

JONATHAN NANGLE, 'PAUSE'. *Where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds; Fragment I; My heart stopped a thousand beats; Fragment II; Pause; Tessellate*. Crash Ensemble. Ergodos ER27.

In 2010, Jonathan Jones, an art critic for the Guardian, reflected on the work of prolific German artist Gerhard Richter in a short article. Commenting on his experience of first encountering Richter's 'Cage (1–6)', a series of six massive abstract paintings – the artist's homage to American composer John Cage – Jones recounts, '... it was like going from a claustrophobic interior into an expansive parkland where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds. These paintings are liberating and time-freezing, sombre and ecstatic'. Jones, in his wonderfully evocative imagery, unknowingly struck a chord with Irish composer Jonathan Nangle who, a year later, was setting out to compose a work for solo violin and electronic resonators. Using language from Jones' descriptive account as a title, *where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds* tellingly became the first track of Jonathan Nangle's debut album *Pause*, newly released on Ergodos records in July.

Featuring superb performances, fittingly full of clarity, transparency, and an admirable attention to detail, *Pause* is a testament to the artistry of Ireland's Crash Ensemble – and specifically their string section. With six chamber works for strings that span the last decade of Nangle's artistic output, *Pause* is also a revealing portrait of the composer. Out of the selected works emerge threads that tie the album together. Among them is Nangle's penchant for textures of repeated and overlapping patterns. Another is his reference to music of the past.

Looking back at Jonathan Jones' review with this latter thread in mind, we see a series of connections. From Cage to Richter, Richter to Jones, and Jones to Nangle, this chain of associations points to a deeper connection between Nangle and Cage bubbling beneath the surface of *where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds*. In the years 1946–50 Cage adopted principles of Indian philosophy, and in notable works like his *Six Melodies* (1950) and *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50) he set out to 'sober and quiet the mind thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences' – a spiritually tinged modus operandi that Cage borrowed from his student (and in turn, teacher) Gita Sarabhai. To achieve this detached and calming aesthetic, works from this period often employ what Cage called 'gamuts' or cells of highly limited yet unrelated melodic and harmonic material, engaged using

specific repeating rhythmic structures closely tied to the concept of the Indian *tala*. While Cage described himself as no longer interested in expressing specific feelings and ideas in his music using traditional functional progression, he nonetheless employed tonally suggestive material in his gamuts. These works thus have a built-in tension between the tonal allusions suggested by the irregularly placed and overlapping patterns of gamuts and the lush harmonies that arise out of them, despite their lack of a clear intentional functional harmonic development.

Jonathan Nangle's music featured on *Pause* plays with similar tensions. Of his *My heart stopped a thousand beats*, a slowly unfurling piece sensitively performed by Lisa Dowdall on viola and Kate Ellis on cello, Nangle writes, 'my aim was to create complexity through simple conglomeration, in this instance just using six notes. The pattern seems simple on the page; the complexity reveals itself in performance'. Along with *Where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds*, *My heart stopped a thousand beats* features a detached, floating quality brought on by the cyclical use of small tonally suggestive melodic, harmonic and rhythmic motives similar to Cage's gamuts. These patterns, rather than leading to anywhere in a traditional narrative sense, seem to spin around, picking up speed, and stalling out before materialising into something more. Nangle, like Cage, conjures a vast meditative sonic landscape void of direct expression by employing slowly evolving textures of open strings and harmonics and by instructing his players to play *senza vibrato*, *sul tasto*, and in the case of *My heart stopped a thousand beats* to produce a 'white, pale sound'. But these works, while revolving around a Cageian aesthetic and compositional method rich with possibility never fully come into their own, failing to build substantially upon the fertile grounds that were earlier established.

These two works are bookended by two minute-long improvisations *Fragment I & II* scored for violin, viola, cello and double bass. Both act as a sort of aural sorbet to cleanse the pallet between the album's larger works, but similarly leave the listener wistfully wanting more. Formed as improvisations on excerpts from the title track *Pause*, these two fragments offer only a tantalising glimpse into a perhaps more sprawling landscape.

