

# Live wires

Flashing lights, smoke machines, pounding music ... and Handel. **Harriet Clifford** talks to Gregory Batsleer and Claire M. Singer about two innovative festivals, which combine classical music and electronics to dazzling effect

**T**echnology can be divisive, particularly when it comes to classical music. Why tamper with something so beautiful, when the music already speaks for itself? Many people want to hear a piece or an instrument played exactly how the composer would have heard it, without any special effects or electronics. Yet, is there also a place for experimentation and exploration? After all, composers throughout history have always been at the forefront of technological advancement, utilising all available techniques and developments to the best of their abilities. This month (March), two festivals which embrace technology are presented in London, celebrating classical music of the highest calibre in two different ways: through reimagining the works of

one of the world's most famous baroque composers, and through commissioning new experimental music.

On 27 March, Gregory Batsleer will conduct his Festival Voices choir and Ensemble FV orchestra in an evening event as part of the London Handel Festival. Entitled *Handel Remixed: Volume II*, it follows last year's debut appearance, returning to Peckham's Bussey Building to showcase some of Handel's best-known works, such as *Zadok the Priest* and *The King shall rejoice*. The difference, however, is that the music performed by the 12 singers and 12 instrumentalists will be remixed live in the nightclub by producer/DJ Nico Bentley. Batsleer professes himself to be 'very interested in how classical music can expand

its reach, find new audiences and begin to engage with 21st-century thinking.' Working in collaboration with Bentley over the last few years, Batsleer has begun to reimagine music from the baroque canon with electronic dance music: 'Baroque repertoire really suited having these new sounds mixed with them, because obviously baroque music is very much based on dance rhythm, as is music heard in clubs, so the two work hand-in-hand.'

London Handel Festival director Samir Savant shares Batsleer's vision and wants to broaden the horizons of the festival, this year running from 5 March to 10 April: the idea of an evening of Handel in a nightclub was born. 'Interestingly,' says Batsleer, 'this is the way Handel's music would have been presented ▶

▼ 'Baroque music is very much based on dance rhythm, as is music heard in clubs': *Handel Remixed: Volume II* comes to a nightclub in Peckham



LONDON HANDEL FESTIVAL



SPITFIRE AUDIO



BEN MCKEE

▲ Claire M. Singer (l) curates *Organ Reframed*, while Gregory Batsleer (r) conducts choir and orchestra to bring Handel to a wider audience

◀ when it was written. This sort of music wasn't necessarily for big grandiose concert halls – it was written for social gatherings and an evening's entertainment, and that's what we're trying to do with this project.'

How does it work? 'We've got a setlist of well-known Handel choruses – it's an eclectic mix of Handel, not just a specific piece. Nico, myself and the team work together to think about how we can reimagine these works, how we can look at them in a different

that – it can create the most exciting and eccentric energy and vivacious spirit in each performance.' Being held in a nightclub, one may imagine that the event would largely appeal to younger generations and those who may not be used to classical music concerts; yet Batsleer explains, 'We did a version of this last year and the audience demographic was completely mixed, ranging from people who had never been to a concert before to traditional Handel-goers. I think by and

try it out, and if they don't like it, in some ways that's great – as long as they're engaging with it.'

## 'On my first session with the organ, I was absolutely blown away by the unimaginable breadth of the instrument' – Claire M. Singer

way and create a base in which, in the performance, he remixes it live with the choir and the players.' Unlike a normal classical music concert, Batsleer and the players work with a click track: 'There's an element of rigidity that maybe other performances don't have, but actually the nature of baroque music requires a steady tactus, which doesn't really have much flexibility to it, so it forces the musicians to be strict to their tempi and commit to things.'

As with any live performance, there is a risk that something could go wrong, even more so in this case, as there are more elements at play. 'Sometimes a live performance needs

large everyone had a very unique experience. Bringing together audiences – young and old, new and established – that's what Samir's trying to achieve with this project.'

