

At the start of the movement, the viola plays 11 bars of winding melodies to go from C to the C# about 71 cents higher. The note it plays on the first beat of each bar along the way is barely perceptibly higher than that on the first beat of the previous; E is reached in the fifty-eighth bar, a little more than five minutes in. Projecting a scale that's unscalable, in music that seems not to move its pitch anchor yet does, navigating a fearsomely abundant pitch space, this movement enters another galaxy, far beyond air from another planet.

At a rehearsal of the seventh quartet a year ago, Ben Johnston expressed relief and pleasure that it could be played. In a concert, however, the pitches might not be as accurate. What's possible? How close to exact must/may notes be, in various contexts, when based on higher harmonics?

That we have the seventh recorded at all is a miracle. Then there are the other nine quartets and the short, intoned postlude (1996) included here, in memory of Salvatore Martirano. What the Kepler Quartet has accomplished on these three CDs is very unlikely to be repeated. They spared nothing in their shattering presentation of all the music.

Kyle Gann's lively, detailed notes and the fine sound quality complement well this completion of one of the most prodigious achievements in the history of recordings. Beyond spurring interest in these quartets, these CDs should spur other composers to explore just intonation, whether extended or not, in practicable performance media, as something acoustically and musically 'right', even crucial.

Paul Rapoport

'VARMINTS': ANNA MEREDITH. Anna Meredith (cl., keyboard, elec), Sam Wilson (drums and perc.), Jack Ross (guit.) and Gemma Kost (vc). Moshi Moshi MOSHICD67

'KATE SIMKO & LONDON ELECTRONIC ORCHESTRA': KATE SIMKO. The Vinyl Factory VF204CD

'MINIATURISED CONCERTOS | MACHÉ'. Disc A ('Miniaturised Concertos'): works by POPPY, PINNOCK, CASHIAN, RILEY; Disc B ('Maché'): works by MACLEOD, VINCENT, BELL, AKAMA, MURCOTT, CHADBURN, TUKHANEN, RICHARDS, ROWAN, PERKS, GLOVER, PAPAIOANNOU, VITKAUSKAITE, SUTHERLAND, MORGAN,

MIYACHI, TIPP. Kate Halsall (pno and keyboards) with guests. Métier MSV 77205

Genre is held together by expectations – of sounds, shapes, moods, levels of complexity (or lack thereof) and where they all ought to lie in the course of a performance or a work. The problem is that these expectations get tangled up in the expectations surrounding composers, musicians and musical institutions, expectations based on their context and background. Anna Meredith, a Royal College of Music composition graduate who was commissioned by the BBC Proms in 2008 and 2009, understands that when she straddles the worlds of concert and popular musics, it's all frustratingly relative. She recently told *Wire* magazine, 'I had a piece played in [London's] Purcell Room one night and a gig the next, and of the two reviews, one went 'garish, monotonous, repetitive' and the next was, 'inaccessible, abstract, experimental'.¹

Evaluating CDs that mark a special attempt to bridge that gulf will bring particular challenges, then. Each of the releases under review here comes from a classically trained figure branching into various aspects of popular music. If it is anything more than a coincidence that all three releases are the results of projects created by women, it might be because gender, like genre, can also present a set of expectations to be transcended by those whom it frustrates.

Anna Meredith's 'Varmints' appears on Moshi Moshi, a record label that has played a major role in British indie rock and pop for nearly 18 years, providing a platform for acts such as Bloc Party, Florence and the Machine, Disclosure and Architecture in Helsinki. Meredith's robust, repetitive, texture- and metre-focused writing is not only recognisable on the album's 11 tracks, but finds a notably sure footing in the relatively starker, short-form statements (between two and seven minutes) of a moderately experimental indie rock album. In this case, it is a rock idiom in which the characteristic dominance of electric guitars and drum kits within a band structure is somewhat ceded to synthesisers and strings. Meredith herself is part of the band, singing and playing clarinet, an opportunity not typically afforded to the concert composer.

