

Lely's pieces often follow and develop one musical idea, yet this meticulous concentration is never coloured in one particular way: while the previously described works produce a rather radiant quality, the atmosphere of *Nocturne* is gloomier and more anxious. The four notes in the piano's middle register are divided into two ascending intervals: a perfect fifth and a perfect fourth which veer off their course once in a while, exposing the dramaturgy inherent in the nature of our most fundamental musical intervals. A gradual expansion from high to low register takes place across 20 minutes in *For Phillip*, which also works around a set of limited monophonic pitches, oscillating between lighter and darker shades.

Despite the simple harmonies, stepwise melodies and sparse textures all being a clear point of reference to the generation of British experimental composers preceding Lely, Lely's music never sounds predictable or boring. It always seeks to challenge the listener and demands their close concentration on the unfolding process, which is of high importance to the composer. Only then does it truly reward us and unravel its more concealed beauty. This release is certainly a welcome addition to the composer's catalogue, encouraging listeners to form an all-round impression of Lely's music and to soak up his intimate soundworld from different perspectives.

Marat Ingeldeev

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Josh Modney, *Near to Each*. Modney, Laubrock, Smythe, Roberts. Carrier Records, 067.

*Near to Each* is such a wonderful title for an album, and an equally wonderful hook to begin talking about the music on the album. The title invokes two common metaphors about music that both carry explanatory power and introduce creative friction through their internal contradiction. 'Near' implies that music occupies space, and that some sort of juxtaposition within that space is possible, while 'Each' implies that music can be lumped into objects, and that these objects can be enumerated. Josh Modney knows that both metaphors are limited in their ontological power, and his compositions do a wonderful job of bringing those contradictions into relief. If the listener approaches this music as enumerated objects in space, and judges their various proximities, and indeed goes further to ask the question 'What is near to what?', and furthermore: 'How

can any one object be equidistant from all the others?' – that is, 'Which of these objects is actually Near to Each?!' – it quickly becomes clear that the lack of an answer to this question is the whole point.

The album is scored for violin, cello, tenor saxophone and piano. The pianist Cory Smythe also plays on a set of keyboards with software of his own devising, and together the instrumentarium thus has access to both tempered quarter tones and to just intonation. Modney also allows for an extensive amount of improvisatory freedom, and this contributes to a refreshing mix of spontaneity and tight control. Indeed, there are numerous moments, sometimes several within a single track, where the music seems to derail into recklessness before obeying some external cue to yield to a completely unexpected, delicate texture. Between these jump cuts and the equally unexpected hints at recurring materials throughout, one repeatedly gets the impression of an ensemble 'taking stock' of its musical objects and their interactions. Some trajectory through the 'space' is seen to be careening towards a dead end, so the music calmly breaks away and enters a reassessment phase. But over it all lies a perfectly cool veneer of probing curiosity and a commanding, highly unique sense for form and structure. Words fail.

The opening three tracks consist of a great ponderous ensemble movement entitled 'Whalefall', which is bookended by an expository 'Violin Solo' and an aggressive yet desultory 'Tenor [Saxophone] Solo'. The first bares its soul; the last bares its fangs. But 'Whalefall' itself is a series of exquisitely conceived sound blocks, each uniform and gradually evolving, but all negating each other's intentions. Whatever thing is *Near to Each* of these sound blocks remains inexpressible – perhaps it is not even music? – but we can't deny its presence in our minds: some impossible geometric principle that links these blocks together, cetacean in its proportions, playing upon frequencies inaccessible to the human ear. The last block of 'Whalefall' is set off from the others and features an unforgettably rich microtonal *idée fixe*, passed between the instruments according to some unfathomable principle. As it unfolds, we lose interest in identifying the linking principle, though, and get lost in the intricacy of the moment. This was my favourite track on the album, even if not the most consequential one for making sense of the whole form.

