

listener's perspective there is audible friction between the different string tunings.

arcing, stilling, bending, gathering is divided into four movements, and in the first an often disjunct piano part contrasts with a sweet, sustained string backdrop. The piano is faster moving in the second movement, though the underlying tempo is overall slow and the dynamic level generally at a low level. Solo strings emerge from the mass in the third movement and the piano texture is more chordal, as if the instruments had reversed roles from the previous section. A more energetic piano passage at the end of this section is surprising, as if it has come out of nowhere. The fourth movement is the longest: starting with high-pitched piano chords, again against a string backdrop, it brings together ideas from the other sections. This is music that is content just to be, to colour time without a strong sense of dynamism or forward momentum.

Tiding II (silentium) (2021) is performed by the GBSR Duo (George Barton, percussion and Siwan Rhys, piano) and David Zucchi on soprano saxophone (not clarinet, as indicated on the CD sleeve). It is inspired by a 2013 woodcut by the artist Christiane Baumgartner: Illean admires the precision of her representation of a liquid form. A swirling, faintly metallic opening sets the scene. Music being a time-based art, it is more adept than a woodcut at conveying the movement of water: in Illean's piece, though, one is aware of the permanence of the vast expanse of water as well as its internal motion. Zucchi's saxophone is perfectly sustained and controlled, emerging almost imperceptibly from the rest of the sound fabric, while Rhys' trebly piano and Barton's percussion are like points of brightness. The instruments are underpinned by an electronic backdrop, operated by Michael Acker of the Experimentalstudio des SWR, that plays the same connecting role as the string ensemble of *arcing, stilling, bending, gathering*. While there are slight variations in intensity, ebb and flow, overall the piece is like a floating ribbon of time rather than something striving towards a climax.

A through-grown earth (2018), performed by Explore Ensemble and soprano Juliet Fraser, is a setting of three poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Lantern Out of Doors', 'Ash-Boughs' and 'Epithalamium', framed by an introduction and coda. There is also an electronic element featuring pre-recorded sounds of retuned zithers plus live voice. Explore Ensemble (bass flute, clarinet, violin, viola and cello), with Nicholas Moroz on the sound desk,

are setting new standards for the interaction of live instruments and electronics in new music.

There is an intriguing multi-layered sustained introduction, like a wine-glass rim being stroked but reimagined for orchestral instruments, and this sonority is revisited in an interlude between the first and second vocal movements and in the coda, where the sustained sound is blended with more prominent instrumental sonorities and a snatch of Fraser's voice. I wondered how Illean's style would adapt to text setting, and particularly how her musical language would work in combination with nineteenth-century poetry, but in fact this is the most imaginative and immediately appealing work on the disc. Hopkins' striking recontextualisation of everyday words has a parallel in Illean's otherworldly twanging of detuned zithers combined with live musicians. Juliet Fraser's distinctive sound adds a plangent human tone to the strangely compelling electronic/acoustic accompaniment.

Land's End (2016), performed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Robertson, is inspired by detailed pencil drawings of windswept landscapes by the Latvian-American artist Vija Celmins. Just under 11 minutes long, its ebb and flow align it with the watery environment of *Tiding II (silentium)*. Towards the end, there is frequent call and response between different instruments moving from low to higher pitch, though Illean ensures we hear subtle shifts in timbre and not dramatic contrasts from one moment to the next: the sound morphs from muted brass to clarinets to vibraphone, or there are even more subtle shifts from one stringed instrument to another. The piano, tuned percussion and harp's pointed articulations are like shafts of light on the expansive landscape.

This disc shows that Illean's music has a consistent harmonic language and an attractive, though not particularly varied, soundworld. If you like one piece on the album, you will surely like the others. But the Hopkins text settings hint that there is more potential in her compositional language, and I look forward to hearing her move in different directions.

Caroline Potter

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Oliver Leith, *Last Days*. Platoon, PLAT22471V.

