HANNA TUULIKKI
Ruth Barker

SING SIGN by Hanna Tuulikki articulates twin threads of poetic exploration within the architectural and associative structures of Edinburgh Royal Mile. The performance is both a mapping of the communicative body in relation to the city; and a reading of the dialectical relationship between the languages we use to speak to one another. Through the complex interchange of song and gesture, Tuulikki weaves a wordless dialogue of playful Baroque meditation.

Two performers, one male and one female, stand within the arterial architecture of one of Edinburgh’s wooded closes. Framed by the close mouth, the performers face one another and offer a greeting. Then, in choreographed motions, their hands punctuate the air with gestures drawn from British Sign Language and other less defined forms of bodily incantation. Opening their mouths they sing, uttering the precise and lyrical lexemes of a wordless language that reverberates around the close walls.

SING SIGN borrows the structure of a kettledrum, a musical device used since the 14th century, in which the melodic line is split between two voices. This line, in communication. As intoning voices call in fluting recognition, and fingers conjure silent dialogue, we see the back and forth of transmission and reception danced before us. And yet the performers do not ‘speak’ only to each other, but resonate through the lines of the city itself. Their score is literally the map of Edinburgh’s streets, with the rhythms of inhabited pavements constructing the step and the breath. Here, to sing the city is to speak to it, to listen to it, to walk in it, to sing it and to sign in it, translating street names into eloquent gesture. Tuulikki’s previous work has located voices (her own and others’) in rural, windblown landscapes of open skies and whistling birdcall. Stepping into the city she sits her work with the same attention to both poetry and place.

The music that underpins the language of SING SIGN’s sung kettledrum has its origins in a European Baroque suite of dances. Movement one: Allemande; Movement two: Courante; Movement three: Sarabande; Movement four: Gigue. The four movements, uttered as tumbling and ascending melodic peals, are punctuated by the staggered physical poetry of RTL. These incantant gestures, choreographed as both dance and dialogue, tie the performer’s colloquy back into the body of closes and alleyways that permeate the city’s Old Town. Tuulikki has described this kettledrum as a “golden thread of conversation” and as such it stitches through the Royal Mile’s spine as a sinuous golden cord. But the kettledrum is also mimetic. At its purest level it gives musical structure to the act of conversation itself, embodying as well as representing the interchange of discourse. Tuulikki’s interrogation is implicit: who are we when we speak? Who are we when we sign? What can we ever read of one another if all the languages we speak are partial? Our intercourse is always provisional, and we know this. And yet Tuulikki’s work asks us afield to consider the wordless voice, the speaking arms, as adumbrated and articulate poetry.