

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL
ARTISTIC EVALUATION - MUSIC

Organisation/Venue: Edinburgh International Festival

Title of Events: Connecting Cultures concert series, Usher Hall

Li Xiangting, 11 August 2003
Nieuw Ensemble, 12 August 2003
Shiv Kumar Sharma, 15 August 2003

Type of Event: performances

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named below. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or a Council Officer, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work, to the management of the venue if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report may be made available to Scottish Arts Council Officers, Council and Committee members, and specialist advisors as appropriate. It will be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Council to report on the overall performance of its Core Funded organisations.

Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:

Very Poor –standard falls well below what is acceptable

Poor- not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation

Competent– routine rather than especially interesting

Good –well conceived and executed.

Excellent –conceived and executed to a high standard.

For multiple performances or festivals, or if you prefer, please feel free to use headings for a more extensive commentary. Please note the artistic assessment according to the ratings detailed above.

1. Artistic Assessment

1.1 Overall production – was the event successful overall in relation to any stated aims (e.g. in the programme or other printed material, and stated aims and objectives)

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: Connecting Cultures was a thoughtfully curated series of eight concerts showcasing music from China, Korea, India and Japan. It aimed to present both traditional and contemporary classical music from each country, enabling the audience to experience the clear connections. I was only able to attend three concerts, but did manage both the traditional and contemporary concerts of music from China – the musical links were evident. I believe the aims of this series were met.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	✓	

1.2 Vision and Imagination.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: This was an excellent series of concerts, imaginatively put together. I would like to have attended the full series – or at least experienced another juxtaposition between traditional and contemporary. Pressure of time and other Festival commitments made this impossible, and I couldn't help feeling that I would have preferred to have traditional and contemporary music in the same programme. However, I appreciate that this was a late-night series of short concerts, and therefore presenting both in one programme would have done little justice to either.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	✓	

1.3 Standard of performance(s) - where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The quality of the programme and performers were uniformly high. The degree of formality and direct engagement with the audience varies, but this was understandable given the different contexts in which the performers normally work.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	✓	

1.4 Quality of presentation – please comment on whether the event was professionally presented from a technical point of view.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	✓	<p>Li Xiangting treated us to a selection of classical qin compositions spanning its 2,000 year history. Although I doubted that a solo performer with a delicate stringed instrument could contend with the vast space of the hall, this worked well. The qin is a remarkably dynamic and expressive instrument when played so skilfully. With the help of the programme notes, especially the descriptive titles, I was able to appreciate the evocations of people, places and eras. Nevertheless, I would have welcomed a short personal introduction – Li Xiangting simply came on stage, played eight pieces and departed (after taking a bow to the appreciative applause).</p> <p>The Nieuw Ensemble presented five chamber works by contemporary Chinese composers, two with vocals. Having attended the qin concert the previous night, I could occasionally detect traditional musical themes and techniques fused with contemporary instrumentation and composition. The five works felt artistically distinct, yet the programme overall had a stylistic coherence. Although I am not familiar with the composers or the ensemble, I could nevertheless sense the tight direction and clarity resulting from high technical standards and considerable rehearsal. Nieuw Ensemble's long association with new Chinese music came through in the confident delivery.</p> <p>Shiv Kumar Sharma is a charismatic performer and was well-supported by his small ensemble. Having seen him play before, I was particularly looking forward to this concert and was not disappointed. He has an easy rapport with an audience, and I appreciated his short introductions to each piece. There were technical problems with the sound/recording equipment (performance being recorded by the BBC) and feedback interference. This was resolved reasonably quickly but caused a slight false start. The performers then treated us to some outstanding ragas and talas. The energy, passion and playfulness between the performers radiated throughout the hall – it was impossible not to smile.</p>

1.5 Was the performance appropriate for the audience?

Yes.

1.6 Estimated size of audience and reaction to the event.

Li Xiangting – approximately 250 people, which felt very sparse. Predominantly older people (aged 50+). I spotted only a few Chinese people in the audience, which is disappointing given Edinburgh's growing Chinese community. Enthusiastic response.

Nieuw Ensemble – a smaller audience (approx 150), although a wider age range. Appreciative, if subdued, response.

Shiv Kumar Sharma – a much larger and younger audience – at least 500 people attending. This could be due in part to it being a Friday night, but also his relative popularity. A noticeable number of Asian people in the audience. Tremendous response.

1.7 If appropriate, please comment on the educational value of the event

Not an educational event as such.

2. Management of Event

2.1 Was the venue suitable for the event?

The Usher Hall is a massive space, and presenting soloists and small ensembles is a challenge. The audience was seated entirely in the stalls and the performance space/performers were positioned at the front of the stage and oriented towards the stalls. I was aware of the surrounding stage and upper seating areas, but these were dark and lighting was tightly focussed to create a more intimate space. This was reasonably effective, but there was still a feeling that some of the potential richness of sound and intimacy of performance was lost in this cavernous space. That said, I can fully appreciate why EIF has tried to make best use of resources by programming late-night concerts into a space that has already been hired, teched, etc. A smaller space, such as the Queen's Hall, would have been preferable.

2.2 Information/Interpretive material provided at the venue (e.g. programmes, displays etc)

- range, quantity and clarity.

I didn't notice and displays, but the programme was readily available. It was extremely useful to have the full series in one programme, although it was somewhat confusing to navigate. A table of contents and page numbers may have helped. The linear and country progression makes sense, but it would have been easier to follow if each programme was set out in chronological order, rather than a cover page with two concerts each.

2.3 Publicity/Pre-Publicity for the Event (leaflets, posters, etc)

- range, content and when and where available. Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Please also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised. Comment on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information.

Excellent promotional materials and mechanisms for EIF as a whole.

2.4 Accessibility of the venue

- *ease of payment* - through EIF/Hub box office. The addition of on-line booking this year is very welcome, improving access on top of EIF's efficient personal, postal, fax and telephone systems already in place.
- *location* - Fine. Easy access from public transport and car parking.
- *external signposting* – Fine.
- *internal directional signing* – Fine.
- *access and provision for disabled people* – adequate (improvements will be made as part of the forthcoming capital redevelopment)
- *timing of event* – excellent to have late-night concerts, although this seemed to work best at the weekend.

2.5 Customer service

- quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering).

Front of house and bar service was surprisingly chaotic given the relatively small audiences for these events. The ushers had inadequate floats for selling programmes and the bar service was painfully slow.

3. Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding (if applicable)

Following is an extract from the Scottish Arts Council's conditions of grant for funded organisations:

"The company should acknowledge Scottish Arts Council funding in press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, notices display and exhibition materials, websites and advertising). Acknowledgement of the Scottish Arts Council grant must also be

made in any secondary or indirect products arising from the revenue funding such as recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, and computer programmes etc. “

Please comment on whether the above conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company’s website.

Conditions of grant met, with the Scottish Arts Council logo prominently displayed in the EIF brochure, as well as the programme for this event. The Scottish Arts Council is acknowledged on the website, although one has to look for it. EIF may wish to consider putting the logo on the homepage.

Name: Cindy Sughrue

Date: 30 August 2003

Advisor

Scottish Arts Council Officer

