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Music We'd Like to Hear II: (UN)PREDICTABLE

Now in its thirteenth season, *Music We'd Like to Hear* is an established presence in London's new music calendar. And true to form, the second concert in this year's triple bill, named (UN)PREDICTABLE, programmed a host of new works, including the UK premieres of Makiko Nishikaze's *trio-stella* and Alvin Lucier's *Twonings*, the world premiere of Paul Newland's *things that happen again (again)*, and Tom Johnson's *Predictables*, all performed by Mira Benjamin (violin), Anton Lukoszevieve (cello), and Philip Thomas (piano).

The introductory blurb in the concert programme notes that *MWLTH* 'presents brand new works from emerging artists alongside treasures worthy of revival from more established voices', even if the choices with regard to programming are stated as being unabashedly 'personal'. Indeed, over the years *MWLTH* has established its own micro-canon around the aesthetic purview of the curator-composers (Tim Parkinson, John Lely and Markus Trunk). In scanning the programmes of the last 12 years, a particular picture is painted of what might constitute an 'emerging' voice, and indeed a treasured composer: Lucier or Johnson feature in almost every single concert season since the series began in 2005, and amongst the younger generation (still averaging over 40 or so in age), the degree of latitude with regard to the composers represented is not exactly considerable; this is Nishikaze's fifth time on the bill, for example. That being said, the programmes for this year's season were characteristically fascinating, and for its evening of (un)predictability, 'ambiguous', and 'mysterious' were the curatorial watchwords, as put to the audience by Parkinson in his concert introduction. Indeed, under the banner of predictability and unpredictability, the works presented demonstrated how both elements in music can be, in a host of different ways, mysteriously ambiguous.

The concert began with Nishikaze's explicitly unpredictable trio. The form of the work

certainly seems to embrace a wanton discursiveness; the layered gestural groups – sliding unisons, chromatic 'sighing' melodic fragments, and high, softly resonating piano clusters – are all presented at the outset of the piece, and do little by way of development in the time that follows. Rather, inside the nebulous overall form, the predominant gestural shapes seem to orbit around moving gravitational centres, like constellations of stars (implicitly invoked in the work's title), and rather than 'developing' in any dialectical sense, the motivic variations seem almost like viewing similar objects in different lights. Despite the generally enigmatic form of the work, *trio-stella* ends in an almost 'traditionally' musical way: the dynamic peak of the piece (framed by three strong, dense piano sonorities) is followed by dissipating lines slowly swirling into lower registers, and sinking below a lingering, airy drone on the violin.

Taking its title as it comes, Newland's trio is unsurprisingly more directly repetitive than the Nishikaze, and motivic development is completely set aside. Instead, a series of (delicately and tightly controlled) objects are presented simply as a series of mostly homophonic panels, though at times individual components decouple from one another. Although by some margin the shortest work in the concert, it is perhaps the most conceptually intriguing. The concise programme note – 'this work is an assemblage of interweaved looping readymades' – suggests a number of possible proposals for listening, though they all raise more questions than they answer. The application of 'readymades', for example, seems to be used in a way that avoids the baggage of what might constitute a musical *objet trouvé*. That is, in contrast to the Nishikaze, the listening experience here is rather more transparent, and all hints of symbolic musical language are eschewed in favour of a music of faded images (a result perhaps of Newland's synthesis of Duchampian and Japanese aesthetic worlds). This is apparent also in the generally hazy, floating sound world of the piece, and here – as in Nishikaze's work – there are moments of beautifully crafted timbral interaction. One moment that stood out particularly is the use of the cello artificial harmonic often placed above or in unison with the violin, which rendered even seemingly simple voicings somewhat strange. The communication of all these elements within the piece of course would not be possible without the performers of Apartment House, who, whilst playing with an unobtrusive clarity that allowed the music to speak effortlessly, also maintained

an emotional intensity which never became overly detached.

In contrast to Newland's and Nishikaze's pieces, which deal with layerings of conceptual or compositional images, the Lucier and Johnson offerings both work with one explicit idea, and explore it extensively. *Predictables* is made up of a large number of short movements, all of which explore different musical and mathematical patterns in repetitive forms (unison arpeggios, chromatic lines with altered durations, additive figural processes, and so on). With each movement, the basic process at work is generally recognisable, but Johnson always spikes his recipes with unexpected quirks of arrangement, division of material between players, and so on. The genius of the piece is in how expertly the rate of change and irregularity is judged, in that the music never becomes either dull in its predictability, or unrecognisable in its patterning. Of course, if the ensemble does not execute every pattern perfectly, then it could be that a work designed with exact patterns of material could be undone somewhat, but rather any moments of this kind only served to bring into focus the interesting tension between the 'objective' music and the drama of the performance. A surprising consequence, perhaps, of the composer removing traditionally 'musical' elements and room for performative subjectivity, is that here it brings both into full focus. In fact, the piece could easily be described as virtuosic, and it not only brings the role of the performer into sharp relief, but indeed the materials of the music itself. The arpeggio becomes an object of scrutiny, not as a symbol or sign, but as a readymade sound-itself.

Reviewing a concert of Lucier's music in *The Village Voice* (1972), Tom Johnson writes: 'if you can flow with it, and stop wanting something dramatic to happen, it can be extremely rich'. The anachronistic application aside, this seems about as good a listening approach to *Twonings* as any other. *Twonings* (as in 'two tunings') is perhaps the most sparse piece of the programme. The cello and piano duo simply play the same, slow sequence of individual notes, but the cello uses only natural harmonics to produce the pitches indicated, creating a complex and wonderful timbral composite. The intensely focused material (and indeed, performance) create again a piece of two listenings. As with the Johnson, the incredibly exposed nature of the music creates a tension between the fragile beauty of each individual sound-event, and the dramatic unfolding of each moment, particularly of the need of the cellist to navigate the fingerboard with immense precision between each note. Over the course of the performance, though, the experience becomes almost hypnotic, helped in part by the generally irregular distribution of pitch material and carefully judged pacing of attack (on the part of the performers). A clear pattern only finally emerges in the piece's brief coda, in which the harmonics of each cello string are explored in turn, through slowly ascending sequences of seven notes, from the sixth to the twelfth harmonic, the final sequence of which is of course ethereally high. This provided an utterly arresting ending to the concert, which was undoubtedly filled with music very much worth hearing (again).

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