

SOUND PERFORMANCE Hotel Pro Forma tells the story of the man who invented the first electronic musical instrument.

Music of the air

Billedstofteatret laid the foundation for what, since 1985, has been called Hotel Pro Forma, and considering theatre to be first and foremost an image-borne medium has always been their hallmark and great strength. Few are able to rival them in creating pregnant, statuesquely beautiful and sensually challenging picture tableaux on a stage. But a love of the image as material has also at times been their weakness, in the sense that their performances did not always satisfy the basic human need of a narrative. They have been criticised for focusing exclusively on form and on abstract, conceptual ideas.

In their new performance *Theremin*, staged alternately at the Danish Broadcasting Centre and Vega, one is on the other hand presented with an easily accessible, chronologically constructed story narrated from the world of reality and, into the bargain, the truly interesting story of the Russian physicist and inventor Leon Theremin's life from his birth in 1896 to his death in 1993. His personal life-story is exciting in an elementary way, but it also encompasses wide culture-historical perspectives that are fully exploited. 'Ether music and world history' is the subtitle of the performance. That is why it also becomes a story that – like all the company's performances – deals with the progression and partial decline of modernity, and with the epistemological, scientific, technological and artistic implications connected with the concept 'modernity'.

As a child in Russia, Theremin played the cello, but he became interested at an early age in the mechanical side of music production, and in 1920 he was able to launch his own electronic musical instrument, initially called the aetherphone and later renamed the theremin. It is an electro-magnetic, partially string- and aerial-based instrument where the hand is moved 10-15 cm away

from the instrument, thereby producing high-frequency oscillations and thus sounds. He met Lenin, who saw electricity as a symbol of the revolution and the hope of a new, modern Russia. Lenin was enthusiastic about the instrument and wanted every Russian home to have one. Theremin travelled all over the world with his instrument, settling for a time in USA but returning home just before the outbreak of the Second World War, only to be sent to a labour camp, suspected of counter-revolutionary activity.

The theremin, however, became widespread in the West, inspiring the later electronic production of music, with much use being made of it for frightening effects in Hollywood films and in the pop and rock music of the 1970s. After the war, he was forced to work for the KGB as a scientist on the invention of espionage equipment. His artistic side was concealed and forgotten and it was only in the wake of the perestroika movement of the 1980s up to his death in 1993 that he experienced a renewed and actually enormous interest in the theremin – especially from the West. The more factual contours of Theremin's life seen in relation to the development of electronic music have been outlined in a small folder for the performance – though it is fun to see how many 'theremin sites' a simple Google search will come up with.

On stage you see 'the orchestra', consisting of four children who play in turn on the theremin, the violin and the cello. Two men act the part of Theremin without saying a word – as an old man (played by the painter Laurie Grundt) and a young man (played by the dancer Bo Madvig, who is actually a spitting image of Theremin), while the story itself is confidently borne along by Sarah Boberg. All of them are dressed in laboratory-like white coats, except for Boberg, who in a

cobalt-blue, figure-hugging dress and short-trimmed black hairdo is able to portray both the seductive, Western actress and the coughing, faithful Russian wife. 'Portray' is perhaps an overstatement, for in Brechtian fashion she 'demonstrates' her change of roles by initially stating in a neutral voice 'This is Clara Rockmore, the star of theremin virtuosos', after which she recites Clara's monologue with a voice distorted by the theremin. As she speaks, a hand passes over the electric theremin, which turns the voice into an enormously faceted instrument.

The performance libretto comprises small, linguistically precise and slightly poetic, chronologically advancing monologues by the women in Theremin's life: his mother, his three wives, his daughters, the fellow prisoner in the Gulag labour camp, the wife of the American ambassador, who is spied on via a theremin aerial, etc. 'It is as if he dreams forth a world without touching anything with his hands,' his mother says – and this both highly present and yet distanced attitude to the world is incarnated in Bo Madvig's gymnastic and static movements across the stage as well as the elderly Theremin who, however, in all his listening passivity seems to be almost superfluous on the stage.

A viewing screen right across the stage is used to visualise sound waves or, in a more documentary fashion, to outline important years in Theremin's life or provide an alphabetical list of all those almost poetic new words coined as a result of the invention of electricity – from ampere and frequency to sine curve and watt. As has been the case several times before, Hotel Pro Forma make extremely productive use of children: to portray Theremin's lost childhood, to play

beautifully on instruments and – also in a mechanical à la Brecht spirit – to be responsible for various striking tableaux. On the 'image' side economies have been made, as mentioned, in favour of the documentary-inspired story. Even so, one is surprised, for example, to see sticks changing into swinging blue fluorescent tubes, aided by the roundabout-like music of the 'sound' side suddenly changing into a hectic dream tivoli.

The complex narrative of the interweaving of the personal life-story and the major account of modernity is presented – as always with Pro Forma – with great solemnity – only when the boy talks about sweaty palms when practising, or when the dumb dancer almost talks, do we laugh, almost from a sense of relief. Likewise, one can recognise from other performances a gently moralising, somewhat simplistic defence of free art and the good and specifically human as against politics, alienation and rationality.

'He conquers New York, extracts music from the air in the city that has otherwise seen everything... he is the future in human form,' says the theremin virtuoso Lucie Rosen – and in *Theremin*, the theatre company has discovered an enormously interesting form through which the entire 20th century narrative of modernity can be filtered, in a form that is highly virtuoso not least in terms of sound in conception and execution.

BY METTE SANDBYE