

just to Owen's own back catalogue, but with everything that went before. These didn't so much give voice to those least heard, but let them find it for themselves, even as they might talk over each other amidst all the other noises off that can sometimes drown them out.

In Edinburgh, *Deeds Done in the Body* resembled a gig situation, with its opening event featuring a live improvisation by an ad hoc quartet of musicians — double bassist Seth Bennett, cellist Semay Wu, drummer Casey Miller and trombonist John Kenny. As the audience drifted among and around them, the musicians responded to Owen's audio-visual construction as recordings of his interviewees shared stories, criss-crossing in the moment as they historicised the past. The result was a kind of partly pre-recorded Happening that remained of the moment even as it archived itself.

The extended remix for Perth opens with a performance by long-term conditions choir, Vocal Chord, with further sounds by Bennett and composer Shiori Usui. As with the Edinburgh show, beyond the opening event, left to its own devices, *The New Vocal Club* has no captive audience, with a more transient form of passing trade drifting in and out to look, listen and hopefully share in the experience.

The New Vocal Club's non-linear structure and disruptions of sound and vision relate to what director and avant-provocateur Jean Luc Godard said about how 'a film should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.'

Sonically, Owen draws from maverick Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's idea of what he called 'contrapuntal' radio, a term normally applied to music, in which independent melody lines play simultaneously. Gould developed this in his radio documentary *The Idea of North* (1967). This was fictionalised in *Truck Stop*, a segment of *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), François Girard's waggish compendium of vignettes looking at different facets of Gould's life and work.

More recently, *32 Sounds* (2022) is Sam Green's latest adventure in live cinema, which, rather than streaming to people in the sort of isolation Gould's characters in *The Idea of North* might appreciate, turns cinema into an experience involving in-person narration and a live soundtrack.

32 Sounds gives an obvious nod to Girard's Glenn Gould film, as well as to actor /theatre maker Simon McBurney's remarkable solo piece, *The Encounter* (2015). Like McBurney, Green equips his audience with headphones, and uses binaural sound to make something both immersive and participatory. A very personal audio-visual playlist includes a hockey puck, a purring cat and a whoopee cushion. There are room tones, birdcalls, and even someone blasting out Phil Collins' piece of 1980s bombast, *In the Air Tonight* (1981).

The New Vocal Club relates to all of these and none. It is both counterpoint and progression. Like each, however, Owen's work exists in a place one of Gould's protagonists in *The Idea of North* likens to El Dorado or Utopia. These parts unknown remain as mythical as they are something to aspire to. Until they are discovered, *The New Vocal Club* is an ideal for living (or making a song and dance about).

It's the quiet ones you have to watch in *The New Vocal Club*, Benjamin A. Owen's fusion of sound and vision that holds court at Perth Theatre's foyer for a week in November 2022. Words and music overlap and realign to tell their stories in this second version of Owen's work, which has been developed since its first outing at the Wee Red Bar in Edinburgh. That was in an iteration called *Deeds Done in the Body* (2022). In both, the polyphony of voices that speak out suggests there is a whole lot more than one singer and one song to be heard.

Bingo callers, sports announcers, Gaelic speakers and puppeteers all have their say, as do carers, choirs, and those in care homes with dementia. The utterances that emerge aren't the impenetrable, jargon-loaded mantras of bureaucrats, or the slog-anising manifestos of polemicists and orators proselytising some hand-me-down testament or creed. Nor are they the easy-on-the-ear soundbites of wannabe celebrities and talking heads mouthing tabloid-friendly platitudes in words of one syllable or less.

The New Vocal Club doesn't roll its 'r's that way. Its physical mash-up is part film installation, part oral history documentary, and part found-sound collage that becomes a kind of Speakers Corner of the everyday. Here, rarely heard histories from a carnival of souls are put under the spotlight in a virtual speak-easy, where the wisdom of experience counts for everything, and talk is never cheap.

As Owen puts it, *The New Vocal Club* is not an artwork. It is a voice and a collective ideal. This gets back to the roots of art, music, whatever, as a way for people to connect. This is something perhaps most visible over the last few years by way of the increased popularity of choirs. Beyond singing and playing together, a desire exists to join in with other things. This isn't as passive spectators left in the dark in concert halls and theatres, but as active participants, taking part as one, en masse.

That the latest edition of *The New Vocal Club* is happening, not in a gallery or enclosed auditorium, but in the wide-open space of a theatre foyer, next to the bar, speaks volumes. This is where people convene and commune with casual intent before going on elsewhere, perhaps to a more formal do, before maybe letting their hair down later. It is telling too that *The New Vocal Club* logo features the heads of some of the club's members and participants collaged together as a group in a design modelled on Bob Pepper's artwork for the cover of Love's 1967 album, *Forever Changes*.

Having played in bands in Bristol, Owen understands the gang mentality of being in a group. *The New Vocal Club* operates with a similar dynamic. The interview process is a crucial part of the work's over-riding narrative, becoming an unconscious Brechtian device, deconstructing itself as it goes. Speech patterns too matter as much as the words spoken. Few people speak in straight lines without preparation, so the stops and starts, the ums and ahs, the repetitions and the toss and fros of conversation create a musically beyond the work's more straightforward function as oral history.

In this way, *The New Vocal Club* becomes part of an ongoing continuum of lived experience. It is the latest dot to be joined as part of a collective memory, linked, not

The New Vocal Club are: Jill and Peter/Mary and Richard/

EXHIBITION OPENS

4 NOVEMBER 2022
6 — 7.30PM
(ALL WELCOME)

AT

PERTH THEATRE
MILL STREET
PERTH, PH1 5HZ

FEATURING A LIVE
PERFORMANCE BY

VOCAL CHORD
(SING FOR WELLBEING)

WITH MUSICIANS

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AND

SHIORI USUI

AUDIO MASTER
DUNCAN GALLAGHER

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Perth Theatre

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THE NEW VOCAL CLUB

By Benjamin A. Owen

4 — 11
NOVEMBER
2022



THE

By Benjamin A. Owen

NEW

4 — 11

NOVEMBER

AT 2022

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THEATRE

VOCAL CLUB



The New Vocal Club are: Jill and Peter/Mary and Richard/David/Caitlin/John/Leigh and Steve of Clyde Built Theatre/Debra/Emma/Ronnie/Edith/Julie, Kerry, Trish, and Margaret of PKAVS/Jonathan/Christie/Cameron/Ann/Elliot/Aileen/Bruce/Irma/Seth/Shiori/Liam and St. Johnstone F.C./Vocal Chord (Sing for Wellbeing)