

Music

Hong Kong's Fragrant Village Music Festival brings performances to unusual venues

Pieces were remixed and altered to fit their surroundings



Gabriel Prokofiev with cellist Wong Ka Lap at the Eaton Hotel © CFCHUGO

Ken Smith NOVEMBER 5 2019

“Sha Tau Kok?” the train attendant repeated, as if being asked directions to the end of the Earth. And in a way, she was. Designated a Frontier Closed Area since the early 1950s, this storied zone near the mainland Chinese border was long associated with smuggling (both goods and people) and other Bamboo Curtain intrigues. Only since 2012 have visitors been allowed in the surrounding areas without a police permit.

San Tsuen, one of many Hakka hamlets outside central Sha Tau Kok, made a grassroots bid to rejoin greater Hong Kong with last weekend's inaugural Fragrant Village Music Festival, its headline act pairing the TimeCrafters, an intrepid Hong Kong chamber music collective, with the London-based composer Gabriel Prokofiev (grandson of Sergei). Prokofiev's well-honed affinity for non-traditional venues fared well in turning the music lounge of Kowloon's Eaton Hotel into a postmodern chamber hall on Friday night and the Asia Society Hong Kong

Center's theatre into a mood-lit nightclub on Saturday afternoon. The event culminated in a Sunday afternoon outdoor concert facing San Tsuen's inlet bay.

Joining the musicians with laptop in hand, Prokofiev frequently followed live performances with alternative remixes, working different audiences like an experienced DJ. The same piece often varied according to the setting. Performed by the water, his *Silente* took on a nautical tone, with sampled crackling from vinyl records resembling waves and bass clarinet multiphonics sounding like sonar and a distant ship's horn. *Howl*, a 2013 work for live soloist and electronics written during the Arab Spring, resonated heavily on Saturday as street violence escalated a few blocks away. Facing a peaceful waterfront the next day, the piece became less urgent, more contemplative.

Given the growing vulnerability of Hong Kong's traditional government-run venues after months of anti-government protests, the festival's alternative choices proved prescient. Venues remained open, with audiences carefully directed to accessible routes after Friday evening's transit curfew and Saturday afternoon's street blockades.

Sunday in San Tsuen, however, offered another world entirely. Between the TimeCrafters' sets, audiences were treated to a rhymed history of Hong Kong's inequality led by local rapper MC Yan, and the sunset was greeted by Indian tabla and Tibetan singing bowls in arguably the calmest moment Hong Kong saw all weekend.

★★★★☆

Festival continues with Monique Krüis's opera 'Anne & Zef' in multiple venues, November 23-December 8, [facebook.com/FragrantVillage](https://www.facebook.com/FragrantVillage)

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