

Pop

George Ezra
Lexington, N1

★★★★☆

The race to discover the new Jake Bugg has resulted in money being flung at lots of young men toting steel-stringed, semi-acoustic guitars and citing Dylan and the Delta blues as influences on their British upbringing. That George Ezra has jumped to the front of the queue of those most likely is partly down to luck. The BBC — which put the 20-year-old fifth on its list of artists to watch in 2014 — is a staunch supporter, largely because Ezra, like Bugg, was discovered through its BBC Introducing programme.

At the start of last summer Ezra (whose real name is the less snazzy sounding George Barnett) was a music student in Bristol. By autumn he had played Glastonbury and released a debut EP, *Did You Hear The Rain?*, two tracks from which were fixtures on Radio 1. His packed show at the Lexington preceded a 22-date UK tour — though it's mostly sold out.

The most striking features of Ezra's songs are his eloquent, storytelling lyrics and his voice, a deep, bluesy boom that should belong to a whisky-soaked singer three times his age. Live it was extraordinary, so loud it echoed around the room on hypnotic heartbreak ballads and jaunty folk-pop numbers that recalled Mumfords', always utterly at odds with his delicately strummed or finger-picked guitar accompaniment.

Most surprising was Ezra's ease on stage. He introduced songs with fun stories, made jokes at his own expense and, after the end of his set, returned to admit he had missed out a song and been sent back on to perform it. His best-known song *Budapest* had the crowd mimicking its freight-train noises, but it is *Cassy O'*, the lead track from his second EP, out in March, that could prove to be his *Lightning Bolt*.

Lisa Verrico

Touring from Feb 6 to March 8
(georgeezra.com)



Midlife crisis, what midlife crisis? Adam James and Emilia Fox

Sexy scholars and partner swappers

This feminist comedy is witty enough for the West End, says Kate Bassett

Theatre
Rapture, Blister, Burn
Hampstead, NW3
★★★★☆

Years ago, when they were postgrads, Don was Catherine's boyfriend. Then she headed off on a careerist stint abroad and returned to find her former roommate, Gwen, marrying him. Now they're all in their forties and the tables are being turned in Gina Gionfriddo's American domestic drama which — contriving to be both clever and funny — could well transfer from Hampstead to the West End.

Rapture, Blister, Burn deals with midlife crises and the shifting sands of gender politics. After more than a decade incommunicado, Catherine has reestablished contact and been invited round for drinks. Played by svelte Emilia Fox with a stateside accent,

Catherine has become a hot academic and TV pundit, in chic leather jacket and killer heels. Her books on pornography and the corruption of feminism have got her "the sexy scholar gig", as Adam James's Don teasingly puts it.

Yet she is starting to think she should have settled down with an adoring husband and had kids, like Gwen. Meanwhile, equally dissatisfied, Emma Fielding's rather starchy Gwen has got half a mind to dump Don on Catherine, if she wants him, because he has lost his mojo, dwindling into becoming a provincial college dean partial to booze and blue movies.

The partner-switching manoeuvres that ensue are interlaced with debates about feminist and antifeminist credos as Catherine teaches a summer course encompassing these for Don's institute. Gwen unsettlingly signs up along with an initially brassy undergraduate called Avery who is also Gwen and Don's babysitter. Catherine's seminars are convened off campus in her elderly mother's house. So Gionfriddo can have three generations of women conferring and the theorising getting personal.

This can look schematic and the potted histories of first and second-wave feminism feel like scholarship-lite. Still, it's much wittier than many an ideas play. And Peter DuBois (previously acclaimed for his staging of Gionfriddo's *Becky Shaw* at the Almeida) directs a brilliantly fluid production with clapboard backyards and lamp-lit lounges sliding and spinning into view (designed by Jonathan Fensom).

Fox and Fielding need to be more profoundly cut up if the play is ever to merit its emotive title. But Shannon Tarbet is outstanding as Avery, conveying the mouthy cocksureness of youth and a surprising protectiveness (far less caricatured than the post-feminist teen in April de Angelis's recent, generational seriocomedie *Jumpy*). Moreover, James is wonderfully droll and makes Don a most compelling, three-dimensional character, downplaying his dissipation in favour of rising frustration and desire.

Box office: 020-7722 9301, to Feb 22

Concert

An Eastern Vigil
LSO St Luke's

★★★★☆

A tiny programme from a tiny nation with a huge voice kicked off the four days of unaccompanied vocal and choral music which is the London A Cappella Festival. But quite why the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir and their conductor Daniel Reuss chose to sing only an hour's worth of music remains a mystery.

Mystery and mysticism, though, were very much the order of the evening. The lights were dimmed in St Luke's and the audience sat round candlelit tables, somnolent in the gentle light of those distinctive bell-like sopranos and true basses, who sang with rare focus and purity of tone in their vowel-rich, non-aspirated language. Perhaps song texts and programme notes would have broken the spell; the audience was certainly poorly served by the lack of both in the meagre programme card.

