

paradox, then this is a familiar vocabulary of exploration and alienation.

The album continues with *Trente*, a 30-movement work for piano after Kandinsky's segmented painting of the same name. It is here that I finally understand the importance of (Gesamt)kunstwerke, as although each of the movements is named for a single constellation, *Trente* is a vast intertextual survey of mythologies of the night sky.

The piano navigates between polarities of harmony and register. The direction of the music is sometimes obscure, but perhaps this is what the composer intended for her listeners. As due north is shrouded in the glittering constellations of the piano's upper register, so too is the musical compass, the inner logic of the work. We are afloat in the zero gravity of the piano's sustain pedal and expansive compound intervals.

The prepared techniques in the tenth movement, 'Lyra' – a plucking of the strings inside the body of the instrument – is a welcome development in the language of this work. We are introduced here to a distinctive character, a vulture or eagle carrying a lyre, and we hear the bird's sharp talons on the strings of the harp. The character work continues throughout *Trente*, with diverse prepared techniques returning for the likes of watery 'Hydra' and vain 'Cassiopeia'.

I appreciate the restraint in Lind's writing. *Trente* might be best understood by its moments of silence, of absence, of the void. In 'Virgo', the listener is invited into the quietest moments of the work, and the ear stretches to catch the low resonance of sympathetic vibration in the piano. I found myself intently listening to the silence long after the track had stopped.

Somewhere in the starry character survey of *Trente* I lost the original reference to Kandinsky's work of the same name. For music so figurative, so explicit in its titular description, Lind's *Trente* seems light years away from Kandinsky's abstract, black-and-white painting. Indeed, Kandinsky himself wrote scornfully of programme music, the antithesis to his abstract mission: 'How miserably music fails when attempting to express the exterior form, is shown by narrowly understood program music.'<sup>4</sup>

Insight is offered, perhaps, in Kandinsky's writing on black and white in colour theory: 'White affects us with the absoluteness of a great silence... It is not a dead silence, but one full of possibilities... [a] silence which has suddenly

become comprehensible... [Whereas] like a nothingness after sunset, black sound is like an eternal silence, without future or hope. Represented in music, it is as a final pause, which precedes the beginning of another world.'<sup>5</sup>

Another world, indeed. Many worlds, really, within Lind's interstellar, intertextual album.

Kate Milligan

10.1017/S0040298223000761

---

Lei Liang, *Hearing Landscapes/Hearing Icescapes*. Liang, Aguila, Díaz de Cossio, Hinrichs. New Focus Recordings, FCR360.

How might a musical composition demonstrate meaningful engagement with research in other fields? For composers, especially those involved in academia, this can seem like a tired and redundant question. Artists are familiar with the wealth of possibilities afforded by cross-disciplinary collaboration. Practice-based methodologies, sometimes drawing on strategies such as data sonification and process-driven composition, can facilitate demonstrable links between non-musical source materials and musical outcomes. Nonetheless, any creative process that seeks to transform non-musical research materials into artistic practice can raise fundamental questions regarding the nature of meaning, understanding and communication. Where does the research end and the music begin – if these distinctions are even useful? *Hearing Landscapes/Hearing Icescapes*, by Chinese-born American composer Lei Liang, is the striking result of two contrasting research projects. The composer's programme note draws attention to the multidisciplinary, collaborative environment that enabled these pieces to come to fruition.

The first work, *Hearing Landscapes* (2014), is a three-movement electronic work with a total duration of around 20 minutes. Materials available through the composer's website and Lei Lab, the research centre spearheaded by the composer at Qualcomm Institute (UC San Diego), provide fascinating details about the project. To create this piece, the research team focused on the landscape paintings of Huang Binhong (1865–1955). Lei Liang frames the project as an attempt to reconstruct a lost world, beginning with the questions 'can images be heard, and can a sound be seen'.<sup>1</sup> While an

<sup>4</sup> Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual In Art*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/170868203> (accessed).

audio team developed software to create sonic analogies to Huang Binhong's painting techniques, a visual team conducted detailed analyses using procedures such as X-ray fluorescence and multispectral imaging. The paintings that form the basis of this piece were all created during the 1950s, after Huan Binhong had lost his sight. In reference to this time and place, each movement draws on a different recording made in China during this decade.

