

Edinburgh International Book Festival – REVIEW – Scarlatti and Cage with David Greilsammer and David Mitchell

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* muses on the nature of boundaries – namely, the boundaries between noise and sound. The novel suggests that all boundaries are conventions, that one may cross “if only one can first conceive of doing so”. It doesn't seem beyond the realm of possibility that Mitchell had this thought in mind when he and the acclaimed conductor and pianist **David Greilsammer** collaborated for their latest project: an evening of the piano sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti and John Cage, interspersed with Mitchell's writing, performed in the atmospheric setting of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral.



One of the best aspects of the evening was this breaking down of the boundaries – and the 300-odd years – that lie between Scarlatti and Cage. By juxtaposing the Baroque and the controversially avant-garde, Greilsammer illustrated not how these two composers are different, but how they are the same.

Greilsammer's considered interpretation of the Scarlatti spoke delicacy but not sentimentality; his performance of Cage was transcendent. Cage's refusal to adhere to traditional form (and traditional tuning of the piano) shares an affinity with Scarlatti's exploration of sonata form, burgeoning as it was in his time from the earlier binary form.

The boundaries between Scarlatti and Cage are conventions, as (Mitchell suggests) are those between noise and music. A sort of dynamic tension and circularity is created by Greilsammer in the acoustic of St Mary's that reveals the influence of Baroque counterpoint on Cage's work, and the vision in Scarlatti's sonatas.



It is a shame, therefore, that it was the acoustic of St Mary's that ultimately let this concert down. Mitchell's readings were thought-provoking and varied – but from where we were seated, they were also largely inaudible. Having given the issue some thought and having seen what others had to say about the concert on social media, I feel I cannot properly review Mitchell's contribution.

As someone who has herself spent many hours either performing or in the audience in the Cathedral, I am well aware how fickle the acoustics of the building can be. This seems an even greater shame given that what I could hear of the readings was quite brilliant. A personal favourite was the monologue on Scarlatti's inspiration to write his first piano sonata:

□“Why did I write it? What choice did I have? No one else heard it.”

There were flashes of razor-sharp humour and pathos too in the tale of the 'meanderer', a critic doomed to the most unusual of fates after a run-in with an author whose work he lambasted.



Scarlatti and Cage may well have been excellent; indeed, at moments it was one of the most original concerts I have

enjoyed in recent years. That it was hampered by technical difficulties is a genuine pity. Those who were in better areas of the building with better sound quality almost certainly enjoyed an engrossing and moving evening in which boundaries in music and the spoken word were evinced as the conventions that, perhaps, they are.

Saturday 26th August, 2017

St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral

Edinburgh Book Festival