

Kanga gradually descends into the piano, overtones glisten over the crimson resonance of the low strings, and the piece flows like molten lava to its end.

McLaughlin has cultivated his drone language within a paradox of stability and uncertainty, a remarkable compositional achievement. The listener is ever confident of the drone's warm presence but is kept aware of multiple sonic futures as the harmonic spectrum shatters into particulate matter overhead. It's a kind of suspended temporality that summoned the imagery of the *Kunstammer* with which I began this review – the impossible stasis of nature, an illusion in time. This is the paradox of *the endless mobility of listening* for violin and live electronics, the second track on this album. Benjamin uses 'drone-bowing'<sup>3</sup> – with minute technical alterations to bow pressure, speed and angle – to generate delicate string harmonics. Usually ephemeral in nature, these harmonics are captured by the electronics and sustained, quasi-organum, in glassy harmony above the violin. The 18-minute track (just a fragment of the possible duration of the work) is a masterclass in suspended animation.

By comparison, the third track – *in the unknown there is already a script for transcendence*, for prepared piano and live electronics – is fleeting. A bell-like exclamation is heard at the beginning of the work and in refrain throughout. It is the most discrete thing heard yet on the album, stark against a familiar drone texture generated by the combination of electromagnetic resonator and live electronics. A cast of sonic escapees appears after this initial fugitive gesture – small, incidental noises in and around the piano, the rustle of materials as Kanga arranges and rearranges the sound. The strings groan occasionally, accommodating these alterations. As objects within the piano find new adjacencies, new colours emerge in the music, shifting subtly in proximity to one another. I would love to hear this recording in a spatial mix – a kind of musical feng shui encapsulating the interiority of the piano and its material intimacy with the performer.

Returning to the *Kunstammer*, that famous symbol for fascination with the non-human, and an early philosophical provocation for our role in the natural world, I feel now that this comparison falls short of what McLaughlin is trying to achieve in *we are environments*. This music does not presume that nature can be captured

and contained for humanity's delusions of creative grandeur. Instead, musical bodies – human and non-human – are understood as porous and entangled, and musical environments as inherently wild. Furthermore, unlike the poor, dusty critter in my taxidermy simile, McLaughlin's music can be resurrected in performance. This is immortal music, and I could listen to it forever.

Kate Milligan

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Ian Power, *Ave Maria*. Rainwater. Carrier Records, 072.

To gain access to the CD in the case of *Ave Maria* is to go on a small pilgrimage. The design enacts the mystical experience of veiling and revealing. Hand-folded laser-cut card-stock paper unfolds in a sequence: first a flap opens out to the left, a second to the right, another down and the last folds up. Each layer is like a panel. The outermost is cut in an intricate pattern like the grating between a penitent and a confessor. Another holds the booklet with Carolyn Chen's liner notes. The last two have oddly criss-crossing strands of paper in front of an image printed on the back of the CD: the words 'AVE MARIA' in a heavy block type have been removed, spelling out by their absence. Parts of the lettering are held together with a thread of paper mere millimetres wide. One must be cautious when handling this item; it is precious. Designer Jacob DeGeal has produced an extraordinary item.

But CD cases were always fragile. Even a small amount of accidental torquing would snap the tiny plastic hinges at the top and bottom; the teeth in the centre holding the disc in place would only last a few times removing and replacing before breaking. The changes in the music industry over the previous several years have led distribution networks away from physical media towards streaming. A movement in favour of physical media has since emerged in reaction: CDs and especially vinyl records have experienced a resurgence in popularity. Some boutique labels even put out cassette tapes. At the time of writing, bandcamp is really the home for such boutique labels and consumer choices. Because any purchase includes digital copies of the music, issues of scale can be set aside in favour of obsolete formats and stylised, arguably impractical designs. This particular

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

CD is part of a limited run: only 50 were produced. I received number 38.

