

(fairies, pronounced shee) luring people into their sithean or fairy hills with enchanting tunes and warm lights. There are very subtle shifts on the drones, and the growling notes slide deeper into dread. Foreboding seeps into the former church for almost 20 minutes before Chaimbeul glides onto stage and takes a seat to join them with her pipes.

A central theme in not just Celtic but global folklore is the distortion of time, where 100 years pass but it feels like one night. Chaimbeul's playing and this minimal piece hold a similar charm, where the immersive sound wraps around the audience like a crepuscular cloak, transporting us to another dimension. The notes rise to a buzzing, chaotic climax, then break, dissipating gently. The motifs of trad Scottish reels waft back into the room, as if we're returning to the mortal realm.

A performance of Philip Glass's 1969 composition *Music In Similar Motion* follows these unearthly delights, and his energetic loops flip the tone in the room. Its repetitive figures jolt out of the earlier dreamscape with a buzzing urgency, lurking in the space where the veil is thin between minimal classical and folk horror, it's an exquisite night.

Claire Sawers

Elaine Mitchener: /tongues of fire / yearning... / a communion with the invisible

Mount Stuart, Isle Of Bute, Scotland
Pillars of rare Italian marble rise like glossy blocks of gorgonzola and stilton all around the impressive Marble Hall, in the centre of Mount Stuart. The gothic palace, on a Scottish island near Glasgow, was built in the 1700s, and then rebuilt after a massive fire ripped through it. In charge of renovating his family home, the third Marquess of Bute John Crichton-Stuart (1847-1900, once one of the richest men in the world) added in nods to his special interests: astrology, religion and mysticism. A dark map of the stars covers the atrium ceiling 25 metres above, and stained glass signs of the zodiac glow lilac and turquoise.

From a balcony, lights start flashing, and whispers dart between surround sound speakers. "*Spiritus, spirits*" hiss hidden voices, and we glimpse shadows moving just out of sight. A crackling sound of flames licks through the room as Elaine Mitchener tiptoes down marble steps behind us, singing in a warbling soprano, pristine and wonky, somehow both melded together.

The experimental vocalist and movement artist was invited to Mount Stuart as part of their Visual Arts Programme, now in its 25th year. Previous artists have included Martin Boyce, Ilana Halperin and Alberta Whittle. While the vast Mount Stuart fortune wasn't made from slavery, and the family had links with the abolitionist movement, it speaks to the power of inherited wealth. The house doesn't shy away from these connections, giving free rein to artists to explore its past.

Mitchener calls this piece a performance-installation, responding to the extravagant mansion on the island, its history and its contents, including newspaper articles about the fire, and Pietro Longhi's painting *Edward Wortley Montagu And His Attendant*: a shisha smoking aristocrat, the marquess's great

grandfather, and a man not named in the painting, but who was revealed by Mitchener's research to be Massoud Fortunatus, Edward's son to an Egyptian mother.

The performance is a semi-improvised assemblage of symbols, a layered, time travelling conversation with ghosts from the past, where the amped up and ancient bounce off each other. Mitchener performs with three musicians: Angharad Davies on violin, Sylvia Hallett on kemma, Hardanger fiddle and accordion, and Mafalda Ramos on a selection of metal and wooden flutes. In front of the tiny stage where they perform sits an antique metallophone that was buried in the building's attic the day before; Mitchener dusted down what looks like a row of dangling cowbell gongs and did a makeshift repair with string for tonight. She holds objects up to a mic in turn, ping-ponging a kalimba, shaking leaves from Mount Stuart's massive gardens, and scratching spikes from a dried monkey puzzle branch.

Her voice does a melodic ricochet between styles, with jazzy flourishes of pitchbending then operatic highs, and sometimes bursts of spoken word. Recordings float in from around the Marble Hall. We hear strains of a very early recording of an Egyptian singer named Aminah, unearthed by Mitchener's work. A recording Mitchener made of Mount Stuart's chamber organ is piped in from behind the actual organ, a magnificent mahogany beast with tortoiseshell keys.

