

directly interrogate our assumptions about what a groove actually is. Edwards sustains that mystery while also letting on that it's no mystery to her. She is smiling from ear to ear and having a deliciously good time with it. All of that comes across instantly and so directly – her certainty and the listener's befuddlement – that it's all overlaid still further with an odd sense of reassurance. We are all captivated by the same layers of sound while also acknowledging that we hear it in different ways.

'Sumn to Tell Ya' is a similarly playful reverie, with more Bollywood vibes, and the clear hierarchy of layers continues to hold sway. The melody breaks up into a stretto of calls and responses. Then, with just a slight change in emphasis, that same melodic material seems to settle into a vamp. Attention is drawn to the undercurrent of ostinato activity: freshets of narrow-band noise and some quick bi-directional glissandi affirm the Bollywood touch, in no other way than that they are reminiscent of tabla. After several refrains, these interactions are brought to a close by a certain *deus ex machina*, whose exact nature should not be revealed at the risk of spoiling the track. Edwards is compelled to interrupt the reverie with an outside (biographical) force, but the decision to do so makes an odd kind of sense. Her sonic exploration had no immanent reason to come to an end.

The track entitled 'Black Enigma', whose centrepiece is an angular, plucked double bass solo executed by Caleb Edwards, is notable for its reduced cast of characters. The layering effect of the other tracks is far less pronounced here: no percussion, no digital ostinati. Instead the spare bass line underlays an expansive, capricious violin fantasy, only briefly enriched in some spots with thick tremolo multi-tracking. Were it not for this penultimate track, the whole album would perhaps suffer from a sameness of density. As it stands, this leavened duet texture is a perfect prequel to the finale, 'Outta My Head', where the familiar exuberance of the first two tracks returns and explores the widest melodic range of the whole album.

Caitlin Edwards is a young composer and violinist, keeping herself very busy with a highly varied, promising career as well as a busy mentoring schedule. Her performing and pedagogical responsibilities are enough to keep any ordinary musician occupied, so music lovers can call themselves lucky that she found the time to put together this album. Now I hope the reception of *Exhale* will give her the

encouragement she needs to continue sharing her creative gifts in the recorded medium.

Philipp Blume

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John Cage, *Choral Works*. Latvian Radio Choir (Sigvards Kļava). Ondine, 1402-2.

This is a wonderful album, presenting four late works by John Cage: three of the number pieces and *Hymns and Variations*. Their quietude seems even more appropriate today than when Cage created them: music whose making reshapes our understanding of the world in as sustainable a way as is possible. *Hymns and Variations* (1979) is indeed a twofold recycling, Cage using again a version of the reductive compositional technique that he invented in 1969 to turn Satie's *Socrate* into a monodic piano piece, *Cheap Imitation*, this time to make new music out of two hymns, 'Old North' and 'Heath', by the eighteenth-century American composer William Billings (1746–1800), from his 1770 collection *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.

Cage took these source works and then erased notes, at the same time extending the durations of some of the notes that survived the process of erasure, so that Billings' quite straightforward tonal harmonies become blurred and new heterophonic melodies emerge from the interplay of the voices. Cage also abstracted vowels from the texts set by Billings so that their religious content disappears. The result is a work in 12 movements, each two minutes long: first we hear transformed versions of the two hymns, then a series of ten variations, each one presenting a different set of erasures and extensions. It's music that is grave, yet full of light, and is sung with perfect dedication by the Latvian Radio Choir, directed by Sigvards Kļava.

In 1993 William Brooks published 'John Cage and History: *Hymns and Variations*', an extraordinary piece of analysis in which he reverse-engineers the process that Cage used to compose *Hymns and Variations*, working out how the chance operations must have been organised to turn Billings into Cage. Brooks' scholarship is, as ever, exemplary and his conclusions fascinating: he suggests that Cage enables him to 'hear through the *Hymns and Variations*, tracing in their absence the source materials on which the process was performed. Billings is present, but only as if heard at a distance, or through a screen; Cage gives me something like a metaphor for memory, or decay, or simply the

passage of time.¹ More provocatively, Brooks also argues that Cage's compositional process 'stands outside time; it operates on its source with no regard for its history'.² Listening to this new recording I am struck instead by how carefully Cage regarded his source, using a process that obscures its harmonic contours in such a way that it sounds new yet retains a sense of its oldness.

