

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Ensemble Intercontemporain at 40, Philharmonie de Paris

In response to Paul Valéry's words after the First World War in *La Crise de l'esprit* – 'We later civilisations . . . we too now know that we are mortal' – the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler remarks, in his own chapter entitled 'Apocalypse Without God' in his *What Makes Life Worth Living*,

We too, earthlings of the twenty-first century know that we are capable of self-destruction. And if in the past the possibility of such an extinction of our kind was inconceivable other than as the consequence of God's anger – of original sin – today there is no longer any religious reference at the origin of this extreme global pessimism' (p. 9).

It is no secret that each passing day on Earth now seems to mirror the aftermath of another dramatic shift in 'origin', an apocalyptic threshold, so much so that some have even called for a new geological epoch: the 'Anthropocene'. Stiegler writes, 'nobody can see how to re-find the path capable of leading to peaceful growth and development', there is 'the feeling and the knowledge that *something has come to an end*' (p. 10). It is a crucial, if tormenting, lens to adopt. Yet, it is also a reality, and one that new music composers seem, vitally, to continue challenging with creative curiosity.

March was a month of celebration for the Philharmonie de Paris ensemble in residence, Ensemble Intercontemporain. Founded in 1976 by Pierre Boulez, the ensemble gave three concerts on 17, 18 and 30 March at the Cité de la Musique not only to celebrate turning 40, but also to pay tribute to the late composer/conductor who passed away aged 90 in January 2016. Having used the first two concerts, *À livres ouverts* and *Hommage à Pierre Boulez*, to fully embrace what has now been and departed, a path was paved for the final concert, *Genesis*, to fully engage the 'new'. By unique design, this concert featured seven newly commissioned works each representing one of the seven days of Creation, the purpose being that each composer was in turn to use the biblical narrative 'to give their own vision of the creative process: creation ex nihilo, renewal or extrapolation of

material already existing, etc.'. It was an exciting prospect. The line-up included: Chaya Czernowin (day 1), Marko Nikodijevic (day 2), Frank Bedrossian (day 3), Anna Thorvaldsdottir (day 4), Joan Magrané Figuera (day 5), Stefano Gervasoni (day 6) and Mark Andre (day 7). Fuelled with potential, the evening seemed set to exhaust what 'genesis' as a linguistic nexus alone might signify in relation to compositional creation.

Under the baton of composer/conductor Matthias Pintscher, the ensemble navigated the concert with elegant prowess. Each individual piece, performed consecutively as a cycle, seemed to function both independently and as a unit, capturing the same existential stressors as outlined above in relation to Stiegler. In the pre-concert talk and debate, Czernowin described how she approached her piece, *On the Face of the Deep*, by 'really looking back on the seven days'. The composer continued:

I tried to think about what it means, all the things that are written there because it is very interesting for me that, in the bible, it is not written that there was nothing. So, the first day is not inventing something from nothing, that would have been very difficult. There was everything, but it was chaos. . . . I am dealing with a chaos, and out of the chaos begins to be an order that humans can perceive.

The work itself seemed to reflect this dealing with elemental chaos in part by manifesting two distinct sound-worlds: one that seemed tight and alarming, signified especially by the repetitions of strong percussive tremolos, and another that seemed viscous and meandering, like the flow of lava. Scurrying to intricately mesh these two sound-worlds together, the piece soon subsided as a single plateau into a soundless space.

Stiegler summarises that 'the Enlightenment has been inverted into darkness', with the notion of 'Enlightenment' defined here in relation to Edmund Husserl: 'the ardent desire for learning, the zeal for a philosophical reform of education and of all of humanity's social and political forms of existence' (p. 12). It is a toxic enveloping motion, yet one that Thorvaldsdottir's piece, *Illumine*, seemed to depict in reverse from the core of the concert. The energetic intensity

