

PROFILE: JULIET FRASER

Soprano Juliet Fraser has a repertoire dominated by the very old and the very new. She has performed as a guest soloist with contemporary music ensembles Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Modern, Asko|Schönberg, Talea, Remix, ICTUS, Plus-Minus, London Sinfonietta and We Spoke: New Music Company. She is an active commissioner of new works, and has worked particularly closely with composers Cassandra Miller, Michael Finnissy, Bernhard Lang, Matthew Shlomowitz and Rebecca Saunders. She is also a core member of EXAUDI vocal ensemble, which she co-founded with composer/conductor James Weeks in 2002. Her discography includes Morton Feldman's *Three Voices* (Hat Hut Records), Bernhard Lang's *The Cold Trip, part 2* (Kairos) and Michael Finnissy's *Andersen-Liederkreis* (Hat Hut) with pianist Mark Knopp, and portrait discs of Frank Denyer (another timbre) and Andrew Hamilton (NMC). Juliet is the artistic director of *eavesdropping*, a new series and a symposium celebrating women in new music, and co-director of *all that dust*, a new record label.



Credit: Dimitri Djuric

In 2002 you co-founded EXAUDI, last year you founded a new series, eavesdropping, and now you've just announced the launch of a record label: you've taken a more engaged role in making music than some performers. Was this a pragmatic choice – creating work – or is there a deeper principle – changing the world in some way?

Wow, big question! Well, first of all I should distinguish between my 22-year-old self who co-founded EXAUDI and my 38-year-old self who has been busy with *eavesdropping* and *all that dust*. I started EXAUDI because I wanted to recreate as a fledgling singer the chamber music experience I had so loved as an oboist and combine it with my growing interest in what I then called 'modern' music. Thereafter, EXAUDI brought me many amazing performing experiences and quietly developed my skills as a businesswoman (I was Executive Director for the first 12 years) but James [Weeks, EXAUDI's Artistic Director] had both the full pleasure and responsibility of the curatorial role. My latest ventures have undoubtedly emerged in response to a growing desire to shape and serve the new music scene.

I'm not sure I can articulate a deeper principle, but I am increasingly interested in agency – the agency that I can claim as an artist and the agency that I can give to, or nurture in, other artists. As for the idea of a pragmatic choice: goodness, not at all! Each project has demanded hours, months, years of unpaid work and moments of intense stress and frustration. On paper, each has been a terrible idea, but of course it's all been worth it. They have been labours of love, born out of my characteristic impatience at the lack of something in the world and probably a naïve optimism that others might also benefit from the adventure of my trying to address that lack.

all that dust is the new record label you are running with Mark Knoop and Newton Armstrong. What prompted this? Do you see a gap in the market or is this a response to your encounters with other labels?

I suppose it's a bit of both. The idea has been a long time brewing, but I know that all three of us have at times felt frustrated by how drawn-out, expensive and unsupportive the experience of trying to release a recording can be as an artist. I also think the landscape has shifted in the last 10 or 15 years. During my time as Reviews Editor at *TEMPO* I realised just how many little independent labels there were cultivating small catalogues of well-curated music, and I think this diversity reflects a shift within the new music scene in general as well as a transfer of agency away from the bigger commercial labels and towards our community of artists. There is room for both models, and there is room for more of everything, I think. We felt that, between us, we had all the relevant experience to offer a good deal to the artists we chose to promote and that we'd enjoy helping release some good music into the world.

You have commissioned some very substantial new works for your duo with Mark Knoop in an era when music for voice and piano has seemed to be in decline. Why?

To be honest, I'm not sure that the repertoire for voice and piano has actually been in decline, at least not across the full gamut of contemporary classical music. And certainly I wasn't thinking about any of that when I started commissioning new works – I just wanted some juicy new repertoire to sing with Mark! It was only when I started trying to sell the project that I realised to what extent 'song', in the form of voice and piano, is perceived as 'too traditional', as weighed down by the baggage of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century canon. In the end, though, this 'problem' became part of the project, since both Michael Finnissy and Bernhard Lang directly engaged with the legacy of Lieder in their new works for us. And the results speak for themselves: there's absolutely no reason why any particular combination of instruments should be dismissed as irrelevant or outdated – it's all a question of what you invite those instruments to do.

You have talked elsewhere about how you are exploring new ways of collaborating, particularly in your work with Cassandra Miller and Rebecca Saunders. Could you explain what's emerging, whether it's specific to the music you have been making with those composers, or whether these new ways might have further applications?

A meaningful collaboration allows for both, or all, participants to break free from their usual designated role (e.g. singer/composer) and grow through exposure to another's practice. This requires a particular dose of time, vulnerability, honesty, flexibility and courage. As a general rule, I have found the composer–performer relationship not to be very collaborative, but I have also found that there is no reason why that should be so. Currently I am thinking that it's a question of intention as much as anything else. What these new ways are depends entirely on the people involved, and of course hugely influences the resulting material. Where my work with Cassandra has resulted in a near-total blurring of roles, a joyful abandonment of notated musical material and an open-ended project, my work with Rebecca conforms much more to the familiar composer–performer relationship and is

producing discrete pieces, but both working relationships have these hallmarks of openness and growth. I think a successful collaboration always has further applications because all parties have explored meaningful new territory, and that tends to prove irresistible.

What would you like to sing that you haven't sung yet?

Is it too late for me to play *Rite of Spring* as an oboist, do you think?! When I think about this question I actually immediately start thinking about the people I want to commission. I've always been more interested in performing brand-new works than extant ones, but there are of course wonderful pieces already in the repertoire that deserve further attention and that I'd love to sing. Feldman's *Neither* is on my wish list, and all the Vivier you can throw at me; in due course I might reverse my way into the serialism of Berg, Webern and Krenek; more generally, I'd really like to do more uncondacted chamber music, and maybe some more contemporary opera; working with Éliane Radigue would be a dream come true.

A tired old topic, I know, but do you think there's anything significantly different about singing new music? Why don't more singers do it?

I love this topic! It's important to identify what excites me about singing new music, and to encourage more singers at least to experiment with new repertoire. I think the biggest obstacle to the non-initiated performer is the ideological separation of new music from mainstream classical music perpetuated by too many of the institutions that are training the next generation. (This problem, albeit to a lesser degree, also affects early music.) The young singer-in-making is immediately and persistently indoctrinated with this nonsense about new music being too vocally compromising or aesthetically extreme or lacking in career prospects. Like training of any kind, the crucial thing is to match the exercise to the individual, and like education of any kind, the crucial thing is to expose the student to the full range of options available to them.

Beyond the institutional impediments, the main obstacles are more likely to be psychological than vocal: have you the energy to tackle new notational systems? Have you the courage to explore uncharted musical territory? Have you the confidence to go it alone? Certainly I dispute that new music is bad for the voice: arguably it requires a more sturdy yet flexible technique than earlier musics (and don't get me started on 'extended vocal techniques' – that term really doesn't help anybody). And anyway, 'new music' is no single thing: what is required of the voice, and of the performer, in, say, a piece by Brian Ferneyhough is wildly different from that required in Jürg Frey or Steve Reich or Wolfgang Rihm. Fortunately there are a few institutions helping young singers to explore this wonderfully varied repertoire: Darmstadt, Royaumont and University of Music in Stuttgart offer dedicated courses, for example, and here in the UK there is the new 'Composition, Alternative Performance and Performance Art' course run at Snape Maltings. More singers *should* do new music, and so long as we continue to fight for access to a broader repertoire for the emerging generation of performers, I think more singers will.