

## Music

# Rhythm is a pianist

Silvio Camilleri is transported by the evidence of talent, hard-work and sheer musicality in Gabi Sultana's performance.

Gabi Sultana's solo piano recital at the Music Room of St James Cavalier included a selection of post-1950s compositions, some of which featured extended techniques such as piano string plucking, playing clusters of notes using the forearm and percussive effects. The programme consisted of the same bill presented during the IBLA Grand Prize International Music Competition in Ragusa, for which the pianist was awarded the Contemporary Music Award.

The opening work was *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* by American composer Frederic Rzewski, born in 1938. The composer makes references to a traditional song which recounts the hardships endured by factory labourers. Clusters of notes and repetitive rhythms suggesting the aggressive sounds of industrial machinery are evident in the opening and closing sections. Rzewski's inventiveness is attested in the way he transformed the original melody such that it only becomes discernible towards the latter part of the work.

The articulation of the rhythmic phrases in the beginning of the piece showed decisiveness on part of the performer, and Sultana seemed to be comfortably enjoying the rendition of the middle blues-like section.

The second work was by the 22-year-old Belgian composer Koen Quintyn, who has already received various awards for his compositions and instrumental performances. His work is entitled *Assembly Lines - Motivational Practice*. Written in 2013, it features similarities with Rzewski's composition, through emphasising recurring rhythmic cells in the outer sections, with melodic writing in between.

Quintyn's work is inspired by Andy Warhol's assembly lines, where artists or craftsmen were



employed to create the works conceived by their maestro. By muting particular piano strings using the fingers, the pianist evoked the repetitive work patterns, and the haunting atmosphere of the piece lasted till the sustained resonance of the final note.

The third work was *Makrokosmos* by American composer George Crumb, born in 1929. This is a four-volume series, with the last two being scored for two pianists and other instruments. *Makrokosmos* constitutes a milestone towards the exploration of a wide range of piano timbres.

Apart from featuring extended piano techniques, *Makrokosmos* requires occasional vocal input on part of the performer such as whistling, muttering or shouting. Interesting resonances are created

for instance by throwing a metal chain or a sheet of paper on the piano strings.

**"Sultana brought out the contrasts between the passages"**

Sultana interpreted four movements from Volume 1, and three movements from Volume 2. I particularly liked the crisp rendition of *Spring Fire*, followed by the pensive approach of *Dream Images*, with its quotation from Chopin's *Fantasia Impromptu*. Sultana closed off with confident interpretations of *Gargoyles* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*,

where forceful rhythms were again at the fore.

Next in line was *Evrjali* by Greek composer Iannis Xenakis. Dating to 1973, this work features passages which cannot be achieved by a piano soloist due to dense overlapping themes to be executed at fast tempos, and notes which are not available on a piano keyboard. The latter are, therefore, transposed to lower octaves.

The interpretation of the work entails the selection of those elements to be played, and others to be de-emphasised. Having mastered a particular reduced version, a pianist can opt to change or add on further elements, in an attempt to move closer towards the (unattainable) perfect interpretation.

Commenting about a rendition of *Evrjali* is a bit difficult, seeing that it

was written in a way which is not possible to perform on solo piano. Having said this, Sultana brought out the contrasts between the passages featuring a wide range of pitches and the more percussive-like sections, involving a narrower range of notes. This mixture is intended to create 'unexpected' passages, which together with rapid tempos imbue the work with an element of tension.

The encore was *Ruletka* by contemporary Russian composer Efrem Podgaitis. Born in 1949, Podgaitis penned an impressive number of works, including 13 operas, orchestral scores, chamber compositions and instrumental music. *Ruletka* again featured the performer in swift rhythmic playing; this time on a lighter vein.

In sum, the concert comprised an interesting mixture of 20th century classics and very recent works. Sultana's vigorous performances were enhanced by her ability to sustain fast *ostinato* rhythms which demand considerable physical preparation. Despite that swiftness is not the only virtue which a performer is expected to acquire, it considerably helps when interpreting such compositions.

The choice of works was possibly influenced by the pianist's admiration of percussion music and her brief period of study with Steve Reich, whose compositions emphasise gradual changes of repetitive rhythms.

On the other hand, I think that if the programme were to include alternative types of post-1950 compositions, it would have better showcased others of Sultana's piano talents. These include her approach to more meditative types of passages, as was evident in her interpretation of Crumb's movement *Dream Images*.