out of folk-style tunes with subtle support from Downes's marshmallowy harmonium. The concert's climax, the newly commissioned, Edwin Morgan-inspired *There is no beginning*



O'Rourke and Downes's collaboration worked well

– co-written by O'Rourke and Downes for themselves plus the Ensemble – felt rather anticlimactically like more of the same, its elusive, switch-back tunes now simply spread across a broader canvas, and the string ensemble mostly relegated to an accompaniment role.

It was the concert's dogged modernism that really stood out, from the slithering micro-polyphony of Ligeti's opening *Ramifications*, given an assured, unshowy, beautifully transparent account, to the intricately layered cross-rhythms of Tansy Davies's foot-tapping *The beginning of the world*, all under the clear, precise leadership of guest director Simon Blendis, who also delivered some use-

fully informative introductions. Best of the lot was David Fennessy's remarkable, St Kilda-inspired *Hirta Rounds*, whose cascade of ringing open strings and glistening harmonics was summoned by ever-shifting leaders from within the scattered players, all coalescing into something rich and wonderfully strange.

DAVID KETTLE

MUSIC

BBC SSO

City Halls, Glasgow

★★★★

NEVER having experienced an LSD trip, I can only imagine it as something similar to hearing Richard Strauss' mad-cap tone poem *Don Quixote*.

It is, in every sense, the set of "fantastic variations on a knightly theme" described in the full title: the wild extremes of the hero's imagined exploits – their horror, whimsy and sheer lunatic visionary distortion – expressed through music so aberrant, at times so agonisingly discordant, that fantasy and reality become impossible to distinguish.

In Thursday's performance