There's something very *cool* about Oliver Leith's *Last Days*. The chamber opera premiered to a series of sold-out shows at London's Royal

Opera House in October 2022, which led to a one-off performance at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA in February 2024. The cast were dressed by Balenciaga, the libretto is based on a film that no one much cared for, the plot of which is about the death of Kurt Cobain, and the production has a cameo from arty popstar Caroline Polachek. In fact, if memory serves, Dua Lipa went to see the show during its London run.¹ These sorts of things can't be said for any other piece of contemporary classical music that I can think of. As a reviewer, this does all weigh on my mind, as do the many other reviews or comments that people have made about the production. Most importantly, or what frames these vogue accolades and the subsequent reputation at least, is that *Last Days* is an opera. This label, I think, summons all sorts of baggage to play off and thus build an image from: drama, style, opulence, classicisms. But that's not quite what I'm presented with here and that's an important distinction to make. Instead, I'm reviewing the audio recording of *Last Days* as distributed by Platoon. The only physical release is a triple vinyl, complete with bespoke locking grooves that loop sardonic ringing sounds, such that listeners must 'answer the phone' to change the side. Pretty cool.

True of any audio recording of an opera is just how much is omitted: the set, lighting, costumes and acting. But, most importantly here, I'm missing the protagonist: Blake, portrayed by Agathe Rousselle, is a near mute character who only occasionally mumbles some indistinct words. The ominous withdrawal that seems to be potent to the opera's production is replaced here with an actual absence. As such, the supporting characters direct their singing into or at a void. This central lack serves to heighten the novel and bleak handling of narrative. Not much happens in *Last Days* and even less happens that one didn't already know: Blake – or Kurt Cobain, if you like – is going to take his own life. As a result, I wonder if this recording of *Last Days* is less about creating a spectacle of woe around the decline of Blake than drawing attention to what precedes an awkwardly appearing release of grief.

The operatic dimensions of *Last Days* of course have implications on more specific

musical moments, too. Leith has a signature approach to instrumental writing. The lines recall both tropes of nose-up Romantic music and various fuzzy guitar bands like The Smashing Pumpkins, My Bloody Valentine and Slowdive. This already fresh material is put through a sort of filter of wonkiness and haze, where pitches and rhythms become stretched or misremembered somehow. There is an elegant, alluring and sentimental sense of removal and distance from passion in Leith's instrumental writing in *Last Days*. The vocal composition, however, does not seem to have had the same treatment. Whereas the instrumental sounds gloop and soothe around spectres of classicisms and adolescence, there are many moments when vocal lines break this spell precisely because of, to my ears, how operatic they are. In Act 2, the Private Investigator's loud groaning of 'Blaaake' at the start of Scene 4, 'Confusion', is more droll than uncanny or bizarre. And the Housemate's expletive delivered in a polished quasi-Wagnerian voice in Scene 2 of the same act suggests the sockets as a comfortable place for my eyes to roll to. These two examples sound like opera singers pretending not to be opera singers (which, I must say, is really not cool). This approach of somehow incorporating the everyday is, partly, what Leith does in the instrumental writing, but the latter feels far more settled its own languid lexicon. To be clear, this is not a slight on the singers' performances themselves but a clash of styles that sometimes jars and takes me out of the otherwise foreboding haze surrounding the missing Blake.

This disparity is perhaps made more obvious by how rethink-your-ears-beautiful Caroline Polachek's cameo aria is, 'Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare', found within Act 1 Scene 3, 'Blake Listens to Opera'. The track was released as a single ahead of the full album on a 7" vinyl, as is the artefact found in the production of *Last Days* itself. There is such elegance to this version and Polachek's classically trained but not classical voice pairs celestially with the strings. However, the album version includes moments when the whole recording is slowed down and detuned as if someone – I assume Blake – was playing with the record player itself. Put glibly, this is not far off Leith's approach to instrumental writing, such that when it happens to all the musicians, the result is otherworldly and magnificent. This sentiment is only heightened by Polachek's performance: her top F# emanates from the ensemble and points towards the traversal of

¹ Even more cool is that I think I can hear Leith's influence on Charli XCX's 'everything is romantic', from her 2024 album *brat*. He worked with Charli's producer A. G. Cook in the same time frame, and the slushy philharmonic sounds at the start of the song are not a million miles away from the composer's orchestral works.

sounds and passions beyond what are sensible. The material from this aria reappears as another highlight of *Last Days* in Act 2 Scene 4, 'The Super-fan', this time with a gloomy guitar riff reminiscent of Nirvana's 'Something in the Way' and Patricia Auchterlonie gracefully filling in for Polachek.

