

Focus - Contemporary music

Bl!ndman leads the way

New musical sounds call for new ways of performing and new ways of listening. One of Belgium's pre-eminent ensembles goes all out to win over the public

BY GEORGIO VALENTINO

*Mainman Eric
Sleachim (centre,
with soul patch)
and his Bl!ndman
collective*

Contemporary music was born in the 20th century from that peculiarly modern impulse to kick against the pricks, to overthrow an aesthetic order inherited from antiquity. It was the Classical Greeks who had laid down the law: only that which is harmonious is beautiful, and only that which is beautiful is good. Two millennia of Western history only reinforced this axiom, which had come to be accepted as a natural truth.

By the dawn of the modern age, nature had had its day. The artist now looked to the city for inspiration and found there the reverse of the classical ideal: *disorder*, *disharmony*. Art was no longer intended to please the senses but to confront them. The modern composer duly expanded his palette to include alien textures, harmonic tension, unconventional sound sources and brute, industrial cacophony.

It might be atonal (as advocated by Luigi Russolo’s pioneering polemic *The Art of Noises*) or altogether anti-tonal (like John Cage’s epically silent *4’33”*), but this modern music, if it was to assert itself, had to be *sensationally* novel. Stravinsky’s ballet *Rite of Spring* famously incited a riot at its premiere. Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music* is still regularly referenced as the worst pop album ever recorded (it *is* the farthest from the popular idiom).

Today the shock of the new has faded, its signature publicity stunts co-opted by commercial culture. Relieved of the obligation to be controversial, contemporary music has become more modest. Finally, in its maturity, it focuses squarely on its most substantive aspect: its meditation on the structures of music, the ways in which we experience it and its relation to other artistic media.

The Ars Musica festival is a showcase for this contemporary brand of new music, and Eric Sleichim, founder and artistic director of Brussels’ Bl!ndman, is one of its stars. Named after Marcel Duchamp’s short-lived Dada magazine, Bl!ndman began in 1988 as a contemporary saxophone quartet and has since grown exponentially (and we do mean exponentially) into a federation of four quartets – sax, vox, drums and strings – coordinated by Sleichim, who in 2008 yielded his musical chair in Bl!ndman (sax) to focus on his behind-the-scenes duties.

Sleichim’s adventure in the genre began in his youth. Indeed, he reckons that he didn’t choose contemporary music as much as it chose him. A student of the

saxophone in conservatory, he discovered that Adolphe Sax’s creation, with but 150 years of history, was still in its infancy. “Composers are even now trying to find a way to integrate the exotic colour of the sax into the traditional orchestra,” he tells me as we sip tea in his office. “It’s so different from the other, more ancient instruments. Its very essence is contemporary.”

By another fortuitous stroke, young Sleichim found himself in a similarly contemporary milieu. Brussels in the 1980s was a crucible of experimentation across artistic media. The energy was palpable, attracting not just native talent like Sleichim but also like-minded agitators from abroad. Englishman James Nice, future founder of the eminently modern LTM Records, once described his move to Brussels thus: “I felt like I had arrived in Paris in the 1920s.” Music, theatre, dance, fashion, film and visual arts were deconstructed and cross-pollinated, establishing an ethos (and a *dramatis personae*) which continues to dominate the Belgian avant-garde even today.

