

scenes emerging from it, we leave the theatre at the end of *Aura* with the drama still unfolding forever just beyond the listener's gaze.

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10.1017/S0040298222000997

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Bryn Harrison, *Three Descriptions of Place and Movement*. Quatuor Bozzini. HCR, HCR27CD.

In many ways, composer Bryn Harrison has been repeating himself for the last 20 years. Individual pieces of his are consistently preoccupied with reiteration: patterns of rhythms and pitches seem to meander and mutate beyond or below the threshold of perceptibility, such that the fallibility of (aural) memory is made apparent. In other words, when listening to Harrison's music, I often cannot get a hold of the structure, but am content to be lost in the maze of sounds haunted by the spectre of Morton Feldman's late works, letting fleeting moments of tangibility arise enjoyably, as they do. Indeed, because of this aesthetic steadiness, there is a sense that the composer has been writing the same piece since 2000. But 2022 sees the release on Huddersfield Contemporary Records of Harrison's first string quartet, *Three Descriptions of Place and Movement*, performed by Quatuor Bozzini (their second collaboration, following the 2017 *Piano Quintet* with Philip Thomas, reviewed in *TEMPO*, 73, no. 289, pp. 73–74). The obvious question to ask, then, is: does *Three Descriptions of Place and Movement* continue the predictable (even *safe*) trajectory of Harrison's previous compositional work, or does this three-movement, hour-long monolith offer something beyond (another) repetition of something that already exists?

Both a noun and verb that references Tim Ingold's notion of how actions come to define spaces, 'opening' is composed of repetitive structures, comprising a Shepard tone-esque arrangement of pitch to offer the illusion of movement, regularly placed within complex tuplets, such that time often seems to simultaneously dilate and contract. I sense that there are formal patterns here, but what they are remains out of reach, because as one comes into view, the next conceals it. Indeed, this confusion is exaggerated by the momentary 'punctures' to the texture through noticeably (albeit slightly) longer and louder notes in the cello. The clarity of Quatuor Bozzini's bow work aids the effervescence of this sonic kaleidoscope: perhaps initially counter-intuitively, formal and aural ambiguity is affirmed

through the performers' care towards and execution of gestural detail. The liner notes claim that this piece is 'disorientating in its brevity' at only five minutes long. Indeed, several of Harrison's works from the late 2000s are approximately six to seven minutes long, but rather the ambiguity arises from Harrison's helix-like forms, which, in theory, would not necessarily become any clearer over a longer period. However, this remark does prompt me to wonder what a *really* brief – as in, say, under 30 seconds – Bryn Harrison piece might be like. 'opening', then, is a repetition of Harrison's compositional identity.

The second track, 'clearing', presents a homogeneity of rhythm: a rigid crotchet pulse of 63bpm for the full duration of the piece. This temporal regularity is occupied with multifarious patterns of pitches that teeter on the verge of emergence and understanding. There is a tension between simplicity and complexity. Relentless re-examinations of material – to the point that their identity either in themselves or the mind of the listener becomes obscured – are, to me, so successful in Harrison's previous work precisely because of the complexity of the rhythms, ordering of pitches and cyclical forms. I am presented with a path of absorbing fascinations, such that I feel compelled to attend to each of Harrison's compositional decisions: I cannot help but *listen* and be satisfied when I notice the music stumble through and upon moments of clarity. Indeed, perhaps this is best demonstrated in *Piano Set (six miniatures)* (2005), where the same single side of A4 is played six times, but detecting this purely from listening is onerous, to say the least. In other words, I think that Harrison's music *works* precisely because it is complex. But, in 'clearing', with its harmonic and rhythmic simplicity, my interest fades and I feel my attention drift elsewhere as the piece meanders through its (now seemingly interminable) 23 minutes; as a consequence, there is very little space for the brilliant particularity of the Quatuor Bozzini to muster. What's more, this trading in of intricacy for purity in terms of rhythm and harmony, at best, alters, if not *lessens*, the presence of Harrison's previously unmistakable compositional voice: it feels as though there are quite a few individuals – graduate students emulating Harrison, for example – who could have composed this second movement. However, this tension presents an alluring question and one that is not posed in his previous work: how much does Harrison want 'clearing' to be listened to? Or, better, what *sort* of listening is being invited? The sort of disorientation that appears here makes a decided leap from focusing on the arrangement of materials to one

that centres on listening; I am disorientated because I am hearing myself attempt to listen.

The album ends with the most ambitious movement of the piece in terms of duration and instrumentation: 'burrow' presents a palimpsest of three recordings of Quatuor Bozzini overlaid on top of each other. The two that are 'pre-recorded' are each panned hard left and right with the 'live' central (I wonder if the simplicity/complexity dilemma is present here, too, in the decision to use this straightforward mix, rather than one that might more ambiguously interweave the past and present). In general, the two pre-recorded quartets play patterns of bowed material that create a mercurial soundscape of entangled and often indistinguishable movements within and between each other. The live quartet traverses this babbling sonic glacier, sometimes joining the two other quartets with similar material, but, just occasionally, arriving seamlessly at a distinct melody, which is repeated just enough times to lock into my aural attention before being lost to greater presence of *ongoingness*. The cello's (relatively) lower register is used with precision to this end; indeed, at points, it almost feels as if the rest of the string quartet is accompanying the cello in a concerto, but when that alteration of roles exactly occurs would be impossible to say.

There is an emotive quality here that I have not found in Harrison's previous work and, to be frank, I can neither fully put my finger on what or why that is. Often, there is a sort of hypnotic softness, even lushness, to Harrison's

music. I am presented with a sonic ongoingness that I am happy to *observe* and let float above me. But 'burrow' expresses something different: generally, there is some sort of woe or emptiness, a difficulty, that I feel implicated in. Maybe this speaks to the fact that Harrison composed the quartet in 2020 over the turbulent period of the UK's lockdown response to COVID-19. Undoubtedly, this enigma between emotional absence intermingled with involvement is highlighted (if not entirely brought to life) by the adroit flittering between reserved and affecting playing of Quatuor Bozzini. I wonder, too, if this sense of involvement arises from the live players carving out these ephemeral moments of sometimes Romantic-esque melodies among a *mêlée* of past selves.

While reviewing *Three Descriptions of Place and Movement*, I returned to a selection of Harrison's older work and found aspects that were new to me; I only arrived at these realisations through the sort of interconnected questions that this new string quartet raises. I wonder, then, if *Three Descriptions of Place and Movement* is indeed a continuation of the 'meta-piece' that Harrison has been composing over the last 20 years, but that each new addition offers a renewed reading of this self-referential and transcending singular work, such that my (now altered, if not outright doubted) perception is brought to the foreground as *productive*.

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