

## CDs AND DVDs

'NIGHT MUSIC': MARK SIMPSON. *Night Music*<sup>1</sup>; *Ariel*<sup>2</sup>; *Barkham Fantasy*<sup>3</sup>; *Echoes and Embers*<sup>4</sup>; *Lov(escape)*<sup>5</sup>; *Un Regalo*<sup>6</sup>; *Wind Flower*<sup>7</sup>; *Nur Musik*<sup>8</sup>.  
<sup>1</sup>Leonard Elschenbroich (vc), <sup>1</sup>Alexei Grynyuk (pno),  
<sup>2</sup>Mercury Quartet, <sup>3</sup>Richard Uttley (pno), <sup>4,5</sup>Mark Simpson (cl.), <sup>5</sup>Ian Buckle (pno), <sup>4</sup>Víkingur Ólafsson (pno), <sup>7</sup>Nicholas Daniel (ob.), <sup>6</sup>Guy Johnston (vc),  
<sup>8</sup>Ensemble 10/10 c. Clark Rundell, <sup>8</sup>Jonathan Small (ob.). NMC D225

'Night Music' is one of three releases this year from NMC as part of their Debut Discs series. It comprises eight chamber works by Mark Simpson showcasing pieces from 2006 – the year he won both BBC Young Musician of the Year and BBC Proms/Guardian Young Composer of the Year – to 2015.

The works here are most often inspired by such dark themes as loss, ghosts, fragility and deaths both human and abstract – Night Music indeed! Simpson gives weight to these inspirations in the sleeve notes, and the austere cover images and colour palette let us know we should steel ourselves for Seriousness. However, in this compilation he reveals himself to be a composer who veers more towards passion and hope than introspection and melancholy.

The most engaging illustration of this optimism is the pure rhythmic muscle that drives the music forward, around and upwards. *Lov(escape)*, the earliest work here, which Simpson wrote expressly to play in the semi-final recital of Young Musician, has this in spades: it is a four-minute crescendo, gleeful and whirling, giggling despite itself, defying the yearning/escaping dichotomy set up in both the portmanteau title and initial musical material. This kind of emphasis on the rhythmic feels very natural on the clarinet, and it seems that Simpson the clarinetist and Simpson the composer cross paths here. But he doesn't keep all for himself: rhythmic impetus is a recurring feature of all eight works, regardless of instrumentation. The most affecting sections of the title track, *Night Music* (2014), have muscle too, knitting together many disparate fragments of floating gestures. *Ariel* (2012) was inspired by Sylvia Plath's poem of the same name; this also makes striking structural use of rhythmic passages, which gallop

towards a final goal – a repeated three-chord cadential figure. This insistent short chordal progression is arresting, a calling card for both Plath's poem and Simpson's clean, harmonic approach; a simple statement that might perhaps have benefited from a swift conclusion rather than the multiple endings we have here.

This is not to say that Simpson writes only in a pulse-led manner. His compositional language is absolutely in the romantic tradition, in which you hear admiration for Stravinsky, (then) Britten, as well as twinklings of jazzier and even pop harmonies. Lush melodies, yearning to be heard, feature prominently and – dare I say it? – sound very pleasurable for the musicians to perform: Simpson writes 'musicians' music'. These melodies can feel improvisational, as in *Un Regalo* (2015), written for Guy Johnston's cello's 300th birthday, or combative, as in *Echoes and Embers* (2012), and are most affecting when allowed simply to sing. They are less affecting when undercut or interrupted (which happens quite frequently) as often such interruptions seem like a structural tool, rather than something that comes from a holistic emotional core.

*Windflower* (2013) was commissioned to be a companion piece to Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*; Simpson chose Ted Hughes's *Venus and Adonis* as inspiration. This is the standout work of the recording and, interestingly, it is also the least explained in the sleeve notes. Simpson weaves pure poetry here, displaying an unselfconscious style that is the most relaxed and authentic on the disc. This is a work for solo oboe that stylishly morphs into an oboe 'duet' for one player; the lines then fragment in ravishing fashion. Even though we hear quite clearly the ripping of Venus's hair and the splatter of Adonis's blood, the message that stays with us is of the constant creation of life and beauty beyond death.