The CD has one piece, a set of variations on a theme by Giacinto Scelsi, composed by Power in 2008–2009. The theme comes from the *Three Latin Prayers* (1972), for solo female voice. Listeners familiar with the *Quattro pezzi* and *Anahit* will be surprised: tempered diatonic pitches set the text of the Ave Maria prayer with intoning ritualistic quarter notes. Twenty phrases begin and end the same way, describing an inverted arch shape like the cabling on a suspension bridge. B♭, like a pylon, is followed by a descent, reaching back up. But every time the interior structure of the melody shifts ever so slightly: even as the melody is revealed, the specific nature remains veiled. A very compelling musical discourse is woven out of extremely simple materials – with no score to follow, the music is always barely past the edge of comprehension. Power has orchestrated it for singing pianist: the instrument accompanies the pianist's voice in unison. It is a texture familiar to any musician who has worked with singers: 'plonking'. Pianist Anne Rainwater is not a trained singer, and that is clearly intentional. The high note of the melody is not too high for her, but it's close.

Immediately the variations commence: Scelsi's melody is slowed and now harmonised beneath with rich and dissonant chords. It is a texture like certain chordal music in Messiaen's work but without such a rigid adherence to the 'mode of limited transposition'. At a certain point the melody becomes bass line. But was it both top and bottom the whole time? Has some subtle transformation been guiding the discourse? The extremely delicate weighting of each chord is paramount for this effect to come across, a real testament to Rainwater's artistry. A final chord is caught in the sostenuto pedal; the last few notes of the theme sound in hollow octaves.

Variation II opens the discourse up with a high repeated B, accelerating and slowing, flickering like a light. The melody, in the tempo of the theme, sounds in octaves below. As the music unfolds, the stratum of flickering light shifts higher and lower, and the melody grows in intervallic complexity.

A massive chord of blinding intensity begins Variation III. A second one follows, then a third, tracing out and dissonantly harmonising the first three notes of the theme. A low cluster like a distant rumble punctuates the truncated end of the phrase. Past the halfway point, a new layer enters: the theme not in complete

phrases but somewhere in the middle, unharmonised, quiet and humble among the explosive chords. A final low cluster has an aftershock like a halo or a cloud, tremolando and pianississimo.

Variation IV returns the 'plonking' with singing directly from the theme, but this time with a halting second voice – only in the piano, repeating a G – insinuates itself into the texture like a commentary. Gradually it grows into a more and more full modal harmonisation. Choral-like, the harmonisation sounds now with halting vocals 'a – ve'. It is absolutely gorgeous music.

The interlude interrupts variation IV and upsets the flow of variations. Leaving the 'on the keys' music of pitch, the felted metal and wooden joints mechanically clunk in a regular pattern, and a gong-like muted B slowly pulses out: an EKG. It comes across, at least to my ears, as a crisis. Not only a crisis of form and material but a crisis of faith. There is an agitation animating the material stasis, a music of waiting.

According to the track list, variation IV is resumed: the only obscure formal relationship in an otherwise very clear structure. The steady pulse from the interlude vanishes; the contrapuntal second voice from variation IV briefly wanders alone.

In a sense, the epilogue combines elements of the previous four variations into a single texture: a high repeated pitch, martellando chords dissonantly harmonising a truncated statement of the theme. But I'm left with a much more powerful impression: the crisis of faith prolonged and intensified. The high repeated pitch is an insistent gesture and not once is it answered. There is no resolution.

This is extraordinarily well-crafted and well-composed music – without a doubt the best music I've yet reviewed for *TEMPO*. Rainwater has brought a sensitivity to performance and interpretation absolutely essential to this deceptively simple music. Similarly, recording engineer Murat Çolak has brought an extraordinary transparency and beauty to the audio image.

The question of the piece is: how do you handle a crisis of faith? There is no answer, but the music presents a shockingly powerful image in the epilogue: the struggle of doubt and penitence. It is a deeply human feeling of powerlessness over the fates and fortunes of one's life, and a desperate pleading for mercy.

Once the four panels have been folded out, one can see the actual item: a CD one side of which digitally encodes 31 minutes of music composed by Giacinto Scelsi and Ian Power. On the reverse there is a picture in black and

white, taken by Power himself. A human is bowing, forehead to the earth in prayer.