Pause, also for violin, viola, cello and double bass, uses a two-bar phrase from the third movement of American composer Charles Ives' behemoth *Concord Sonata* as its starting point. Nangle, who again draws upon a web of historical associations

for inspiration writes that ‘this connecting thread stretches back to the early twentieth century and is filtered through my twenty-first-century imagination’. Originally written as the sonic component of a video installation, *Pause* subjects the Charles Ives fragment to a sequence of rearrangements, cyclical patterns, repetitions and ruptures over the course of the nearly 10-minute piece (the longest track on the disc). This work despite its repetitive treatment of the Ives excerpt, avoids adopting an Ivesian aesthetic, and seems more conventional in its formal development, growing to more predictable peaks and valleys of activity.

The final track on this release, *Tessellate*, is most unlike the others. Scored for solo cello and electronics, the work is fast-paced and uses a highly rhythmic sonic vocabulary in the electronic part, reminiscent of glitch music. As opposed to *where distant city lights flicker on half-frozen ponds* where the electronic resonators are subtle in their reinforcing of the solo violin’s line, the electronics in *Tessellate* rise up, becoming a dominating force in opposition to the cello. This work, like the others on the disc, is based on layered repeating patterns of material. But in this case, the patterns are perhaps less obvious to the ear.

Nangle describes the act of composing as ‘threading a narrative through sound’. But beyond the more surface level feature of recurring intertwining patterns, Nangle more accurately threads narratives through history – drawing connections through works of the past via direct quotations and embedded aesthetic allusions. Within Jonathan Jones’ words Nangle by chance stumbled upon a remarkably precise description of his own work, on display on this new release: ‘time-freezing, somber and ecstatic’.

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10.1017/S0040298217001085

REBEKAH HELLER, *Metafagote*. Steiger, Fujikura, Eckhardt, Lara. Tundra 006.

Bassoonist Rebekah Heller is committed to expanding the repertoire of solo and electro-acoustic works through close collaboration with composers interested in writing for the often-unsung instrument. Each composition on the album was written specifically for Heller between 2012 and 2015, and each work showcases different facets of her virtuosity.

Rand Steiger’s *Concatenation* for bassoon and electronics opens the album with a declamation of the bassoon’s lowest register in the form of

perpetual motion that morphs into six other rich and varied motivic areas. Composed in 2012, Steiger’s 16-minute work is a self-described ‘nested etude’ that exploits both Heller’s technical dexterity and her sensitivity to phrasing. The electronics play an important role in differentiating each of the seven varieties of material, as each take a unique approach to signal processing. Quivering tremolos are treated with echoes and spatialisation, slow, expressive glissandi excite resonant filters, rapid and succinct motives are harmonised, and heavy, powerful tones are fed into unexpected distortion. In *Concatenation* the processing serves to expand the bassoon’s timbral palette; true to the title of the album, Steiger and Heller create a ‘meta’ bassoon, rather than a case of acoustic solo and digital accompaniment.

Concatenation is an exhibition of Heller’s admirable performative agility. She moves seamlessly between technically demanding etude-style material and beautifully phrased melodies, a jump that is not often heard in bassoon writing.

Heller’s emotive phrasing is on equal display in Das Fujikura’s 2014 work for bassoon alone, *Following*. Heller worked with Fujikura on an earlier piece, *Calling*, that is featured on her first album, *100 Names*. While Fujikura explored the bassoon’s multiphonic capabilities in *Calling*, he dials back the extended techniques in *Following*. The lack of novel sounds is quite refreshing; Fujikura allows the listener to devote one hundred per cent of her focus to the contours of the melody. Fujikura crafts his twisting and haunting melody to cover the full range of the bassoon in a brief and almost formless five minutes. Although Heller expertly shapes the energy flow of the melody, the dynamic remains fairly static throughout the work. For such a lyrical piece, it is a shame that the dynamic range was not wider. in the recording.

Jason Eckhardt’s *A Compendium of Catskill Native Botanicals, Asarum canadense, “Wild Ginger”* is similar to *Following* in length and instrumentation. Eckardt writes that the six minute solo piece is inspired by wild ginger, a ‘perennial whose delicate, dark-purple flower, often concealed by the plant’s leaves, is supported by branching rhizomes that grow underneath’. *A Compendium* begins with gestures that recall, in both shape and register, the famous bassoon solo opening of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. These gestures bloom into more elaborate shapes that slip into the spaces between half-steps and occasionally give way to extended periods of silence. The shapes continue to grow in complexity, becoming faster and more intricate,