

The Daily Telegraph

Explosive start to Icelandic get-together

MUSIC

REYKJAVIK ARTS FESTIVAL

HARPA

WOW. Some arts festivals start with fireworks. But only in Iceland does a volcano erupt shortly after the gala opening. The eruption may have cast a temporary shadow, literally, over the festival, but on the day of the gala the sun shone and all eyes were on the controversial new concert hall, Harpa.

The hall was one of the casualties of Iceland's banked economic collapse in 2008. Conceived during the boom years as a prestige harbour-front development with conference facilities, it was left as a large hole in the ground when the public/private partnership behind it fell apart.

Bravely, the city and the government decided to stump up public money to finish the project, though many people objected to their scarce resources being spent on a shiny new pleasure dome that eventually doubled in cost, coming in at an eye-watering £150 million.

Though still not completely



Pleasure dome: Reykjavik's Harpa reflects every shift in the light

finished, the hall was ready enough to stage the opening events of the Reykjavik Arts Festival at the weekend. Visually, the hall is impressive, largely thanks to the involvement of Olafur Eliasson, the artist who was brought in by the architects Henning Larsen to design the facade. Eliasson, who is Danish but of Icelandic parentage, had a big hit at Tate Modern a few years ago with his indoor sun installation. Here he has come up with a coloured-glass creation on the water's edge that reflects every shift in the Icelandic light.

Eliasson disclaims any

connection with natural forms, but it's hard not to see crystallised basalt columns in the polyhedric glass "bricks" on one side of the building, and fish scales in the irregular glass panels of the other. Inside, the walls are a volcanic grey and the interior of the main auditorium (one of four) is a lava-like red.

The star of the festival's opening weekend was the German tenor Jonas Kaufmann. To an audience that included the president and minister of culture among other VIPs, he performed a relatively predictable selection of Romantic opera arias, mostly

French and Italian, to show off his talents.

Kaufmann can claim to be one of the world's finest tenors, and he just keeps getting better. He has a particularly rich, chocolatey bottom register, but every part of his voice is firm and focused. His pianissimos are delicate, his fortissimos ringing, and he gives the impression of having power in reserve.

He was accompanied by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, which will now be based at Harpa along with Icelandic Opera. It has waited a long time for a home of its own – it previously played at the university cinema – and its enthusiasm was evident in its vigorous if not always highly disciplined playing under Peter Schrottner.

A tiny fly in the ointment is the over-reverberant acoustic, but the modern technology the auditorium is equipped with should enable that problem to be solved with time.

The Reykjavik Arts Festival (www.artfest.is), sponsored by the low-fare airline Iceland Express (www.icelandexpress.com), continues until June 5.

TRATING ★★★★★

Paul Gent