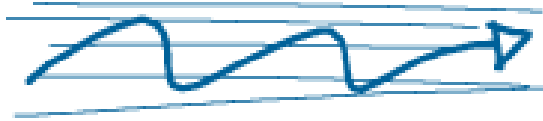


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C0 note (16,35 Hz) — vibrating on liquid surface

Report on the ISCM World Music Days 2012 in Belgium - John McLachlan

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World Music Days: [ISCM WMD 2012 Belgium](#)

Report on the ISCM World Music Days 2012 in Belgium by John McLachlan

I attended the World Music Days 2012 in Flanders and Wallonia—known as Belgium to everyone except the Belgians—between the dates 26th and 31st October inclusive. This means that it is just an account of one person's visit, and leaves out 5 days from before and after. My comments will surely therefore fail to cover some wonderful work or other, and I hope other reports catch those. This report takes the form of a chronicle alternating 'subjective' and 'objective' memories...

It was evident from the first concert that the performers were very much behind the music, and that they were of a very high standard. Typically what happens in ISCM festivals is that an international Jury goes through submissions from the composers of the ISCM member sections, and then gives the scores selected out to the ensembles that have a matching line-up. The great brainwave this year was to simply sort the scores by instrumental forces and let the ensembles themselves select from the resulting piles. This simplification might sound lazy or incoherent, but it was neither, in terms of result. It directly led to the higher than usual quality of performance, as each group felt some 'ownership' and artistic sympathy for the pieces they were playing; this translated into strong and clear communication of the composers' ideas—a whole dimension of the ISCM festival that usually gets caught in the systemic mire. Indeed I heard that some ensembles were saying that they would play some of the scores in future concerts. We, in contemporary music circles, term this 'a result'. The organisers stated early on that since each member section already sets up a national jury to find six scores that represent the quality and diversity of practise in their area of the globe, then, if the member sections do their job well, quality has already been screened for. I hope this method is remembered for future ISCM festivals, as we have not generally taken account of the artistic input of our performers, increasingly relevant in the contemporary music world.

Thursday Oct 25th

My first taste of Brussels was arriving at my hotel late on the 25th to discover that I had been robbed of my e-reader by smooth criminals at Brussels Central Station. This put me in such a cross mood with myself that I couldn't think straight, or bear to go to the last part of the 10pm Acousmatic Music concert. Instead I ate a quick meal and went late to the concert venue, the Marni Theatre, to connect with old ISCM

friends. Thus began a balmy parallel festival of beer discovery which I recommend to all visitors to the country.

Friday Oct 26th

So it was that the first concert that I successfully entered was the Het Collectief in Brussels Conservatory. But before we got to that pleasure we delegates had to pay in advance with the first session of the ISCM General Assembly.

I won't bore the casual reader with any details from this except to say that it is alarming to me that I seem to enjoy these more every year—I used to really hate grinding through an agenda over five mornings, full of society procedure and statutes! The exercise and stretching of my attention and patience over 14 ISCM festivals and Assemblies can't all be a good thing, can it? I suppose I am increasingly engaged by the society's aims because I have been actively pursuing them for years. (If you actually yearn for Assembly coverage you can slake your thirst at the ISCM website where all the minutes can be enjoyed in extra-dry, distilled form.)

The hall in this venue was rather large for chamber music and in bad need of renovation, and I felt the Het Collectief had to push through an ambience barrier that they certainly don't deserve. They started with a cello solo that was so strongly idiomatic for the instrument that I was sure the composer, Tomas Garrido (SP), was a cellist. He isn't, but he plays viola da gamba and double bass. His piece, Sonata "De Lamentatione", had a strong sense of line and a passionate sense of drama, with subtle hints of flamenco guitar along the way. Dan Dediu's Furia (RO) was for four players and explored their musical availability to the full. This was a piece of extremes throughout that sometimes probed the border of kitsch, but was contained by linear and harmonic compositional discipline holding down a very broad range of dramatic explorations. These were the pieces that spoke best to me but the other two from Mauricio Sotelo (SP) and Petra Bachrata (SK) had many colourful and expressive moments.

I then skipped lunch to run to the police station in Brussels to report my theft for insurance purposes, queued, got a nice report in Flemish that will perhaps require €200 worth of translation, ran back to the conservatory, was advised to run forth to the Palais de Justice where our bus for Leuven was parked, waiting for me—phew—I got on, in a lather of sweat...to commence a stately procession of 3 hours in holiday traffic...a thirsty trip.