Lei Liang's detailed discussion and analysis provide invaluable insights, yet the musical material is immediately striking even when heard out of context. The first movement, 'High Mountain', opens with a recording of the evocative, highly ornamented singing of Zhu Zhonglu, from Qinghai province. Sustained, glassy electronics seem to drift in and out of focus, subtly complementing the singer's abrupt shifts between strident chest voice and floating falsetto. Harmonic material is slow moving, its sense of pentatonicism inflected by the electronics' delicate microtonality. In contrast, movement 2, 'Mother Tongue', focuses on material of indefinite pitch – the spoken language of Lei Liang's Beijing dialect. The movement is made from archive recordings of two comedians, Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru, engaging in *xiangsheng* [crosstalk]. Although material is often fragmented, temporally stretched or compressed, the performative quality of the original dialogue is somehow implied through the composer's attention to timing and pitch contour. At times, the juxtaposition of unaltered words and phrases with dense clouds of vocal sound seems reminiscent of Berio's *Thema – Omaggio a Joyce*. Movement 3, 'Water and Mist', returns to recorded music for its source material, drawing on a performance of *Water and Mist over Xiaoxiang* by guqin master Wu Jing-lüe. Beginning with a rain effect, 'created by sounds of Styrofoam peanuts dropped into an open piano', guqin samples are re-presented within a relatively static, microtonal harmonic world. Towards the end of the movement, the original recording comes to the fore, set against a resonant backdrop of birdsong, before fading away into bell-like sonorities that seem to hint at Lei Liang's idea of a lost world.

*Hearing Icescapes* (2018–22) marks a striking change of direction. All references to human culture and history are gone, replaced by non-human sounds recorded in the Chukchi Sea, north of Alaska. The subtitles of *Hearing Icescapes*' two movements refer to the processes of sound impulse and response used in

echolocation.<sup>2</sup> The work's extended duration, totalling around 56 minutes, seems to confirm Lei Liang's proposal that '[t]hese sounds call for a different way of listening'. The first part, 'Call', is an electronic work. Ambiguous, muffled, crunching sounds emerge from silence into a sparse, austere soundscape. The programme notes identify a number of these sounds, such as 'nilas sea ice formation', 'bow-head whales' and 'pods of belugas', together with precise timecodes for when each sound is heard during the piece.<sup>3</sup> The composer's intervention is subtle. Other than changes to panning and volume, it is not immediately clear which sounds, if any, have been transformed and edited. This gives the work a documentary quality, in stark contrast to the intricately constructed, compositional detail of *Hearing Landscapes*.

In the second part, 'Response', the material of 'Call' is replayed, with the addition of three improvising musicians. The repetition is not exact, since 'Response' is about ten minutes longer than 'Call'. Lei Liang describes 'Call' as a 'set of interactive modules', providing the improvising musicians with a 'score' for 'Response'. In contrast to the harmonic basis that seems to underpin so much of *Hearing Landscapes*, the material of *Hearing Icescapes* focuses on timbre and texture. At the start of 'Call', David Aguila (trumpet) demonstrates a vast array of articulations, air sounds and lip pressures, seamlessly blending with the ambiguous, watery soundworld of the electronics. Teresa Díaz de Cossio (flute) adds a wealth of air sounds and subtle effects to the kaleidoscopic array of timbres. Around 18 minutes into the piece, violinist Myra Hinrichs shines in a dazzling display of virtuosity. In response to the rising and falling whale and beluga calls that dominate this section, Hinrichs launches into a rapid succession of ascending and descending figurations, deftly drawing on a huge variety of harmonics and bowing techniques to colour and shape her material. Moments of the ensemble improvisation seem to allude to the type of fragile, timbral subtlety that is often heard in the music of Chaya Czernowin, with whom Lei Liang also studied.

