



Indeed, the tension between the digital and the physical might be greyfade's real guiding principle. Which brings me to Kirschner's *three cellos*. This is the label's first release in its FOLIO series and takes the form not of an LP, CD or even cassette, but of that most old-fashioned medium, a 100-page, linen-bound book. The book contains three essays, of varying lengths, by Kirschner, Branciforte and cellist Christopher Gross, plus photos and scores of two movements of Kirschner's piece – and, on the first page, a QR code and password to download or stream the music itself. Whatever else one makes of this, it places one's experience in a dualistic tactile space that feels very contemporary. A hardback and a QR code: one chunky in your hands, its heavy paper stock pushing back at your fingers, the other requiring almost no tactile engagement at all.

This isn't window dressing: it gets to something essential about the music itself. Since the 1980s, Kirschner has composed digitally, working straight into synthesisers and sequencers (and, later, DAWs). Although he often uses the sampled sounds of acoustic instruments, he doesn't write for them. In fact, he doesn't notate at all. But in 2015 Branciforte proposed making transcriptions of some of these electronic works for acoustic instruments; the first results of this appeared on the 2021 greyfade release *from the machine, vol. 1*, featuring performances by members of Flux Quartet and ICE. *three cellos* pursues the idea further, with Branciforte transcribing Kirschner's *July 7, 2017* (all Kirschner's works are titled according to the day on which they were begun) for two or three cellos, which was then multitrack recorded by Gross (a founding member of Talea Ensemble). Gross' contribution towards the final work is substantial. Besides the challenge of coordinating three layers of essentially atemporal music, it was he who suggested adding vibrato to his playing – a decision Kirschner initially resisted, but which he came to embrace as the final step that birthed the music into the physical world.

The two essays by Kirschner and Branciforte describe the composition, transcription and recording processes in detail – the challenges of rendering Kirschner's non-metrical rhythms in legible notation, the emergence and treatment of unintended digital artefacts, the transformational impact of an acoustic instrument on a digitally conceived concept and the composer's conflicting sensations of loss and surprise that are bound up with all this. These parts of the text are particularly revealing: digital to acoustic transcription is a common technique today (that dualistic tactile space again), used

by composers from Ablinger to Alessandrini, but rarely have I seen its practical working-out explained quite so clearly.

The music itself follows Kirschner's recent compositional practice of stretching, transposing and layering loops of melodic material based on sets of four adjacent semitones. Once he has generated a lot of material this way, he auditions and edits his way towards the final music. 'Think of the material that's come out of your system as a piece of wood to be carved,' he writes. 'You have to follow the wood, to find the traits latent within in, rather than impose your own.'¹ In this way, *three cellos* is essentially a collection of ten short fugues, all on the same subject but each with different characters based on the different harmonic and temporal parameters imposed from the start. There's an early-twentieth-century air to the result that is unexpected but not unwelcome. I found myself thinking of Schoenberg but without the expressionistic anxiety. But, then, Kirschner is writing for an age in which it is not necessary to justify this or that technical decision, merely to explore it for what it is. In that respect, it looks back further still, to Bach, or even Tye. It is somewhat severe music, but endlessly engaging nevertheless.

In fact, I enjoyed this on every level: it's a great idea immaculately realised, and a perfect encapsulation of greyfade's founding ethos. The second FOLIO release, Taylor Deupree's *sti.ll* – another reimagining of an electronic work for acoustic instruments – was issued as I was preparing this review. I look forward to hearing, seeing and feeling how the series develops.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson

10.1017/S0040298224000494

Martin Arnold, *Flax* (for Philip Thomas, 2021). Kerry Yong. *another timbre*, at221.

Martin Arnold's album *Flax* is a sparse 80-minute piano monologue. Performed by Kerry Yong and recorded by Simon Reynell of the record label *another timbre*, the piece was premiered and documented at the University of Huddersfield in October 2022. My advice: listen to *Flax* with a friend, for the conversation that the music will spark, and the mutual accountability to finish listening to the album in its entirety.

¹ In its balance of automation and editing, Kirschner's practice resembles that of the British composer Richard Emsley; see my article in *Tempo* 76, no. 302 (October 2022).

