

CDs AND DVDs

Weekend EP Project: Cohen Elias, d’Heudieres, Tsadka. Bandcamp.

When I was first made aware of this project at the end of January, it comprised four mini-albums, mostly by Chicago composer-musicians; by mid-March, when I started writing this review, there were nine. So, naturally, this is going to be somewhat of a cursory and incomplete review by the time I finish writing it, and it will most likely appear almost myopic by the time it is finally published. This is not just because the weekend EP project is a prolifically augmented collection, but because its aesthetic scope has become increasingly difficult to pin down.

It is only natural, then, that any attempt to provide a succinct overview to this project would be a disservice. Even such a seemingly obvious comment such as ‘these composers demonstrate a broad unconcern with large-scale forms in favour of a self-sufficient, pithy, DIY aesthetic’ doesn’t work, since Sivan Cohen Elias’s contribution, ‘EVE & ADINN’, is culled from a radically ambitious operatic project, centred around a feminine artificial intelligence which ‘believes itself to be human’, that has occupied her for over three years. The vocal distortions here are goeey and unsettling, morphing through pitch, timbre, reverb and identity, recalling Stockhausen’s most outré work with Vocoders (the bit in *FREITAG aus LICHT* where a (male) ice cream cone goes into a (female) pencil sharpener especially comes to mind). It’s never overwhelming, though; in fact, the overall texture is quite sparse, even monophonic. With some hindsight, this seems like a result of the 72-hour strictures of the project: Cohen Elias’s music, particularly in the satellite works from her operatic project, almost always is overwhelming. And, separated from its visual component – Cohen Elias’s uniquely hypnotic use of expanded puppetry – this EP offers listeners a rare chance to really appreciate, on their own terms, each of these finely crafted, highly elusive sounds and their impossibly nuanced transformations (try to parse out where the prepared harp played by Kasia Szczech ends and the prepared piano played by Cohen Elias begins).

Aesthetically similar, if not conceptually so, is Louis d’Heudieres’ ‘Autoglossia’, a low-fi (and,

at several junctures, chiptune-y) suite compiled from iPhone recordings d’Heudieres made of his own voice overlaid with the sounds of, as he disarmingly puts it, ‘stuff I had to hand’, assembled using C-C-Combine, software designed by Rodrigo Costanzo. It comprises the tracks ‘Autoglob’, ‘Autoglop’, ‘Autogloss’, and ‘Autoglott’. The third of these is the highlight for me: it’s actually very catchy, and it brings to mind the MIDI-funk of Ford & Lopatin. Sometimes the album can strike one as a bit twee – as in the last track when d’Heudieres’ already exhilarated squeals are sped up to Chipmunk speeds over grating string pads – but this feels less like an unintended consequence and more a conscious and deliberate aesthetic pursuit, so it’s not really a criticism on my part as much as simple description. Indeed, d’Heudieres’ offering certainly feels the most like an actual EP – some cassette with a hand-drawn cover that you picked up for three quid at a basement gig you don’t really remember – and each track feels like a song in a commercial, if ultimately unsettling, sense.

On the opposite extreme of technological mediation is Maayan Tsadka’s ‘amplifikã:tsija na:tu:ra:lis’, which might be the most haunting album available so far. Described by the composer as ‘a possible life cycle of a sound amplified through natural objects’, the album is a sort of sonic inventory of plant life and tuning forks that the composer has accumulated. The obvious precedent is Cage’s *Child of Tree* and *Branches* (or, say, Wolff’s *Stones*), but in those cases the natural objects are making the sounds one expects them to, while Tsadka’s seed pods sound positively ethereal. Like Cohen Elias’s EP, this collection appears less like a self-standing work than a foot in the door to the composer’s practice more generally, and one becomes compelled to discover how Tsadka will deploy these objects and sounds in future performances.

It seems like the only conceptual through-line of the project is its foregrounding of the conditions under which these EPs are produced. This transparency is quite nice, I think, and may well serve as a corrective to the usual New Music World Premiere, where a finished piece is (ideally) immaculately exhibited to the community. Conversely, these EPs bear heavy

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.

All albums from the Weekend EP Project are available – name your own price – at <https://weekendepproject.bandcamp.com/>.

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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