Review

An Explosive Legacy

How the Huddersfield Contemporary Musical Festival is surviving austerity

Aleksandra Słyż performing at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival • All photos © Point Of View

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival—or HCMF for short—is in full swing, celebrating its 48th edition with performances, workshops, installations and more, all against the backdrop of mounting economic pressures in the UK's arts sector. Over 48 hours of concerts, interviews and informal networking receptions, I tried to work out how the festival is negotiating a harsher reality while taking in the breadth of its opening weekend. (Full disclosure: HCMF covered my travel expenses to attend.)

I. THEORIA

Despite the cold and dismal November weather, crowds flocked to Huddersfield Town Hall, a lofty Victorian venue, for the opening concert of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival—arguably the UK's only festival devoted entirely to experimental and contemporary music, with a 10-day program and an international reputation.

Gatherings of this sort are rare in Britain, especially compared with the denser ecosystems of mainland Europe. It was here, in 1978, that the country's first large-scale platform for living composers was established in a compact West Yorkshire town shaped by its 19th-century textile past. The inaugural edition—led by Richard Steinitz, a composer and lecturer at Huddersfield Polytechnic (later the University of Huddersfield)—was a modest affair. Misfortune struck in the form of winter fog, which upended the program by grounding flights across Europe and leaving musicians unable to travel.

That shaky start didn't stop the festival from growing into the event it is today, attracting major figures of 20th-century music, including Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio, Helmut Lachenmann and Terry Riley. In 1989, it even provided the stage for John Cage and Pierre Boulez to meet again after decades of estrangement. Steinitz remained at the helm for 23 years, succeeded by Susanna Eastburn in 2001 and guest director Tom Service in 2005. Steinitz still attends.

Today the reins belong to artistic director Graham McKenzie—a long-bearded man in glasses, with an elegant, unhurried manner and an all-black look—who marks his 20th edition this year. In his youth, McKenzie visited HCMF several times but eventually drifted away. "The festival had become a little bit static and represented only one aspect of contemporary music rather than the full range of things that perhaps a younger generation of artists were doing," he told me. Before taking the job, he directed Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts from 1997 to 2006. "In contemporary visual arts, you always have to deal with the current generation of artists," he said. "Here, publishers kept phoning me up and telling me it was someone's 80th birthday or maybe the 20th anniversary of their death."

He has shifted the program away from late 20th-century modernism towards improvisation, sound art and installation, while drawing in younger artists and audiences. "When I started, the percentage of the audience under 35 was 1%. Now it's about 35–37," he said with evident pride. "We also very deliberately started talking about the opening weekend as the industry weekend. The festival is a great place to immerse yourself in new music, but also a great place to do business."

Another concern for McKenzie was the glut of works performed once and then left to gather dust. “That seemed to me such a waste of everyone’s time,” he said. In response, HCMF helped establish the Network of International Curators and Festivals (NICAF), an informal alliance of like-minded colleagues who only commission new works if three or four performances can be secured across different countries, with each partner contributing between two and four thousand in funding. “HCMF was so well known worldwide, but we didn’t really use that position to create enough opportunities for young UK composers to take their work abroad,” he said. “We brought a lot of work into the UK, but I wanted the festival to be much more of a producer and co-commissioner, to take work out there and disseminate it.”

The UK’s classical and contemporary music sector has faced turbulent times since the start of the 2020s. The pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and the global energy crunch following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine hit musicians and music organizations **particularly hard**. On top of that, the November 2022 National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) **funding reallocations** shook the ecosystem, supposedly aiming to encourage cultural and economic diversification away from London. Some institutions faced severe cuts—Glyndebourne (52%), the London Sinfonietta (41%) and Sound and Music (39%)—while others, like Britten Sinfonia and the Barbican Centre, lost NPO status and all associated funding. A chilling demonstration **followed** when the oxygen supply was cut to Psappha, a new music ensemble already based outside London.

Some fared better: newcomers Manchester Collective (£120,000) and Contemporary Music for All (£115,000), along with increased allocations for Aurora Orchestra (53%), Spitalfields Festival (37%) and NMC Recordings (23%). Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival was among these fortunate few. Between 2018 and 2022, its NPO status provided an annual average of £241,627. Its **allocation** for 2023–2026 rose to £286,073, an 18% increase. It looks like growth, yet in real terms the festival has less room to breathe thanks to a staggering cumulative inflation of 32% over the past seven years, as **recorded** by the Bank of England.

