

manage and balance their impossible instruments. They manage this pretty well for most of the piece's ten minutes, but inevitably they founder and lose control, reaching a disjointed climax that collapses almost as quickly as it arrived.

gasser, for bass flute, lupophone, contrabass clarinet, contraforte, harp, piano, violin and cello, begins in a similar place, with a counterpoint of held winds and stuttering strings. Despite its instrumentation, the work's sound-world is not initially dominated by low bass tones – Haven has equally chosen his instruments for the aching tension they bring to the higher registers. But then there is that structural switch, this time midway through, as constriction gives way to deeper tones, darker colours and an uneasy kind of release. (Passing hints of Angelo Badalamenti's score to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* give some idea of the overall atmosphere.)

aren't wet and *gasser* are two of four pieces on this recording that are connected (through their titles and their aphoristic programme notes) to a twenty-one-line poem by the composer, whose imagery evokes a related emotional complex of disgust and desire: 'i hold your hand, like you,/ i smell bad. i buy pastries now'. The best of them is the fifteen-minute *starnge nest* [*sic*] for bass clarinet, cello and piano (the fourth is *i burn a million years* for two microtonal accordions). A distant relation of Messiaen's 'Liturgie du crystal', *starnge nest* is a chamber music of independent musical layers, looping asymmetrically around one another (although not literal loops in Haven's case), with the piano providing a constantly shifting harmonic cage. Haven's piano writing is, again, the key: a jittering, birdsong-like continuum that is rolled out over long clarinet and cello harmonics. Hints of a tonal cadence fall in every now and then, almost as if by accident, and each time they do we are brought round in a circle. But for the most part the music maintains an edge state between absolute consistency and continual variety; a highly energised stasis.

Two slightly earlier works, *another ditch* and *slip letting by hand*, stand a little apart. The former, for alto flute, percussion and viola, leans a little heavily on a familiar new-music rhetoric of bow swipes and explosive breath tones, although the extreme reticence of its percussion writing (lightly brushed stone and steel) lends it an unusual accent. The latter, for violin and cello (both prepared), and marked by its noisy, sustained harmonics, ends in loud vocal declamations from both performers: an uncharacteristically clichéd gesture

that makes this perhaps the weakest piece of the six.

In his album notes, Gordon Kampe hears Haven's music in late modernist, Beckettian terms – as desperation and catastrophe. With respect to *i burn a million years*, which ends the album, he argues that the microtonal clashes between the accordions give lie to the 'mirage' of symmetry, and a 'false serenity'. As the two instruments articulate the work's gradual crescendo, their breathing 'gradually increases until it is intolerable, and we get the impression that these two hyperventilating chord-lungs can barely endure any more of their perpetual microtonal disconnection'. Far be it for me (a regular note-writer myself) to criticise a colleague's ears, but there is surely another reading available here too. Asymmetry, fluidity, the way a microtonal clash disturbs and unsettles what Kampe himself describes as 'our tonally socialized ears', to say nothing of all that panting and exertion – this is also a queer, sensual kind of music, engaged both lovingly and anxiously with the body and its presence. (A further clue is given by the composer's frequent use of nudes by Jenny Saville to illustrate his work online.) Since Lachenmann, composers have used an ever-expanding universe of preparations and extended techniques to defamiliarise the sound-world of concert music, with the effect of only making those sounds increasingly familiar. In his strongest works, Haven's achievement is to have found a way to invert them once more, not only to show us that defamiliarity but also to place us in the midst of it.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson

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Catherine Lamb, *parallaxis forma*. Explore Ensemble, Betts-Dean, EXAUDI. another timbre, at215

'The mathematics of harmony are explored through the physicality of the material world'¹ might sound like a hackneyed description of a new-music composer who has come under the influence of the material turn in the late 2010s. This is emphatically not the case for the American composer Catherine Lamb who has persistently explored the intersections of just intonation – or, more accurately, rational intonation – and the various effects the performers' bodies can have on the music since the

¹ www.sacredrealism.org/artists/catherine-lamb/ (accessed 29 November 2023).