Later that day the Burghers of Leuven provided a routine investigation into the beers

of Belgium, with a 'walking meal' of little crackers and toppings. After our extended bus trip this was dived upon; though many—including me—hoovered up only a sample before zooming away in order to fit in a full restaurant meal before the next concert.

At 8.30pm at the wonderful venue Stuk we heard the group Champ-dAction. This was one of many highlights in the festival: a programme of wide expressive range with something good in every piece. Tatjana Kozlova's Horizontals (EST) was a finely filigreed homage to Ligeti that gave us a variety of pace and texture, while Hikari Kiyama's Kabuki (JP) was a monolithic and very loud tour-de-force, but its variety of texture and drama within this made a very convincing case for itself, notable features including long decelerandos and accelerandos which are tricky for most composers, here they were vivacious and fun; one of the outstanding pieces of the entire festival for me. I also enjoyed Mihaela Vosganian's Il gioco degli centi, a heterogeneous and theatrical piece with a fine countertenor part, and Serge Verstockt's Fingerfertigkeit (BE), which was an unexpectedly diverting piece based

upon finger exercises such as Hanon and his equivalents for clarinet etc. This had much humour and drama but also a satisfying shape overall, none of which the programme notes would lead you to expect.

...I avoided programme notes as much as I could for the rest of the festival.

Stuk is a Flemish word for three things: a piece, broken, or stuck. The institution is strict about late entries to concerts: in fact it is off the scale on this and on presentation of tickets etc, even to well-labelled delegates. While this reflects a hearteningly high public demand, one cannot help but feel the place is well named. On the plus side it has a student hang-out upstairs with excellent wi-fi, coffee and beers. The wi-fi is free, once you give your identity card over to them! Startlingly communistic, as noted by one eastern European visitor.

Saturday Oct 27th

I had great hopes for Ian Pace's concert the next day, as I have heard him often before. However, I can't say that I enjoyed the first two pieces in his programme, from Heather Hindman (CA) and Santa Bušs (LV). They were both mostly dry and short on interest, in rather different ways, as the first played around with sostenuto pedal effects and the second with static and bland effects inside the piano. Then there was the hyper-complex Schönes Klavierstück from Harald Muenz (DE), which was more colourful, with stretches of texture varying greatly in harmonic colour and pacing.

Despite its textural busyness it had moments that reminded one of Scriabin, plus some swerves towards calm eddies that seemed a little out of context. I would normally relish such a piece, but here it seemed too long. My favourite in this programme was Herman Vogt's Concordia Discors Etudes 4-6 (NO), which explored the implications of strict process in pianistic terms, while letting its rules break pleasingly from time to time. André Laporte's Graffiti on a Royal Ground (BE) was the only one to use piano sonority to the full, and had a piano-derived tape part, but the piano part sounded like a collage of Ravel-type effects; perhaps a contextual jump too far?

I had not heard of cellist Arne Deforce before, but I was glad to correct such a gap in knowledge, since here was someone really stretching the boundaries of cellism. The outstanding piece here was from Raphael Cendo (FR). His FORIS, for cello and electronics, was a huge noise-piece in which much spectral colour variety could be heard—a coup de théâtre. Daniele Venturi's Riflessi di luna (IT) was also very effective, using live electronics to process the work of the cellist, with interesting spatial effects, though with an over-reliance on reverb. Wieland Hoban's staring (MisLogue I) (UK) was hard to listen to in one go purely because it had his voice speaking in two languages through the speakers which made the attention wander away from the cello, or when it was on the cello, wander from the text. I really think it is fair to say that this one needs to be heard three times to be heard once.

One night in Leuven I met Wieland Hoban with Ian Pace and Ian's wife Lindsay. I was immediately struck by WH's voice, which would be radio gold in BBC terms. An interesting background, I presumed, and which he confirmed.

I very much wanted to attend the next concert, the 'interactive online concert', which would undoubtedly point the way for some future directions in contemporary music, but I had to prepare myself for the following Sunday morning, where I would run for election to the Executive Committee of the ISCM. I retired to my hotel to marshal all my thoughts on the recent past and best future direction for the society. The following day, I was rewarded with coming a narrow fourth in a field of thirteen candidates. There were only three places, but I was happy for the new ExCom members: Nina Calopec from Croatia, Riin Eensalu from Estonia, and Alper Maral from Turkey.

