

Arts

Crossover | The Glasgow-based Sonica

festival promotes work combining visual art, music and performance. By *Hannah Nepil*

It's like no sound I've heard before. Pure, ghostly tones creep up and down the scale, sliding from one delicate harmony to the next. It could almost be music from outer space, or snatches of song heard a mile under the sea. In fact it's produced by audio feedback from shifting water levels in glass vessels that look alarmingly like medical equipment.

Kathy Hinde's "Tipping Point" was one of the most arresting installations at Sonica, a biennial Glasgow-based arts festival that visited London's Kings Place last weekend. And there was plenty else on offer. Sonica, which was founded in 2012, saucily claims to "ravish the senses". More specifically, it programmes performances and installations that fall somewhere between visual art and music. As a result, it can be difficult to promote.

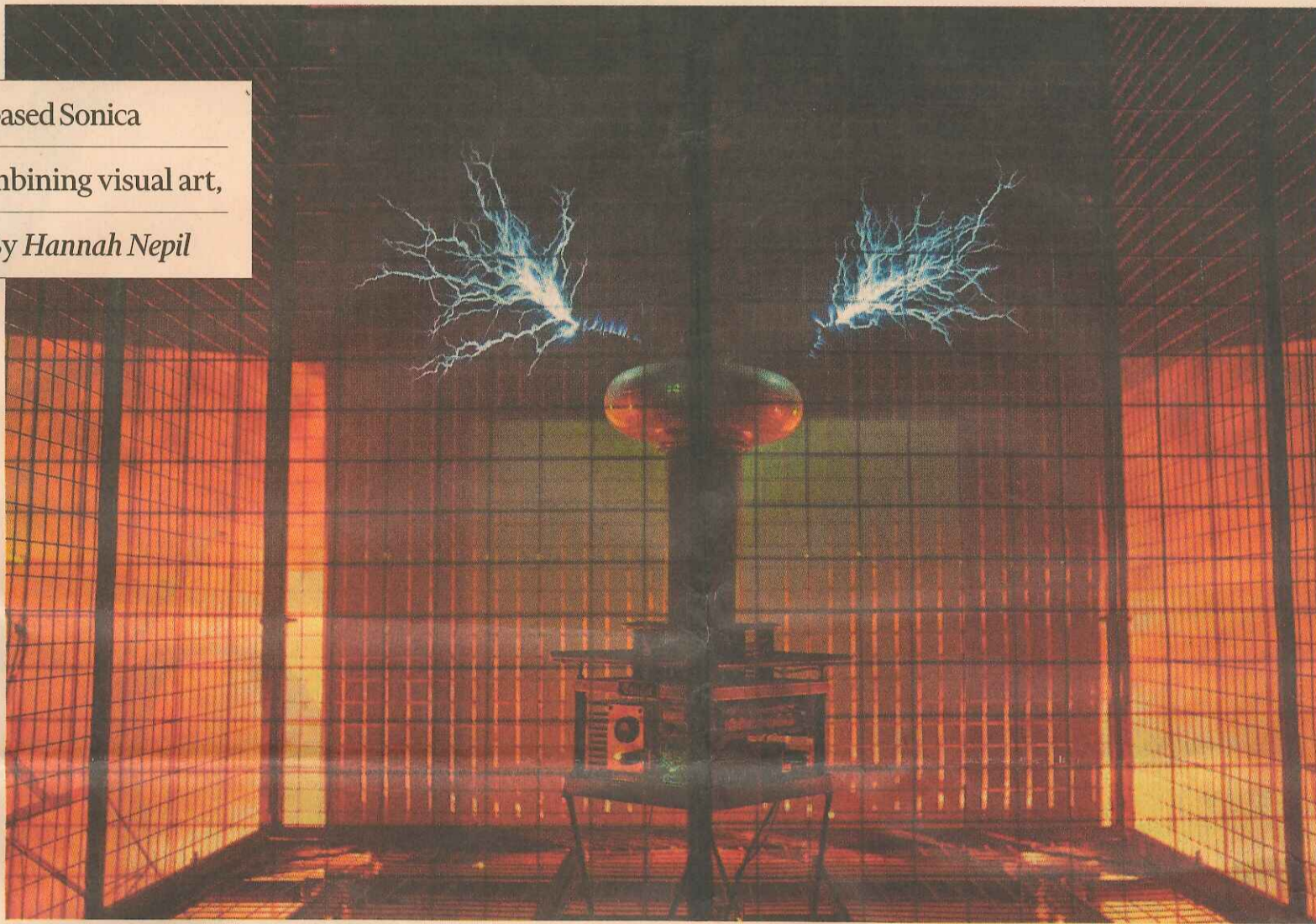
"People want to put things in boxes," says Cathie Boyd, artistic director of Sonica. "So I find journalists and funding bodies asking me, 'Are you visual arts? Are you music? What are you?'"

