



Peter Broderick at Galway Jazz Festival 2018

A New Edge to the West

The Galway Jazz Festival has a new momentum and was bigger again this year – Toner Quinn attended a mix of concerts, from the Radio String Quartet to Peter Broderick, plus a debate on Brexit.

- [Toner Quinn](#)

The Galway Jazz Festival jumped from 40 to over 60 events this year. It reflects the ambition of the new team (Ciarán Ryan, Ellen Cranitch and Matthew Berrill) and their determination to establish the festival not just in Ireland but on the international map. For those in the west, the volume of events meant a sense of carnival in early October, just as the winter clouds were settling in. Galway is small and medieval, a handful of thin criss-crossing streets. Add in several dozen musicians for four days and you will change its artistic climate. This is the immediate achievement of Galway Jazz 2.0 – it has created a new identity for itself, an autumnal buzz, separate to the summer festivals for which the city is known.

GJF began with Radio String Quartet from Vienna at St Nicholas' Church on Thursday 4 October, a collaboration with Music for Galway. Violinists Bernie Mallinger and Igmarr Jenner stood opposite each other, violist Cynthia Liao and cellist Sophie Abraham at the centre. Together they played 90 minutes of their own extended compositions, sometimes with Mallinger and Abraham adding voice on top. The quartet often relied on a similar descending bassline, chord progression and syncopated rhythm for their compositions, building from wandering improv to intense Reich-like textures. At times I heard the neo-folk group Lau, or Jónsi from Sigur Rós, but with few of the interesting harmonies. The pieces were generally taken from their 2017 album *In Between Silence*, which has a particularly meditative aesthetic, exploring the moments before birth and after death, but, however conceptually interesting, compositionally it became repetitive. When they did reach into their earlier works, there seemed to be more to engage with. Several audience members stood in applause at the end in a full church, but I unfortunately felt unmoved for the entire concert.

Responsive

Radio String Quartet was just one of the headline acts this year. Galway Jazz also managed to attract Ashley Henry (a guest resident Music Director at Ronnie Scott's in London at just 25), saxophonist Anna Lena Schnabel (best newcomer at the German Echo Jazz awards in 2017 for her album *Books, Bottles & Bamboo*), ECM artist Julia Hülsmann and British singer Liane Carroll.

On Saturday afternoon, Nick Roth's solo set at Black Gate Cultural Centre was actually his first solo concert ever. Using laptop with piano and sax, his music was not looped but rather played back to him in different forms, and against which he would then improvise. Any sound from the audience became part of the performance too. Roth was impressively responsive to the most subtle of aural shifts, replying in higher registers on the piano or with clicking of keys on sax.

Brexit debate

That morning, Roth had also taken part in the GJF debate on Brexit and music, which I chaired. The conversation not only had London-born Roth and pianist Huw Warren from North Wales, who had given a performance the night before in the Mick Lally Theatre, but GJF had also invited Brian Carson from Moving on Music in Belfast, Olga Barry from Kilkenny Arts Festival and Ciara Higgins from the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. It was a rare group of insights.

The debate began with a discussion of the practical difficulties Brexit will create – much more long-term planning and less freedom of movement – which was grim, but the cultural and emotional impact also began to emerge. Brexit was going to drag the 'family' (Higgins' phrase) of Britain and Ireland further apart, just as they were getting to know each other properly. The views of Carson, who has been promoting music in Northern Ireland since the 1970s – through thick and thin – provided a stark reminder of what is at stake: '...things have been improving... I'm still hoping it doesn't happen.'

A voice from the floor asked why the music community is so out of touch, locked in its own world, not understanding the impetus for Brexit. This prompted Roth to engage in an inspiring description of what music means to society, that it has many languages, not one, and that its influence on society can be subtle but profound. The heat began to increase, the room reaching little agreement on music's voice in this political maelstrom, but we tried to end on a positive note, with Carson reminding us that there is 'hope in music'. Nonetheless, my feeling after the debate was that Brexit is a desperate turn of events for Irish and British society, dredged up from the disillusionment of the economic crash. The deep need for a new cast of political and intellectual leadership remains.

On Sunday, I was excited to hear the Kathrin Pechlof Trio at the Mick Lally Theatre. An improvising concert harpist from Germany, she was joined by Christian Weidner (alto saxophone) and Robert Landfermann (double bass). Several of the carefully constructed compositions were written by Weidner, and he and Landfermann were free creative voices at times, but overall it felt like quite a cerebral performance. Pechlof rarely diverted too radically from the sheet music, and we never got a full sense of her improvising ability.