



**Shorelines, an elusive, impressionistic piece, was like an opera without words**

PICTURES: NICHON GLERUM

## FESTIVAL

### Sonica

Various venues, Glasgow

'What the f\*\*k's going on here?' It was an understandable reaction from a posse of Glasgow shoppers, wandering past a shop window full of gawping spectators, with a weird woman singing opera outside Debenhams in the St Enoch Centre.

And it was probably just the reaction German composer Mathis Nitschke was aiming for with *Viola* ★★★★★, his opera/installation performed as part of the city's Sonica festival of sonic/visual art. *Viola* placed the audience on display in a disused shopfront, watching action taking place in among Saturday shoppers as a lone female protagonist mourns a lost love, tries to connect – with people around her, and even with the silent spectators – and finally recedes back into the crowd.

In many ways, *Viola* felt like a sketch for a longer work, but its simple yet bold conception was remarkably effective, blurring boundaries between audience and performer to provocative effect. Nitschke's music – delivered via loudspeakers as a backdrop to the live singing – swung knowingly between Baroque lament and pounding, raw dance music, and Martina Koppelstetter's smooth, immaculately controlled contralto was the ideal vehicle for his expression-



ist vocal lines. It was a brief but undeniably potent work, and offered a genuinely fresh, ambitious conception of what new opera can be.

A few days earlier, music theatre piece *Shorelines* ★★★★★ at Tramway from composer Oliver Coates, director Josh Armstrong and the Ragazze Quartet felt almost like an opera without words, its scenes delivered by duos and trios not of voices but of stringed instruments. It was an impressionistic, elusive piece, inspired by the 1953 North Sea floods that affected the Netherlands, Belgium and parts of the UK, evoked through movement, sepulchral lighting and Coates's atmospheric music.

There were some wonderfully effective moments – the quartet exchanging breath-like chords at the opening and a touchingly lyrical, Brittenesque duet for violin and viola, among others. But the piece seemed too caught up in its own imagery and atmosphere to truly engage or move. The overall theme of grief and loss was crystallised in a harrowing taped testimony from a woman who had lost her husband, baby and mother-in-law to the ris-

ing water, but by the time we heard it at *Shorelines*' conclusion, it felt too late for it to make its proper impact.

Magical interactive installation *Archifon IV* ★★★★★, however, made for a spectacular conclusion to the festival's eclectic offerings. Czech-based Tomáš Dvořák and Dan Gregor (otherwise known as Floex and Initi) had transformed the chancel of Glasgow University's Memorial Chapel into a giant electronic musical instrument, with columns as gigantic faders, statues providing angelic voices, and arches, stone slabs and more offering skittering tones, its dense digital animations and throbbing sounds brought alive by laser pointers.

It was as entrancing as it was playful, but far more than simply a plaything. It was the sheer inventiveness and richness of the work's hundreds of constituent elements, and the subtle interactions between sounds and animations, that made it really special, so that a trio of users could join together to create something truly musical from its teeming details. An absolute delight.

**DAVID KETTLE**