There is an earlier recording of *Hymns and Variations*, released in 1986, in which the vocal quartet Electric Phoenix were multi-tracked three times. The more numerous Latvian Radio Choir are able to assign a different singer to each of the 12 parts and the result is much more satisfactory; they sound like a congregation dispersed, an impression aided by a recording style that takes us close to each of the singers but sets them in a large acoustic. The other works on the album – *Five* (1988), *Four*² (1990) and *Four*⁶ (1992) – are also given excellent performances and imaginative recordings, *Five* and *Four*² presented as a more cohesive mass of voices, whereas *Four*⁶ uses the same style as *Hymns and Variations*.

Only *Four*² was written as a specifically vocal work; it was composed for a school choir in Oregon and the singers vocalise on the letters of the state's name. The scores of *Five* and *Four*⁶ are more open but work equally well. *Five* is for 'five voices or instruments', and in this recording a number of realisations (it sounds as if either 15 or 20 singers are involved) are performed simultaneously, producing a series of lusciously dense, overlapping harmonic clouds that flood the air; I could quite happily have listened to it for many more than the five minutes that Cage's score allows. In *Four*⁶ each performer must choose 12 different sounds to distribute within Cage's time scheme. The Latvian Radio Choir members assemble an engaging array of sounds, from subharmonics to glissandi and animal impressions, all performed with great discipline. In one of the 'How to kick, pass, fall, and run' texts collected in *A Year from Monday* Cage wrote of his frustration with some performances of his indeterminate scores and wished that he could 'find a way to let people be free without their becoming foolish. So that their freedom will make them noble.'³ In these

recordings the Latvian singers reveal themselves as truly noble.

Christopher Fox

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Sylvia Lim, *sounds which grow richer as they decay*. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

Sylvia Lim's debut album demonstrates a fondness for rare instruments and unusual combinations of sonority. Born in 1992, she recently completed a Ph.D. at Guildhall School of Music & Drama and now teaches at this institution. Her work is intimate, ideal for listening to at home: in a single work she explores a very small range of sound in depth, revealing unsuspected characteristics and rewarding close listening. *sounds which grow richer as they decay* is released by the Texas-based Sawyer Editions, 'a small-batch label specializing in contemporary, experimental, and improvised music', and the recording sessions took place both in London and in Texas.

The album starts with *Piece for three tuned cowbells* (2019), played with admirable precision and sensitivity by percussionists Ben Clark and Antonin Granier. This polyrhythmic piece, around ten minutes long and in three distinct sections, was, according to the composer, 'driven by childlike curiosity'. Around four minutes into the piece, the sounds are more distorted and resonances come to the fore, as if a bell is being stroked. What appears on the surface to be an abstract work gradually acquires a ritualistic quality.

sounds which grow richer as they decay (2017), for the unusual combination of two trombones (Ian Calhoun, Zachary Johnson) and harp (Kaitlin Miller) is a strange piece showing Lim's original sonic imagination. The harp, as if exhausted, produces a deep metallic-edged twanging (an effect produced by the vibrating string being moved by a pedal) and the trombones emerge from nothing to produce quiet sustained sounds that often sound electronically produced rather than human. Silence plays an increasingly important role in this piece, which moves inevitably towards a silent conclusion.

It is hard to believe that *Reordering the Unconsumed* (2016/17) is for two cellos, such is Lim's ability to reimagine the instrument. High-pitched fragments are separated by silence, and while the range progressively expands, it is as if the sound emerges from nothing with

¹ William Brooks, 'John Cage and History: *Hymns and Variations*', *Perspectives of New Music*, 31, no. 2 (1993), p. 99.

² Brooks, 'John Cage and History', p. 100.

³ John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 136.