Originally commissioned by Philip Thomas, *Flax* was written during the pandemic. And it feels like 2020. The world has stopped. All is quiet, still. Notes appear on one long horizontal scroll, with no clear beginning, no end. Beautiful major-7th chords appear for a moment then get put away by muffling felt, like a broken promise. Every note requires so much effort. The keys feel too large, like stairs, or at least the length of a forearm.

Yet the recording doesn't betray the sound of the effort required to play the piano. There are no incidental pedal sounds, partly because the pedal doesn't come in really until the very end (surprise!), and there is no sound of breath or other movement, as there was in *Opus*, the last solo piano concert recording of Ryuichi Sakamoto. Clean, dry, the recording of *Flax* is masterful, pairing exquisitely with the virtuosic performance by Yong.

Yong plays each note with a perfectly consistent sound. The piano is bright but no note is loud. No note is quiet. Nothing is phrased. This is monstrously hard to do, as Yong must play in a way that doesn't encourage the resonance of the piano. Perhaps a flat finger in the middle of the key, with a hard-ish press, a slow lift. Whatever Arnold communicated in the score encouraged Yong to be the anti-instinctual pianist, to forget voicing, forget having a voice at all, which perhaps is the greatest accomplishment: maintaining an objectivity and a trust in this aesthetic.

So what is the aesthetic of *Flax*? Here are some observations. I have no doubt a live concert of *Flax* would be compelling – though the dramaturgy of the work is not dynamic, the human presence and withholding of such committed, lost wanderings would be fascinating. 'Nice' harmonies appear like accidents, pointing to some other genre, like a slowed-down and broken-up jazz improvisation. The two hands often have different characters, and any aberration seems like a chasm. For example, a minor second appears in the beginning, then not again for half an hour. Was the first a mistake? Given the intensity of the playing, probably not. But the continual posturing towards 'pretty' and the immediate denial require us to constantly switch our mode of listening, which becomes exhausting. *Flax* is demanding, perhaps for the sake of being demanding, saying your expectations are meaningless, beauty is meaningless, understanding is meaningless.

Despite (or because of) its structural nihilism, there is an impressiveness and grandeur to the project. Like a large Cy Twombly painting, the

pianist draws on a gigantic piece of paper with giant crayons. For this reason, I am curious about the notation – to know how much to attribute to the intuition of the pianist, to allocate intention fairly between composer and performer. It's a bit bothersome not knowing. Is *Flax* heavily notated like an Evan Johnson piece, the sonic result of which is similarly hinting but never revealing? Or is it written in free time like a John Cage graphic?

Towards the end of the 80-minute work, dyads appear, then clusters, then the left hand has single notes – gestures we haven't seen before present themselves. Only if you have been paying attention, however. Like the floating collagen threads that float across the vitreous film of your eyes – there when you choose to look at them. Have I heard anything like *Flax* before? Is there a limit to expansiveness? Does Arnold have hope for humanity? No good answers, but I am very grateful that *Flax* inspired me to ask these questions.

Julie Zhu

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Walter Zimmermann, *A Chantbook for Lipparella*. Lipparella. World Edition, 0041.

More and more recordings of Walter Zimmermann's beguilingly enigmatic music have become available in recent years, from Nicolas Hodges' survey of his piano music on *Voces abandonadas* (a series of WDR recordings from 2009, eventually released by Wergo in 2016) to the 2019 Mode reissue of the complete *Lokale Musik* recordings (originally released on LP in 1982), the Sonar Quartett's *Songs of Innocence & Experience*, a collection of Zimmermann's string music from 1977 to 2003 (again for Mode, released in 2020) and the retrospective gathering of his music for voices on the *Voces* album (also Mode, released in 2022). But this *Chantbook* is different, conceived not so much as a compendium, more as an album, where musical ideas flow across the ten tracks with a cumulative expressive intent.

The paradox is that this album too is a sort of retrospective, drawing together works from a period between 1994 and 2021; what makes it special, however, is that each work has been reconceived for the resources of Lipparella, a Swedish ensemble devoted to the creation of a new repertoire for Baroque instruments and countertenor. Walter Zimmermann's collaboration with Lipparella began in 2019, the product