Martyna Basta

Alongside Arts Council England, HCMF's other two core supporters are Kirklees Council and the University of Huddersfield. The latter announced nearly **200 job cuts** last year—over 10% of its workforce—as part of a **wider decline** in UK higher education, particularly in **creative subjects**. McKenzie assured me that this hasn't affected the festival. It will also **receive support** from the Hinrichsen Foundation from August 2025 to July 2028.

"When I arrived, the festival had quite a sizable deficit to work through. At the same time, I had to maintain its international ambitions and connections. I'm a great believer that even when finances are tight, you have to be responsible, but shrinking and cutting back is an unhealthy way forward," McKenzie said. "The way to handle difficult financial climates is to be more ambitious, because good ideas attract investment, and that's always been my policy."

He also blamed Brexit, calling it a "disaster for this country," pointing to the Conservative government's **halt** of the Creative Europe fund—this edition is the first without the £120,000 art grant HCMF had previously received. There are also now temporary customs permits, known as carnets, for bringing in equipment. These costs can't be precisely budgeted in advance, as they are determined by individual customs officers at the border. "It's a challenging year," McKenzie admitted.

Given these conditions, it might be easier to see why HCMF has amassed such a staggering number of international partners this year: Sacrum Profanum Festival (Poland), Moers Festival (Germany), Music Finland, Culture Ireland, the Lithuanian Culture Institute, Music Information Centre Lithuania and the Estonian Centre of Contemporary Music. But are these partnerships merely a bailout when national funding falls short? Do they risk turning the festival into a showcase that overseas partners effectively buy into, trading on its long-standing reputation? And could the festival remain as ambitious without them?

“We wanted to develop deeper relationships, so these international partnerships aren’t about showcases. It’s very much two-way. My priority is also to get younger artists into Estonia, Lithuania, Finland and Ireland—our current partners,” McKenzie said. Partnerships usually start with a three-year agreement, and the festival typically takes on two per year. Right now there are four, which he calls “quite a lot for us.” This is because both Ireland and Lithuania wanted to continue, renewing for another three years. Previously, HCMF had similar arrangements with Catalonia, the Netherlands and Poland.

The Mivos Quartet

The financial mechanics of these partnerships aren't as straightforward as they might seem. Typically, HCMF develops a program featuring artists from a selected country. The international partner covers a third of the total cost, HCMF uses a third of its core funding, and the remaining third comes from the festival itself—"I'll take the risk in the third," McKenzie said. In other words, HCMF assumes any shortfall or unexpected costs, while the partner's contribution is effectively doubled by UK funding, which supports their artists' presence in Huddersfield.

One silver lining McKenzie sees is that, unlike other countries—he cites the Netherlands, "great supporters of music, including contemporary music," around 15 years ago—in the UK, "there's never much to take away because no government invests in the arts anyway." Another advantage, he adds, is that HCMF's focus on partnerships and collaborations are "a good thing for the artist." Big continental festivals, by contrast, can commission works freely without needing to collaborate or secure further performances beyond the premiere night.

"We try to get the message across to everyone in Huddersfield: *You benefit from this festival because it generates £1.7 million for the local economy in just 10 days—which doesn't even count the rest of the year*," McKenzie said, citing figures from an economic survey the festival

conducted. Is there a stronger argument for why regional and national governments should invest in HCMF?

II. PRAXIS

These challenges did not seem to affect the quality of the music presented across the first weekend. The opening concert, performed by London-based Explore Ensemble, offered a controlled reading of Rytis Mažulis's icy, pulsating "Canon Mensurabilis," which, for all its precision, never quite ignited. Bryn Harrison's eerie "The spectre…is always already a figure of that which is to come," by contrast, unfolded in slow, shifting layers, its ever-morphing electronics evoking the failed revolutions that haunt humanity until a successful one finally arrives—and carried more spark for me, subtly messing with my perception of time. Overall, the concert carried a wintry chill—cool and remote—and made for a good festival opener.

