

materials reconfigure and reshape the rhythmic texture; at other times, a section builds up and culminates in a new sonic space. Every piece on the album moves around a given set of musical spaces, which are traversed as the music unfolds. Some sections are traversed linearly, and others reappear later on, creating a sense of a cyclical motion. Additionally, every piece introduces a sonic 'other', which in most cases appears towards the end of the piece. This sonic other presents a very different referential space that puts the preceding music in perspective. An example of this is the introduction of harmonic progressions reminiscent of film music in some passages. Another takes place in the last piece of the album, *CASE BLACK*, from 2016, performed by the Black Page Orchestra. The incorporation of musical elements considered to lie outside of the referential space of contemporary classical music shakes the listener and recontextualises everything that has preceded it. The interplay between harsh electronic sonorities and noise-like instrumental textures with passages of harmonic and melodic quality creates a multi-genre musical patchwork; the episodic becomes multi-referential. The coda of *CASE BLACK* reveals a harmonic sequence played in an arpeggio figuration on e-guitar with a melodic bass melody in pizzicati and a soprano melodic line played by the flute. The revelation, albeit somewhat prepared throughout the piece through the gradual insertion of e-guitar licks and harmonic shifts, is quite successful in achieving an expected twist at the end of the piece. The explicit fleshing out of the pop-rock-sounding arrangement unravels somewhat unexpectedly and creates an interesting reconfiguration of the listening experience. Placing this piece last creates a large-scale closing section: a quite satisfying conclusion to the album.

Andrés Gutiérrez Martínez

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Ayanna Witter-Johnson, Alex Paxton, *Philharmonia Composers' Academy* vol. 5. Philharmonia Orchestra, Darren Bloom. NMC, NMC DL3047.

Anyone who still thinks that there is a preferred 'official' contemporary music style in the UK ought to listen to this release. The two tracks, composed in 2022, are the artistic outcomes of the Royal Philharmonic Society composers' programme for which the two featured composers were paired with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Both composers developed pieces over a ten-

month period with the orchestra and conductor Darren Bloom. While the Philharmonia regularly includes contemporary music in its programmes, this is hardly its principal focus and neither of these pieces would slot easily into a traditional orchestral programme (my computer unhelpfully suggests 'unknown genre' for both). The CDs issued as a result of the academy are more like tasters to introduce us to the composers in question than a carefully curated programme designed to be listened to in one sitting.

The most obvious thing to say about the tracks on this CD is that they are, to say the least, extremely different in style; about the only things they have in common are that they are written by composer-performers based in the UK and are just over ten minutes long. Bloom conducts and the members of the Philharmonia featured in the ensemble are not credited by name in the booklet. And it would appear that both composers, Ayanna Witter-Johnson and Alex Paxton, eschew traditional programme notes. Witter-Johnson prefers to allow her piece, *Equinox*, to speak for itself, writing 'Music cannot always be intellectualised into a neat programme note.' On the other hand, Paxton's provocative stream-of-consciousness text is – in my view, at least – a verbal parallel of his track, *Levels of Affection*. He ends with a question: 'There are many levels of affection, these are some of my favourite. Which one is yours?'

Ayanna Witter-Johnson is established as a multi-talented musician who effortlessly embraces multiple styles as both a cellist/singer and as a composer whose work draws on jazz, popular music and adventurous sonorities. Starting with a fragmentary cello melody that gradually draws the string ensemble into its orbit, *Equinox* combines atmospheric string chords and clear, well-placed R&B-style vocals. Expanding and contracting string textures encircle and underline the voice and solo cello. Structurally, *Equinox* contrasts vocal-dominated sections (with a text by the composer) with a light string accompaniment with what sound like improvisatory episodes that are dynamic and highly rhythmically inventive, in which Witter-Johnson sometimes uses the cello body percussively. Only an extract of the text, on the topic of the circle of life, seasons and relationships, is provided, though Witter-Johnson's excellent diction makes the complete reproduction superfluous. This is an instantly appealing, accessible work.