construed by Czernowin was carried forward rigorously by Nikodijevic's *dies secundus* and Bedrossian's *Vayehi erev vayehi boker* to a much more settled mode of being; a place of potential contemplation. Thorvaldsdotir outlines how *Illumine* is based on 'the pulsating dance of light through dark' and 'construed around the idea of origin – the fundamental – the beginning and the dawning point of existence. Governed by darkness the light emerges – the starting point is dawn'. It is the only piece of the concert written just for strings – three violins, two violas, two cellos and a double bass – and the ensemble staged themselves further forward in preparation for a more intimate setting. The work itself seemed to gradually unfold to reveal a serene, yet deeply tainted landscape; an entanglement of rhizomatic trajectories. A sense of resolution was nevertheless soon reached. Rather than pursuing through 'the pulsating dance', however, the strings became more sustained and the echoing pulses less pronounced, leading eventually to a final transcendence of stratospheric glissandos.

The consequent limit(s) brought on by human endeavour, as Stiegler implies, nevertheless provides ample opportunity 'to lose oneself in, and to try and feel one's way around in, shadows: in what their illuminations owe to shadows, if it is true that lucidity is that which brings light, and if it is true that there is no light without shadows – if not blindness' (p. 22). Once again, an energetic flux, this time a little more surreal in nature, was thrust forward by Magrané Figuera's *Marines i boscatges* and Gervasoni's *Eufauniqué* toward a concluding space of introspection. Andre writes that his piece, *riss 1*, is about presenting compositional interstices 'as eschatological spaces of evanescence. It is about the most fragile areas of fluctuation between planes of sound and time, which are also fissures. The seventh day of the creation is probably more than a break: a tear. A time of reflection, of meditation is seemingly depicted there. It is to do with fluctuation, the fragility perhaps as a portent of the appearance of the Messiah'. In line with Stiegler, the performance itself depicted a fraught search through an ever-engulfing darkness. The sounds of heavy breathing, knocking, and sonic fidgeting occurred alongside violent, perforating strikes that seemed to be desperately mining for potential salvation. Sometimes, the strenuous labour would repeat with a bolder force. At other points a piercing sharpness would lead to a beating resonance, yet one that seemed too intense or foreign to touch. In a mark of closure, the piece did prise open, but only to shift into a less precise location;

the propelling of long sound tubes in the air blurred any definite sense of light/dark, life/death.

Stephanie Jones
doi:10.1017/S0040298217000638

***Infinite Now* by Chaya Czernowin, Vlaamse Opera, Ghent, Belgium**

On the evening of 18 April 2017, the world premiere of Chaya Czernowin's highly anticipated new opera, *Infinite Now*, was performed at Vlaamse Opera Ghent, Belgium. The ambience of the venue was buzzing, highly charged, electrical – a visceral state that seemed contextually appropriate for the lengthy 2.5-hour experience (without intermission) ahead. Programmed as part of the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen 2016–17 'Borderline' series, the set-up and contour of the pre-concert events became eerily symbolic: a large, grandiose, guarded door separated the rooms holding the press conference and pre-concert lecture, through which the composer would eventually pass toward the latter to conclude: '[t]he power to continue, that is what [the opera] is all about. It is not the power to be happy or to be sad. . . . It is much more morose, elemental and existential. The power to continue'. In an instant, the strong ring of emergency sirens then happened to pierce and penetrate from the world beyond – a rather poignant signal to declare the doors to the first performance officially open.

Persistently, Czernowin has used her public appearances and website writings to reinforce how *Infinite Now* is integral to the making vulnerable of such an ambiguous, synthetic, concept such as a 'borderline' – a concept that ultimately forges a 'no man's land' between two distinct poles. Speaking about her opera in Darmstadt in 2016, the composer described how '[f]or me, dialectics and oppositions are opportunities. I do not believe in them. When I see an opposition, or dialectic, I become very interested in the continuum between them. So, between the black and the white there is such a rich and huge universe of all kinds of grey. And that universe I would like to open'. The opera itself incorporates text from two main sources: *Homecoming*, a short story by Can Xue, and *FRONT* a 2014 play based on Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet of the Western Front* by Luk Perceval (also director of *Infinite Now*), texts that are both used in the opera not as narrative, but to construct a simultaneity – to 'enact