

CDs AND DVDs

Ben Oliver, *Too Many Sweets*. Perinpanayagam, Ensemble SaxoLogic, Williams, Riot Ensemble, Chan, Shanahan, Troise. Birmingham Record Company, BRC024.

Too Many Sweets collects five recent pieces by composer Ben Oliver, for live musicians and electronics. All the works on the disc are fully composed, but play with genre references from popular music, jazz (in its broadest most voracious understanding) and video game-esque 8-bit electronic sounds (these elements are co-designed with composer Blake Troise, aka Protodome). What's most idiosyncratic and beguiling about Oliver's music is how these elements coexist and fuse in a genuinely complex DNA. The rigour and intricacy with which Oliver manages these materials result in a thrillingly unpredictable and destabilising musical language.

Drip Feeder, for solo piano and electronics, opens with a swung walking-bass texture obliquely married with squeaky Commodore 64-like sounds. The timbre of the piano and the electronics are jarringly foreign to one another but work together thanks to a structural logic that operates akin to video-game sound design. More linear musical passages are subverted by abstracted modular, repeating gestures that remind one of power-up sound effects, glitches or explosions. All of this is absolutely essentially underpinned by the razor-sharp tautness of Yshani Perinpanayagam's playing. Similar ideas and logics come back in other works on the album but aren't the only organising principles at play; in *Drip Feeder* Oliver just as easily tosses away patterns or tropes to pause on a rich jazz-infused harmony or a Beethovenian extended trill.

The titular work, *Too Many Sweets*, feels in many ways like a companion piece, but here scored for Toy Piano (again with whip-smart playing, by Dorothy Chan), a timbre which blends much more seamlessly with Troise's synths. The piece, then, feels more mutant in its marrying of worlds, and much like the best composers of those early video-game soundtracks, it's remarkable how much variety and interest Oliver is able to maintain with such a limited palette.

Similar organising principles are reframed in *Avalanche*, for saxophone quartet and electronics – a longer work at ten minutes. Here, a

similar approach to sound design interacts with a different kind of instrumental language: less mechanical and abstract, at times conjuring the ghosts of the Loose Tubes Big Band in its wildness. While not losing the exhilarating unpredictability of Oliver's structural rhetoric, the composer manages in this piece to imbue the music with a teleological propulsion, through the manipulation of repeated gestures. This allows the brilliant Ensemble SaxoLogic to really play freely and expressively, in ways that other new music employing the grammar of digital snappiness often doesn't quite achieve. This is articulated brilliantly and ridiculously two thirds of the way though the piece where an absurdly stark major triad in the live and electronic parts repeats over and over, gradually losing energy, power and zest like the fizzling out of an overheated appliance.

The sense of a dichotomy between human and machine is foregrounded in the central and most substantial work on the album – *Love Letters*. This song cycle, for chamber ensemble, jazz vocalist and electronics, consists of seven movements exploring different dimensions of love. These are dramatically skewed, however, due to the texts being generated by a custom AI algorithm. It takes some time to really tune into the strangeness of these texts as the performance by vocalist Hannah Williams feels so communicative and direct. Delivered like the most heartfelt of jazz standards, *Love Letters* throws up the weirdest of semi-passionate clauses (at least as this reviewer heard them):

'There is the answer of my life, And you're my biohazard baby!'

'Would you still stand a little into my feet'

'I wanna dance as I have you'

'I still write me to you, I want you'

'End of text'

