

Morgen und Abend's main issue is Fosse's dramaturgy. Fosse has spoken in the past of a wish that his drama should have a sacral air. In *Morgen und Abend* that portentousness is apparent from the opening, in which thundering bass drums alternate with the intoning of an off-stage choir. The problem is that, while *Morgen und Abend* takes itself seriously, it has nothing to say; and profundity without depth amounts to shallow mysticism. There's a well-known writing tip by Chekhov: 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass'. Show, don't tell. Now, in this day and age, one may well feel empowered to veto such injunctions towards specificity, naturalism and verisimilitude; but if one does, one must have something to function in their stead. *Morgen und Abend* settles in this respect on allegory – morning as birth, evening as death, a (two-dimensional) everyman fisherman protagonist, some obvious Christian overtones in the characters of fishermen Johannes and Peter, and so on. If one is looking for some forgettable entertainment – the musical equivalent of a formulaic Hollywood drama – fine, but if the opera has higher aspirations such mock-profundity feels unimaginative and even slightly tasteless.

When watching *Morgen und Abend* I couldn't help but contrast its dramatic conservatism with the progressiveness of *Einstein on the Beach*, a comparison partly due to Vick's production, its blindingly white stage strewn with odd objects (a boat, a shopping trolley, a door frame) having obvious resonances with some of Bob Wilson's. In *Einstein on the Beach*, profundity and meaning are rejected – and joyously rejected at that – in favour of the sensory play of movement and surface. Through its attention to surfaces, and through its daring but thrilling doing-away in one fell swoop with the generic appurtenances of opera (character, plot, aria and so on), *Einstein on the Beach* refreshes the genre, reimagining opera as musical spectacle. Allegory such as that in *Morgen und Abend* can't help but ring false by comparison. As Nietzsche writes, 'Mystical explanations are regarded as profound; the truth is that they are not even superficial'. Opera does not have to be 'serious' to be taken seriously.

Liam Cagney

Steven Takasugi *Sideshow*, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University

Sideshow, for amplified octet and electronics by American composer Steven Takasugi, was

given its US premiere by Talea Ensemble in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 1 December 2015. A 2010 Guggenheim Foundation grant launched Takasugi's work on this hour-long piece, and the Bludenzler Tage zeitgemäßer Musik programmed the first performance in their November 2015 festival. The piece was eagerly anticipated, not least because an excerpt of it featured in Manchester-based Distractfold Ensemble's programme at Darmstadt in 2014, a performance that earned them the Kranichsteiner performance prize that year.

Born in Los Angeles in 1960, Takasugi is known internationally perhaps as much for his intense, metaphor-rich teaching style as for his music. His compositions are largely electronic, consisting of thousands of samples of stringed and household instruments sequenced into long, dense cascades of microtonal and hyper-frenetic attacks that are interspersed with occasional meditations on isolated sounds and their environments. *Sideshow*, based on real and imaginary stories from the freak shows and midways of early-1900s Coney Island, makes manic actors of the Talea performers, who mime playing their instruments as much as they actually play them, stare into the audience with big, toothy, 'carny' grins, and occasionally dissolve into fits of laughter or other horrifying spasms.

Sideshow differs from much of Takasugi's music in its programmatic movement and section titles, largely carnivalesque propositions of a glimpse at 'The Man Who Couldn't Stop Laughing', 'The Human Fish', or someone 'Electrocuting an Elephant'. There are 62 such titles printed in the programme, which range from the fantastic to the financial. While the titles are diverse and evocative, they sometimes rush by, and the music is made up largely of Takasugi's homogenous but dazzling densities, punctuated sparsely by overt theatrical gestures: a stomping march, the introduction of props, or a silent, painstakingly slow surveying glance around the room done by the ensemble with unnerving and impressive coordination. With the spectacle promised by the titles, this can feel disappointing at first, as though the bulk of the music is but a set of virtuosic interludes between watching the musicians do silly things they do not usually do (although Talea were convincing and utterly committed to these roles). This is not to downplay the significance of the theatrical in *Sideshow*. Most of the musicians' actual playing is difficult to distinguish from their miming. There is a disjointedness to every action: sometimes actions are radically slowed down, sometimes radically sped up;

sometimes a player mimes music being performed elsewhere in the ensemble; sometimes a player mimes electronic music they could never, quite, have played. The most memorable moments are when the full ensemble quite literally moves together, either in rapid-fire or with an extreme, ominous protraction.