Alex Huddleston  
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Mem1, *Diapason*. Estuary Ltd, est10009.

For 21 years, Laura and Mark Cetilia have devoted their duo project to a rigorous excavation of all manner of striated artifacts. More than their instruments (usually cello and a flexible combination of electronics and synthesisers), Mem1 are recognisable by their tender attention towards *what slips in and out*. A standard track dilates around the uninvited objects asleep in electroacoustic phenomena. That their music is so often slow and quiet is a measure of their commitment to the fragile states of accidental feedback, distortion, acoustic imperfection and ambient interruption that emerge when instruments are subdued below a threshold. Mem1 are forever seeking the wispy crackles and soft air bubbles that lay trapped between tectonic drones, gently shifting focus away from the (minimal) material itself and towards hazy, less predictable peripheries. Theirs has always been a generous permission for such rich effusions, with the result consistently a notch above this century's deluge of stock electroacoustic drone music.

But *Diapason* – a 30-minute diptych, released this March on their in-house label Estuary in a handsome, limited-edition dyed vinyl – is their most burnished, patient and rewarding venture yet. The album is first a study of one room and its rare treasures. Abandoning their usual cello-plus arrangement, *Diapason* reconfigures around three time-bound instruments separated by two hundred years: a reconstruction of the seventeenth-century Charlottenburg Palace organ since lost to the ruins of war; a 1970 Minimoog Model D, preferred by Hancock and Sun Ra; and the '80s pop goliath Roland Juno 60 analogue. All three live at Cornell University's Center for Historical Keyboards, and it is that campus's Anabel Taylor Chapel – a porous wooden chamber perched high on Ithaca's main hill – that provides the invisible third player on the record, an enveloping acoustic replete with trailing residues of its own. On both sides of the vinyl (labelled simply 'Diapason I' and 'Diapason II'), L. Cetilia remains behind the Charlottenburg, while M. Cetilia alternates between synthesisers, differentiating the tracks by subtle degrees of light.

But the album is no mere zany instrumentarium, like a curio closet of forgotten sounds. The instruments in *Diapason* remain forever in service to an unfolding logic of the leak. While swell (as in its title) lends the album general material, it is the limitation of leakage – and the varying thresholds at which such leaks retain significance – that hem it in. Swell is only an impetus, a utility for testing limits: shifting spectra gradually reveal the precise threshold at which the hiss of air venting from an organ pipe can still be heard, the lowest valley at which haze of electronic interference can still be said to mingle with pitch before aerating it completely or the level of activity necessary to capture the birds chattering outside an open chapel window. This is what is meant by a *logic of leaks*: these many leaking objects – organs, synthesisers, buildings and recording equipment – teach, through patient attention to the varying acoustic returns of all manner of diapasons, where their intended result and fallible intrusion dehisce with highest drama.

It is a fool's errand to speak of drone music in the singular or momentary, and, indeed, what is most rewarding about *Diapason* is the epic scale on which one becomes aware of perceptual drift: knowledge of the many leaky punctures is accrued gradually, and no two listeners take note of the ulterior layer at quite the same time. But there are, however subtle, something like instants, nexuses in which the varying leaks pierce the fore, turning the soft bed of harmony into a kind of uneven topography of small ruptures and fissures. We might, for instance, attend to the rare moments when the organ enters without its dal niente swell, a hooty articulation that puffs a cushion of air into the otherwise seamless plane – or, elsewhere, when a crescendo crests its limit, petering off with an exhalation as if a pressure gauge had been tripped. There's the sound of wooden slats gently clattering as the organ, in silence, prepares for entry, evidence of an instrumental hapticity alongside pure tone. And then there is the ending, a dramatic evacuation of sound, a sudden shutting of louvres, a switch turned off that instantly reveals what has felt rather like loud room noise as having been a controllable phenomenon from the start, divulging at the last possible second yet another threshold of absence below what had previously been understood as the limit.

These moments are fleeting and easy to write off as mere ambient intrusions. But in the scope of *Diapason* as a whole, they are crucial knots that tether the soft blanket of sonic leakage