

A Thing Made Whole V is simultaneously the most enthusing and frustrating movement of the disc. Through the *mêlée* of fragmented and fractured strings there emerges a piano line, sounding like half-remembered (or half-forgotten) Van Morrison. Creamy and wandering, these keyboard lines make me reassess my entire listening experience: is this the disguised doctrine that I have been drawn towards for the past 50 or so minutes that would outline a coherent whole? I wish it was, but I sense that it is not. What could have been a more subtle and ambiguous instance of arrival, and therefore a more novel investigation of coherence, is undermined in two ways: first, this misplaced moment's indulgent duration, as Greenwald is direct in a way that seems at odds with the rest of his writing; second, perhaps because of this lounging, it becomes apparent that the piano writing is hardly engaging in its language. Indeed, on re-listening to the other movements, if *V* is the whole then I cannot hear it in the 'things' at all, making it come across as somewhat gimmicky.

Moving abruptly away from the soundworld of the fifth, the penultimate movement coherently speaks in a derivative dialect of contemporary classical music, presenting an intricate weaving of discordant solo-guitar harmonics and barely pitched fretted notes. However, and perhaps because of this, props must be given to performer Mauricio Galeano, who navigates the flurry of material with graceful tact.

Arriving at the final movement, the listener is greeted by swirling chromatic piano and bubbling bass clarinet lines, before the rest of the ensemble join at around a minute in, to create an alternation between a delirious din, late Cageian harmonies and hints of the lounge piano material. A summative postlude of the past hour, then, that is perhaps the whole, as a stand-alone piece of music this final offering by far has the most character of the disc and does not rely on the rest of the suite.

To return to the title of the disc, 'whole' derives from the Old English *hāl*, meaning 'healthy' or 'safe', which is fitting for *A Thing Made Whole*. We hear many musical ideas over this album's hour and 15 minutes, but the majority of these speak of and to a timeworn body of contemporary music, such that the work lacks vitality in its explorations of coherence in musical form. That said, when Greenwald breaks free from this genre, his compositional voice – the way he uses timbre, line and pacing – is both novel and alluring. However, the overwhelming derivation draws attention to a more fundamental question that remains problematically

unanswered: why continue the well-established investigation of 'wholeness' in relation to this musical idiom? These 'things', this vagueness, result in an album that I sense wishes for more than its conservative realities achieve.

Ed Cooper

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Elizabeth Millar, Christof Kurzmann, *rare entertainment*. Mystery & Wonder, mw009.

I am finishing this review in the Barbican Centre in central London, having just come from my flat in the east of the city. Perhaps this predetermines me to foreground an idea of urbanity when thinking about this music. The album does guide me in this direction with its cover image, a quotidian sight of two – I don't know what they are. Traffic not-cones? (A Google Image search showed me many articles about construction and destruction and delays.)

Recorded live at the Suoni per il Popolo Festival in Montreal in June 2019 and released in August 2022, this release showcases the 'first meeting' of Austrian electropop/new-music improviser Christof Kurzmann and Canadian/Australian sound artist Elizabeth Millar. The way in which the album is constituted of electronic textures in combination with either heavily modulated or very close-mic'd acoustic sounds gives it the effect of something which was created in the studio. Each sound (and there are many sounds) feels carefully placed, both from moment to moment as well as in the sense of a larger structure. I find it compelling that this is the product of a duo, and a live concert; it is much easier to imagine either lots of people contributing their small sounds or one person managing everything in post-production.

The album is accompanied in its write-up by fragments of an e. e. cummings poem, *it is at moments after i have dreamed*, a line of which provides the title, *rare entertainment*. I was struck by another of the fragments of the poem: *the glassy darkness holds / the genuine apparition of your smile*. For me, the idea of a 'glassy darkness' is so very accurate to this music.

