

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

BENJAMIN JOHNSTON: String Quartet No. 7; String Quartet No. 8; String Quartet No. 6; Quietness¹. Kepler Quartet, ¹Benjamin Johnston (voice). New World Records 80730-2

This disc completes the recording of the legendary ten string quartets by Ben Johnston (b. 1926).¹ 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.

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

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.