The reception of 'Varmints' in the popular-music press has noted with interest Meredith's training and achievements in concert music,

¹ Anna Meredith, in Abi Bliss, 'Only Connect', *Wire* 385 (March 2016), p. 14.

often assuming that it gives her an advantage in approaching the genre of indie rock and electronics. This assumption rests on further, longstanding assumptions both of popular music's comparative simplicity and of the universally applicable nature of classical training with respect to the demands of music-making and sound itself. But 'Varmints' puts Meredith in stiff competition with over 20 years' worth of similar albums by more practised acts, bands associated with formally complex styles such as post-rock and math rock, not least on Moshi Moshi: in this context, 'Varmints' struggles to be either unique or exemplary. In the context of new (concert) music, meanwhile, its simplicity is apt to be heard as a step backwards rather than forwards or sideways.

Perhaps neither of these conceptions is really the point, however. Just as much as it falls between two genres, 'Varmints' allows Meredith to explore shapes and moods that can seldom be found in each of them alone. One of the album's most attractive qualities is the exultant, even infectious mood in which barking or cascading riffs on wind instruments are layered, augmented, and metrically wrong-footed. One hopes that 'Varmints' is not just a one-off for Meredith, a holiday from concert music: further exploration of this area could well hone a distinctive voice.

If 'Varmints', located within indie music, represents something of a middle ground between concert music and chart pop, composer Kate Simko's debut album with the London Electronic Orchestra is more of a superimposition of the two, incorporating conservatoire-style playing of piano, strings and harp into richly produced, syncopation-friendly house music. Like Meredith, Simko is a graduate of the Royal College of Music, as are the members of her all-female ensemble. Similarly, Simko's label, The Vinyl Factory, is a major independent player, having released records by Florence and the Machine (again), Massive Attack and the xx, a song of whose Simko covers here. Schubert is also covered: 'Ständchen' is a 'recomposed version' of the eponymous song from *Schwanengesang*, given a 4/4 kick drum.

The album doesn't seem to be aiming for an intensive dancefloor experience, however, but something smoother, something to set a mood, and as such the connotations of genre are difficult to listen past. For better or worse, the listener may find it hard to shake the initial impression that they find themselves in a high-end boutique (or luxury apartment ad) in which an equal mixture of sophistication and streetwise savvy is to

be communicated. If these connotations fade, however, the album presents an accomplished example of luxuriously orchestrated house music, which is its own reward.

Miniaturised Concertos | *Maché* is on Métier, a label that has a substantial catalogue of twentieth- and twenty-first-century concert music; though it advertises this album as 'fus[ing] classical art-music with popular idioms and new techniques of performance and recording, involving many of Britain's top names in the worlds of DJ-ing, electronics and sound design', this 'fusing' is to a significantly lesser extent than for the labels supporting Meredith and Simko. The brainchild of pianist Kate Halsall, this release comprises two discs and a video that can be streamed online. Disc A features four works commissioned by Halsall for two pianos (for which she is joined by Fumiko Miyachi) and various other instruments, all relatively close to contemporary concert music in style: Naomi Pinnock's *Always again* alternates the pianos' violent, angular chords with some jarringly subtle percussion before ending with contemplative sonorities; similarly, Philip Cashian's skill with hovering piano sonorities is on display in *Furor*, though it too begins viciously; Colin Riley's *Hanging in the Balance* channels Cage's Sonatas and Interludes with its use of prepared piano and electronic effects; Andrew Poppy's *Swimming with the Stone Book* comes closest to rock by blending electric guitar, bass and keyboard into a series of tableaux, each with its own carefully balanced harmonic and textural consistency.

It's Disc B, however, that really fuses the classical and popular idioms. Its four tracks are made up of elements of 17 short pieces by 17 composers, many of them specially prepared and almost all featuring piano, chewed up ('*maché*') and woven into bricolages by Halsall and sound designer James Waterworth. The results are wonderfully diverse not just in their sounds, shapes, moods and levels of complexity, but in performance style, with many of the elements taking up the more informal creativity, recording technique and presentation of indie and experimental popular musics, something matched at a higher level by the intervention of Halsall's *maché* technique.

