The Garden of Earthly Delights

Bjork, Eden Sessions, 7 July 2018

*Once upon a time…* no, that won’t do. *Under the hedgerow, at the bottom of the field*… no. How to set the scene for the other-wordliness that is Bjork live? More surreal than Teletubbies, more out-there than the pothead pixie world of Gong, more ridiculous than any progrock excess I know of: ladies and gentlemen, I give you Bjork, playing utopian songs in the middle class botanical institute that is Cornwall’s Eden project, in the glorious heatwave of July 2018.

The black curtain falls away to reveal giant shells (or are they flowers?) and a small circle of fake hedge. Back left, a percussionist; back right, mirroring, a keyboard player or computer player. The hedge slowly turns to reveal a flower fairy, the tiny demented psychedelic vision that is Bjork in a spectacularly gauche shiny dress. On the giant screen at the back of the stage grass blows in the wind, giant ducks cavort and swim, nature ripples and changes and ripens.

The bass arrives in a broken crackle of overload and distortion: this is the worst sound I have ever heard at an Eden concert. The hedge circles again, a team of flute-playing toga-clad figures emerge and will spend the next hour performing a mixture of highly choreographed, synchronised land-swimming and trilling. Like everything else tonight it will mostly be played across, around or through the beat, along with electronic squeals and squawks the likes of which I haven’t heard since the days of early analogue synthesizer experiments by the likes of Morton Subotnick or Richard Teitelbaum.

And then there’s the voice. Bjork opens her mouth and out it comes, ice-cold vapour for a summer’s evening. It’s Nico meets Gregorian plainsong, it’s birdsong at dawn, it's... well, actually, it’s incomprehensible and tuneless. We stand our ground until the ever-present tall people stand in front of us, then move further back to watch. I keep quiet and watch my partner out of the corner of my eye, not wanting to ruin the event, as the music and relentless nature films continue into the dusk. Then she turns to me: ‘Is it me, or is it simply not happening?’ she says. ‘Nothing is coming together.’

She’s right. This is music to listen to in your room at home, not entertain a festival crowd with. Every song seems the same, every song is awkwardly awry rhythmically, texturally similar to the music before and after. Those bloody flautists are still prancing around, there are more giant birds on the screen (although we do eventually get a beautiful religious painting), the synthesizer or sampler is still farting and bleeping high in the mix. Each song simply stops, then another similar one begins. There is a dearth of tunes, of spectacle, of ideas.

I didn’t expect rock or pop, I like experimental music, I (used to) know what Bjork does, and I love the Eden project as a concert venue, think it handles the practicalities of parking, food and drink extremely well (although I must confess that having to buy plastic drinking cups feels like another way to relieve everyone of a quid each rather than an ecological statement), but this was torture. Bjork seemed distant and unengaged with the audience, and she’d given little thought to the dynamics of an open-air concert. Like Bosch’s painting, which I’ve borrowed the title of for this review, what seems fantastically colourful, gorgeous and idyllic, turns out to be dark and full of suffering, torture and dismay. Look, I tried, right, I really, really tried, but this was musical codswallop: faux experimental nonsense and art school excess. And one of the worst gigs I’ve ever been to.

Rupert Loydell