Arvo Pärt and his *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* might have been well enough known. But what of Cyrillus Kreek? No information at all about this Russian-trained Estonian, famous for his religious folksongs and choral miniatures, such as the dark, gently inflected homophonic psalm settings we heard. And the Russians Vasyl Barvinsky and Nikolai Kedrov? Well, the latter's setting of *The Lord's Prayer* is apparently one of the best-known in the repertoire, and the EPCC sang it with poise and devotion. Barvinsky's *Oh, what a wonder!* was sung with pentatonic plangency by a soprano solo, accompanied by a humming choir and the saxophone of Gilad Atzmon, which improvised over the melody.

Over Kedrov's solemn harmonies, Atzmon spun curlicues of descant. His seductive improvisations accompanied and wove in and out of the evening's choral works, from shofar-like wailings to jazz riffs. The word, perhaps, just had to take second place this time.

Hilary Finch

Cabaret

Linda Purl
The Crazy Coqs, W1

★★★★☆

No one seemed to know quite what to expect from a performer who is better known for playing Elizabeth Gaines in *Homeland* and Helene Beesly in the American version of *The Office*. You may also remember Linda Purl as the Fonz's girlfriend in the bright and breezy *Happy Days*, a show that was definitely not to be confused with the work of Samuel Beckett.

By the end of Purl's first night, though, one thing was clear: she has to be invited back for another residency. Having had minimal time to get acquainted with her British pianist Barry Green, she gave a mesmerising display, her personality setting the room aglow. Her voice is bright and full-bodied but tinged with a beguiling huskiness and a relaxed, thoroughly jazzy sense of swing. Droll and worldly, she is refreshingly free of nightclub

schmaltz. "Middle-aged broads should not be forced to stand in stiletto heels," she drawled at one point.

Billed as a journey through the golden age of the New York nightclub, the programme was in effect a showcase for her recently released album, *Midnight Caravan*, the set list diligently following the album's running order. Purl kept the narration to a minimum, tossing in winningly self-deprecatory remarks and a curious anecdote about listening to the Dalai Lama in the Midwest.

The songs spoke for her. *Autumn in New York*, prefaced by its verse just for a change, has rarely sounded so wistful; *My Ship* drifted across a pale horizon. On *Them There Eyes* Purl cut loose with phrasing that had all the authority of a seasoned jazz vocalist and she added an elegant touch of chanson with a version of *L'Etang* that was accompanied by an unobtrusive spoken translation. Mischievously, she recruited Green as a singing partner on the effervescent *Oh Me, Oh My*. He survived the experience and so did Ira Gershwin's playful lyrics.

Clive Davis

Box office: 020-7734 4888, to Sat

Concert

BBCSO/Volkov
Barbican

★★★★☆

Not for the first time, hearing Pierre Boulez's work alongside that of composers so greatly indebted to him makes me wonder how useful the master's voice really was for ensuing generations. In Boulez you hear the authentic voice of the new. It might be jarring on the ears, but it hits both brain and heart: it's disturbing in all the right ways. Hugues Dufourt's piano concerto, *On the Wings of the Morning*, first performed in 2012 and now given its UK premiere by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Ilan Volkov, is disturbing in ways that alienate, occlude and frustrate.

Morning never seems to arrive in Dufourt's piece, which is inspired by a 1979 lecture on Greek art focusing on the relationship between love and death. Dufourt responds with a vortex of destruction. Fluttering timpani accompany wails, bangs and shivers, all produced by a range of instruments that aren't always designed to make those noises. At the centre of the mêlée was Nicolas Hodges, doyen of the fiddliest pieces of new piano music. This was the sort of ultra-fiddly piece where my heart didn't just go out

to him, but to his page turner. There are any number of extraordinary, violent effects in this quasi-concerto (coolly controlled by Volkov) but the net effect of their combining together is to cancel themselves out.

Also receiving its UK premiere was a piece written more than 40 years ago — the 1969 *Mégalithes*, an early work by Gérard Grisey. His experimentation reveals itself in the 15 brass instruments deployed around the audience, the players each surrounded by a collection of strangely shaped mutes, like dragons on miniature hoards. The piece, however, makes you feel like you're surrounded by giant, bronchial frogs.

One for Grisey completists everywhere. So, Boulez — and then Beethoven — were refreshing contrasts. The French composer's *Cummings ist der Dichter* sets a piece of experimental verse by E.E. Cummings with the same fractured beauty of the poet's verse, and the BBC Singers vividly fielded its lingering syllables. And Volkov rounded the evening off with an enjoyable performance of Beethoven's Seventh, played with punch and rounded off by a firecracker of a climax.

Neil Fisher