

# Come on, feel the noise

What should music fans expect from a Night of the Unexpected? **Ivan Hewett** investigates

I'm standing in the airless crush of the Paradiso, Amsterdam's hippest music venue, bedazzled by swirling lights and smoke. Listening to some very strange music indeed. On stage, a Japanese woman bends over a traditional Japanese koto, or zither, strumming with forensic concentration, while the fingertips of her left hand flutter over the body of the instrument. From the speakers there emerges a strangely beguiling cacophony, a thrumming, pattering jangle.

This is not the sound I expect to hear from the delicate and venerable koto. And as an aural experience it's a million miles from the dense vocal polyphony of György Ligeti's *Last Acterna*, which we've just been assailed by, or the Dutch DJ in the small room upstairs. I'm feeling disorientated, but pleasantly so.

And that's exactly as it should be, because this is the Night of the Unexpected, an annual event which forms part of Amsterdam's Gaudeamus festival of new music. The night is devoted to that strange borderland of music known as "experimental". Once the players are on stage with their kotos and saxophones and laptops and mixing desks, improvisation and the chance glitches of electronic systems take over. Every sound we hear will be unexpected, to the players as much as the listeners.

But, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, there's a logic underlying the oddity. If the music is anarchic, the event as a whole really ought to be the same, which is why the Gaudeamus director Roland Speckle conceived the idea of an evening where there's

no programme of events, only the promise of something surprising always round the corner. It's an experience we'll be able to share next week, when the Huddersfield Festival launches a 10-day extravaganza of contemporary music with its own Night of the Unexpected. I'm here to find out what we might be in for.

After the koto performance I head for the small upstairs venue, which also has a programme of "surprise" events. First on is Japanese experimental improviser Toshimaru Nakamura, who creates noises from a mixing-board without any input. He sits there bending over the little box in his lap, while a startling range of clicks, whistles and low rours emerges from the speakers. The tiniest finger movement causes the sounds to swerve wildly, and often they disappear altogether. Part of the charm of the lo-fi electronic gear used in experimental music circles is that it's as temperamental as an oboe reed, and the performer can never be entirely sure what's going to emerge from the speakers.

I can just about tell in the gloom that the audience is composed of all ages, from teens to pensioners. The man next to me with the greying pony-tail turns out to be the director of the Vancouver Jazz Festival, doing a bit of talent-scouting. "Holland is the best place for this sort of music," he says. "I've been here dozens of times." It's all very alternative; one man wears a T-shirt bearing the legend "Drop beats not bombs!" People are very free and easy, with whispering couples in dark corners, and lots of drinking. At particularly



A wall of noise: Norwegian band Jazkamer Full Metal Line-Up on stage in Amsterdam's Night of the Unexpected

Soon I'm willing, and I retreat upstairs to the relative calm of Portuguese "noise artist" Rafael Toni. He holds a light-pen in one hand, and an enigmatic box trailing wires in the other, and with extraordinary ballistic grace causes them to intersect, creating sounds that range from sparse delicacy to machine-like insistence. Gradually the mild curiosity that's the default response to these events changes to enchantment.

So what might we expect at Huddersfield's own event? Certainly not a carbon-copy of Amsterdam's, though the festival director Graham McKenzie has programmed the night with Roland Speckle's help. "For me the deliberate clash of different styles and genres in Night of the Unexpected encapsulates what I have set out to achieve with my overall vision for the festival," he says. "It is intended as a taster. You can come along and sample a whole bunch of stuff in a single evening in an informal atmosphere."

It could be marvellous, but a few words of advice are in order. First, it could be very loud as well as very quiet. Second, be prepared for sounds that hail as much from the outer reaches of pop and jazz as from "classical contemporary". And most important: be patient, as what starts out seeming senseless and baffling can develop a charm and poetry all its own.

◆ Night of the Unexpected opens the Huddersfield Festival on Friday. Details: 01484 470128; www.hcmf.co.uk

striking moments everyone stops what they're doing and pays attention. It's like an 18th-century opera audience without the wigs.

Downstairs in the big hall it's time for Norwegian band Jazkamer Full Metal Line-Up, who according to the blurb are going to give us "a ruthless mix of metal and noise". On the stage there's a blaze of white light filtered through clouds of dry ice. Silhouetted against the clouds are

two drummers, two guitarists, and somebody on a laptop. Without warning a great wall of noise envelopes us, the two drummers are thrashing away for all they're worth, and the man playing the computer does something - possibly "courage return" - with furious abandon. The sound is amazing - it's just like that apocalyptic low thrumming that greets Harrison Ford as he descends on a rope into a snake-filled pit.