To say the sonic universe changes for Alex Paxton's *Levels of Affection*, 'for ensemble and improviser', would be a huge understatement. From the transparent, legible textures and musical language

of *Equinox* we move to something extremely mobile and messy. Paxton's piece begins as if in media res, as if we've turned on a radio between stations, with lo-fi orchestral and synthesised sounds from which a wandering trombone and crazy impulsive xylophone flourishes emerge. The boundaries between live and synthesised sound, between vocal and instrumental utterances, are chaotically blurred.

Paxton himself is the extraordinary improvising solo trombonist, usually muted, wah-wah-ing and/or squeaking, communicating with us in a way that makes me wonder whether there is a text or at least a hidden storyline behind the piece. Short, simple melodic phrases are piled up to create textures as multi-layered and as seemingly spontaneously generated as a Jackson Pollock spatter painting, occasionally clarified and cut back, though not for long. The overall impression is of treble-heavy cartoon music to which we can imagine our own narrative (for instance, around 6'15" there is a distorted electronic lullaby to which the trombonist responds by singing descending gestures through the instrument). All the performers are spectacular virtuosos who are also asked to whistle (without their instrument) towards the end of the piece; in particular, whoever the xylophone player is deserves a medal. In the last few seconds, the trombone seems to plead with us one last time, and abruptly the piece finishes. Perhaps because Tom and Jerry cartoons were one of my earliest formative musical experiences, I enjoyed *Levels of Affection* a great deal.

This short CD provides an introduction to two fascinating British composers, showcasing both the variety of the contemporary scene and the ability of Philharmonia players to adapt to highly contrasting styles. If the aim was to make me want to explore both composers further, it succeeded.

Caroline Potter

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Trond Reinholdtsen, *Spätstil*. asamisimasa. Aurora, acd5108.

Trond Reinholdtsen is an eccentric's eccentric. He is not in any way edgy or abrasive, nor is he trying to be; he is simply and thoroughly weird, in the profoundest sense of the term. His website comprises three small hyperlinks beneath a picture he took of himself with what appears to be a front-facing laptop camera: he is making a strange face, his glasses are a bit crooked and he has two prominent zits, one

near his left nostril, the other a bit above the right corner of his mouth. Reinholdtsen is often discussed in terms of enormous artistic vulnerability and risk, and it's not difficult to see why – he presents a remarkably uncalculated and raw musical practice, just like his homepage. Few musicians are either willing or able to take their total-artwork projects so far that the decorum of concert life and art institutions seems to come undone.

Reinholdtsen's multi-part digital opera Ø (pronounced like the rounded vowel found in several Scandinavian languages but referring to the set-theoretical notion of an empty set, if I'm not mistaken) was, for a couple years, talked about in the excited hushed whispers in which I remember hearing Wandelweiser discussed back in the early 2010s. In most circumstances, a YouTube opera series inspired by the philosophy of Alain Badiou would be bad; somehow, this isn't. It's as notable for its outrageously ornate costuming and puppetry as it is for its dramaturgy and sound. In fact, a truly contemporary, multidisciplinary opera-blob has been a remarkably enduring obsession for Reinholdtsen. His long-term anti-institution, *The Norwegian Opra*, has existed for over a decade, producing a series of projects that more closely resemble bizarre internet detritus than the usual products of new music – more Ratboy Genius than Donaueschingen. Indeed, the first video he published online, from 2009, is him watching Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* and imitating Klaus Kinski's cadences as he shrieks his demands for an opera house, followed by two seconds of him rolling around on the floor in a piece of green fabric. This is characteristic: Trond is less laser-focused than Patrick Frank, the other composer of his generation similarly possessed by an uncontrollable desire to explode the possibilities of new music, but he makes up for it in sheer unhinged inventiveness.

From what I can gather (as the website description suggests, professional information is a bit scattershot), this is the first commercial release of Reinholdtsen's music. *Unsichtbare Musik*, the A-side of this LP, is the earlier of the two pieces, dating from 2009. It was written for a concert broadcast live from the Berliner Philharmonie, taking radio broadcast as its organising principle to launch into 'a kind of lecture where the composer guides the listener into what is happening... as the piece develops, of course, the information you get as a listener from the composer and what actually happens in the music becomes more problematic' (Anders Førisdal, the guitarist of asamisimasa, in