

marks of their production, which has a different effect for each composer's aesthetic: Cohen Elias explicitly presents her album as a truncated work-in-progress, while d'Heudieres incorporates the constrictions into his wilfully unpolished aesthetic. Such a range of engagement alone is enough to highly recommend this project, which, by the time this review is in print, will certainly have hours of compelling music in its roster.

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Max Erwin
10.1017/S0040298218000475

Pascale Criton – *Infra*. Potlatch: p317.

It is fair to say that there have been few opportunities to experience the music of Pascale Criton (b. 1954) in the UK. There is one previous CD of her work, released on Assai, but my research has shown up few live performances. Therefore, the release of this disc could hardly be better timed, coinciding as it does with the most major exposure of her music in this country: a warmly received concert of her chamber music at this year's Tectonics festival in Glasgow and subsequent broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

Active since the 1980s, Criton has amassed a significant back catalogue of chamber music, orchestral pieces and work that mixes live instruments and electronics. There are two important artistic contexts that can be heard in her music, each of which can be tied (probably rather too neatly) to one of Criton's teachers: Gérard Grisey or Ivan Wyschnegradsky. The first context is that of spectralism, with Grisey its pre-eminent exponent. The microscopic focus on sound and the sense that harmony can be seen as timbre by another name both make themselves felt in her work. The challenge for many 'post-spectral' composers is how to combine these concerns with an approach that involves a more active gestural language, or a greater sense of dramatic narrative – issues at play in the work of Jonathan Harvey, or even the more recent work of Tristan Murail. Criton provides her own compelling solutions.

The second context is that of microtonality. The disc's title 'Infra', a prefix meaning 'below' or 'within', refers most likely to the fact that this music explores Criton's fascination with pitches in between those of the well-tempered

scale and, in particular, 16th tones (that is, a semitone divided into 8). The title's focus on this aspect is understandable as the organisation of instruments – which can involve the retuning of strings, the discovery of alternative woodwind fingerings, and often the creation of new instruments – is no small task. The genesis of pieces that explore microtonality in depth are often tied umbilically to the particular instrumental alterations upon which composers and performers alight. Thus, the six pianos tuned in twelfth tones that make up the radical tuning experiments of *Arc-en-ciel* by Wyschnegradsky define in no small part the concerns that piece explores. Yet, to take the title's focus on microtonality as a sign that this music is concerned purely with pitch experience would be to misrepresent Criton's music. It operates on many levels, explores the details 'within' timbral, narrative and gestural experience, and is wholly without the kind of rigid system that can lead a minority of microtonal music into didacticism.

The bulk of the disc is the result of close and sustained collaboration between Criton and cellist Deborah Walker and violinist Silvia Tarozzi, indeed the final work for solo cello is attributed to both Criton and Walker. The disc opens with *Bothsways* (2014), a duo for these two close collaborators. In four succinct movements, its surface is light, airborne almost, with the string tones fissured through bow position, harmonics, trills and an easy swaying between sound and noise. The third movement contains a particularly impressive arpeggiated descent that makes the most of the small pitch deviations at the composer's disposal – a similar passage also appears in *Circle* for solo violin, which Tarozzi performed at Tectonics but is not included on this disc. The instrumental sounds are not necessarily novel in themselves, but they are employed with a sensitivity here that avoids superficiality – 'effects' facilitate another level on which to listen to the music as the ear is guided to the dancing of fleeting harmonics or the rub of two pitches one 16th tone apart.

Structures here do not sound as if they are set up to facilitate the perception of microtonal relationships, the music ebbs and flows with a beguiling naturalness. Certainly it lingers on richly unstable timbres, yet the legacy of spectralism is not felt in an unerring timbral focus. There is, rather, effortless dynamism in the way attention is guided from flitting glissandi in one movement to long, richly dissonant chords in the next.