Later in the evening, we heard "Motor Tapes" by Sarah Hennies, this year's composer-in-residence, performed by the Toulouse-based Dedalus Ensemble. It featured taut drumming, an inventive use of milk frothers to generate rattling textures, and fleeting, almost meditative gestures that slipped in and out of focus, picking up the thread Bryn Harrison had set earlier in the evening. I had rated its premiere more highly back in 2023 at Darmstadt; this time, it felt a bit drawn out. After Friday's two concerts, I assumed HCMF was all about composers and their concert-hall works—but I only had to wait another 24 hours to be proven wrong.

The Dedalus Ensemble performing “Motor Tapes”

Saturday afternoon was all about luminous singing from the Carice Singers, conducted by George Parris, who presented an impressive program of works by Lithuanian composer Žibuoklė Martinaitytė and Finnish composers Lotta Wennäkoski, Perttu Haapanen and Joel Järventausta. I was particularly taken by Arvo Pärt’s “Sarah Was Ninety Years Old,” where austere drumming and a vocal duo—sometimes together, sometimes in canon—built enough tension for the organ’s entry in the closing minutes, carrying a faint echo of the dramaturgy found in Tarkovsky’s films. The communication between the singers was exceptional, their lines passing with clarity and ease.

There was also a concert I found difficult to sit through due to its programming, realized by the New York-based Mivos Quartet. It featured four pieces—by Madli Marje Gildemann, Raven Chacon, Raminta Šerkšnytė and Ville Aslak Raasakka—all post-Lachenmannian in character, though overzealous with bow-pressure screeches and *sul ponticello* bowing. I could, in fact, have won a bingo for the familiar extended-technique clichés on display. By the end, it seemed less like four distinct pieces and more like a single, elongated string quartet in four movements.

Even the dramatic flourish of a bow flying behind the violinist on the final note did nothing to convince me, though evidently it won over someone.

Saturday evening finally injected some razzmatazz and left-field frenzy into the festival, courtesy of ONCEIM, a French ensemble whose musicians span free jazz, improvisation, classical and contemporary repertoire. While Christian Marclay's "Constellation" filled the Bates Mill Blending Shed with imposing, expansive sound, Genevieve Murphy's "Together We Feel And Alone We Experience" pushed beyond the physical confines of the space, transforming the orchestra into an extension of the bagpipes and driving forward with an intensely physical, visceral force. The audience was utterly transfixed, and the musicians earned a well-deserved ovation.

The late-night program of intimate singing, electronics and gentle guitar picking by Martyna Basta, alongside the booming modular synths of Aleksandra Słyż—both from Poland—brought a long Saturday to a close. Their sets were tender yet raw, making me feel excited to stay up late on a Saturday—as late as a 31-year-old can—hearing ear-thrilling sounds and feeling quietly held by the industrial character of the Bates Mill Photographic Studio. The only shame was that, as a 31-year-old, I had little energy left after 10 p.m. following a day full of musical wonders.

It was especially enlightening to learn, through a brief conversation with Krzysztof Pietraszewski, artistic director of Sacrum Profanum in Kraków, that this concert resulted from a collaboration between his festival and HCMF. What began as a straightforward UK–Poland artist exchange quickly grew into a focused exploration of experimental electronics and composer-performers, with particular attention to women and the LGBTQ community. Earlier

this month, Sacrum Profanum hosted the UK's contributions—saxophonist Cath Roberts and turntablist Mariam Rezaei—both recommended by McKenzie.

III. POIESIS

The performances across the first two days showed that festivals of new music don't run themselves for 48 editions—they need constant care and nurturing, all while deftly dodging economic bullets from every direction. HCMF might not be as quirky as **some** or as big and international as **others**, but it may well be one of the best things contemporary music in the UK has. Its legacy is unquestionably worth fighting for. These "explosions in November," to borrow Steinitz's book title, not only supply listeners with fresh musical discoveries but also foster international communities and support the local economy, and have been doing so for nearly half a century.

Perhaps a more varied set of events on Friday would have lifted the day's pacing, though this may simply have been coincidence. More guest curators would have been welcome. Clearer venue signage and printed booklets could have helped too, but these are minor quibbles. My only regret is not staying until Monday to hear Heiner Goebbels' improvisations—an experience that alone would have made the trip entirely worthwhile. ¶

Update, 12/3/2025: An earlier version of this article misstated the concert affected by fog and ensuing travel chaos. It was two concerts in the middle of the program. VAN regrets the error.