The intriguing title 'Crystallization' is written over both the fourth and eighth track, the latter carrying the alternative title 'Ritual'. Whatever is

crystalline about the first 'Crystallization' is not at all present in the second, which suggests the possibility that the former is emphasising the process of crystallisation, while the latter might represent the resulting state, albeit of a completely unrelated crystallisation process, borne by different physical materials. 'State' is not to be confused with 'stasis', though: the crystal, once formed, only becomes stable enough that we can perceive its inner fragility and register that it is on the verge of crumbling to dust. But dust too can be crystalline, before it gets blown away.

There are three tracks interposed between the Crystallizations. The fifth track, 'Opening', playfully invites cross-reference to the seventh, 'Rift'. Are these not synonyms? To be sure, there is nothing particularly expository about 'Opening'. No, something has instead opened up and its innards have been exposed. Again a matter of weird proportions: after rummaging through a truly ragged array of disparate musical objects, the centre of the piece cuts to some emphatic, disjunct double stops in the violin, and the entire second half of the movement sees the remaining instruments re-invoking that disjuncture over a steady overpressure sound emitted by the violinist. 'Rift' strikes upon an equally vulnerable interstitial material. Here, though, the texture is gentle, impossibly intricate. The musicians are frequently at the limits of their ability to control how they sound.

Between these highly contrasting introspections is, in many respects, the heart of the album, a cheekily titled 'Ballad', which refuses to actually tell a story. Cello and piano are cast in an obstinate accompanying role while the solo violin expounds a winding melody. Echoes of the 'Louange a l'Éternité' from Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* suggest themselves. The violin melody is notable, however, in its steadfast refusal to break down into phrases. Watch it sing, yet it never runs out of air. In a maddeningly beautiful moment it is later joined in this monody by the saxophone, in one of the most unlikely and oddly dissonant unison cantilenas you could imagine. But this injection of colour changes nothing about the melody itself. It continues to be a slice of eternity with no immanent reason to end. (I cannot speculate on whether the reference to Messiaen is intentional, and I don't want to know.) Once we're past the halfway mark, the tenor sax takes over completely, introducing a new melodic attitude (can't call it an 'idea'), and carries said attitude forward as the obstinate duo re-enters and its chords start to fan out. The balladeer has

definitely stopped balladeering. Smythe closes out the track on his three spectral keyboards – spectral in the sense of haunting – to restate some of the original violin melody. Given how this track ebbs to a close, nothing could possibly follow it except the shredded silence of 'Rift'.

Space considerations prevent me from expounding about the final track, 'Chorale', to the degree that it deserves, but the title really winks back at us in a revealing way. Although it runs for nearly 20 minutes – in other words, given plenty of time to cohere into some chorale-like texture – we are treated to all sorts of other things which would have no place in a Lutheran hymnal. The track comes to a close in apothecic revelry and a harmonically gorgeous anti-linear counterpoint that, in itself, could be explored for an entire follow-up album.

The metaphors that Modney underscores with his clever titles constitute a powerful set of clues about the music's thematic focus, and the compositions themselves are a study in dismantling exactly these metaphors. In the course of – and through the process of – abdicating their expressive power, they become expressive. Profoundly so. I beg you to give this album a listen, as there is so much to ponder in it. The whole suite would be such a magical thing to hear in a live setting as well.

Philipp Blume

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Mirela Ivcevic, *Scarlet Songs*. Black Page Orchestra, Klangforum Wien, Miceli, Tsiatsianis, Volkov, Wiegers. Kairos, 0015123KAI.

Mirela Ivcevic (b. 1980) is a Croatian composer living in Vienna. She is a co-founding member of the Black Page Orchestra, a contemporary music ensemble based in Vienna. Ivcevic's Album 'Scarlet Songs', released by Kairos, includes a selection of pieces composed between 2014 and 2019 for large and small ensemble configurations performed by Klangforum Wien, one of Europe's leading contemporary music ensembles, and the Black Page Orchestra, an up-and-coming contemporary music ensemble focusing on electroacoustic and mixed-media works by young composers. Ivcevic's musical writing is highly differentiated, ranging from the use of dense sustained sonorities to more rhythmically driven multi-instrumental gestures; from timbrally diverse granular textures to repetitive segments with a clearly articulated rhythmic/melodic profile; from a contemporary