

Leaving aside an implicit challenge to other composers, it is clear that the 'lack' of drama is a fundamental part of his aesthetic.

The title track, *Stain Ballad*, seems to exist in one, hazy musical moment, despite the fact that the septet of strings, piano and organ are doing quite different things: dreamy chords are adorned with violin melodies that go round and round familiar pitches in unfamiliar patterns, while there is a layer of constant, sometimes rather incongruous, pizzicato and percussion. A greater sense of coordination towards the end of the piece makes for a satisfying conclusion. The composer's description of 'indistinct sentimentality' is most apt, something that the aforementioned Dunn and Leith share.² There is also an apparent sense of laidback ease, which the performances by London-based Apartment House bring to the music.

Arnold makes the point that the term 'ballad' refers both to the lyrical – 'I'm devoted to lyrical (if endlessly meandering) melodies' – and to dance. He argues that 'all the music I make is in some sense dance music'.³ This is most noticeable in *Slip*, for a quartet of violin, cello, piano and bass clarinet. The lilting yet unpredictable rhythms also highlight Arnold's meandering melodies and his knack for coaxing a distinct kind of sound from whatever ensemble he is working with, here underpinned by the warmth of Heather Roche's bass clarinet. That Arnold has been doing his thing for some time is indicated by its date of composition: 1999.

The opening piece for solo, *Litra* (named after a genus of otter for reasons unclear), is for me the least immediately engaging. An extended exploration of harmonics, with some gentle humming from cellist Anton Lukoszevieve, it struggles to create the same sense of atmosphere as the other works here, a sign perhaps of the perennial challenge solo pieces present. The enigmatically named duo *Trousers* has no such trouble in creating a sonic identity with the gently sliding violin and cello creating a – perhaps specifically North American – folk feel, though it is more like the gentle improvisation on the veranda at dusk than a closed-form barn dance. Lukoszevieve and Mira Benjamin beautifully capture its mesmeric openness.

It is notable that, despite the focus this music displays, there is often room for some surprise in these pieces. Seemingly new elements are regularly introduced shortly before the end, such as

the clarinet solo in *Slip* or the introduction of pizzicato in *Trousers*. The effect is often to break up the hypnotic effect and to leave the music pointing in a new direction, towards which it only begins its journey.

The big question regarding the rise of Arnold and his younger colleagues is 'why now?'. The cultural currents that have led us here are, as always, complex and varied. The legacy of minimalism and the continuing devotion to Morton Feldman play their part, particularly now there is no necessary opposition between modernism and the minimal, as once was the case for a portion of the new music world. The close sonic inspection and audience immersion in spectral music, and the similar experiences in experimental music exploring the harmonic series and just intonation, can be seen as another tributary to this flow. Finally, such influence is likely also to come from far outside the realm of concert music: ambient electronic, noise music, folk music (which is an inspiration for Arnold) and electronic minimalism might all play their part.

All such seemingly new tendencies make us search the distant and immediate past for aesthetic forebears in a bid to create a convincing story of their genesis. In this story, Arnold's music could easily assume the role of a main protagonist.

Neil Thomas Smith

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Judith Hamann, *days collapse*. Another Timbre, at 165.

The deep greens and greys of Liene Pavlovskā's cover painting, with its intimations of movement among seemingly disparate colour fields, is an apposite way into Judith Hamann's album *days collapse*. Both works – Hamann's four-part suite for electronics, field recordings, cello and humming, and Pavlovskā's (presumably untitled) painting – were created in the spring of 2020 while their creators were on an arts residency on the Finnish island of Suomenlinna, some 15 minutes from central Helsinki, having arrived just prior to the spread of Covid-19 into Europe. Both seem to suggest the possibility of transcending boundaries through shifting perspectives.

