

With the proliferation of the festival scene, more bands than ever can boast on their CV of sharing a stage with huge acts, without mentioning that their slots were 12 or 13 sets apart. Not so IMMIX ENSEMBLE, Liverpool's foremost new and classical music crossover combo. But don't let that description confuse you. "I've always been really interested in crossover-type projects. Crossover can be a dirty word: it makes people think of Il Divo, which is not what interests me in the slightest," says Daniel Thorne, founder and de facto leader of IMMIX, when we sit down for a chat. "It's still about getting the right notes, the right durations. It's just as hard to write a simple piece of music as it is to write a complex one. I can see why people can struggle to get their head around that. There's a tendency to view uncomplicated/less virtuosic things as less worthwhile, perhaps."

The *dramatis personae* of our 40-minute conversation are nothing short of a rundown of the Liverpool scene: IMMIX have triumphed in collaborations with Ex-Easter Island Head and Bill Ryder-Jones - with line-ups including players from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra alongside those from Thorne's own diaspora - and have delivered concerts featuring everything from post-brass band works to electronica via solo guitar. And that's barely even a sketch of IMMIX's first season. To be perfectly clear: the project isn't even two years old.

So how does a New Zealander come to be so embedded in this welding of musical approaches here in Liverpool? Thorne's own potted history on Merseyside starts in the heady days of 2013. "I built up relationships at a composers' lab and through that was offered a Time And Space residency at METAL," he explains in his warm, affable manner. "They helped me put together an Arts Council bid to start my own ensemble, and gave us a rehearsal space. The idea was to have something with unusual instrumentation that tried to bridge the gap there seemed to be between classical musicians in Liverpool and interesting things happening in the pop, rock, and electronic scenes."

That funding was for four shows that were delivered throughout 2014, where IMMIX pitched some of the region's most talented songwriters, musicians and composers together to attack the lack of dialogue between these seemingly disparate communities. In doing this, and working alongside each collaboration, IMMIX helped create some startlingly new work: between Ex-Easter Island Head and composer Joe Hillyard; with electronic musician Tom Cowcher (Sun Drums, Bagheera) and multi-instrumentalist and singer Rachel Nicholas; with Bristolian producer Vessel; and with composers Lucy Pankhurst and John McGrath at Static (a live recording of which will be released on Product Records).

To the sound of swooping disco strings in the background, Thorne describes a typical IMMIX line-up: "It's roughly fixed. As we're dealing with freelancers, the personnel might vary for each show, but it's currently a six-piece of cello, violin, oboe, bass clarinet, alto sax and trumpet: I'd love for it to get bigger though. In new music, texture is in. People are just getting their heads round Ligeti. There's the opportunity

to distinguish acoustic [and electronic] textures by virtue of the fact that you're using 60 people to do it."

Over the course of the project, Thorne has worked as a composer, arranger, and director. But he still insists it's not 'his'. "At the moment, I'm sort of driving, and Andrew Ellis is ensemble manager, dealing with bookings," he explains. "If there's an artist who hasn't worked with this soundworld before, I am here as a tool to facilitate what that artist wants, but there's no obligation for me to be anything more than a player."

Talk of collaborations inevitably lead on to the porous nature of some of art's most famous scenes (1920s Paris, Warhol's Factory), and whether Liverpool's could rival such hotbeds. Of course, they're hotter in retrospect - day-to-day it was probably much quieter in Hemingway's Paris than in the 100-or-so pages of *A Moveable Feast*. "The orchestra's such a big part of this city's musical landscape," Thorne states when discussing the impact of the world-renowned RLPO, "but orchestras are behemoths: to put anything on takes a lot of money and time. I wanted to put something less bureaucratic together where I can say to John [McGrath], 'Let's go for coffee: I want to do a concert with you, this is the instrumentation, interested?' in the same way you'd ask someone to play at any other gig. It's cross-pollination."

That cross-pollination isn't restricted to the music scene. IMMIX have dealt with other disciplines too. "When we played at The Bluecoat, we thought it would be really cool to link it to the exhibition at the time, *Negligent Eye*. We [Thorne and Ex-Easter Island Head] previewed the exhibition, had a chat, went away, came back and heard these pieces of music which related to what we'd seen. We're keen for it to be more than just 'I write some music, you write some music' - it could be arranging someone else's, or enabling a solo artist."

Bill Ryder-Jones is one of those artists. His appearance with IMMIX at FestEVOL in The Kazimier in August was one of the stand-out sets of the festival calendar, but I wonder if there's a rigid hierarchy when collaborating? "It varies. I chatted with Bill, who had a very clear idea of where he was going, then I wrote my interludes and arranged the parts for his songs," says Thorne. "That said, the opening cello solo - performed by Abel Selacoe - was scored out, but each time he played it was different. All the groups I've been in, even heavily composed jazz groups run by the composer, have been democratic set-ups where everybody wants to contribute. I think that's really beautiful and leads not just to good music but enhances everyone's experience, so you come away with a different appreciation of how you might compose your next piece, or play your next solo."

The next stage for IMMIX will see them extend this collaborative strand further, before embarking on more

ambitious recorded projects in 2015. Their performance with *Stealing Sheep* at The Bluecoat on 25th October will be a multi-layered collaboration with Liverpool Music Week and Liverpool Irish Festival. The addition of contemporary dance from two of Ireland's leading dancers and choreographers, Fearghus Ó Conchúir and Aoife McAtamney, will showcase lesser-known aspects of Irish culture while still being integral to the musical performance. Thorne is looking further ahead, though. "Next season, I want to pair a playwright with a composer, maybe producing a spoken-word piece or a song cycle. I also want to do more concerts like last year's. That, and finding new artists."

Open-mindedness is part of what makes IMMIX so versatile. It doesn't really have a brief beyond the creation of music. It does have a specific set of resources: the players' technical ability and sense of ensemble. But, simpler than that, they provide timbres not usually heard in pop music, and not usually employed in the classical realm. IMMIX's identity is bound up in ideas, attitude, and realising potential. That's how cultural institutions survive the centuries. As an entity, IMMIX could continue indefinitely.

"As a sax player, I'm between the two worlds of classical and pop. It's been interesting meeting local orchestral players and freelancers who get excited about music in the same way I do. There are so many people who - it sounds corny, but - are just into music. Your average punter here seems more willing to try new stuff. Elsewhere, it can be very 'this is the rock scene, here is the jazz scene' and the two don't mix, and there aren't any musicians working in both. Whereas here, it's a very up-for-it musical community. There's so much potential for collaboration - Liverpool's the perfect city for it."

IMMIX play at The Bluecoat on 25th October in an exclusive collaboration with Stealing Sheep, as part of Liverpool Music Week and Liverpool Irish Festival.

immix-ensemble.tumblr.com

IMMIX ENSEMBLE

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