

Review of Artonov festival in Brussels

BY [ROSASAWERON](#) 9 NOVEMBER 2020 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))

Martin Longley reviews Artonov festival, which took place in Brussels, Belgium 4-6 October 2020, and takes an in-depth look at two performances that made a significant impression, Homecoming and Come On Feet.



Vincent Courtois and M d ric Collignon, Artonov 2020. Photo credit Olivia Droeshaut   DYOD

This was the sixth edition of Artonov, a festival dedicated to multiple forms, tasting music, dance, theatre, performance art, flower arranging, culinary adventures, film, fashion design, mime, painting, poetry, historical edification, photography, architecture, installations, and olfactory creation. All is possible, although not as much as usual, in the sad landscape of 2020. As with most festivals this year, there were fewer international artists arriving, although this has had a beneficial effect of allowing a country to look inwards, savouring its local talents.

Of course, the mass of possible Artonov art-forms aren't usually present in a single performance, with perhaps three disciplines being the maximum amount in most cases. In all cases, the venue itself becomes a significant experiential influence on the event, as Artonov moves about the city and its suburbs, winking out delightful edifices that mostly date back a

hundred years or more. Occasionally, the setting might be somewhere that grew up in more recent decades.

Your scribe attended performances for three days, opening with **Homecoming** at the Solvay Library in the Etterbeek district, not far from the European Parliament. Solvay was originally the Institute Of Sociology, when built in 1902, and its library shelves house tomes that are a trial to carry, and impossible to borrow. Almost everything in this vaulted space is polished wood, with a church-of-reading ambience. Glowing globes provide low lighting.

The French cellist **Vincent Courtois** sat on the stage, but we could hear squeaky shoes on the upper level gallery. As his bow made dainty string-bounces, concealed gong activity became apparent from above. Then metal bowls were stroked, and was that a further shoe-dragging, or was it the sound of rubbed polystyrene?

Courtois developed a cello riff and then a high, mountain stream voice flitted about the high timbers, as **Médéric Collignon** wafted downstairs to the audience level. This fellow Frenchman descended into deep throat-singing, alternating with higher parts, finding a new vibrato by punching his own windpipe, then slurping imaginary noodle soup, and eventually perching on a high stool to issue soft cornet phrases. Courtois and Collignon were together with reedsman **Louis Selavis** for his 2003 album *Napoli's Walls*, released by ECM. Almost certainly unintentionally, the library's lingering wood-polish aroma became part of this gig's sensory experience.

Once Collignon was down on stage with Courtois, the performance became slightly more akin to an improvised music set, although with more than the usual amount of absurdist humour. He combined horn and voice into a single scating entity, as Courtois picked out some virtually Dixieland lines, the pair becoming, for a while, like some veteran trad jazz duo. Collignon's voice-range was extremely wide, and also prone to being combined with cornet-splatter. Courtois often seemed content to follow rather than lead. This was a virus-rebellion of gullet-splutter extremity, from the missing offspring of Ella Fitzgerald.

Probably influenced by the bad times of 2020, **Come On Feet** was an atypical Artonov performance, springing from recent decades, as it blended a live music soundtrack and a dance company, working together in a jazz-influenced realisation of plunging-depth sounds from the old dancefloors of Detroit and Chicago. House, techno, footwork, Afrobeat and Haitian vodou were all present, but the relationship between players and dancers had an improvisatory nature, even if in reality it was probably carefully coordinated.

The Ixelles location was probably one of the most spacious ever used by Artonov: a converted barracks area in the new See U Brussels creative encampment, which is one of the many energised sproutings on the city's arts complex scene, mostly using old industrial zones in fresh guises. It almost looked like a swimming bath without a pool, with its large arched ceiling, but neigh!, it's a former equestrian centre..!

Bert Cools (guitars, etc.) and **Stijn Cools** (drums, etc.) are the brothers who provided the sounds, subjecting their core instruments to heavy electronic processing to provide a fully-pumping sound. The six-piece dance ensemble was choreographed by **Quan Bui Ngoc**, from Vietnam.



Come on Feet, Artonov 2020. Photo credit Yves Dethier © DYOD

Bert Cools had a guitar-synth sound, but sometimes sounded like he was playing an actual guitar, and brother Stijn reduced his strike-sound at first, opting for a disguised electro-wooliness, the pair cloaking their source instruments into a oneness-of-spread layering. The dancers, too, were initially isolated around parts of their vast performing space, their moves beginning with a lone member, steadily increasing a series of highly detailed minimalist gestures. The movement-style wasn't easy to nail down, with sudden jerks and arm-awakenings amongst the other five dancers, from mantis stretches to body popping, plus what looked very much like *The Twist*, although somewhat mutated. Alarmingly, a bout of hiccups started to spread through the movers, getting more frequent, and affecting their entire frames.

The Cools brothers released a heavy dub load, but all except one dancer remained rooted, a tactic which once again had an unnerving effect, this sharp contrast between stillness and hyperactivity. Even as other dancers leapt into swift action, others kept their calmness. Then there was a 1920s techno-Charleston sequence. One of the dancers, **Boule Mpanya**, moved to a percussion set-up, singing in what sounded like Haitian vodou ritual style, goading the rest of the team into an increased level of abandonment, as Cools bowed his guitar like a Cretan lyra player.

As the *Come On Feet* performance evolved through its multiple phases, there were certain points, and one major nexus near its climax, that completely clutched at the sheer ecstasy of performance during this fleeting out-of-lockdown period. The artists and audience alike were slammed by a sense of complete rushing enthusiasm and empowerment, to actually move forcefully, with coordinated urgency, the musicians playing for dancers, the audience standing up or dancing themselves, the cavernous, arched venue providing room to live, even if only for an hour.

Three weeks later, on 26th October, Brussels went into lockdown again, and is due to emerge on 19th November, when live performances may well be making a tentative return...