The most striking aspect of *Love Letters*, however, is its profoundly anachronic relationship to other musics. Underneath William's virtuosic and relatively 'straight-ahead' vocals Oliver subtly incorporates a baffling but clearly well understood panoply of languages into the work that feels itself almost algorithmically or AI-generated in its uncanniness. *melancholy adorations* is built

atop an off-kilter Dilla-esque beat, before *delirious ecstasy* takes the listener into robotic post-bop swing territory. *Writing to you because I love you* feels like a chewed-up Patty Waters or Norma Winstone avant-garde cut, while the beautiful *sex* channels a stumbling, crazed boogie. These stylistic resonances are never straight but always disrupted or undercut by Oliver's rhetorical eccentricities and flair. The final song of the set, *letter [for Anna]*, is in many ways the most subtle and strange. Over a lopsided locked groove expertly held down by Riot Ensemble, a tender vocal is delivered over a repeating six-chord sequence that begins cold and oblique and ends with warm quartal harmonies. It's a very subtle progression that gives the impression of human and non-human in a strange kind of dance. *Love Letters* represents a fascinating example of music utilising AI-generated elements, rendering a uniquely palpable feeling of that slippery relationship between man and machine.

The final piece on the disc, *A-Listers*, returns to the forces of piano (played by Clíodna Shanahan) and electronics, but here the pre-recorded audio includes snippets of an interview with Anil Sood, a figure central to the Southampton dance music scene in the 1990s and 2000s. The text is never fully explicatory, but rather paints a picture of an underground cultural scene and community. Oliver cannily avoids direct musical references to 90s dance music culture, and so opens a space and dialogue between Sood's history and our own contemporary relation to it. It's a work that sticks out on the disc as operating in quite a different way to the other pieces, but as such it's a generous and fittingly human way to close the album.

Neil Luck

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Sarah Hennies, *Bodies of Water*. Duo Refracata, Arcana New Music Ensemble. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

How many times can one repeat a gesture? At what point does it become something else, does the mind become moulded to its contours and is then free to do something else? Notice something else? These were my questions when listening to Sarah Hennies' *Bodies of Water*, and it turns out they were also questions that Hennies had herself when composing *Lake* (2018) and *Abscission* (2017), the two pieces comprising the album. They are not companion works, but they are nice companions together, and it's worth listening

to how Duo Refracata and Arcana New Music Ensemble tackle similar conceptual frameworks carried through by audibly different processes.

Lake feels like a series of still videos. Fifteen minutes long and composed for an intimate trio of violin, vibraphone and piano (Ilana Waniuk, Michael Jones, Shaoai Ashley Zhang), the piece is arguably six vignettes that are two or three minutes long. The title evokes a placid landscape – whether sombre or peaceful, the listener is free to superimpose their current frame of mind – but the form is not a rolling camera as per a nature documentary, panning across. It's rather a camera set on a tripod, capturing a seemingly unchanging scene. Yet when one looks for long enough, there are subtle changes: perhaps waterfowl float slowly in the distance from one side of the frame to the other, or the cattails sway ever so slightly. Dear reader, we leave the details to your vivid imagination since a specific natural description of a lake is not the point, as I understand it. Though how does one compose the feeling of a lake? For Hennies, there are piano chords that imbue atmosphere. There are short violin artificial harmonics that recall crickets or cicadas. Taken as a whole, the metaphor here is that something serene on the surface upon closer observation reveals that a lot is actually going on. Continuing the analogy, I sometimes wished that there was a musical zoom function (maybe in a future album?); instead, Hennies allows extra time in the musical gesture to do that work of noticing.

Abscission, for violin, cello and guitar, also has the minute or half-minute as its timescale, but the compositional blocks are less picturesque and greater in number. They morph and build forward momentum, though still invested in the idea of repeating. Two of the instruments (violin and cello, performed by Carlos Santiago and Erin Busch) have a closer relationship to each other than to the other (guitar, Jonathan Pfeffer). I did not pick up on this hierarchy immediately, but I did find it very interesting that in a conversation with Hennies she divulged that this trio in her mind could represent two parents and a child.¹ Hennies surprised herself, as she normally isn't so prescriptive about the meaning of her pieces in interviews. But I understand, in a way – family is complicated, and it's not hard to view the world through the lens of relationships. It adds to the piece, I think, to listen with 'family' in mind, if not this particular iteration of a nuclear family, because *Abscission* lends itself to humanistic thoughts. Though there are loops, normally shaded 'machine' in this composition, 'errors' are

¹ Interview with Sarah Hennies, 19 August 2024.