In reimagining Handel's work in this way, Batsleer says, 'I think it's important as artists that we are not afraid of people challenging us on this sort of thing. We're very keen that the music we play as musicians and singers is at a high level with the correct phrasing and the correct baroque articulation – it's not that we're going against the rule book. It's really just an exploration. If one caveats it like that, then I think it's hard to argue, because music is there for interpretation and exploration. People can

**N**orth of the river, Union Chapel hosts something a little different: *Organ Reframed*, an experimental organ festival which began in 2016 and is curated by Claire M. Singer. The festival, which this year runs from 27-28 March, evolved from *The Organ Project*, headed by Singer and transitioning Union Chapel's organ from its full restoration into a programme of concerts and educational workshops. The idea for the festival was sparked in 2006 when Singer was commissioned to write her first organ work for the SOUND Festival in Scotland: 'At that time, I was studying music at Goldsmiths College and writing quite abstract experimental works. On my first session with the organ, I was absolutely blown away by the unimaginable breadth of the instrument. I felt like I had discovered a secret and couldn't believe there weren't more organ works being written by contemporary or experimental composers. The organ to me was clearly an instrument invaluable to the future development of composition and performance.'

Like Handel's music, the organ has a rich tradition, which is something Singer acknowledges: 'The organ has one of the largest repertoires and, in my opinion,



we should embrace its historic repertoire and also help it to grow and keep the instrument moving forward. There aren't many contemporary composers writing for the organ, as access can be tricky – in order really to explore and write innovative music, you need time with the instrument.' *Organ Reframed* was developed with this in mind, aiming to commission artists to write new works, allowing them time on the instrument to develop ideas. 'To have the opportunity to build on the organ's rich history and bring it to the attention of a new generation of artists feels hugely important.'

How would Singer define 'experimental' music? 'For me, anyone writing experimental music is pushing existing boundaries and the current genres of that instrument. It's about finding the unique sounds of the instrument and exposing that beauty. I experiment a lot with mechanical stop action, controlling how much wind enters the pipe, which creates the most beautiful kaleidoscope of sound.' Like *Handel Remixed*, *Organ Reframed* attracts a varied demographic, ranging from regular organ recital-goers to people who have never heard the instrument before: 'Undeniably, the use of electronics does tend to pull in

a younger audience, but it is certainly not limited to this demographic.'

Often referred to as the 'Rolls Royce of organs', the 1877 'Father' Willis organ in Union Chapel was deliberately hidden behind ornate screens so as not to distract the congregation. Since then, Harrison & Harrison have carried out a restoration project and the hydraulic blowing system has been restored by Duplex, enabling it to be used as an alternative to the electric blowers. For the festival, Singer is writing an immersive work with Chris Watson, who is known for his recordings of wildlife and his ongoing work with Sir David Attenborough. 'We are creating a journey from pole to pole, which combines organ, field recordings, modular synths, the London Contemporary Orchestra (LCO) and Choir. Chris will be diffusing his field recordings live through a multi-channel system, and I will be at the organ with the LCO and Choir scattered around the chapel, to create a truly immersive aural journey.' Other performers at the festival include James McVinnie, Katherine Tinker and Jacob Lekkerkerker. Alongside the headline performances, the festival will also feature artist talks,

composition masterclasses and free, family-friendly organ building workshops.

Summing up *Organ Reframed*, Singer says, 'The festival is geared towards a pure listening experience. There will be no screens showing the organist at work; the chapel will be transformed into an immersive space to sit back and listen deeply to these new explorations of this wonderful instrument.'