What's needed, she argues, "is a new category that covers these works". After all, as she points out, they haven't sprung from nowhere. As far back as the turn of the 20th century, the composer Alexander Scriabin experimented with sound and colour, incorporating in his 1910 piece *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* a "colour organ" which was played like a piano but projected coloured light.

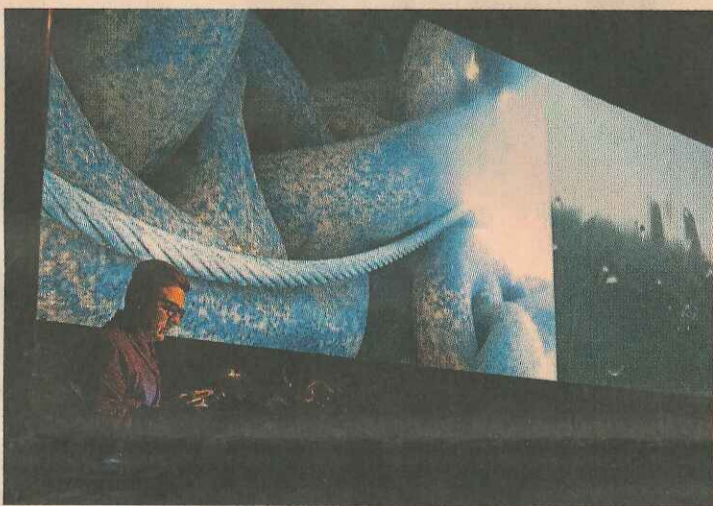
Only a few years later Marcel Duchamp, now generally considered to be the father of conceptual art, tried his own hand at cross-breeding in *Erratum Musical: La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*. This 1913 composition, which included roles for a funnel, several toy train wagons and a set of numbered balls, was never published during Duchamp's lifetime. But it looked ahead to a very particular age of experimentation.

This was the 1950s and 1960s, when instruments increasingly became a spectacle in their own right. Musicians themselves became display pieces, not least in La Monte Young's *Compositions 1960*, which instructed its participants to "build a fire" and "release a butterfly into the room". It was an era when artistic boundaries crumbled — nowhere more flamboyantly than in John Cage's *Theatre Piece No 1*, which combined poetry readings, music, dance, photographic slide projections, film and the four panels of Robert Rauschenberg's "White Paintings", suspended from the ceiling in the shape of a cross.

The cult of the interdisciplinary continues to gather pace, and many regard this kind of crossover as the most fertile area in the arts today. According to Mark Lyken, who was featured as part of the Sonica festival: "There's all sorts of things that sound can do to image that you wouldn't necessarily expect. It can



In perfect harmony



From top: Robbie Thomson's 2014 work 'XFRMR (Transformer)' at Sonica; Mark Lyken presents 'The Terrestrial Sea' (2014); Robert Cage sets up telephones for a performance of 'Variations VII', 1966

Tommy Ga-Ken Wan; Robert R McElroy/Getty Images

elevate, and transform things and allow you to play with convention."

His words were borne out during the Sonica weekend by many of the works on display. In Hinde's "Tipping Point" we saw a simple idea, changing water levels, transformed into a piece full of mystery. In Sisi Lu's "The Age of Digital/Analogue" familiar images — a printer, a textile factory — are transformed into something unsettling, even dystopian, thanks to the clever sampling of mechanical sounds.

Lyken's own piece, "The Terrestrial Sea", was similarly memorable. Here we were presented with an industrial soundscape at war with the strikingly beautiful images of nature on a screen. The result was a surrealistic meditation on the way that different environments encroach on each other.

However, Lyken is also quick to admit that cross-pollination is hard to get right. "There will be times when you put sound to image assuming it will elevate it, then you realise neither has been transformed in any way. You're left with just an image, and just sound."

In Lyken's opinion this can happen when neither component is interesting in its own right. "What you don't want to do is cheat by trying to enliven a mediocre image with sound, and vice versa, in the hope that if you keep chucking things together eventually you end up with something interesting," he says. "Both the image and sound need to carry a lot of weight."

There are times, however, when the image carries too much weight, reducing the sonic element to a bit part. For example, when the pianist Mikhail Rudy presented his audiovisual take on *Pictures at an Exhibition* at Kings Place last year, Mussorgsky's colourful score was relegated to the background, while the lurid accompanying visuals hijacked our attention. Other artists, such as the Dutch company 33 1/3, have tended to produce breathtaking images accompanied by lacklustre scores.

According to Hinde, this emphasis on visual stimulus is symptomatic of our times: "In contemporary culture we're quite visually literate because we're used to screen-based media and reading messages that are visual all the time."

Thus, Sonica makes it something of a mission to place image and sound on an equal footing. "If you're dealing with a pre-existing piece of music, it's important that the visuals enhance it," says Boyd. "If a composition is being created with a view to being visualised, then the two should work seamlessly together."

What's most important in either case, she says, is to respect the audience's imagination: "The beauty of music is that it takes you on a journey that's incredibly personal, unless you're dealing with a piece with an explicit narrative such as *The Nutcracker*. I want to create something which leaves space for people to go on that journey."