

First Festival reflections

The reception of Jonathan Mills' debut programme surpassed his expectations, finds Mark Fisher

IT'S BEEN some year for Jonathan Mills. Taking up the post of artistic director of the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival only months before his first programme was due to be launched, he was propelled into the planning, decision-making and deal-brokering necessary for the smooth running of the event. No wonder he is feeling a kind of cultural jet-lag as he sits in his Royal Mile office just over twelve months into the job.

When you ask him how his inaugural year has been, it's as if he's not yet ready to answer. 'I'm only now starting to draw breath and, of course, there's next year to think about immediately,' he laughs. 'I'm in a slightly unreal reverie. I'm enjoying it, but it will take me a year or two to understand what it all meant.'

Pin him down to the specifics of the 2007 Festival, however, and he admits to being delighted by the reception. He is heartened that audiences gave an enthusiastic welcome not only to his core programme but also his innovations. These included much more early music, a blurring of the line between theatre and music and a thematic link between events throughout the programme. 'My expectations were exceeded,' he says with delight.

If he had any doubts about Edinburgh's appetite for renaissance music, they were dispelled as soon as the Festival swung into life. Within a couple of days of the first concert of Monteverdi madrigals, the whole series sold out. It was the same story for the Harmony and Humanity programme. 'That was very encouraging,' he says, pleased to be offering music as broad

in range as the paintings in a national gallery. 'We're an arts festival, not a festival of 19th century Germanic orchestral music.'

The director's 2007 line-up allowed audiences to trace connections from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* to the music/theatre experiments of the Wooster Group. They could also put Monteverdi into a clearer historical context through the early music recitals and enjoy a varied range of treatments of classical myths by talents such as Trisha Brown and the National Theatre of Scotland. Everyone's journey through the programme was different and everyone came away with a story to tell. 'The most gratifying thing was the number of people who said, "I went to *The Bacchae*, *Poppea*, *L'Orfeo* and to Greyfriars Church and this is my story,"' he says. 'They were telling me their interpretations. They really liked the sense of connections being made.'

He was pleased too with the open-minded way in which audiences accepted genre-defying productions such as the Wooster Group's *La Didone*, which mixed opera, theatre and film or Theatre Cryptic's *Optical Identity*, which presented music theatrically. 'Monteverdi didn't see these distinctions between music and theatre,' he says. 'People care about the experience, not the genre.'

Even if he doesn't follow exactly the same pattern in his 2008 line-up, he can move forward in the confidence that 2007 was a success. He is careful to attribute that success less to himself than to the loyal supporters of the Festival, not least the Patrons and Muses. Without their engagement, the

Festival would cease to have meaning as a cultural celebration. 'It's an enormous privilege to do this job and I owe it to the people to make sure I lead from the front and say, "Welcome to your Festival. I hope you get enthralled and even enraged, but I hope you don't ignore us." This Festival is the city's gift to itself. It's an incredible gift to give and one that implies trust. I have to earn that trust from people to take another step on the journey with me. In order to get there, we need the support not just of public funders, but individuals, trusts and corporations to ensure the gift is worth having.'