This technique perhaps better achieves the diversity that composers and musicians frustrated by the constraints of genre crave than does the replication and adoption of a single alternative genre, in this case one each from popular music such: indie rock and house. It is not enough simply to adopt a different but pre-

existing genre, or to fuse the hallmarks of existing genres into some new chimera: genre itself must be dismantled, or at least imagined as temporary and finite against a plurality of possibilities. Equally, however, the continuity and consistency of genre is often a source of great value and appreciation. Tellingly, the albums by Meredith and Simko both close with intimate, even poignant strings, conjuring an atmosphere of emotion through classical harmony and vibrato – evoking Bach concertos and Romantic string quartets, it is as if both composers are looking back to those central, most deeply prized areas of the Western classical music tradition, and are keen not to leave them behind entirely.

Adam Harper

‘STORIES FOR OCEAN SHELLS’: KATE MOORE & ASHLEY BATHGATE. Cantaloupe CA21109

With their collaborative cello cycle *Stories for Ocean Shells*, Australian composer Kate Moore and American cellist Ashley Bathgate weave an utterly mesmerising tapestry of sounds. This set of six works written primarily for the cello (subtly augmented by tape layers, vocals, pedal steel guitar and vibraphone) gradually unfolds in its complexity and lends the listener a glimpse of a path that is evidently intensely personal. A journey such as this often requires the trust of a long-term working relationship, and indeed, Moore and Bathgate have been working together for a number of years. I previously enjoyed Moore’s *Cello Concerto*, written for Bathgate and seen in concert in the Netherlands, and I was curious to see what further fruits their collaboration had produced.

In the hands of Bathgate, the cello truly sings – one can almost glean the words it seems to be uttering in the opening track, *Whoever you are come forth*. The sound she produces is powerful and sonorous, yet each phrase retains a sense of vulnerability in its execution: in this way, this naked and plaintive melody deftly avoids falling into the trappings of sentimentality. A slightly weary, worn air is allowed to creep in, and without any long drawn-out farewell the music simply turns around and leaves – just like that, it ends.

After an opening that is arresting in its simplicity, Moore steers the title piece, *Stories for Ocean Shells*, into the hyper-layered textures that are growing to be something of a trademark: patterns coil around themselves and motifs pile

up, the music settling into a series of harmonic states before unceremoniously shifting to the next. This results in delicious consonances that are nevertheless not cheesy, co-existing as they do with grating dissonances that fastidiously hold their place in the whole. When the music is swept into progressions, such as on the third track, *Velvet*, I realised that the harmony is always taken exactly where I want it to go.

The opening of *Velvet* feels like stepping into a room in which these particular repeated strains have already been sounding for millennia. Rhythmic cycles are a strong component of Moore’s work, and on this release they are exploited within each piece but also on a macro level as they develop over the CD as a whole. She expands and contracts the tempo not by direct acceleration, but by multiplying and layering subdivisions in a very organic way: a musical mitosis. Segments of each complex layer are delivered from all sides, every motif comprised of multitudes.

The tempo is also of vital importance in my favourite track: *Doloroso*. Static textures of breathy vocals and distorted guitar are passed out one by one, as the vibraphone teasingly hovers around the harmony. They are unapologetic in their slowness; there is a message to be delivered, but at their own pace. As the listener you are gloriously held in place, obliged to lend your attention as the music takes up ownership of its space, seemingly stating ‘you will take your time to receive me’.

Homage to my boots is in itself a small cell cycle – again, cycles within cycles. According to the liner notes, the work describes ‘stepping out into an unknown world where everything is possible’, and indeed it leads us through successive and distinct events, telling a tangible story that paints a rich picture using the barest minimum. A track that shows its rough edges more than the last, *Homage*, draws out the raw sounds of scraping bows, letting you almost taste the silty wind, and every possibility is coaxed out of each sound introduced, such as the series of almost guttural overtones flowing from a single note. On CD this work sometimes feels too long, but in a live performance the human connection with the performer would change this.

With the last track, a simple solo work entitled *Broken Rosary*, we find ourselves back at the start of the spiral. Its repetition is resolute and unfolds with a timeless quality. Added textures are external influences: crackling fires and *The Shining*-esque strings loom in upon the listener, but do not affect the cello’s ceaseless steps, and it is only at the very end that