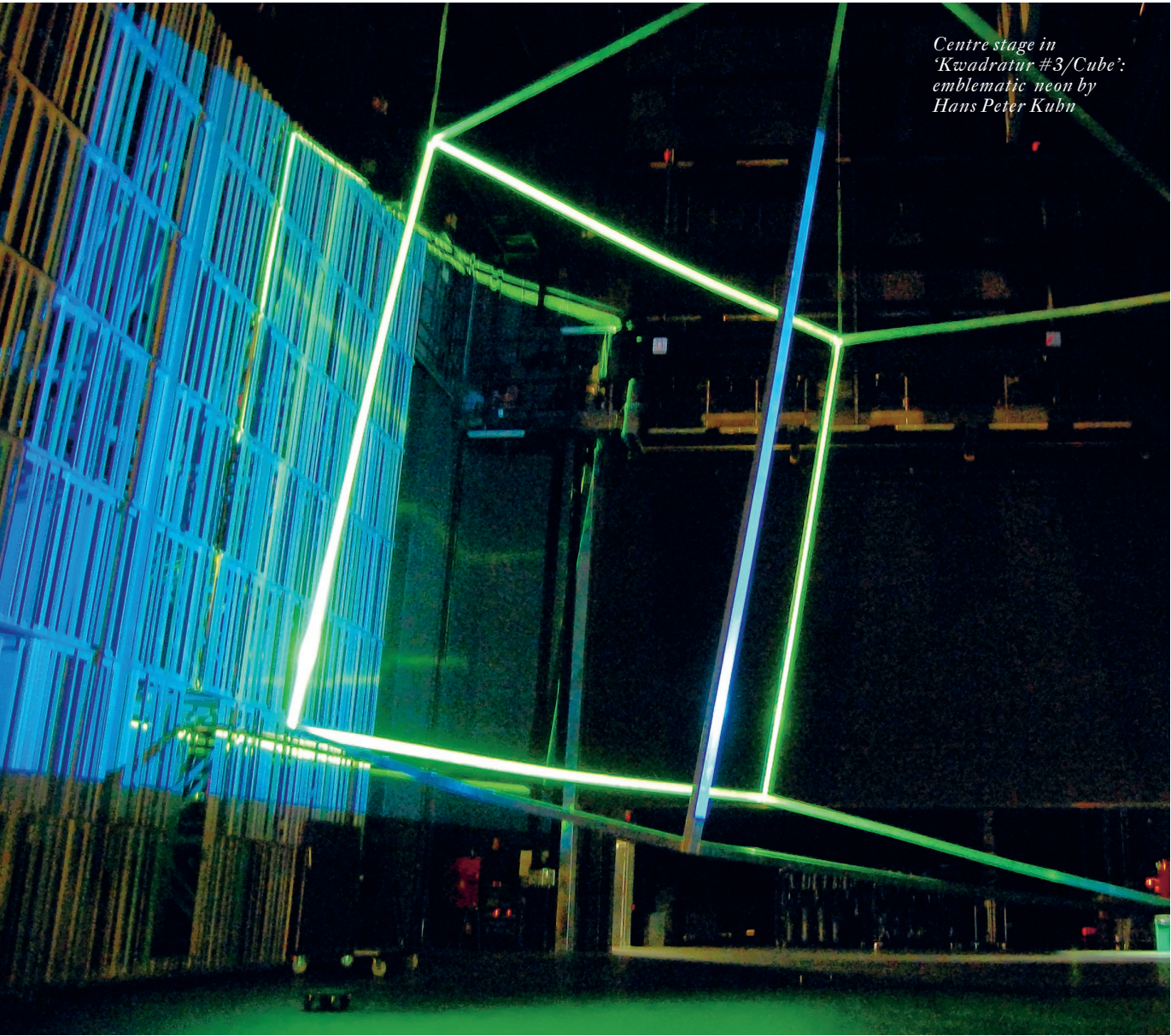
Sleichim’s name is inscribed in said *dramatis personae*. He formed in those early years the influential avant-rock group Maximalist! with Peter Vermeersch and Walter Hus, and collaborated with dancers and choreographers Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Wim Vandekeybus. Sleichim remembers above all the playfulness and camaraderie of the period, laughing, “We spent most of our time drinking in the cafe.”

He founded Bl!ndman at the end of the decade with the intention of bridging the gap between contemporary music and the public at large. “People are afraid of this kind of music because it takes effort,” Sleichim observes. “You have to think about it. You can’t just sit back and enjoy it passively. So I don’t want to be too aggressive. I want to give them the keys and invite them in.”

Instead of revelling in esotericism, Bl!ndman would court the audience solicitously. Instead of driving his passengers headlong into the cerebral world of contemporary music, Bl!ndman would ease them into modernism by mixing rough and smooth, familiar and unfamiliar.

This approach is evident in Sleichim’s *Kwadratur* trilogy, a cycle begun in 2008 to mark Bl!ndman’s 20th anniversary. The squaring of the circle in three steps, from *Globus* (2008) to *Transfo* (2010) to *Cube* (2012), is not just a cute reference to his own quadratic enterprise, but a metaphor for contemporary music as a whole. The first instalment respects traditional structures,

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Centre stage in ‘Kwadratur #3/Cube’: emblematic neon by Hans Peter Kuhn

with spectators in their seats and musicians assembled on stage playing a mixed programme of classical and contemporary compositions. There is, however, an elephant in the room: the giant silver balloon at centre stage, indicating that something is afoot.

Transfo begins to complicate the structures its antecedent took for granted. The players are no longer constellations orbiting the departed planet Globus, but are rather colonising new spaces within the hall. The limits of tonality are tested and electronic textures force their way to the fore.

Finally, *Cube* sees the culmination of this *Transfo*-rmation. Under the sign of the eponymous geometric form, rendered in brilliant neon by German lighting designer Hans Peter Kuhn, the action has escaped the concert hall. The first half of the programme consists of 16 simultaneous solo-performances-cum-installations distributed in the nooks and crannies of the host venue. (At *Cube*’s

January premiere at the Concertgebouw in Bruges, this included even the lifts.) Each of Bl!ndman’s individual musicians is an exhibit: “I wanted to create a museum where you are free to explore on your own terms.”

The second half of *Cube* reunites the ensemble in the hall but inverts the logic of the spectacle. The audience now occupies the stage while Sleichim’s Bl!ndmen skronk out their finale in the stands.

At its best, contemporary music is all about this mobility of perspective. The rank and file of Bl!ndman add to it their enthusiasm and technical finesse. Mainman Sleichim, who has assimilated into his oeuvre influences as varied as down-home Americana (complete with banjo) and turntablism, adds his prodigious curiosity. ■