Sunday Oct 28th

At 14:00 on Sunday the Danel Quartet played, with electronics from the Centre Henri Pousseur. There were four pieces in the programme of varying styles but all somehow unified by the quartet's consistent and phenomenal artistry. I was very

struck by how Sergei Newski's Quartet no. 3 (RU) built up a long compositional line out of initially disparate and marginal musical elements; also by how Richard Whalley's Interlocking Melodies (UK), began with uncluttered melodiousness that was startlingly freshly achieved, and rolled on to be a neatly distilled piece that built up the layers and came to a witty ending. I did not take to the enigmatic and mainly inaudible combination of electronics and quartet that was Maarten Buyl's Tilted Pyramids (BE). It bore no relation to its programme notes, which didn't even tell us about its movements. The instruments appeared to be playing/miming, entirely without pitch, a full quartet by a classical master, this you could tell by the hand movements. Afterwards I learned they were playing normally but with no resin. The audience speculated: was it meant to convey how Beethoven heard his late works? It could have made its point in half the time. Jean-Juc Fafchamps' Lettre Soufie: Kh[a'] [Esquif] was a more rewarding piece, beginning with wonderful attention to sound spectrum richness while weaving extended string techniques expertly into its texture. However, it aimed to unite another style which entailed a painful lurch into populist Philip Glass-like areas, before reconciliation to its old self.

Thanks to the ever-totalitarian Stuk approach to tickets, I only got in to the Danel concert due to a stern intervention from Marie-Paule Wouters, who is known as the dictionary of Flemish music. We pretended I was security, I think. Several others remained excluded, as we had left tickets at the hotel, having assumed there would be time to get back there. Even our Flemish Vice-President and chair of the organising committee of the entire festival was shut out. Obviously I am a slow Stuk-learner, as I was to miss entirely the next event by dint of a short delay in the wi-fi-land of Stuk's bar. I heard that this, a concert of new music by young students, was of great interest. Instead I had a very energising chat with a German publisher

about the one-sided media rhetoric of the EU neo-liberal bank-saving programme...very soon, it seemed, it was time to walk on to the fine Theatre Schouwburg for the next concert.

I was especially looking forward to the Ensemble Intercontemporain. The piece I most wanted to hear, in a programme of just three, was Luc Brewaeys Fêtes à tensions: (les) eaux marchent (BE). His piece from the previous ISCM festival (in Zagreb) had stayed in my mind. It turned out I enjoyed everything in the programme, but even more than the Brewaeys I loved Unsuk Chin's Gougalon (KR). This was endlessly inventive in terms of ways to invoke the music of street theatre. It struck a very delicate balance between giving hints of street music (an endangered species, like our own?) and being constantly novel, achieving success through extraordinary timbre invention and unexpected dramaturgy. It is hard to explain exactly why this

was among the best pieces of the festival—a skilled navigation of heritage, perhaps. The Brewaey was next and this divided its audience purely because it used quotes from Debussy, Stravinsky etc. It is up to the artist to be free to subvert, and I enjoyed the piece, but I had the same nagging, disturbing prejudices that we all have with quotes, however brief. Enno Poppe (DE) was next with his 30' Speicher II, III, IV. It occurred to me that the composer might have been taking Rihm's Jagden und Formen as a model, by writing a lengthy, energetic and sectional work-in-progress that promises to continue to 80' in future versions. Open-endedness is always a provocation to a composer audience but I am of the opinion that we have too many outside-time 'rules', which are merely unquestioned presumptions, and that an attempt to be free of them should be judged on its own sonic merits. It worked.

...It probably helped that I only really strongly tuned in one-third through the piece. This was the end of the Transit in Leuven part of the festival, which was marked with another beer reception joyfully received, with giant and amusing boards of cubed cheese. This was followed by a late bus transit to Mons, on which I had a good chat with Emilio Mendoza about the relationship of folk music to the calendar of religious festivities, how this exists in Latin America but not in Ireland.

Mon(s)day October 29th

The General Assembly in Mons was exciting—a healthy airing and letting off of tension regarding financial priorities of the Society. An extra meeting in Ghent was requested to sort out a loosening of the purse strings in the direction of music activities that combine society members. Now a little bleary in Wallonia, we dusted down our French...

Ensemble On played in a ground level 'underground' venue. Some of the audience were disturbed by the casualness of their staging, but to me it was a no more than a change of social atmosphere. Not every piece was as short as its material seemed to justify, so I will just pick out three. Helena Tulve's Silences/Larmes (EST) feature the composer herself playing wine glasses expertly. It was a poetic blend of voice and glasses with an oboe part that stood apart, showing personality and conviction. Piece for 7 instruments from Pierre

Slinkx (BE) was a calm, nicely blending piece where almost twitchy elements combined insouciantly with longer spectral elements, while through speakers we heard something like a tape part, though apparently it was only amplification (presumably with live manipulation) that was subtle in its relation with the ensemble. I found this well-judged and attractive. Claude Ledoux's Un ciel fait d'herbes (BE) was

from 1992—and this may have helped it sound fresh! Everything seemed to be in the right proportion in a fairly pointillist and poetic whole.

