

TIMES ONLINE

Robert Ashley/MAE and Nieuw Ensemble/Spanjaard

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Neil Fisher at St Paul's Hall and the Town Hall, Huddersfield

There's been some excellent talk during this year's Huddersfield Festival about broadening the focus, welcoming different approaches and generally opening the gates to the High Church of Contemporary to some less orthodox believers. Just in case anyone was missing the good/bad old days, however, there was Thursday's order of service – pull up a pew and start praying that the musical emperor had clothes. The main event first, which came second: late-night storytelling with Robert Ashley. It sounds innocuous, but Ashley is an avant-garde purist, with an *idée fixe* – voices can sound like music, and vice versa – that he believes represents the future of opera. What this meant in practice was either Ashley's shaggy-dog stories, mellifluously croaked out by the composer through a microphone, or the sterling work of Ensemble MAE, either swapping excruciatingly tedious refrains or, in *Hidden Similarities*, reciting one of Ashley's beatnik ballads in Dutch as well as playing the soapy accompaniment. We did get subtitles; what a pity they only showed up the sheer banality of the text. Ashley surely doesn't want his listeners to sit on the fence, so I won't: as a Yoko Ono-style cabaret act, he might cut the mustard, but stuffed and mounted in St Paul's Hall, while we sat stupefied/admiringly in front of him, this encounter moved rapidly from the amusing to the brain-sapping.

Earlier on, the Nieuw Ensemble and conductor Ed Spanjaard had served up a surfeit of UK premieres from young, largely European composers. The stand-out highlight was Brice Pauset's *Vita Nova*, fizzing with the volatility of the encounter between Irvine Arditti's harshly glinting violin part – superbly played – and the teeming responses from the players. Here an uncompromisingly modernist approach had a purpose and a destination. Too many of the other pieces simply gave us the form without the content. The works not afraid to admit some humour – Giel Vleggaar's *Atomic UFO Saves the Day (Again)* and Mayke Nas's jaunty *La Belle Chocolatière* – fared much better. Remember both names.