

Nuit Bleue

ROYAL SALTWORKS OF ARC-ET-SENANS
ARC-ET-SENANS, FRANCE

Located in a secluded corner of eastern France, the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans is the work of visionary 18th century French architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Housing a salt production facility, workshops and employee's dwellings, this walled complex was designed to rationalise the production process and safeguard the workers from the temptations of the outside world – thereby reflecting Ledoux's utopian belief that architecture could model and transform social behaviour. Associating the functionalism of industrial architecture with the rigour and harmony of the neoclassical style, the imposing buildings making up the complex boast porticoes and pediments and are laid out in a vast semicircle, in the centre of which stands the director's house. Their restored remains provide an ideal environment for the annual Nuit Bleue Festival, which for the past five years has been exploring the relations between music and architecture, sound and the visual environment.

Spread across two nights, this year's edition presented a variety of acousmatic and electronic music programmes in different buildings, while a night time outdoor light installation by visual artist Michel Verjux reconfigured the architecture of the site. On the first evening, the cavernous expanses of one of the former workshops played host to a programme whose highlights included a selection of pieces by Turkish composers. Erdem Helvacioğlu and Bora Simsek were among the younger composers represented: the former's *Dance Of Fire* deftly wove together ominous washes of sound and muffled crashes, while Simsek's aptly titled *Fugazi* (meaning 'fucked-up situation' in US Army jargon) was an eerily compelling recreation of sounds of warfare that filled the space with desolate whirrs, distant explosions, persistent sirens and an inescapable sense of foreboding. Most powerful of all however, were the pieces by veteran electronic music composer İlhan Mimaroglu, who studied composition with Varèse and worked with

Ussachevsky at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in the 1960s. His harrowing 1974 composition, *To Kill A Sunrise*, layered texts by Che Guevara and Guatemalan guerrilla poet Marco Antonio Flores over mournful, plangent timbres and suspenseful ripples of sound. The programme also included an impressive set by Norwegian electronica proponent Phonophani and French composer Christophe Ruetsch, who worked with abrasive crashes, mosquito-like whines and sounds reminiscent of straining ropes, welding them into a seamless whole. Later that night, Carl Michael von Hausswolff's set proved an immersive, all-pervading physical experience. Constructed by means of 14 oscillators and taped sounds, it opened with soft, slow dirge-like noises that soon gave way to an unrelenting hypnotic throb. Like an accelerating heartbeat, it gradually increased in speed and volume, only to be swallowed up by thunderous billows of sound.

Pierre Henry's premiere of *Utopia* on the second night took place outdoors, making the most of the Saltworks. Not to be outdone by his surroundings, the 79 year old replicated the shape of the site by setting up his console directly opposite the ornate columns of the director's house and placing 60-odd loudspeakers in a semicircle behind him. He had also

penned a brief text in which he compared the different stages in the construction of the site to the composition of a musical work. A homage to Ledoux, *Utopia* was a lavish, bustling soundscape full of twists and turns that leapt from unruly hisses to glistening nuggets of sound or skittering percussive motifs. Its busyness proved wearisome at times, but Verjux's motionless semicircular pools of light projected on the surrounding buildings helped to counterbalance its more overblown moments.

The Raster-Noton label showcase that took place indoors later that night was likewise helped along by visuals, albeit of a very different character. Frank Bretschneider's unremitting clicks and whooshes were brought to life by the unceasing flow of black and white lines flitting across the overhead screen. More thought-provoking, however, was the performance by Signal, tonight playing as a duo of Bretschneider and Olaf Bender in the absence of Carsten Nicolai. Their harsh, relentless beats conjured up a sensation of emptiness and desolation compounded by the enigmatic lines and expressionless black squares of their visuals – a dystopian world countering the utopian promise of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's Royal Saltworks.

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Pierre Henry at Nuit Bleue

