



Voices lent to thrilling effect on sound grabs

CONCERT

Theatre of Voices
Stimmung (Stockhausen)
Winthrop Hall
Review: Neville Cohn

To experience Stockhausen's *Stimmung* is to be drawn into a unique sound and mood universe which does not so much attract the attention as galvanise it.

Yet its components, when considered in isolation, seem like little more than a sonic dog's breakfast.

Consider these improbable ingredients: feline mewlings, vulpine snarls, the words *Saturday* and *Mittwoch* (German for Wednesday), as well as rather prosaic monosyllabic chantings. Eerie wails, jaunty whistlings, mutterings barely above the threshold of audibility and a hallelujah or three are thrown in for good measure.

Here were seemingly limitless varieties of sonic experiences, transformed by the composer's genius into a magically integrated, meaningful whole I'd gladly have walked through a blizzard to hear.

Stimmung was presented as music theatre in the round. On a central dais, six singers sit on cushions around a low table on which is positioned a spherical lamp to illuminate their scores.

The audience sits either on cushions near the dais or, further back, on chairs. It is rather like attending a quasi-religious ceremony.

Winthrop Hall is transformed. Minimal lighting from the ceiling casts weird shadows.

The venue's giant rose window

becomes steadily darker and ominous-looking as twilight gives way to night. This phantasmagoric visual aspect is as powerful as the singing in generating atmosphere.

Paul Hillier's Theatre of Voices is no run-of-the-mill sextet. On the contrary, the very highest level of ability, both intellectual and physical, is needed to breathe life into one of the most complex and novel of 20th-century music scores, and this is done to wondrous effect. The intensity of their concentration is almost visible.

Occasionally, one will give a hand signal to cue the others in this extended mulling — *Stimmung* lasts more than an hour — over six notes.

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For the most part, the audience listens in attentive silence, though the spell was broken by late-comers and then by others, clearly unimpressed, who walked out mid-performance.

I cannot readily think of many small vocal ensembles with skills developed to the august levels required to do justice to this fiercely demanding score, but Theatre of Voices rose magnificently to the occasion.

And nothing so justifies the existence of PIAF as providing Perth concertgoers with top-level experiences such as this.