When discussing this release, my friend Sidney mentioned the 2008 release *The Breadwinner* (Graham Lambkin/Jason Lescalleet), *Duos for Doris*, a 2003 release (Keith Rowe/John Tilbury), and the music of Michael Pisaro, as reference points. They all sit in a similar sonic and methodological space; however, none reach the coldness of *rare entertainment*. The depth and timbre of the

modulated motor which opens the album is so icy, and when combined with strangled clarinet sounds and abstract metallic percussion it is a chilling and unwelcoming world into which the listener is placed. I was put in mind of the city in winter – damp(ened), desolate, inward-looking.

But there are elements of the album that made me reconsider this initial feeling of desolation. When the singing voice of Christof Kurzmann enters, 2'40" into *1 part 1*, it is such a surprise. Intimate from its close mic'ing, the vocal doesn't disrupt the music's strangeness and coldness, so much as add to it in a charming way. The simple melodies, words and vocal delivery put me in mind of the deeply melancholic recent work of Nick Cave. A juxtaposition of EAI with experimental song is not uncommon, I suppose, but here it adds significant and unexpected depth and delicacy. From when the vocals enter, and especially towards the end of *1 part 1*, I am bewitched by the wavering harmonies of the accompanying tones. At around 6'45" in, there is a moment where these accompanying pitches waver into a major third. Such moments, where I get a glimpse of a glowing harmonic world, which occur rarely but repeatedly throughout the release, are mesmerising among the quiet noisiness.

There is a subtle maximalism to this album. Instead of hearing the same sounds repeated against the motor rumbling and fan noise, I am treated to an ever evolving array of sounds, from both samples and live improvisation. I wonder if this understated excess speaks to ideas of the city in the winter, too. Upon reading the liner notes, it felt uncanny the degree to which my thinking on this resonated with that of their author Steve Bates (writing in winter in Montreal). His note recounts a list of 'unaccountable, unfathomable' sounds of the city, which he experiences as snow lands and situates him in space via sound, like some midwinter echolocation.

This liner note makes me consider an acoustemological reading of the album; I am put in mind of R. Murray Schafer's idea of the 'soundscape', and the widespread critiques of this most ubiquitous of neologisms. Schafer famously told us that 'on a downtown street corner of the modern city there is no distance; there is only presence'.¹ He intended this to be a criticism, but perhaps this presence – even of something bleak – is exactly what can be treasured about this release, what might lead to a way of knowing through listening.²

¹ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Simon and Schuster, 1977).

Writer, activist, and pioneer of New Urbanism Jane Jacobs (1961) wrote about the way pavements function in the city: 'all composed of movement and change... we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance... to an intricate ballet'.³ The quiet succession of sounds on this album, the constant rumble, its brittleness and strangeness speaks to the density and chill of London as I experience it now, in the November fog. The brief vocal sections initially endeared the release to me, but with the increased familiarity of repeat listens it is rather their sharing space with an array of strange and cold sounds which I have grown to enjoy.

Forty-five seconds into *1 part 4*, I was abruptly reminded of some drilling which happened directly outside my bedroom window for several weeks in September – of when sounds of the city infiltrated my intimate space in a way that I could not opt out of. Later on in this track, I hear modified vocals which sound a bit like farm animals, alongside shifting tones which often settle into major thirds in a way which is very beautiful. A moment of lightness (with an unrelenting drilling sound): it makes me think of an urban farm under a concrete flyover in my hometown of Newcastle upon Tyne. I find myself feeling a strong affinity for the 'glassy darkness' for the impersonal and sometimes uncomfortable ballet of city living.

1 part 5 stretches the release's sonic and contextual parameters, featuring the only sample which is explicitly from the natural world (bird call) alongside one of the only traditionally 'musical' samples on the release (bells) alongside hospital beeps and bovine sighs and rockets lifting off. This moment of excess feels a little incongruous, and I wonder if it undermines the brittleness and strangeness of the release as a whole. On the other hand, as it comes at the end of the section, I wonder if instead it can be understood as the correct conclusion of the quietly maximalist, accelerationist ethos of the release as I have understood it.

I often think of my favourite Anne Boyer essay, *Erotology*, in which she talks about desire through the analogy of familiarity with the city in which one lives, of *longing as cosmopolitanism*.⁴ I find Boyer's short essay endlessly lovely; it

² Steve Feld, 'Acoustemology', in *Keywords in Sound*, eds David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 12–21.

