Festival fever

With festivals taking place up and down the country, it seems that Britain needs little excuse to celebrate new music, writes Owen Leech

Given that serious contemporary music occupies a rather marginal place in the cultural consciousness of the music-loving public, it is remarkable that Britain boasts such a variety of impressively tenacious and fearlessly adventurous festivals of new music. Recent economic woes have no doubt forced fresh challenges on festival administrators – and some smaller and less established concerns have had to either close down or announce indefinite postponement. Nevertheless, there remain some doughty youngsters and newcomers, some of which I will consider – in this far-from-comprehensive survey – alongside some established rivals.

New music draws much of its impulse and inspiration from the worlds of both intellectual and technological innovation, so it is entirely natural that many of these festivals owe their existence to visionary individuals within university music departments. Preeminent among these, of course, is the 34-year-old Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, founded by Richard Steinitz in 1978 – this year running from 16 to 25 November. Long considered a heavyweight among European new music forums, HCMF has hosted and featured the titans of post-war music, including Boulez, Berio, Cage, Ligeti, Stockhausen and Xenakis. The focus has perhaps shifted a little away from the European intellectual mainstream, no doubt reflecting the interests of Graham McKenzie, who took over as artistic director in 2006, in experimental music and also improvisation.

This year’s featured composer is the extraordinary Norwegian vocalist and composer Maja Ratkje who will be performing several of her own works, not least the UK premiere of her concerto for voice and orchestra. There will also be UK and world premieres of new works by Matthias Pintscher, Dai Fujikura, Wolfgang Rihm and Glenn Branca, as well as a rare performance of Morton Feldman’s seminal four-and-a-half-hour For Philip Guston (www.hcmf.co.uk). Experimental music is very much the focus of another much younger university-led festival run by the fascinating and internationally admired Interdisciplinary Centre for Computer Music Research at Plymouth University. The Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival 2013

Progressive experiment: Consortiuml7 appears at the inaugural Stone Newington Contemporary Music Festival
Unfortunately, some of the other important university-based festivals have yet to release even basic information about their 2013 events, yet given the consistent quality and variety of their recent festivals it will certainly be worth checking the websites of the Bangor New Music Festival (www.bnmf.co.uk) and Queen’s University, Belfast’s long-running Sonorities Festival (www.qub.ac.uk/sonorities), and also Canterbury Christ Church’s Sounds New Festival (www.soundsnew.org.uk).

Two ambitious region-wide festivals deserve particular mention: North-east Scotland’s impressive Sound festival, apparently thriving in its eighth year, and south Wales’ Vale of Glamorgan festival which though founded as far back as 1969, redefined itself as a ‘festival of living composers’ in 1992. This year’s month-long Sound Scotland programme (www.sound-scotland.co.uk) runs from 19 October to 18 November and boasts no fewer than 17 world premières, including new works by Robert Saxton, Hew Watkins, Stephen Montague and Claudia Molitor, and performances all over the region by the likes of New Music Ireland, Benjmain, Elisabeth Chojnacka, Ruth Wall and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. The full programme of the 2013 Vale of Glamorgan Festival (www.valeofglamorganfestival.org.uk), running from 9 to 18 May, is yet to be confirmed, but it will certainly feature a celebration of Graham Finkin at 50, a focus on contemporary Lithuanian composers and music by the increasingly prominent American composer Sebastian Currier, who won the lucrative Grasmeyer Award in 2007.

Also in Wales – but only just – is the lovely border town of Presteigne (or Llanandras) which has hosted an extraordinary festival since 1983. Originally founded by local composer Adrian Williams, since 1989 the Prestige Music Festival (www.presteingletonfestival.com) has been directed by conductor George Vass, an ardent and indefatigable promoter of new music, who has drawn composers and musicians from far and wide to this quiet spot in the Welsh Marches. Plans for the 2013 festival (21-27 August) are already impressively advanced. Benjamin Britten’s centenary is the defining influence on the programme – with performances not only of his works, but also by those composers befriended and influenced by him, Britten’s ‘Carlow River’ will be performed alongside a new chamber opera by Sally Beamish, while composer-in-residence Gabriel Jackson will be represented by performances of various orchestral, chamber and choral works. There are also commissions and new works from David Matthews (celebrating his 70th birthday), Thomas Hyde and Jon Opstad.

Lastly, a promising little new festival has sprung up in north-east London; the inaugural Stoke Newington Contemporary Music Festival, which takes place on the weekend of 20 and 21 October, takes its inspiration from a local history of ‘radicalism and progressive experiment’ in presenting post-war ‘classics’ by the likes of Cage, Berio and Feldman alongside new work by locally-based composers and musicians. Performers in this compact two-event festival include recorder ensemble Consortium5, singers Gina Fergione and Miriam Rodell, organist Gary Cheung and DJ Richard Lannoy – in an eclectic programme ranging from Louis Andriessen to Arvo Pärt, with new works from Brian Inglis and Matthew Lee Knowles. For further information see www.facebook.com/StokeNewingtonContemporaryMusicFestival.