Given the detail and lucidity with which Lei Liang describes the scientific processes that underpin the two projects, there is tantalisingly little information regarding the nature of the improvisation in 'Response'. Questions such as

<sup>2</sup> Liner notes, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the role of the composer, choice of instruments and replicability perhaps exceed the scope of a programme note. Interestingly, Lei Liang's subsequent work, *Six Seasons*, which premiered in October 2022, combines many of the electronic sounds heard in *Hearing Icescapes* with an improvising quartet. Perhaps this is indicative of a different direction in the composer's future work.

In the context of Lei Liang's varied and prodigious career, the contrast between *Hearing Landscapes* and *Hearing Icescapes* might not solely be attributable to the passage of time. Instead, musical diversity seems indicative of the vast breadth of Lei Liang's interests, as demonstrated by Lei Lab and his extensive catalogue of works and recordings. In addition to the cultural and ecological ideas explored in this album, Lei Liang's other compositions have examined social issues such as gun control (in the opera *Inheritance*, in 2018), and climate change (in his Grawemeyer Award-winning concerto, *A Thousand Mountains, A Million Streams*, written in 2019). The home page of Lei Lab refers to upcoming projects with intriguing titles such as *Singing Earth* and *Inaudible Ocean*. Given the scope and variety of his work to date, it seems almost impossible to imagine the soundworlds of his next work. Lei Liang clearly has much more to say.

Edmund Hunt

10.1017/S0040298223000773

---

Lise Morrison, *No grief without joy*. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

How does grief unfold and refold after the death of a loved one? How does it bend and diffract through the prism of loss? What are the possibilities of feeling or even love in the wake of bereavement? These questions linger as I listen to Lise Morrison's *No grief without joy*, released in July 2023 on Sawyer Editions. The debut portrait album comprises five works written between 2016 and 2019 in a time of feverish artistic growth while she was studying composition at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Yet, as Morrison writes in the liner notes, this was also a 'period that echoes, in part, the grief after [her] mother's passing at the end of 2015'.

The album opens with *The Actors* (2017), an acousmatic work featuring multitrack recordings of Federico Fòrla, (oboe) and Sofie de Klerk (accordion). It was originally presented as part of an installation at the Royal Academy of the Arts in The Hague and appears on the album

in the same form. Samples of oboe and accordion are interlaced here to create an arrested chordal progression in which timbre, voicing and shape sit like material architectural features. The lo-fi recordings of the accordion are particularly tactile, with emphasised lower frequencies feeling almost grainy, like the touch of sandstone, in the ear. Where the accordion samples suggest an enduring tactility, the oboe shapes are almost illusive, like subtle shafts of light dancing on a mirror's surface. There is little in this work to distract from the textures and shading of timbre, which Morrison playfully manipulates like shadow puppetry through equalisation. Lasting just over 15 minutes, the work is the longest on the album and asserts the composer's aesthetic language of minutiae, which marks to greater or lesser degrees all the works on the album.

*Five Times Recycled* is the most recent composition and was written for Ivan Bushuev of the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble in 2019. Scored for bass flute and tape recorders and performed here by Sara Constant, the two-movement work is self-effacingly humorous. The delightful first movement offers snappy rhythmic motives in the recorded flute parts as manic playmates for the live flute. Yet the tape hiss and distortion of the recordings engender a type of lo-fi refraction. This not only makes the listener aware of the material presence of the recorders but suggests something of the uncanny animation of these marionette-like ensemble members. The second movement retains this sense of the ghostly by referencing Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*. Here, slow multiphonic chords are recorded live and layered over each other, becoming almost haunting memories of each progression. If the minutiae of timbre and voicing is the order of the day, Morrison's dark satire seems to suggest, then we are playing a mad game with ghosts.

The third work on the album is – on the surface – humorous in a less morbid way. Citing Morrison's South African background, *Dololo* is youthful slang for 'nothing', 'absence' or 'missing'. It is often used in response to not finding what you are seeking (as in, 'I looked for money in my wallet – dololo!'). The earliest work on the album (2015), it pre-empts the stripped-down aesthetic of the later works while still offering more traditional notions of motivic figuration, drawn here from mbira music. However, scored for flute, string trio, guitar and percussion, there is a marked sense of playing with synthetic timbres. The guitar and gongs, for instance, are drawn together to