

MUSIC
SOUND FESTIVAL
VARIOUS VENUES, ABERDEEN
★★★★

It comes as quite a shock to hear string quartet players carefully adjusting their instruments so that they're glaringly – and intentionally – out of tune with each other. But that was the whole point of the Edinburgh Quartet's enthralling concert on Saturday night, one of the centrepieces in the microtonal music weekend in Aberdeen's sound festival of contemporary music.

Microtonality is hardly an easy sell, nor a simple concept to convey – with its talk of commas, cents and Pythagorean tunings, it can sound forbiddingly academic, and it might make you worry that the resultant music will simply be excruciatingly out of tune.

Thankfully, neither was true of the two remarkable new pieces given powerfully committed first performances by the Edinburgh Quartet in King's College Chapel. In fact, both composers used their bizarre tunings to expand their music's expressiveness, conjuring vivid, almost hallucinatory harmonies and a sometimes decadent lyricism.

Christopher Fox's witty *The Wedding at Cana* imagined a guest at the famous water-to-wine celebration walking from room to room, hearing anachronistic pop tunes transformed into archaic dances using deliciously piquant tunings.

The *String Quartet no.5 (Haec dies)* by Aberdeen-based composer Geoff Palmer was a rapturous, highly moving celebration of the natural world, bringing in flying geese, turning tides and the aurora borealis, and requiring the patient Edinburgh Quartet players to retune their instruments so that they could imitate the sublime resonance of a Himalayan singing bowl. The foursome were on remarkably fine form, though, clearly relishing the

two astonishing pieces' strange sounds in fiercely dramatic yet limpid performances.

The previous evening, Syria's Ensemble Al-Kindi had been prevented from performing when they were denied UK visas, but instead, Al-Kindi's Swiss founder, Julien Jalal Eddine Weiss, gave an illuminating lecture-demonstration on microtonality in Middle Eastern music, using the qanun, a plucked and strummed Arabic zither whose pitches he could minutely adjust by flipping tiny levers at the side of each string.

There was quite a lot of talk, but Weiss's complex explanations came into sharp focus when he started to play. His sparkling performances shifted effortlessly between sound worlds as he scampered around the instrument, lithely tweaking his strings' tunings, and in a piece of his own composing, he even seemed to invite Bach to the party.

There was more microtonality in clarinettist Alex South's wide-ranging Saturday-lunchtime solo recital in Aberdeen's Art Gallery. In Evan Ziporyn's *Impersonations*, South nimbly recreated the ear-tweaking tunings of Japanese, Kenyan and Balinese music, even balancing his instrument on his knees at one point, and although his account of Steve Reich's *New York Counterpoint* could have done with a bit more rhythmic bite, he dispatched the jazz-meets-serialism of Meyer Kupferman's *Moonflowers, Baby!* with hedonistic verve.

The sound festival's wide-ranging events continue in venues throughout Aberdeen until late November, including an informal late-night series in city-centre bar Musa that on Friday featured eloquent electronic musings and touching ambient piano from Ross Whyte. The festival's microtonal theme was a bold undertaking, but judging by the intense expressivity of its gratifyingly varied events, it was a resounding success.

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