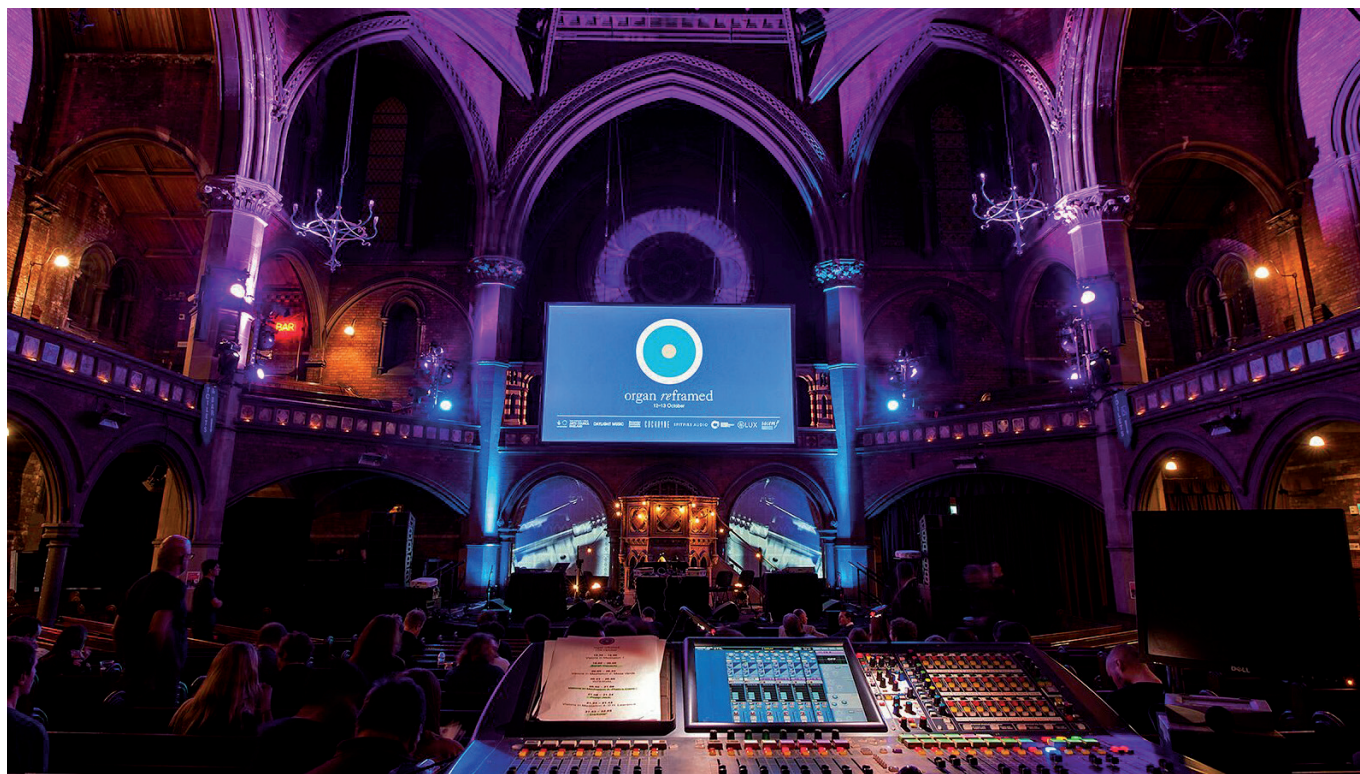
The thing that both these festivals have in common is curiosity; the people behind their conception are not content with solely presenting traditional repertoire and playing it in the way it has always been played. It goes without saying that there is a time and a place for tradition, but if no one ever pushed compositional and performative boundaries, then classical music would still be stuck firmly in the medieval period. What would Handel say to *Zadok the Priest* being performed in a nightclub in south London? The word 'chuffed' comes to mind. ■

*Handel Remixed: Volume II* – 7.30pm,  
27 March, CLF Art Café, Bussey Building,  
Peckham, London.

Tickets: [london-handel-festival.com](http://london-handel-festival.com).

*Organ Reframed* – 27-28 March, Union Chapel, London. Tickets: [unionchapel.org.uk](http://unionchapel.org.uk).

▼ 'Anyone writing experimental music is pushing existing boundaries and the current genres of that instrument': *Organ Reframed* celebrates innovative composition



COURTESY: ORGAN REFRAMED