mid-2000s. It is precisely the ‘subtleties of friction, pressure, breath, and bow changes’ that play a crucial role in bringing the faltering nature of human existence into the heart of her music-making, while also ‘connect[ing] the sonic with the tactile and the visual.’²

In fact, she was probably one among few musicians who sparked greater interest in just intonation and alternative ways of organising and conceptualising pitch. Not only is she an in-demand composer with prestigious accolades – having received a grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts’ Grants to Artists program in 2018, the Ernst von Siemens Composers’ Prize in 2020 and a BBC Proms commission in 2023 – but also an auteur with a distinct style, producing some of the most enigmatically compelling music of today. Coincidentally, issue 305 of *TEMPO* features a short interview with the composer, should you want to learn more about Lamb.

Her most recent album, *parallaxis forma*, released in September 2023 on another timbre, is a portrait CD consisting of three works written in the mid-2010s. These pieces showcase her fascination with the human voice and how its predisposition to sing between the notes, that is the twelve piano keys, can seamlessly fit into an ensemble setting or simply establish its own harmonic space. The disc opens with *color residua*, which, true to its name, evokes images of chemical materials – or, more pertinently, sonic materials – evaporating and leaving a residue only in one’s memory. Like much of Lamb’s output, it is a textural composition where the interplay of harmonics produced by the joint force of EXAUDI (featuring soprano Juliet Fraser, mezzo-soprano Cathy Bell and baritone Michael Hickman) and Explore Ensemble (comprising Julia Doukakis and Emma Purslow on violas, as well as Deni Teo on cello and Toby Hughes on double bass) forms a mesmerising sonic landscape. Pitches, timbres and voices resolutely enter the soundscape with long notes and then leave, all within short periods of time, contributing to the overall texture, but constantly morphing it. This procedural unfolding, adorned with a perfect blend of warmer voices and cooler string timbres gives this music its radiant omnidirectional quality. Well-placed rests in the middle of the piece inflict a shocking sensation, almost as if somebody pulled an emergency brake, only for the music to re-emerge soon after. It is no wonder that at some point I began hearing

a train horn; it seems like one can discover pretty much any sound in this piece.

The second offering on the album is *pulse/shade* intended for four voices, but realised as a multi-track version by Lotte Betts-Dean. While rhythm is not usually Lamb’s primary concern, the pulsating nature of this composition adds variety to the predominantly textural essence of the other two pieces. The concept behind *pulse/shade* involves four singers subdivided into two pairs, with the first pair starting very slow and gradually building up the speed while the second pair does the opposite. It is a different kind of procedural music: this time not so much timbral, as rhythmical. Similar to the other two works, this piece requires the vocalists to sing pure phonemes without any recourse to words or text. Upon the initial listen, I found the rhythmic element of the work quite fascinating. However, my subsequent discovery that it was digitally manipulated by Explore Ensemble’s artistic director and the recordist of this album, Nicholas Moroz, to achieve a perfectly symmetrical structure altered my perception of the piece. One can still appreciate Betts-Dean’s splendid production of vocal formants and get carried away with focusing on different overtones, but somehow it is not the same.

The album’s namesake piece, *parallaxis forma*, rounds up the release. This time Lotte Betts-Dean is joined by an extended line-up of Explore Ensemble – featuring Taylor MacLennan (flute), Alex Roberts (clarinet), David Zucchi (saxophone), Sarah Park (tuned glasses), Sam Cave (guitar), David Lopez Ibañez (violin) and Deni Teo (cello) – to dissolve ‘any trajectory of vertical/horizontal thinking... into refracted or expanded space.’³ The recurring theme of the piece involves resonant vocal formants washing up against the backdrop of shimmering instrumental overtones. Due to the expanded nature of the instrumental line-up, Lamb has a broader palette of colours than in the previous pieces, emitting both lighter and darker shades. Often, moments of evanescent beauty arise not so much from various timbral combinations, but rather from the faltering or stalling of the bow or breath pressure. However, the real gem of this work – an ascending scalic melody in the voice – only begins to crystallise as the attentive listener invests enough time and follows through the compositional process, being rewarded for such a demanding task. It is the preceding, repetitive washing up of sustained vocal fragments at

² Ibid.