If in *Windflower* Simpson is at his most musically captivating, it is tempting to surmise that extra-musical influences suit his purpose best. However, *Nur Musik* is a completely instrument-led composition, written for Ensemble 10/10 in 2008 (the year his birthplace, Liverpool, was European City of Culture) and is charming. This work might be alternatively

titled 'The Oboe Ascending'; structurally and harmonically, it is a piece very much rooted in the English tradition. The aggressive rumblings of the ensemble texture create a dense cage that the oboist, Jonathan Small, resists and tries to shatter. The most intense music, however, is reserved for the simpler oboe-piano duo passages, which breathe beautifully: the open and clean language Simpson displays here feels much more demonstrative of the track title.

All eight works are performed here by the musicians for whom they were originally written, and, as you might expect, the works featuring Simpson himself are placed centrally in the track order. The performances are all of the very highest standard. Particular mention must be made of Nicholas Daniel and Guy Johnston, who shine as the interpreters of the two solo tracks. The production is clean and crisp and feels suitably intimate.

This is an assured and fluent recording, and the order in which the works figure makes both stylistic and logical sense. If I were to venture a mild criticism, it would be that the choices showcased in 'Night Music' tend to hit too similar a note. I might have welcomed, as contrast, a touch of outright levity. It is clear that Simpson has a lot of light and charm in him. I hope to hear some Day Music in the not-too-distant future.

Natalie Raybould

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BENJAMIN JOHNSTON: String Quartet No. 7; String Quartet No. 8; String Quartet No. 6; Quietness<sup>1</sup>. Kepler Quartet, <sup>1</sup>Benjamin Johnston (voice). New World Records 80730-2

This disc completes the recording of the legendary ten string quartets by Ben Johnston (b. 1926).<sup>1</sup> The project took 14 years, partly because the first violinist lived a long way from the other players; the main reason, however, was the need to raise money and to find the techniques and time to master the music's unique difficulties.

Nine of Johnston's ten quartets (including the three recorded here) are microtonal, an unfortunate term suggesting arcane deviation from good old 12-tone equal temperament. But no. At work here is just intonation, or pure tunings, often with pitches in relationships extended as far as the 13th harmonic ('13-limit'). In its truly rational

pitch structures, this extended just intonation produces a sound world that makes twelve-tone equal temperament a limited artificial cart that we've put before an unlimited natural horse. (True even of 5-limit just intonation, which uses pure harmonics no higher than the 5th.)

I recommend hearing the quartets in the order 8, 6, 7, from least to most difficult, especially for those unprepared to have their ears freed of the compromises of equal temperament. The 13-limit Quartet No. 8 (1986) relaxes the formal complexity of Johnston's previous three quartets via a neoclassicism that he explores further in Nos. 9 and 10. The first movement is a sonatina. The 'lazy, rocking' second movement's inflections seem both French and American. The third, a fast, witty waltz, anchors dizzying infra-chromatic melody to simple chords. The Reichian last movement employs irregular, shifting rhythmic figures in slowly changing harmonic fields.

Mellifluous and at times morose, the one-movement, 11-limit Quartet No. 6 (1980) was once likened by Johnston to a conversation among four disagreeable people. They don't argue, but interaction is constrained. Besides just intonation, the music's main structural bases are endless melody, elements of serialism and retrogression. Each instrument in turn spins its lines to sometimes radiant chordal accompaniment. After a brief but dazzling interlude in an 11/32 metre, the music proceeds in retrograde, but at a faster speed than the longer first part. Throughout, metres are governed by simple metric modulation linked to harmonic structure.

Quartet No. 7 (1984) comes with a particular reputation: the most difficult of all, unperformed for its 32 years, 'mad', 'impossible', because of its intensive, uncompromising extended just intonation. Even though Johnston makes it possible for performers to play the right notes by tuning theirs to others in the texture, it is an extreme demand when notes are short, the music is non-centric, textures are complex, or differences in pitch are very small.

The first movement is a manic, glittering prelude. With simple rhythms in complex harmonies, the second again contains palindromes and other hexachord manipulations, in a persistent but light sul ponticello scherzo that sounds like a sustained étude. Led by the viola, the long last movement completes the daring use of 13-limit just intonation by crawling structurally through an ascending octave by the most intricate constellations imaginable, including collaborative metric changes.

<sup>1</sup> My review of the first two CDs appeared in *TEMPO* 66/260 (2012), pp. 77–8. I was also a contributor to this project.