

Seriously crazy about Israel's modern music

By Jessica Duchen, March 24, 2011

The Meitar Ensemble



A thriving contemporary music scene where performers play to enthusiastic young audiences? It seems unattainable. But not for the Meitar Chamber Ensemble. This award-winning young Israeli group, founded by pianist Amit Dolberg, consists of nine players who share a passion for contemporary music. They have been working together for seven years, yet their average age is still under 30.

"We started really young," says Dolberg. "We had all wanted it to be possible to listen in a serious way to Israeli contemporary music, but we couldn't really find it in Israel. There was nothing! I spoke to several musicians whose work I really appreciate and we decided to establish an ensemble for Israeli music."

Given the healthy quantity of general musical activity in Israel, the lack of contemporary outlets might seem surprising. Why the gap? "It's very difficult to live as a contemporary music ensemble anywhere in the world," Dolberg says. "It needs to be very well organised, it's hard to survive the few years at the beginning and, of course, relationships with composers are complex because they're all over the world. We have many, many Israeli composers and you need to find the right ones for you to play. Don't forget this is not popular music - you need to really like it to do it. You need to be crazy for it. And we are crazy for it," he adds, "so that's all right."

The proof of the ensemble's success is in its sold-out concerts, its packed schedule - some 80 projects in the diary this year alone - and the variety and quality of the composers virtually queuing up to work with it.

"A high proportion of our concerts are still with contemporary Israeli composers, but we have done projects involving Jewish music from the start of the 20th century and now we are also working closely with some distinguished international composers," says Dolberg.

The ensemble commissions about 20 new pieces each year, but also takes up and performs existing works:

"We have so many projects that we have the possibility to keep pieces of music alive, whether they were written two or 50 years ago. And our commissions can be from the older generation or really young composers. We're doing everything!"

The Ensemble will be playing in London next week when the featured composers will represent a snapshot of the Israeli contemporary music sphere.

"Most of the pieces, whether jazzy or rocky, tonal or non-tonal, were written especially for us," says Dolberg. "It was very important for us to show the diversity of the styles."

The Meitar Chamber Ensemble performs at the Purcell Room, London SE1 on March 31.
Box office: 0844 875 0073. Part of the JMI's Conference on Israeli Music. Details at www.jmi.org.uk