If all this sounds hectic, it's not. It feels rich, sprawling, haunted. Like Mitchener's work in general, artforms overlap, cultural inspirations clash and congeal all at once, splicing and stacking elements to build something greater. Radical Black artists are a theme she returns to: she's riffed previously on a Jean-Michel Basquiat painting about police brutality, or composer Julius Eastman's bold, fearless approach to being a gay, Black artist. Her debut solo album *Solo Throat* experimented with words from African-American and African-Caribbean poets. Tonight she continues being what *Wire* writer Hugh Morris called "a genre

all of her own", in a sumptuous, story-soaked space and a wonderful one-off event.

Claire Sawers

TOPOS

Experimental Music and Performing Arts Center, Troy, US

For a music gathering, this second TOPOS festival in Troy, New York, is heavy on lectures. That's perhaps fitting for the facilities on the upstate campus of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and indeed most of those presentations are performative, even musical.

Day one is about history. Not musical history so much as the African history from which centuries of Western music have arisen, and from the perspective of writer and broadcaster Edward George. His freewheeling opening monologue touches on racial imperialism, Bo Diddley, Richard Pryor and the connections between Duke Ellington and disco. Then his film *Black Atlas* traces the transatlantic slave trade through archival images (with a soundtrack by Paul Abbott, Crystabel Efemena Riley and Seymour Wright). Following the screening, George discusses the film in a conversation with poet Fred Moten (who sadly didn't perform himself).

George opens day two with a live podcast recording focusing on reggae drum legend Sly Dunbar, who died in January. Later that evening, the percussion and electronics duo IMA (Amma Ateria and Nava Dunkelmann) provide the first musical performance. The room resounds with dense reverberation and spoken word, encompassing and massively present under undulating white and blue lights. With deep, moaning bass and whispers and static overhead, the sound is more about top/bottom than left/right. Immersive, submersive and structured, it's a little like being underwater: music for sophisticated fish.

The third evening begins with the duo of Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith. From the first notes in the piano's lower register, the large theatre sounds stunning, warm and full. Smith leans deep into the low microphone



Elaine Mitchener at Mount Stuart

and plays soft melodies. His playing drips with compassion and concern. Iyer moves from the Steinway to a Fender Rhodes, initially so delicately that it sounds like a haunted music box. With outboard electronics, he reaches into something like the highest registers of a pipe organ. They play music for the church we deeply need. At length they build into a trumpet concerto in which the orchestra is layers of white noise, disembodied voices, cavernous echoes and street sounds.

Miho Hatori is probably still best known as half of Cibo Matto, and her performance of *Paris Syndrome* recalls their 1999 album *Stereo Type A*. It's another lecture in a sense, although rich with electronics and tuba, about the institutions and contracts built around love and sex, pushing through the PA at considerable volume, given dimension through the theatre's Ambisonic system.

The final day begins with a lunchtime barbecue followed by two concerts by area groups. The Rock City Falls Trio play appealing, open-form improv for harp, double bass and drums, occasionally drifting into amplified dissonance. The accordion/clarinet duo Sun Dogs use Frippey loops and a Disklavier piano to craft engaging, thick abstractions. Then George is back, working the turntables, telling stories, dropping names and needles alongside drummer Abbott laying stuttered staccato with a strong sense of space. By the penultimate set, having George on 40 per cent of the programme proves a bit much.

TOPOS concludes with a bang: The Silent Light's live score to Teinosuke Kinugasa's 1926 Japanese silent film *A Page Of Madness*. This harrowing, hallucinatory film is given a melodic, pounding, ambient, riff-heavy soundtrack by the duo. When an onscreen riot erupts in the asylum, it becomes a mosh pit spanning a century. The unspoken star of the fest, though, is the building itself. Each of the four acoustically pristine spaces in the 2008 hall seems to take pains to meet the musicians' intentions, making listening a pleasure.

Kurt Gottschalk

Tyshawn Sorey: *Perle Noire: Meditations Pour Josephine*

Palais Garnier, Opéra National de Paris, France
Perle Noire opens with soprano Julia Bullock standing illuminated before a gold square at the centre of a black backdrop. "*Here is who I am now*", she declares, inhabiting the persona of Josephine Baker, dancer, singer, actor, French Resistance heroine and Civil Rights activist. "*I turn my skin into a costume*", she states, cueing a dissonant texture from piano, violin and reeds.

