

BBCCO/Lockhart – review

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

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Andrew Clements

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Ether, the Southbank Centre's celebration of musical innovation and technology, is always a broad church, but this year many of the events have a distinctly transatlantic slant. There are evenings devoted to Michael Gordon, John Cage and Christian Marclay still to come, while the BBC Concert Orchestra's contribution with its principal conductor, Keith Lockhart, was a programme of music by Julia Wolfe.

Best known in Britain as one of the co-founders (with Gordon and David Lang) of the hugely influential New York-based Bang on a Can, Wolfe is a distinctive, abrasive musical voice. The earliest of the four pieces here was Tell Me Everything, from 1994, a perfect introduction to her world of close-packed, grinding harmonies and pungent rhythmic profiles, which often pack a great deal of complexity into their apparently blunt outlines. Cruel Sister, inspired by the same old English ballad that also generated works by Birtwistle and Muhly (not names you often find in the same sentence), is a striking half-hour showpiece for strings alone, which moves from menace to an uneasy calm, and then to a pizzicato-led coda. LAD demonstrates how Wolfe's style adapts to the most unlikely instruments, in this case nine sets of Scottish bagpipes, here courtesy of the be-kilted Red Hot Chilli Pipers, generating a formidable mass of sound from which a keening melody gradually emerges.

There was a brand new work, too, the idiosyncratically capitalised riSE and fLY, a percussion concerto commissioned by the BBC for Colin Currie. It's literally the remarkable Currie for half the work: the solo part is first played entirely on his body, with amplified claps, chest slaps and stamps, before a marginally more conventional second half uses a variety of found objects, plastic and metal cans, oven racks and more.

Wolfe calls it "urban folk music for the orchestra", but like so much of her music it's

also a wonderfully imaginative, boundary-crossing fusion of sources and styles.

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