

Classical review: John Luther Adams at the East Neuk Festival (*****)

It could have all gone so horribly wrong. Planning a large-scale outdoor performance of contemporary classical music by a little-known composer, in Fife, even at the height of summer, brings a burdensome barrage of risks. Will anyone turn up? What will they make of it? Most importantly – will the weather hold?

There were contingency plans in case of rain, of course, but thankfully the gloriously hot, sunny day meant they weren't needed. And in the event, the organisers needn't have worried about the audience either: a large and enthusiastic crowd from toddlers to senior citizens flocked to the event, creating a joyful atmosphere of excitement and expectation.

The music being performed, part of Fife's eclectic five-day East Neuk Festival, was the hour-long *Inuksuit* by Alaskan-based composer John Luther Adams, known for the environmental and ecological themes of his music that evokes nature in all its raw beauty. 'Music is not what I do. It's how I understand the world,' Adams has explained. 'When I was younger, I painted musical landscapes. But I'm no longer interested in painting pictures or telling stories in music. I no longer want my music to be *about* nature. I want my music to *become* nature.'

Music and nature mingled to brilliant and memorable effect in *Inuksuit*, as 30 percussionists nestled in among the shrubs and trees of the walled garden of the Cambo Estate, near Crail, or solemnly paced through its pathways, inviting listeners to follow them and hear Adams's evocative music from different perspectives.

East Neuk artistic director Svend Brown described the piece as 'a single breath', and indeed, it grew from the faintest whisperings of the performers' exhalations, amplified through home-made cardboard cones, to a dense cacophony of clashing cymbals and gongs, hammered drums and wailing sirens, with the haunting cries of conch shells issuing enigmatic signals. The piece slowly subsided to a bewitching conclusion of birdsong fragments played on tinkling glockenspiels and crotales, while the sounds of the gorgeous Cambo garden – the burbling river, wind in the trees, and the voices of the birds themselves – gradually took over again.

In his programme note, Adams explained that the piece's Inuit title means 'to act in the capacity of the human', and his grand arc of music seemed to portray the impact of man's activity on the natural environment, as well as reminding us of the brevity of our presence in the context of the immensity of natural processes. As the piece gradually headed towards silence, listeners slowly gravitated towards the last remaining players, keen to hold on to the final vestiges of this enchanting experience.

Inuksuit was followed by more music by Adams, this time in the sweltering indoor space of Cambo's converted potato barn. *Songbirdsongs* again had grand ambitions – to convey the freedom and expressivity of birdsong using human musical instruments – but it was for the more modest forces of two piccolo players and three percussionists. As the piece's lyrical birdsong fragments whizzed back and forth between players, across the heads of the (again) wandering audience members, what was most impressive was the subtle yet dramatic playing of the Red Note Ensemble's musicians, and the highly evocative soundscapes they managed to conjure.

As the East Neuk Festival's brochure admits, although John Luther Adams is held in high regard in his native USA, his music is relatively little known this side of the Atlantic. In staging these two ambitious works, the festival made major

moves towards remedying that – and provided what must surely count as two of this summer's most magical and memorable musical experiences.

Next year's [East Neuk Festival](#) runs from 27 June to 6 July 2014