

Disarming mix of hardcore and the downright fun

CLASSICAL

Sound Festival

Various venues, Aberdeen

It's been a big week for violas. Last Thursday, Jane Atkins premiered John McLeod's masterful new concerto *Nordic Fire* with the SCO and now the viola is centre stage too at Aberdeen's sound festival of new music – as an apparently “endangered” instrument in need of its champions, though frankly it's debatable how accurate that description is.

Whatever the reality, Aberdeen-raised violist and composer Garth Knox was sound's high-profile champion across its opening weekend (fellow composer and violist Sally Beamish visits next weekend), and it was with the viola's more ancient forebear – the elaborate, 14-stringed *viola d'amore* – that Knox showcased his supple, liquid talents, in Friday evening's concert alongside the dependably excellent Red Note Ensemble (★★★★). The piece in question was Argentine-born composer Oscar Strasnoy's quirky *D'amore*, which combined the grunts of tennis matches, lonely-hearts ads, Japanese crooning and voluptuous loops of orchestral sound in what was a surreal but never less than entertaining reflection on the vagaries of love. It drew some beautifully thoughtful, delicate playing from Knox, and he returned with his own humorous *Three Weddings and a Fight* during a family-friendly promenade concert in Aberdeen's Maritime Museum on Saturday morning (★★★★)

A more seriously neglected



↑ Garth Knox's playing was thoughtful and delicate

group getting well-deserved exposure at sound are women composers, with Saturday's programming devoted almost entirely to female music creators. The festival's lunchtime concert in St Andrew's Cathedral (★★★★), for example, was the culmination of a residential project for five Scottish-based women composers to write brand new works for a trio of Red Note players.

The results were unsurprisingly mixed, but the darkly glowing harmonies and rapturously intertwining tendrils of melody in Aileen Sweeney's nature-inspired *The Wooden Web* stood out among a strong clutch of new works.

But beyond its serious themes, it's sound's disarming mix of the hardcore and the downright fun that gives it a distinctive – and brilliantly charismatic – personality among new music events.

There was plenty of fun to be

had among the eclectic ingredients of Strasnoy's *D'amore*, and it was followed by the unapologetic seriousness of senior Scottish composer James Dillon's *Tanz/haus: triptych 2017*, getting its Scottish premiere – a major, hour-long meditation on motion and stasis that contrasted passages of mind-boggling density and complexity with stretches of atmospheric emptiness, and which pushed the Red Note players to the extremes of their skills.

There was plenty of fun too in Paul Rudy's *Degrees of Separation: Grandchild of Tree* for amplified cactus, plucked, caressed and tickled during a wonderfully colourful, nuanced performance by festival chair Pete Stollery as part of the Maritime Museum's promenade concert.

But the work that most perfectly combined seriousness of purpose with playful delivery – and which also continued sound's celebrations of women creators – was Aeolian by British installation artist Kathy Hinde and Norwegian composer Maja Ratkje (★★★★★), another Scottish premiere.

With bizarre air-driven contraptions – bellows, fans, snaking tubes and expanding concertinas – nestling in among an expanded 13-piece Red Note group (who themselves surrounded Danish accordion maestro Andreas Borregaard), Aeolian was an exquisite examination of sound, music, breath and air, as lyrical and playful as it was rigorous and uncompromising, and utterly bewitching from start to finish.

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