The next concert was violin soloist Izumi Okubo. All of the pieces had live electronics and so the Centre Henri Pousseur received equal billing to the soloist. As a programme, it seemed to blend well, with satisfying, but not problematic, contrasts between the styles of pieces. Izumi Okubo played with utter conviction throughout, and we heard many entertaining transformations of her sound that ranged from sci-fi film quality to micro-canonic hysteria. The pieces I found most striking here were Douglas Geers' Inana's Descent (US) and Peter Swinnen's Hen'az (BE), both were pleasingly idiosyncratic.

I was reaching the end of my tether by now, simply drowning in music. I had a restorative and inexpensive meal with delegates and composers from Slovakia, Estonia and Australia in the centre of Mons...I proceeded to the Théâtre Le Manège thinking I was ready for more, but during this concert I made notes in the dark which turned out to be non-existent, the pen having run out. I left the final concert a piece early to make new notes and to allow some of the music to pour back out of my ears.

Musique Nouvelles is a large ensemble that provided the next concert. The conductor, cellist and composer Jean-Paul Dessy spoke eloquently in three languages to introduce the group, mention its 50th celebration and praise its co-founder Pierre Bartholomé (Pousseur being the other), who was present and celebrating his 75th birthday. The first piece, Subsonic, was by Dessy (BE) and was a cello duo with amplification. It combined a striking virtuosity and incredible timbres and colours with some rather kitschy motifs: a crowd-pleasing opening not afraid to make the composers and musicologists feel a little ill. Fausto Romitelli's *Domeniche alla periferie del impero* (IT) was the highlight of the programme for me, but next to that was surely Hrim from Anna Thorvaldsdottir (IS), a strongly atmospheric piece with a sense of harmonic line. Philippe Boesmans' *Ornamental Zone* (BE) also made a strong individual statement. Of interest for its unusual orchestration was *Analemma* from Veronika Krausas (US), though she mentioned later that the amplification did not suit the piece at all.

Despite enjoying the considerable beauty and expertise from this group I had to go out at this point, missing other pieces in the programme. To mark the end of the Mons leg delegates had a nice impromptu party in the hotel, including useful networking. I introduced Hikari Kiyama to a Swedish performer who I felt would be interested in his music.

Tuesday October 30th

Initial bus journey to Ghent, pleasant conversation with Texan Steve Lias about whether high artistic achievement and eccentric or wild lifestyles are in any way related, among other things...before that, a less cheering breakfast chat with Turkish delegates about the US Presidential election which drifted on to Armageddon territory. Oh dear.

At the Logos foundation we heard 6 pieces for robot orchestra, one of which required a naked viola player to dance, in order to trigger motion sensors which in turn organise the robots' thoughts, as it were. I told everyone I would entitle my entire report 'World Nude Music Days'...

A most interesting field trip to the Logos Foundation, where we heard six pieces. They did not all make the most of the sonic potential there, but I was very impressed with the place and the organisation that Godfried-Willem Raes has created. I would recommend it to any composer to try to write for these forces. Fred Momotenko's Dust Against the Wind (NL) and Willem-Raes' Namuda Study #27.3: Specs' were the most engaging. The Momotenko piece would make excellent film music, while there was a great sense of flexibility and assuredness in the Raes, which you would expect.

There was of course debate going around on whether the nudity can possibly be other than a clever marketing ploy...and/or a 60s hangover...despite Raes' assertion that it is a necessity from the infra-red-based motion sensors. I thought: surely skimpy covering would work, but I was not sufficiently troubled to ask Raes, in any case...

The historic Handelsbeurs concert hall is housed in what used to be the Stock Exchange. Major renovations in 2000 provided it with a very comfortable and acoustically flexible space, and this gave Het Collectief's second appearance a superior air. Again their performance was pretty gripping, and it allowed the audience to bridge the style gulf between George Benjamin and Reich, for example. Evis Sammoutis's Metioron (CYP) had for a while a novel way of bringing the listener along: organising itself into ready-parsed time-packets. I thought it then veered off to rather basic gestures, but I would watch out for future pieces by this composer. Go Hua from Oleg Paiberdin (RU) and [how does the silver cloud s]ou[nd?] from Vykintas Baltakas both made positive impressions. Thomas Dieltjens (pf), Toon Fret (fl) and Benjamin Dieltjens (cl) each shone in a solo piece.

