

## Counterflows

Various venues, Glasgow

A crumpled tinfoil blanket; buzzing handheld fans; glistening cellophane towers. Manchester performance collective **Katz Mulk** headlined Glasgow's Counterflows experimental music festival on Friday night, but their new devised performance comprised theatre, installation and dance as much as it did sound.

However, that's hardly surprising in a festival that strains against the boundaries of performance, celebrating the new, the pioneering and the downright uncategorisable.

And **Katz Mulk's** untitled piece (☆☆☆☆) was specially conceived for its setting too – the strange, geometric, 1960s pyramid interior of Anderston and Kelvin-grove Community Church.

With its dark, aggressive beats and obsessive chant-like rap from Ben Knight, it grew increasingly claustrophobic – all the more so when Letitia Pleiades' loose, baggy choreography got up close in among the jam-packed audience.

All of its unsettling intensity was dissipated by an unexpectedly poetic ending, however, as a giant hairdryer-inflated balloon rose elegantly to the pyramid ceiling's apex, only to float back gently to Earth. Uncompromising, certainly, but with a big heart underneath.

If **Katz Mulk** were all about the theatre, pianist **Alexander Hawkins** (☆☆☆☆) stripped things back to pure, abstract music in his equally powerful performance on Saturday.

Alone at the keyboard in the apse of the Mackintosh Church, he delivered vivid creations – almost certainly part-improvised, part-composed – whose hard-edged elegance and focus mirrored the clean lines of Mackintosh's interior.

It was a bristlingly athletic, muscular performance, at times so thunderous that it threatened to shred several of the Steinway's strings, and carefully conceived – very classical, in fact – in its thoughtful, almost obsessive explorations of simple musical ideas.

If at times **Hawkins** strayed too close to direct quotations of Messiaen and Ligeti, it was immediately captivating, as though he were laying his creative processes bare – sometimes touchingly sentimental, sometimes rough, tough and unflinching.

**Bill Wells** is something of an unsung hero of Scottish experimental music – a situation **Counterflows** set out to remedy in an afternoon of his music in Maryhill Community Central Hall on Saturday, led by the **Viaduct Tuba Trio** (☆☆☆☆). The exquisite richness of the three tubas' combined sound alone could send a shiver down the spine, and they were joined for a couple of numbers by the 14-strong **Gorbals Youth Brass Band**, providing what felt like an ideal vehicle for **Wells'** achingly tender miniatures of Satie-esque simplicity – sometimes stark and austere, sometimes rich and sentimental, always shot through with gentle melancholy. It was a quietly joyful performance that brought a lump to the throat.

Just as involving – though utterly different in style – was a bracing improvised set from Detroit flautist **Nicole Mitchell** and London percussionist **Mark Sanders** (☆☆☆☆) that followed in Maryhill.

This was a masterclass in musical communication, the two musicians responding brilliantly to each other's gestures, accompanying, mimicking, even challenging, and generating a shifting musical tapestry that felt entirely organic in its development, and remarkably rich with **Mitchell's** arsenal of extended techniques and **Sanders'** subtle, ever-intentive drum-kit skitterings.

It was just the thing to sum up the freewheeling, vibrant aesthetic of **Counterflows** overall.

**DAVID KETTLE**