Despite my initial reservations, I think it's precisely because of Blake's peculiar absence alongside tensions of style that *Last Days* does something which, as with its reputation, cannot be said of lots of contemporary classical music. It offers an emotional world that sneaks up on you. I'm not sure when exactly – I'm not even really sure what exactly – but every time that I listen through *Last Days*, feelings of strangeness and barrenness are cultivated within me and linger in my ears. I wonder if the omission of an audible protagonist creates a space for the listener to hear themselves being batted around the quirky-cum-sinister characters' yearnings. At some point throughout Act 2, I think I start to grieve Blake, but I'm not sure exactly when, why or how, not least because I only know him through what others project on to him. Maybe this sort of sympathy, that flirts with empathy, for Blake is a state of mind afforded by privately listening to *Last Days*. Other macabre questions, then, are teased out. If we know that someone is going to die imminently, then when do we start grieving? And when or how does grief turn into mourning? At what point might private feelings spill over to the external world, and can or should that be measured? It is only through Leith's masterful combination of melodrama and nonchalance within operatic paradigms that these particular bleak questions are arrived at and make *Last Days* an emblem of what contemporary opera might achieve.

Ed Cooper

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Neil Luck, *Eden Box*. Accidental Records.

Given how eclectic, how experimental and how abstract the sonic fabric of *Eden Box* is, it evokes its conceptual framework with astounding clarity. Reading the introduction to *Sensible Activities* (the 'oblique' – or, accompanying – book publication to *Eden Box*), it was almost uncanny how much I recognised the ideas which were being presented to me – ideas which had floated up from what I had already heard. It is rare and precious for music itself to

genuinely speak so richly of the complex questions its creator is asking – in this case, about the sometimes unsettling ways in which we experience the modern world. The success of *Eden Box* on this conceptual level, along with the sheer joy arising from the freewheeling sonic inventiveness which I have come to expect in Luck's work, offers him up as one of the most interesting and genuine artists making work today.

It feels like *Eden Box* is a way for Luck to sit within the concerns and the grammar of visual art – creating a movie (or dream sequence) – but use the medium of music. Though Luck's recorded work has been theatrical in the past (*Prayer*, on his 2021 album *Downturn Fantasies*, comes to mind), as well as of course invoking the physical via its strongly foregrounded 'grain', what is present on *Eden Box* is something subtly different. Most of Luck's previous recorded work feels like it is *dealing in music*, however experimental – it is experienced as a line in time, has a musical grammar, bears concern for and even gives primacy to melody, harmony, form, structure. *Eden Box* feels like it departs into making visual art using sounds: its concerns are with montage, scene-setting, jump cuts, juxtaposition of discrete objects, irony, allegory. The title, shared by the twentieth-century artist of the same name (or pseudonym), sets this idea up, as does the introduction to *Sensible Activities* in its discussion of dreams being 'back-colonised' by twenty-first-century video media culture, as does the way Neil sometimes creates performance art – but to hear it distilled so inventively and evocatively on to an album is incredibly compelling.

This music vs film distinction feels perhaps esoteric or even flimsy when the first track on the album, *For the Mother/Cherry Tree*, begins with a distinct evocation of steel-string Americana; even when it cuts across into something stranger, a conventional musical teleology is undeniably presented. *Eden Box* is slippery in this way – assertions I make as I listen are constantly challenged, in a way that runs much deeper than the wild inconsistencies of aesthetic from track to track. But I still maintain that the scaffolding of this album being that of an extra- or non-musical grammar – that the language is one of films and dreams, not of music in the way we might usually consider it – is an idea with resonance. The guitar music we hear is actually a genre-signifying object, a place-maker, a scene-setter, a wink and a nudge.

I think because I've mostly experienced Neil's work live, the clean, precise cutting of the voice