Nomi Epstein, *cubes*. Carlson, Stuart. Sawyer Editions, SE018.

Put aside for a moment the medical, social, economic toll: composers reacted to the logistical hurdles created by the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that threw their predispositions into high relief. Those of us whose work is dependent on a more or less traditional model of live performance and concentrated rehearsal may have focused our professional energies on remote teaching, or arranging recordings, or study, or revision, or nothing at all. But composers whose minds tend more naturally towards open-ended collaborative imaginings and more generously flexible working processes found themselves, eventually, with a strange and costly opportunity to refine, interrogate and extend their methods.

Nomi Epstein is a musician of the latter type. Based in Chicago, she has a long-standing reputation as a composer, performer and curator of experimental music: usually quiet, generally calm and spacious, often variable in structure. It is both welcome and unsurprising, then, that out of her personal confrontation with the specific intersection of artistic and logistical roadblocks that the year '(2020)' after a work title implies, we have this: *cubes* (2020).

Written for violinist Erik Carlson and percussionist Greg Stuart, two more mainstays of this particular American experimental-music culture, *cubes* was designed for recording, and for recording separately, for later recombination. The heart of the score is a series of 24 boxes, divided into upper and lower halves. Each half contains either an extremely vague verbal prescription ('single'; 'emerge'; 'balance'), a simple graphical cue or occasionally nothing at all. Which performer plays which part (or both parts, or neither) of which 'cube' is left entirely for them to decide; the arrangement of the cubes in time is subject to a handful of simple conditions; an ancillary repertoire of cueing adjectives like those often seen in the cubes themselves ('together'; 'submerged'; 'full'; 'spacious') is also provided, to be deployed or not as the performers see fit.

On the one hand, this sort of material obviously involves deep familiarity with and deep trust in the performers and their sensibilities, their ears, their imagination, their own collaborative openness. On the other, a great deal of specific aural imagination lurks within these seemingly vague boundaries. Those adjectives, open-ended as they are when taken individually, imply a very specific approach to sound and gesture. There is a strong focus on phenomena of emergence and submergence, which in turn implies a relatively static 'horizon'; there is an idea of layering, therefore presumably multiple 'horizons'; there is the somewhat surprising question of 'clarity', of 'bareness': one thinks of a blinking beacon, a lighthouse in the fog, but also of the fog itself: a sustained unclarity – a surprisingly difficult thing to achieve.

When we listen to the result, recorded separately by Carlson and Stuart in their homes on opposite sides of the US, edited together and mixed by Carlson, 'sustained unclarity' is as good a descriptor as any of what we hear – except maybe 'varieties of sustained unclarity', since the 'cube' structure is strongly marked on the surface of the hour-long piece. We hear paradigms shift, materials juxtapose, unexpected sound sources (slide whistle; ocarina) contribute and then fade; we hear boundaries strongly and faintly, and the occasional significant silence. We hear prolonged violin dyads, pitches sustained so long they lose their pitchiness and become sound; we hear regular impulses (long, generally, at first; shorter, generally, as the work tends towards its provisional conclusion); we hear rustles and rubbings and distant knocks. As the end draws near, we sometimes hear slowly alternating pitches, the poetic analogy to those beacons and waypoints becoming ever clearer. We hear as the predominant rhythmic material the faint trace of the physical gesture of carefully turning, the slight smooth articulations of a rubbing or bowing action changing direction as the edge of a surface or the end of a bow is reached.

Epstein creates one of those environments – this is one of those pieces that is in fact an environment – where silence gains a sharp edge. The several seconds of silence that occasionally punctuate this slowly changing surface are a direct compositional decision, their necessity specified (with unusual directness) in the score's instructions, and they seem less like a relative or consequence of the faint noises that permeate most of the work's surface than the mirror, the symmetric consequence, of the held pitches, especially those from Carlson's violin, that sometimes pierce through. This is the question of 'clarity', of 'emergence', of 'bareness' and, to cite another of Epstein's privileged terms here, of 'negative space'. Are we put so much aslant here that pitch is negative space? I don't know, and I don't want to know; I suspect that Epstein doesn't want to know either.