³ www.sacredrealism.org/artists/catherine-lamb/text/Parallaxis_Forma_notes_19.pdf (accessed 29 November 2023).

the start of the pieces that gives birth to this marvellous gem.

One can feel how much thought and care the composer has poured into the music on this CD. It is undoubtedly well crafted, possessing an enigmatic quality and an allure that can attract a range of music lovers. It is also clear how competent the musicians are at versing in Lamb's compositional speak. Yet, I personally found it challenging to listen to all three pieces consecutively. It required serious heavy lifting even for my somewhat trained ears. There are many things to unpack here, and each listening iteration can bring its own revelations. Importantly, the inclusion of *pulse/shade* as the middle piece balances the CD nicely. However, when listening to the individual compositions, their shorter duration allows for careful and focused listening, providing much-needed time to digest and enjoy their inward, as well as outward beauty.

Marat Ingeldeev

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Explore Ensemble, *Perfect Offering*. Miller, Illean, Dunn, Saunders, MacLennan, Haworth, Roberts, Wai Nok Hui, Havlat, Rhys, López Ibáñez, Perks, Robertson, Teo, Moroz. Huddersfield Contemporary Records and NMC

Perfect Offering is a joint venture from Huddersfield Contemporary Records and NMC, and is a nice break from portrait discs which often, in my opinion, cram too much of a composer's work on a CD with little nod to thematic curation. This album is quite the opposite: four long-ish pieces from four high-profile UK composers, if in different ways, from the repertoire of the Explore Ensemble. Explore are led by Nicholas Moroz, a sort of Pierrot +1 +1 +1 outfit with an extra pianist, violinist or oboist as the case may be. *Perfect Offering* feels held together thematically by the works' similar lengths and understated styles; perhaps this is the 'affinity' the ensemble writes of feeling with these works, a word that does not do enough but which does feel borne out in the selected pieces.

The most striking piece, unsurprisingly by Cassandra Miller, is the first, the eponymous track. The liner notes speak of bells and the imitation of bells, but as usual I find this direct reference less compelling than the music itself. The first section is a series of Debussyian piano

impetuses, the decay of which is curiously and delicately padded out by the ensemble. This is music of breath and breathing, of waves, rhythm and pacing. It plays so directly with rhythm and our expectations, our attention so closely held to what might come next, that it almost reminds me of the sketch comedy show *I Think You Should Leave*, which seems to prey not on our impulse for laughter, but rather just how exactly to place weird events in time to keep our disbelief perpetually balanced on a pinhead. Siwan Rhys' piano stands out for her confidence and clarity, although this is not a place in which we will hear virtuosity.

This section alone would be a captivating piece, but of course there is more. The piano and ensemble coalesce eventually into a section where there is less decay and more continuous overlap – this somewhat spoils the suspense of the earlier section to me, but only compared to the latter's brilliance. It definitely builds anticipation in preparation for what is to come; I prefer cuts and jumps myself, but this is solidly paced. We are surprised by a sudden, soft, insistent clarinet solo on the same note, evocative of bells in a different way. A Wandelweiser sensibility should not be able to be 'approximated' by way of context, it should not be possible to reproduce the feeling without the scale, but Miller comes close with this clarinet solo. It is the ease, the patience, the love. I hear so much love in this music. After a few more skilful flourishes (a common tone modulation, a repeated chord that echoes the beginning) we are set down.

If you play this album without paying too close attention, I guarantee you will slip from track 1 to track 2 without knowing, and ditto for track 2 to track 3 and perhaps the whole thing. This perhaps does an injustice to Lisa Illean's *Weather a Rare Blue*. While at first coming off as the most conventional piece on the album, upon closer listening there is a lush soundworld at play. The ensemble is noise, wind, machines, seeping in, sneaking into the background, fading away, interacting with the piano. Piano features seem to be another thing tying at least the first three tracks together; here, Joseph Havlat punctuates and outlines the foggy texture. Later there is wonderfully lyrical cello playing by Deni Teo, accompanied by Havlat's perfectly muted, understated piano. I do wish the piece had picked a direction either towards motion or towards monolith; in this middle ground I never feel totally immersed. Its textures and moments, however, are full and comforting.