

Helm/JG Thirlwell/Apartment House + Anna Peaker + Andrew Chalk & Tom James Scott

Cafe Oto, London, UK

Luke Younger – aka Helm – is an audacious sonic explorer, a maker of electronic soundscapes that unsettle and surprise, which begs the question why so much of the opening night of his two day residency at Cafe Oto is squandered on polite, decorative sounds antithetical to his own vision. It is after 10pm when Helm himself, with JG Thirlwell and musicians from Apartment House, takes the stage. But, by this point, too much energy and good will has been sucked out of the room.

First up is Anna Peaker, who begins by fumbling awkwardly with the wiring between her keyboard and looping system, cursing quietly over a loose connection or some other technical snag. I've enjoyed some of Peaker's plush drones on record,

but this lame Alvin Lucier tribute act is a major disappointment. A sighing, falling minor-toned keyboard figure emerges out of those preparatory fumbles that, mirroring the processes of Lucier's *I Am Sitting In A Room* or *Ricochet Lady*, is slowly devoured by the pure resonant overtones of the loop itself being looped. Lucier's pieces have meaning because the material being worked on has depth and a purposeful internal design; you're happy to be taken along for the ride. Peaker's material, though, is utilitarian and uninspiring. Once the general direction of travel becomes clear, the piece finishes in my head before it finishes onstage.

At least Peaker tries. The three pieces Andrew Chalk and Tom James Scott perform during the second set – Scott on piano, Chalk adding wraparound electronics – are merely trying. This is sweet-toothed harmony doodling

around twee and ingratiating arpeggios. Perhaps Scott and Chalk thought of it as a latter-day response to Brian Eno and Harold Budd, but their humourless pomp has more in sympathy with the dollar-rich minimalism of Italian composer Ludovico Einaudi. Such music clearly finds its audience, but feels out of place at Oto.

Immediately Helm's own set starts by emitting a rude electronic belch: people sit up in their seats. Despite the late hour, something, at long last, to chew on! Four tracks from *Chemical Flowers* – "Capital Crisis (New City Loop)", "I Knew You Would Respond", "You Are The Database" and the album's title track – are woven around Helm's new material in an hour long uninterrupted span.

JG Thirlwell, who wrote the string arrangements for Helm's album, cues the musicians from Apartment House – a string quartet consisting of Gordon

MacKay and Mira Benjamin (violins), Bridget Carey (viola), Anton Lukoszevics (cello) – instinct telling him, apparently, when the strings might brush against the electronics to achieve maximum expressive impact.

Occasionally the air clears, allowing a harmonically smudged hymnal chorale, or a brief glimpse of bowed cello, the space to sing. More often, Thirlwell evokes the tumbling glissando strings typical of Xenakis, 1950s Penderecki or Gloria Coates which, in the context of electronics stampeding relentlessly forward, feel more than a mere hat-tip towards those avant garde moments you have always loved. The strings, however temporarily, however illusory, bend the contours of the electronics, spinning them in other directions – uprooting the sounds from their anchors.

Philip Clark