Carlson and Stuart are in some sense co-composers here, both in the latitude they have in determining the specifics of their

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interpretation and in the clear influence of their personal musicality on the way the material is couched. Their performance, despite the alienated nature of its production, has, somehow, an undeniable intimacy. There is a juxtaposition of tendernesses, a calling back and forth across thousands of miles, a joining of aims that makes even an artificial simultaneity affecting in the extreme. I am going to resist the temptation to analogise Epstein's work to something having to do with the better angels of human nature in the harshest depths of the pandemic, largely because it does the work a disservice to localise it thus. It is really about what Epstein says it is about in those adjectival pairs that permeate the text: those distances and closenesses, clarities and unclarities, edges and washes. It is beautiful, balanced here between those opposites.

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Rósa Lind, *Kandinsky Kunstwerke*. Geoffrey Gartner, Laura Chislett, Mark Knoop. all that dust, ATD17.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky is credited for his contributions to abstraction in visual art. He often looked to music as the genre par excellence for expression devoid of signification: 'Music, by its very nature, is ultimately and fully emancipated and needs no outer form for its expression.'[1] An avid spiritual theorist, he sought personal and emotional fulfilment in the Gesamtkunstwerk – in 'monumental art'[2] – which, in today's lingo, might be understood as the High Romanticisation of interdisciplinarity.

Into this context steps composer Rósa Lind with an album of electroacoustic music entitled *Kandinsky Kunstwerke*. Taking a Kandinsky painting as her point of departure for each of the three works featured, Lind plots an extraterrestrial trajectory through solo instrumental writing. A sense of wonder pervades this album – the culmination of decades of compositional inquiry – as Lind looks to astrology for spiritual fulfilment. In Lind's idiom, I hear Kandinsky's searching rhetoric echoing through time.

The first track is a work for amplified cello, gong and tape, skilfully interpreted by Geoffrey Gartner. In *Extrema: A Galilean Sarabande* we hear curves traced in air, tension focused by the performer at the point of melodic extremity, where the sound has reached its periphery. The composer furnishes our imagination with the Galilean moons of Jupiter. Callisto, Ganymede, Europa and Io: four indistinguishable movements, each a meditation on the outer reaches of the mind, coerced by physical laws and artistic prerogative into sound.

A recurring, single strike of the gong punctuates the cello's wandering narrative: as the composition moves away, so it must return to its point of origin. The gong serves to focus the music and to situate the listener – a northern star in Lind's wandering idiom. Or, rather, a distant Jupiter, dimly visible in the night sky.

The writing in *Extrema* oscillates between fevered Romanticism (there is a yearning in the melody, something exploratory and questioning, not least for the wonder of deep space evoked by the title) and stark modernism. At times we hear references to solo Bach, his voice splintering through Lind's telescopic lens. As the work reaches its finale, moments of gritty tremolo follow fragile harmonics, which hang in the air like dust escaping from a profound shadow (low-frequency radio samples from Jupiter). Perhaps this swinging temporal exploration is where we find the sarabande – a dance through history, processing solemnly through the courts of the late Baroque to the angular halls of the early twentieth century.

Next is *Courbe Dominante*, described by the composer as 'an abstract series of dance movements for flutes and other sound sources, from a planetary origin, through the resonant arcs of Saturn's rings to multiple vanishing points'.[3] The flute (Laura Chislett) presents a palette of colour, darting between registers and articulation so that the ear is drawn primarily to contrast. We are aware of these gestures only as a collective, much like how the edges of Kandinsky's brown hues are softened next to the sharp blackness of the shapes in the foreground of his *Courbe Dominante*.

Ghostly radiation from Saturn interrupts the flute's manic soliloquy, if only for a brief moment, reminding us of the strangeness of it all. Where Kandinsky offers discrete gestures and a language of disconnection, Lind relies on angular intervallic shapes and disrupted melodies. Certainly, this language echoes that of the Second Viennese School, and the severance of the early modern spirit. If there is such a

[1] Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual In Art*, tr. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), pp. 35–36.
[2] Ibid., p. 87.
[3] Liner notes by Laura Tunbridge.