Wednesday October 31st

Although one had heard some aesthetic differences between all the groups and soloists thus far in the festival, Nadar (an ensemble of ten) swerved us off the road into a more youthful field of glitch, noise and collage aesthetics. They also played in civilian clothes, on school chairs, which made it seem likely that they would be a bit amateur, but they definitely weren't. Malin Bång's Turbid Motion (SE), was frenetic, enjoyable and had a high proportion of non-pitched material. The next piece was a welcome gear-change, to a study in

inharmonicities: Daan Janssens' [...en paysage de nuit...], where harmony and timbre were blended expertly. Stefan Prins's Fremdkörper 1 (BE) was more noise-centric than even the first piece, more in the 'glitch' style. Plenty of fine work went into the piece, though I had issues with the cymbal part which was not well balanced. I quite liked how in the thickets of the piece one note was often the binding element. Johannes Kreidler (DE) provided a big talking point for the festival with his Outsourcing. He verbally moderated four movements in his piece to explain (or claim) that he had written the first one, but outsourced the remaining composing and algorithmic coding to very cheap experts in China and India. He explained the tiny proportion of the commission fee that was thus required for three-quarters of the piece. It was a wonderful political provocation that angered some of the audience. I thought it excellent as agit-prop art—as a starting point for endless recursive discussion; but nearly everyone agreed that his collage piece that seeded the process was not very good. Maybe that is necessary for the piece to go downhill sufficiently, to better illuminate the audience's discomfort.

Spectra (a medium-sized ensemble) played at the Kraakhuis, or mortuary, of de Bijloke, a converted ancient hospital. After the concerts so far, I was underwhelmed by the entire repertoire here. The best thing in the concert was the first movement of Raminta Šerkšnyte's Almond Blossom (LT), which twisted by glissando some pretty chords. In the other two movements it rested in a tonal language, getting more and more like music for a TV nature documentary. Pedro Álvarez's Interalia (CL) was the most convincing whole piece, where scordatura harp reflected amidst a stubborn musical argument. The long rectangle shape of the venue went against properly hearing the vocalist in the last piece, the richly-tapestried Memories of an Index, by Annelies Van Parys (BE).

Later, after a hurried meal, we heard the Brussels Philharmonic, who had programmed some Mozart and Franck to go with Texan and Croatian living

composers. They made sure it was a tonal programme throughout. Karim Al-Zand was the former, with Visions from Another World. It was not as otherworldly or proto-surreal as its inspiration, the illustrations of J. J. Grandville. The middle movement had an air of personal introspection but the last one was rather cartoonish. Srdan Dedic's Symphonic movement came across as someone re-creating patches of Debussy and Schoenberg (hyper-romantic period) using only theory textbooks.

My final after-concert socialising was at Vooruit, a theatre with an artsy bar—a chance to mingle with performers and composers and catch up with Ghent-based friends. Vooruit (and definitely not voorhuid, which is how I was saying it) means 'forward'!

Readers who may not be familiar with the ISCM festival structure(s) should know that this festival appears in a different country every year and has to adapt quite widely from year to year. The two most typical models are (i) where it backs its juggernaut into the parking space of an existing week-long festival, as in Zagreb Biennale 2011, or (ii) where it stitches together the existing contemporary music activities in a country to create a one-off degree

of co-operation. This festival falls squarely into the latter category, so it was a convergence of festivals, series, and one-off concerts in Brussels, Leuven, Mons, Ghent, Bruges and Antwerp. For everyone concerned this means much packing and moving, patience and co-operation, logistic brilliance and grace, and, when the unexpected intervenes, forbearance and understanding. The payoff should be lasting new relationships within and across the musical circles in the country, and a far greater interest from mass media. It is too early to say exactly how positive the legacy will be in those terms, but it is possible to say that even in the present it succeeded with both the media and the large audiences. The organisers executed everything very well, and the only thing that went even slightly wrong, from the delegates' point of view, were extra hours spent on buses...the bus approaches to both Leuven and Ghent involved entering the city centre, passing the street parallel to the hotel, leaving again for 30 minutes on the ring road, and re-entering at a slightly different angle. The festival theme could be 'navigating heritage'.

I congratulate and thank very warmly Peter Swinnen, head of ISCM Flanders who made it possible, and the festival team: Evelyne Lauwers, Bruno de Cat, Ken Hendriks and Karolien Polenus, and also the other board members of ISCM Flanders and others who helped the festival team.

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