³ Jane Jacobs., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁴ Anne Boyer, 'Erotology', in *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), pp. 82–85.

seemed uncannily relevant to this release, which leads me to a strange warming to the wintery city, where *the glassy darkness holds / the genuine apparition of your smile*.

Joanna Ward

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John Lely, *Meander Selection*. Apartment House. Another timbre, at 195.

'Don't judge a book by its cover' is a well-known dictum, inviting us to be cautious when making any kind of aesthetic evaluation. Nowadays, it is the composer's website which serves the role of the proverbial book cover and has the potential to communicate a good deal about the artist's creative persona. And yet John Lely's humble website is a testament to how sometimes judging the book cover, especially when that cover is well crafted, can actually tell us the exact details of its content: its adherence to angular geometric fidelity, straightforward colour palette, balance of form and minimal presentation all parallel his work as a composer.

Lely's most recent album, *Meander Selection*, is his music's fourth appearance on Another Timbre and the second album solely dedicated to his compositions. Unlike the first CD, which presents one of his most famous pieces, *The Harmonics of Real Strings* (2006) – where a fluid and translucent sonority comes alive with the simple action of lightly pressing a finger against the cello's string and moving it closer to the bridge over the span of approximately quarter of an hour – this latest release is more of a portrait CD, consisting of Lely's compositions written in the past ten years. The selection of diverse works will no doubt inspire listeners to pursue an even closer examination of all aspects of Lely's music.

But what is his music all about? It is precisely the long-standing preoccupation with probing the limits and exhausting the potential of minimal material which drives many of Lely's sonic findings forward: '[w]hen I'm composing I'm learning, asking questions and testing limits. I appreciate the effect of compositional constraints because they reveal something new, either about the material or about myself.'¹ True to this statement, which suggests an enthusiastic infatuation with *experimental* discovery, drawing on the word's more scientific connotation and not on its hackneyed everyday use

among those wanting to distance themselves from the mainstream music, a purity of tone, colour and structure emanates from all the pieces on this album, not least because of the nuanced performance of Apartment House. The choice of performers hardly seems surprising given the ensemble's close affiliation with the label. But even more important is Lely's affinity with the musicians: he has described the group as a 'formative and ongoing collaboration'.²

The chemical agent keeping all the pieces on this CD bound together and making Lely's music instantly recognisable is a profound sense of persistence. It permeates everything from rhythm and harmony to register and texture. *Karnaugh Quartet* is a perfect illustration of this persistence: tense, rhythmically charged and abrupt chords formed by the string quartet are repeated 12 times before one of the instruments switches a note and thus produces a minor change in the overall harmony. This process lasts around 13 minutes with all instruments participating one after another: there is no variation in texture or timbre, just changes of colour in harmony. Or take *Stopping at the Sheer Edge Will Never Abolish Space*, where for the entire 15-minute duration of the music we hear a constantly pulsating D in different string instruments, which perseveres relentlessly while melodies and harmonies grow entwined around the tone. The addition to this album of an electronic track, *Pale Signal*, which projects a sedative and intimate texture similar to that of snow crunching, is particularly commendable, given Lely's deep involvement with improvisation using both acoustic and electronic instruments.

A more subtle persistence is found in *Doubles*, which presents a meditative soundscape of sparse chords. The sonorities suggest an expansive ocean whose vastness and sublimity cannot be adequately comprehended. This appearance of size is achieved by using a pedal note in the cello which doesn't change throughout and prevents any musical change from happening. The epitome and collective image of Lely's style is the album's namesake work, *Meander Selection*, which can produce a serene effect on the listener with its pure sonorities, lack of rhythmic variation and sparse chords. The sequence of chords repeats, yet occasionally one of them hangs up in the air, allowing us to take a breath and keep on listening in stillness. A sense of harmonic direction unravels itself and flickers in the distance, only to disappear soon after right in front of us.

¹ www.anothertimbre.com/johnlely.html (accessed 18 October 2022).

² <https://johnlely.co.uk/about.html> (accessed 18 October 2022).