



Rajasthan Express musicians and Shye Ben Tzur perform *Junun* at the Barbican

Miriam Abdulla

Abdullah Ibrahim
Barbican Centre, London, February 27

The venerable old man of 'Cape jazz' could be described as South Africa's foremost landscape (or townshipscape) painter, who uses his grand piano to conjure vivid musical imagery and create tranquil atmospheres.

Given that his previous London show for the 2015 EFG London Jazz Festival found his subtle art rather overpowered by various British jazzers, this was a very welcome chance to hear him in his element, as a solo performer. More to the point, the unmistakably peaceful subtext of his wonderful, ruminative medleys couldn't have offered a more appropriate endorsement for the efforts of thousands of Londoners who'd attended CND's No to Trident march and rally earlier in the day. After all, he does hail from the Cape of Good Hope.

It was a generous, two-part set running to over one-and-a-half hours, and although there were no songs from his albums *Mannenberg* or *Soweto*, he did treat us to lengthy quotes from firm favourites such as 'Third Line Samba', 'Sotho Blue', 'The Wedding', 'The Mountain', 'Pula' and the breathtakingly iconic chord progressions of *Blues for a Hip King*, his musical tribute to the King of Swaziland, his former home in exile.

For a man with such magisterial status in African music, his understated attire and humble acknowledgement of the audience's jubilant response was a reassuring reminder of why he's been recognised as such a master of what he does. It's also comforting to know that this 80-something pianist, composer and musical ambassador to the Rainbow Nation is still drawing cool, refreshing water from an ancient well.

JON LUSK

Ballaké Sissoko & Vincent Segal
Union Chapel, London, March 3

There are some albums that you fall in love with but think, 'I bet this sounds even better in concert.' *Musique de Nuit*, the disc of duets by the Malian *kora* maestro Ballaké Sissoko and the French cellist-turned-world music adventurer Vincent Segal, is one such recording.

The third night of their UK tour turned the promise into reality and Union Chapel proved to be a perfect venue for their stringed magic. This isn't religious music, but nevertheless Sissoko and Segal's compositions flew heavenwards and despite the intimate nature of their duets, the sound seemed to fill the vast dome of Islington's celebrated Victorian Gothic church.

The music they make together has its roots in improvisation but has

been developed into a set of exquisite arrangements that are alternately elegant and exuberant, reflective and playful. The interplay between them was intuitive and profound. The classically trained Segal is accustomed to reading a score; without one he kept turning instead to look into Sissoko's eyes, as if he was reading his colleague's soul.

Their instruments were closely mic'd, which meant you could hear every scrape and rattle, and added to the intimacy. If you want reference points, think Bach meets *Astral Weeks* in African *griot* jazz heaven. Yet the music Sissoko and Segal made seemed to exist entirely in its own unique and hermetically sealed world where, for two hours on a blustery March evening, time stood still as they enveloped us in their sublime stringed enchantment.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

Junun
Barbican, London, March 11

Was there a more intriguing album released last year? When the Israeli poet, composer and guitarist Shye Ben Tzur joined forces with the musicians of the so-called Rajasthan Express, he created soundscapes combining ecstatic *qawwali* rhythms with texts in Hebrew and Hindi as well as in Urdu. Thanks to the participation of Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood

– not to mention Paul Thomas Anderson's documentary film – the project has deservedly found an audience that extends far beyond the world music faithful.

The sense of exaltation at the Barbican was unmistakable. That said, the delicacy of some of the settings didn't always survive the maddeningly overbearing sound mix – the volume levels better suited to an open-air festival bash than a concert hall. With the three-man brass section going toe-to-toe with a full-blooded *nagara* drum barrage, the 'love poetry to the Almighty' occasionally sounded more like a domestic dispute raging on the other side of a partition wall. (There were similar problems when Ben Tzur and his colleagues performed the material *al fresco* at Jerusalem's Sacred Music Festival last autumn.)

Greenwood was almost inaudible at times as he switched back and forth between guitar and understated electronica. Ben Tzur, a bearded, inscrutable figure who signalled changes of tempo and direction with brisk hand gestures, fared a little better. He was at his most dominant, in fact, when he swapped his guitar for flute. On 'Junun Brass' the horns shimmered and danced. The irresistible 'Roked', fuelled by a staccato chant, had the implacable energy of a techno anthem.