For the middle two pieces, *Process* and *Steppings* (both completed in 2013), Tarozzi and Walker are

heard as part of Dedalus, a group that also includes flautist Amélie Berson, trombonist Thierry Madiot and guitarist Didier Aschour. The former piece begins with overlapping lines that descend against an unstable backdrop of interfering pitches and quasi-vocal trombone sounds. A slowly oscillating drone emerges in the second half, around which the instruments continue to provide a darkly flickering texture.

Steppings consists purely of a repeated pulse, at times adorned with a background line of softly sustained pitches. The pulse, primarily characterised by battuto strings, migrates in its timbre, with different modes of attack, such as consonants into the flute, pizzicato and strong tonguing, fading in and out. These migrations give the impression of rising and falling not just because of changes in pitch but through variations in the spectral emphasis from lower to higher partials. The five-minute work in fact only explores one spectrum on E from which the sustained notes are also taken. Both *Steppings* and *Process* are effectively coloured and paced, though their structural simplicity does not quite provide the rich potential of the opening duo – despite this they still provide a detailed and engaging listening experience.

As mentioned above, *Chaoscaccia* (2014), the final piece on the disc, is unusual in the joint authorship ascribed to composer and performer. There is material with more than a little kinship with *Bothsways*, with close dissonance and buoyant glissandi. This suggests the importance of collaboration to the composer's pieces, or indeed the extent to which Walker has integrated the composer's style into her playing – two propositions that are not mutually exclusive. Composers of a previous generation would have been far more reluctant to give up their authorial rights, even with the substantial documented input of so many creative performers over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this, the gesture made to mark the collaboration of Criton and Walker looks towards the future.

This is a relatively short disc, not 41 minutes in length, but there is more than enough fine music to make it a most worthwhile contribution. Criton's music is not noisy in its newness; it does not attempt to overwhelm or antagonise the listener. Rather, its strength lies in that rather underrated realm of subtlety. It is music that rewards close attention. The performers match this with wonderfully sensitive playing, with great care taken over the shifting timbres and character of the gestures – all of which is recorded with appropriately intimate sound. It is an important side note that both Tarozzi and

Walker also work closely with French electronic composer, Éliane Radigue. If this release is anything to go by, their efforts will do a great deal to showcase two exceptional, and rather overlooked, musical talents of contemporary French music.

Neil Thomas Smith

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Bennett: *Togetherness*. Barbara Lueneburg (vln); Decibel, Daniele Rosina (cond). Diatribe, 2018.

Born in Northern Ireland in 1975, composer Ed Bennett was, from 2013–2017, Composer in Residence at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is currently a Reader in Music at Birmingham Conservatoire. Bennett has fulfilled commissions for a number of prominent artists, such as the BBC Symphony and Philharmonic Orchestras, RTE National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, the London Sinfonietta, Crash Ensemble, Icebreaker, the Smith Quartet, Garth Knox, Reinbert de Leeuw, James MacMillan and Rolf Hind. Future commissions include those for Syzygy Saxophone Quartet and Northern Ireland Opera.

Togetherness, Bennett's latest portrait disc for the Diatribe imprint, features Decibel, an ensemble he founded in 2003. The group has also recorded his works elsewhere, notably on the disc *My Broken Machines*, released to wide acclaim in 2011 by NMC Recordings. Like Ireland's Crash Ensemble, Decibel melds instruments and electronics, with a particular fascination in the potential for combining amplification and the concert music milieu. This approach was taken on *Broken Machines* and created an edgy, often propulsive vibe. This is also true of *Togetherness*. However, Bennett's approach to rhythm on the most recent disc is more supple, and the pitch world is even more malleable, with sliding tones, especially glissandos of the descending variety, abounding.

The touchstones for Bennett's music are varied and palpable. His brief studies with Louis Andriessen and a longer time spent working with Michael Finnissy were formative. One also hears the energetic scores of the late Steve Martland, as well as those of English composer Oscar Bettison (now in the US, teaching at Peabody in Baltimore, Maryland) and his slightly older Irish colleague Donnacha Dennehy (currently in the States as well, at Princeton University). Bennett's early experiences in pop