The live concert experience invites a reflection on how Takasugi's music worked before the introduction of the radically theatrical into his practice. *Die Klavierübung* (2007–09), for example, brutally refracts crackling, tinkly piano samples over 40 minutes of music not unlike that of *Sideshow*. One feels not as though inside the piano itself, but as though inside a cathedral built of the splintered, discarded wood, metal and ivory scavenged from the destroyed remains of a thousand pianos. *Diary of a Lung* (2006/07) behaves similarly, this time using samples of the composer having a particularly phlegmy coughing fit that are accompanied by a more heterogeneous (than *Die Klavierübung*) catalogue of various bathroom implement sounds. Through shifts in material and acoustic, the listener travels into and out of Takasugi's physiological and medicinal ritual with great speed. One of *Sideshow's* great feats, then, is that the listener can easily map the obvious grotesquery of the theatrical gestures onto Takasugi's dense sound world, which might otherwise be more difficult to penetrate. The music is uncanny, not in half-recognition, but in over-saturation.

Texts from the satirist Karl Kraus inspired periodic interludes in the piece, but the texts are not spoken and these interludes can be difficult to distinguish from the rest of the music. Still, Kraus's texts in the programme look like a script for a master of ceremonies, and the cumulative effect is of being in a space made this time of the splintered, discarded tropes of 100 years of morbid fascination with the sideshow. The penultimate section, 'Von Dunkel Zu Dunkel', is the closest Takasugi comes to a misstep: its expansive, breathy, reflective space treads dangerously close to feeling moralistic, but perhaps a certain nihilism is essential if the piece is to be truly felt. Thankfully, the lawlessness is reincarnated for the delirious, harrowing ending. After the concert, a performer revealed to me that the ensemble is coordinated by Takasugi's own, strangely affected voice in their earpieces, adding another uncanny dimension to the production.

Sideshow's subject matter would tempt most composers to thoroughly exploit representation. However, Takasugi's trademark relentless

granulation of electronic sounds induces a macabre feeling via the light claustrophobia of the music, and the confusion about who is producing what. Despite its length, I found myself eager to experience the piece again, to learn about it simply by being with it, as if my presence could somehow comfort the contorted musicians. As delivered by the unwavering hands of Talea, *Sideshow* is freakish without being gimmicky, making for an uncommonly rewarding concert experience.

Ian Power

Miranda Cuckson and Yarn/Wire at National Sawdust, Brooklyn, NYC

National Sawdust opened in October 2015, and behind its brick facade in Brooklyn a promising venue for new music was unveiled, overseen by composers, creators and visionaries. Spotted in haphazard polygons and neon tubes, the modest space offers an intimate environment for a new generation of artists to showcase their work. The venue's name comes from the sawdust factory that once occupied the century-old building at 80 North 6th street, and which its governing non-profit organisation raised over \$16 million to bring to life. The building was designed by Bureau V architects and the acoustic consultants from Arup, who made some critical decisions, such as placing the building on over 1,000 metal springs to absorb the shock from the subway trains running nearby. Advised by a board whose members include Philip Glass, Renée Fleming and Laurie Anderson, composer and entrepreneur Paola Prestini helms the organisation.

On 4 December 2015, in one of the first events to christen the space, curator and violinist Miranda Cuckson, whose repertoire is vast and rich in living composers, joined Yarn/Wire – a wittily named ensemble consisting of pianists Laura Barger and Ning Yu, and percussionists Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg – for world premieres by George Lewis and Chiyoko Szlavnic. Each piece approached the idea of homogenising timbre through distinct methods: Lewis interlaced instrumental colours across the ensemble through various techniques of tone production to emphasise the similarities in sound generation, whereas Szlavnic narrowed the range of tone production to blend the ensemble in sonic uniformity.

Trombone improviser and computer-music composer, George Lewis has spent a large