Through her movement and delivery of Claudia Rankine's poems, Bullock conveys Baker's athletic performance style and subversive turning of the exoticising white gaze back on itself. Yet Baker's dancing is also cathartic. "*Wringing something out of me - the me who can't run far or fast enough*".

Baker ran from the racism and poverty of segregated Missouri to forge a new identity in 1920s Paris. That dynamic is reflected in "Bye Bye Blackbird", the first of eight songs from Baker's repertoire reimagined by Tyshawn Sorey. Emerging from a crescendo of piano clusters, this is not Broadway or the jazz club. The "*blackbird, blackbird*" refrain is delayed, with Bullock working over the word "*blue*" in dialogue with Travis LaPlante's luminous alto saxophone. The complexity of emotions, from anguish to hope, deepens the song's resonances with Baker's own life. As the oratorio unfolds, the themes of exile, racism and identity are explored through song, poetry and dance, with Bullock's tour de force performance at the heart of it all.

Conceived by Sorey alongside Bullock, Rankine and director Peter Sellars in 2016, *Perle Noire* is the first of the composer, improviser and multi-instrumentalist's vocal works related to the Black experience. In taking this new production to the Opéra National de Paris, Sorey continues to break down barriers. Leading an ensemble featuring the brilliant violinist Jennifer Curtis and members of International Contemporary Ensemble, Sorey switches between piano, drum kit

and percussion, creating a range of musical settings from chamber music and chanson, to blues, spirituals and jazz. In one electrifying sequence, the opera house is transformed into a Montmartre club, with Bullock singing and dancing up a storm over the ensemble's Latin rhythms and gypsy jazz.

For all the variety, it never sounds like pastiche. Those familiar with Sorey's instrumental works such as *Pillars* will recognise the characteristic cluster chords and dramatic irruptions of bass drum and gong, but there's also some sensitive tonal writing for woodwind.

In contrast to the rollicking dance numbers, Sorey strips away the jaunty setting of "Si J'Étais Blanche" ("If I Were White") to create music more reflective of the lyric. Later on, a poem turns the song's proposition on its head, with Bullock/Baker asking, "*Do you see yourself, do you feel white, do you fully know that what is missing in me was taken from me by you before either of us got here?*".

In these opulent surroundings, such questions hit hard. The finale, where Bullock sings the slavery-era song "My Father How Long" is deeply moving, with Sorey allowing the closing refrain of "*We will not suffer here*" to reverberate over subdued ensemble colours. *Perle Noire* is a total work of art, bearing witness to the trauma of racism and exile, while capturing Baker's dazzling talent and moral courage.

Stewart Smith

Mamer

B10 Live, Shenzhen, China

August sees Mamer, from Xinjiang in northwestern China, taking his new album *All The Joys, All The Pains* on a cross country tour that takes in Chengdu, Xi'an, Beijing and Shenzhen. Released this year by Modern Sky World Music, it includes songs Mamer discovered while growing up in the 1980s and 90s, alongside his own settings of Kazakh poetry. Performed on the same inexpensive Japanese guitar he used on his 2024 album *Sleepless*, most of them are rooted in Xinjiang and the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.

Tonight, dressed in black, he plays an amplified silent guitar (an instrument often used for quiet practice) and mouth harp, with an acoustic guitar at his side. Opening with "Blacksmithing Bellows" from his 12 project's 2013 album *Jangqerek*, he immediately conjures a familiar Mamer tone: dark, hardcore, solemn. He follows it with "The Leather Strap" from *All The Joys, All The Pains*. Performing the song, about a family reunion at a funeral, his calm, almost flat voice resonates through a warm cave filled with distant, hazy sounds. It's like listening to a radio via a bad signal.

Mamer's band name IZ translates from Kazakh as footprint. *Jangqerek*, or *Echo*, is broadly viewed as his rebellious departure from the roots of Kazakh folk songs and ancient poems, even as Mamer's industrial transformations of them resonate with those traditions. On this tour he sequences his own compositions and traditional songs down a path back to their roots through heavy effects and improvisation.

Midway through his set, he evolves "Sleep



Julia Bullock in *Perle Noire: Meditations Pour Josephine*