

Laurel Halo



Julia Reidy + Laurel Halo

Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany

The Kiezsalon concept is simple: Two artists, two 30 minute sets and a small enough audience to leave plenty of room for each performance to breathe. While clubs and venues remain closed or only partially accessible across Berlin, the event series borrows from a tradition with deep roots in the German capital's longstanding club culture: on 16 September, it returns as an open air set against a late summer sunset on a rooftop at the heart of a sprawling park.

The event series is intentionally limited in its scope: to constrain an artist to just 30 minutes offers an opportunity for clarity, precision and intent. As such, Kiezsalon's idiosyncratic format lends itself to original compositions, with both Australian experimental composer and

guitarist Julia Reidy and Berlin via Detroit electronic musician Laurel Halo premiering new work for the occasion. Both pieces make the most of Kiezsalon's first show at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, where couplings of chairs are spread across the expansive terrace and the ambient rustle of the breeze filtering through the inner city forest bleeds into each set.

From the evening's small provisional stage – dwarfed by a backdrop of HKW's striking curved rooftop – Julia Reidy's work is all-encompassing: As she fingerpicks a 12-string guitar, she also works a control panel of synths and pedals. Her track loops over itself, gaining momentum as dizzying arpeggios and licks repeat themselves under swelling synths and Auto-Tuned ad libs whispered into a microphone like a hymn, or a prayer. It's hypnotic and arresting, and as the performance nears its end, the



Julia Reidy

frantic loops give way to reverb-heavy fingerpicking, this slower, pitched high and almost celestial in its timbre.

Where Reidy's set turns inward, wrapping around itself ad infinitum as a confessional, Halo's composition draws itself outwards. As she performs, she stands alone on the stage, moving cautiously as she mixes. It's a refreshingly cinematic composition: what begins as a grumbling bass becomes a chorus of hisses and droning synths. As the set continues, there's a sense of motion: the low rumbles grow closer, while a palette of scattered noises is filtered and thrown into the distances, as if approaching from far beyond the horizon. A choir of breathy synths wheezes and croaks like steel rubbing against steel; muted horns play in the background and a string section swells, rocking back and forth. Like Reidy, Halo's set is spatially progressive: It fills

HKW's rooftop terrace in three dimensions.

Throughout both performances, there's an idle buzz of chatter as drinks are refreshed, chairs are rearranged and people circulate around the terrace. Kiezsalon, founded and curated by Michael Rosen in 2015, is known for its unaffected approach to live performances: the wine selection, he jokes, is as important as the music itself. Its success is two-fold: the breezy nonchalance pairs well with the dimming afterglow of the sun and the restlessness of late summer, and even more so as Berlin's live music scene returns from its months' long slumber.

Shows, concerts and club nights are slowly re-emerging as outdoor raves dwindle in popularity and the weather grows colder, and wetter. But as if a send-off for the season, Kiezsalon in open air marks a new beginning.

Nathan Ma

Dara String Festival

Musikbrauerei, Berlin, Germany

Following months of silence, where virtually all concerts in Europe had been cancelled in the wake of coronavirus, live music has slowly, haltingly been returning to Berlin, albeit with restrictions we're all growing accustomed to: face masks, distance between seats, and providing contact tracing information.

Still, the second edition of the Dara String Festival, an event curated by violinist Biliana Voutchkova – who also performs throughout the weekend – feels like a leap toward some kind of orthodoxy even if conditions require quicksilver adaptations. The music is played by six excellent string musicians: Voutchkova, cellists Lucy Railton and Frances-Marie Uitti, violinist Akiko Ahrendt, and violists Yodfat Miron and Catherine Lamb. The camaraderie between the musicians is palpable, as is their joy in returning to the stage. The festival takes place at Musikbrauerei, a former brewery in Prenzlauer Berg, and the programming, intended to occur in two different rooms in the building, ends up being consolidated mainly in the larger upstairs hall halfway

through the opening night when it becomes clear that all of the attendees could be safely accommodated in the main space, although an installation featuring homemade monochord instruments built by the Cologne-based Ahrendt remains in the dank basement.

The programme includes a few world premieres, a couple of improvisations, some duets and a handful of venerable solo pieces by contemporary music titans. There is a pervading roughness to many of the performances, understandable given the provisional nature of the festival, particularly on the first night. With lives and work practices upended by social restrictions, there was little time for rehearsals of several group pieces and the grassroots nature of the endeavour injected some moderate technical hiccups.

The most notable music is a couple of group pieces. On Saturday Railton, Voutchkova and Miron – positioned in a triangle configuration with each musician facing outward – play a weightless piece by Ukrainian composer Anna Korsun called *Sottilissime*, marked by a shimmering rising and falling that is devastating in its ghostly timbre. The following night

features the world premiere of *Descensus Trio*, a stunning trio piece by Lamb performed by the composer, Railton and Voutchkova, in which largely unbroken bowing shapes a gorgeous meditation rife with kaleidoscopic harmony. The violinist regularly articulates a lovely descending scalar melody before it is passed around to the other musicians in a constantly shifting rhythmic navigation. Both of these works embody a kind of ritualistic fragility that seems apt given our current circumstances.

The Berlin-based Israeli violist Yodfat Miron – who conveys rigorous new music virtuosity – plays two solo works with bracing precision. She opens Saturday's event, perched above the audience in a balcony for technical use, with Georg Katzer's *Kette (Chain)*, in which a simple motif becomes increasingly complex, as if the musician has to struggle with a can of worms they've opened. Miron, however, remains in total control, and her sensitive treatment of the piece's graceful dénouement is striking.

Later she delivers a razor-sharp interpretation of the Iannis Xenakis solo *Embellie*, a microtonally dense

collection of discrete fragments with folkish undertones, to which the violist brings true cohesion. Ahrendt gives a beautiful performance of Carola Bauckholt's *Doppelbelichtung*, in which the musician imitates prerecorded, sometimes manipulated birdsong (as well as the thumping of a woodpecker) in a multichannel projection that surrounds the violinist, who occasionally peers around the darkened room as if she were looking for the source of those avian sounds. Uitti performs the Jonathan Harvey piece *Curve With Plateaux*, sweeping from its luxuriant yet muscular low end toward no less assertive yet more delicate upper register cries before cascading back down.

She also deploys her famed double-bow technique on a loosely composed original titled *This*, which she performs in near darkness each night, with divergent results, both gripping in the way she stretches the timbre like a painter. The fact that Voutchkova is able to produce the whole thing under such adverse conditions feels like a triumph, giving a glimpse of normalcy during a very abnormal time.

Peter Margasak