CLIVE DAVIS

WOMADelaide
Botanic Park, Adelaide, Australia, March 11-14

There were record heat and record crowds for WOMADelaide, that annual feast for the senses taking place under the magnificent trees of the South Australian capital's Botanic Park. After a traditional Welcome to Country by the body-painted Steve Gadlabarti Goldsmith, an elder of the local Kaurna people, Friday kicked off with a rousing main-stage set by maverick New York eight-piece Hazmat Modine. Led by charismatic blues harmonica player and growly vocalist Wade Schuman, this rattling outfit threw everything from swing to klezmer and New Orleans R&B into the pot; a UK tour needs to happen. Over on a smaller stage, and with a night sky filled with wheeling fruit bats, Ukrainian quartet DakhaBrakha cut through the humidity with their quirky brand of ethno-chaos, a mix of off-kilter vocal chants and influences ranging from India to Russia and Australia, yet rooted in Ukraine.

Elsewhere, six-man Aboriginal collective Djuki Mala (aka The Chooky Dancers) combined indigenous physical theatre, hip-hop and traditional dance with stories told to pin-drop silence; and Indian classical musician and slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya mesmerised with a technique drawn from Hawaiian slide guitar, with the sublime Hindi-language vocals of his teenage daughter Anandi, sitting cross-legged next to him.

Saturday's highlights included the fiery 47Soul, a UK-based quartet combining the likes of Palestinian *dabke* street music with modern electronica and visceral theatre, getting thousands of us crouching down as scattergun sounds flew over our heads. The Mercury-nominated jazz/soul/folk experimentalist Eska wowed with two sets that drew smiles, shouts and heartfelt tears; French-Cuban twins Ibeyi, fetching in red jumpsuits, deployed their hypnotic, minimal songs to joyous effect, even if they still feel like a work-in-progress.

While New Zealand singer Marlon Williams, Melbourne *salsa dura* collective Quarter Street and Japanese funksters Mountain Mocha Kilimanjaro wowed Sunday's crowds, Monday's acts were even mightier. Asian Dub Foundation got us thinking and dancing. French-Egyptian crew Orange Blossom had hands in the air. Afrobeat prince Seun Kuti left no doubt that he's taking on his father's mighty mantle, clenched fists raised and cylinders firing, into the future.

JANE CORNWELL

Homayoun Sakhi
The Music Room, Wembley, London, March 12

Homayoun Sakhi is probably the greatest Afghan *rubab* player in the world. He was involved in the brilliant *Other Classical Musics* concert with Indian and Central Asian musicians at the Wigmore Hall, but did a solo



Ibeyi at WOMADelaide

Diane Brooks Photography

concert a couple of days later at The Music Room in Wembley. It was my first visit to this venue and from suburban London it was like stepping into an Aladdin's cave: a low-ceilinged room, lined with textiles and musical instruments – a violin, zither, saxophone, *sitar*, mandolin and several rubabs. There were sofas and chairs at the back and cushions on the floor at the front. The Music Room is owned by Afghan-born Rahmat Simab and hosts intimate concerts, usually of South Asian artists.

The Afghan *rubab* is a beautiful instrument, both to look at – with its fingerboard inlaid with mother of pearl – and to listen to. It has a deep, warm, muscular tone. Homayoun Sakhi was on the carpeted platform with *tabla* player Salar Nader, of Afghan descent and a disciple of

Zakir Hussain. It was the continuous interaction of the musicians that drew you in. They tossed musical phrases, exchanged glances, chuckles and smiles. At one point Homayoun Sakhi started plucking just the sympathetic strings to create a sort of impressionistic shimmer, then there was a frenzied flourish of notes followed by a finely shaped punctuation on the lower tabla.

It was brilliantly choreographed and all the time the tassel on the end of the *rubab* danced in front of my eyes. The player was less than two metres away from me. It doesn't get much better than that. As I drank green tea in the break, a Persian speaker translated the poem inscribed over the stage for me: 'if you drink the knowledge of the *rubab*, you will be drunk forever.'

SIMON BROUGHTON



Afghan *rubab* player Homayoun Sakhi and *tabla* player Salar Nader

Simon Broughton