Hamann, a self-described 'cellist, improviser, organizer of sounds', had been investigating the concepts of 'shaking' and 'collapsing', ideas which clearly fed into *days collapse* and gave her some tools to aid in negotiating the doubled

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

stresses of quarantine in an unfamiliar place and grieving the recent death of a close friend. The album grew out of a piece called 'days collapse days collapse night' Hamann made for Jon Abbey's Amplify 2020: quarantine festival¹ and released on 29 March 2020. Soon thereafter, Simon Reynell commissioned Hamann to expand the piece into a full-length album, one of several 'quarantine commissions' various artists have fulfilled for Another Timbre.

The resulting album is both discursive and – in some sense of the word – unified. At the level of individual sounds, they often enter into Hamann's musical world isolated as single sonic events or, at most, paired as if a line were beginning only to gutter into silence. These sounds sounding alone, separated by silences, hesitations, intimately and closely recorded before being reassembled in a virtual aural space, feels, a year on, like the perfect evocation of those first weeks of quarantine as each of our worlds individually collapsed inward – they have a resigned sadness to them, but not a nihilism; they are a commentary on aloneness rather than a cry into the void. This atmosphere of optimism in the face of difficulty is also apparent in the structure. Each track is largely static in its mood and materials, but each ends with a few tens of seconds of something new. However introspective the music can become, or depressing the world becomes, change is constant. I heard this as hopefulness.

The sound sources intentionally produced by Hamann are primarily cello, humming, electronic sounds and the scraping of pencil on paper (one of her coping routines was daily 10-minute drawing sessions), while Suomenlinna itself provided barnacle geese and other birds, wind and water. All four tracks adopt different distributions of similar basic materials, and there is a unity of approach and structure which holds the album together as an artistic whole without sounding goal-oriented moment to moment. Throughout the work, even the electronically-produced sound elements seem to breathe and pulse with life as much as the human-played cello and the voices of animals and Hamann herself. Every element swells and shrinks, comes in and out, in its own time. The overall effect is of an unconstrained (in the sense of not being forced into a system) polyphony of natural, human and electronic sounds, each sounding in their own way, sometimes

radically different from one another, sometimes timbrally blending so as to momentarily disorient the listener. With no visual clue, the drawing of a pencil over paper can sound remarkably like breathing, cello harmonics like a sine tone, high-register cello like humming, low-register sul ponticello much like artificial white noise.

This timbral play is one example of the transcending of artificial boundaries on this album. There is a beautiful moment that happens midway through the fourth track – almost a like climax – when the isolated notes from cello and voice and electronics seem, for once, to slip from being independently parallel into a kind of colour melody or hocket. Is there one melody shared? Is it counterpoint? Or are there actually only isolated, independent sounds and my mind just desperately wants them to find each other, so – for at least this listener – they do?

One further example of boundary-crossing: throughout the album, Hamann has left in what sound to me like artefacts of the recording process. These include what might be the rubbing of fabric on microphones (for example, from a field-recording microphone held unobtrusively in a pocket or bag), clicks from touching the recorder or the discomfiting sound of wind in the microphones. The choice to leave these marks of the recording process, to leave a record of the artist-as-recorder within the soundworld of the work, is also a kind of boundary crossed. With these gestures, Hamann leaves behind the Romantic-modernist idea of artist as separate from the work, and the work as separate from the world. Any artistic work is the record of a person in a time and place, and those leave their traces whether the artist wants them there or not; Hamann's foregrounding of them is a stimulating artistic choice.

Like the best field recordings – a genre it partakes of as well as transcends – *days collapse* rests on the ear like something natural; it moves the air like something alive.

Daryl Jamieson

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Marco Stroppa, *Miniature Estrose, Primo Libro*, Bertsch. Kairos, 0015071KAI.

The Italian composer Marco Stroppa (born 1959) has had close connections with IRCAM in Paris since Boulez invited him to the Institute in 1982. Members of IRCAM's resident Ensemble Intercontemporain have played his work, and Stroppa is particularly associated with the

¹ <https://amplify2020.bandcamp.com> (accessed 24 February 2021).