

## Phronesis at Brecon Jazz Festival the Telegraph 2011 \*\*\*\*\*

The world premiere of Pitch Black, a performance in total darkness by jazz trio Phronesis, was a unique, unmissable triumph at Brecon Jazz Festival.

Despite Allen Toussaint's star billing at Brecon on Saturday, those tuned in to the festival buzz would have heard another name permeating the early evening chatter: Phronesis, the Anglo-Swedish trio due to perform in perfect darkness.

Pitch Black – premiering at Brecon – was conceived as a natural live follow-up to the band's 2009 album Green Delay, written after band leader and double-bassist Jasper Høiby learned that his sister had gone blind. According to Høiby, he sought to raise "awareness for what it's like for people who can't see anything ... then all of a sudden feel that connection [to music]." Dedicating the album to his sibling, the liner notes read: "Sister, now that your eyes have ceased to work, here's something for your ears."

Extended to a live setting, Høiby's vision played out like musical theatre, a mix of drama, tension and comedy, held together by remarkable jazz, immaculately played.

Having taken our seats, we were told that once the performance started, no one would be allowed to leave. Those faint of heart were advised to remove themselves; not a soul stirred. There was a palpable electricity in the air as Phronesis took the stage, equal parts excitement and trepidation, and the trio's landmark show didn't disappoint.

They began under bright stage lights, ironically revealing a trio with an inimitable visual attraction – Høiby, lithe and chiselled, with hair pulled back in ponytail; pianist Ivo Neame, dandyish in a polka dot shirt; and drummer Anton Eger, with an outlandish Mohawk-cum-side-parting haircut, resembling a half eaten Walnut Whip.

This performance, however, was all about what was to come. "We're all going to be blind for a while," said Høiby, before starting second number Love Song. He wasn't lying. Over the next few minutes the stage lights gradually dimmed. Soon, the hall was plunged into black – real, "Pitch Black", with only the faintest neon glow from a fire exit offering any indication of a world beyond the hall. It truly was an immersive aural experience, akin to the serene joy in putting a favourite record on loud through headphones, and closing one's eyes.

But it was the sense of drama which made Pitch Black so exceptional. At one point, percussion seemed to be coming from all corners of the room, as something which rattled and chimed was rolled across the floor, somewhere near the stage. Dissonant bass and piano figures played call and response in short bursts. Meanwhile, the darkness brought with it macabre thrills; as one leg (presumably) brushed another in front of me there was an audible gasp. This was hair-raising stuff.

To relieve the tension, Høiby told several jokes – "hope you're enjoying this ... we just put the record on, we're having a few drinks back here" was the best – but proceedings never descended into pantomime.

And what of the music? In a word, stunning: melodic contemporary jazz, played with a note-perfect flair and fluidity which lit up the room (metaphorically, at least). But in truth, the music was almost a sideshow to the overall experience.

As the lights came up during the final song, the trio still had their eyes shut, perhaps a final show of solidarity with Høiby's sister. It was a touching sight – at last – to cap a unique, unmissable triumph.