

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Matthew Lee Knowles, *For Alan Turing*. Ledger. Online performance, 17 February 2021.

Long-duration performances have been an interest of mine, since finding Morton Feldman's score for *String Quartet No 2*. Like, I believe, many readers of TEMPO, I enjoy the feeling of immersion in pieces such as Catherine Lamb's *Prisma Interius IX*, discussed in issue 289 of this publication, or James Week's *Windfell*, reviewed in issue 291. These works, as pleasurable as they are to listen to, also ask for particular endurance and concentration on the part of the performer.

Composer Matthew Lee Knowles has also made many pieces requiring an exceptional level of endurance. Knowles recently finished *For Clive Barker*, a piece he has been writing since October 2016, featuring 29,000 bars and 1000 pages of music, lasting 26 hours. Knowles created the piece translating every individual letter of Clive Barker's novella 'The Hellbound Heart' into music, the content of which foregrounds themes of torture, sadomasochism, hedonism, extreme pain, pleasure and puzzles. These are wonderfully reflected in his 'painstaking attempt' to translate the letters in the book, and he subsequently spent 6000+ hours making the piece.¹ Knowles seems to have a penchant for wordplay and puzzles in his work and tweets, although on trawling through three months of the latter to find coherent examples thereof, his associations, to this writer, are often non-sensical or confusing.

Endurance, puzzle-making and torture are concepts similarly explored in *For Alan Turing*. As readers of this publication will no doubt be aware, Turing was a mathematician and logician, who made immeasurable contributions to theoretical computer science and codebreaking during the Second World War. He was also a homosexual, and was betrayed by his government, who chemically castrated him for his sexuality, leading directly to his eventual suicide at the age of 41.

Knowles' homage to Turing was finished in 2011. It is made up of six movements with a duration of between two and half hours and eight hours. In 2012, the sixth movement was performed in Cambridge by Knowles for Turing's centenary. Coinciding with LGBTQ+ history

month in February, Knowles teamed up with York-based pianist Kate Ledger for its first full performance, which was livestreamed from her home on the 17 February 2021 and remains available to watch on her YouTube channel.²

Ledger's performance was staggering: starting at 2pm, her seven-hour performance kept me company well into the evening of a lockdown-weary day in February. Each attack and decay were thoughtfully considered. With no breaks, it was an exceptional performance of endurance, both physically and mentally. The piece had the danger of becoming coarse simply because of its length; instead, Ledger played with refinement throughout.

The piece consists of only white keys on the piano. Knowles used various texts connected to Turing; he read about his life and then chose texts based on things that he believes would have interested the mathematician. He then isolated the letters 'ABCDEFGF' from these texts, as he explained in the chat during the livestream:

"you miGht notiCE kAtE isn't pLayinG Any BLACk kEys, you won't sEE A sinGLE BLACk kEy DEprEssion in thE whOLE piECE As this is A trAnslAtion of vArious tExtS isolAtinG thE lEtTErs ABCDEFG".

As a result of these restrictions, I was absorbed into a sound world consisting of repeating notes and patterns. As the letters A and E are common vowels, this results in a 5th as the constant stable ground for the occasional F and B to conflict with. Working with a restricted palette of tones was not remotely a problem for Knowles, nor did it pose problems for this listener. The six movements made use of different registers, ranging through the middle register to low moody periods in the second and third movements, to an open final movement, played exclusively in the higher register, with a greater density of chords. The piece ends with spread chords in this register.

A seven-hour livestream was the perfect format for this piece. The decision of how to delve into the work was completely at the listener's discretion. I was not held 'hostage' in a live concert environment; I could immerse myself

¹ <http://matthewleeknowles.com/2021/01/for-clive-barker/>.

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dBoqTvxEE.

fully or dip in and out of the performance. This listener-agency is now common in the current online-ness of art, and it has its benefits. As much as I crave experiencing a performance in a live setting, seeing Ledger in her own personal and private space screened to the community of 20–30 viewers throughout the marathon was a pleasure. Being able to chat to others watching and ask the composer questions was a surprising highlight, as was seeing usernames I recognised from the world of new music.

The livestream also offered us a charming view of the pianist's home life. Ledger's home is decorated as a space for a meditative performance: behind her was a painted fireplace, her piano was decorated with objects belonging to her children, her piano bench was covered with a comfortable fluffy pillow, and the meditative ethos of 'inhale exhale and repeat' was emblazoned on her jumper. Part of Ledger's performance practice for this piece included 'a series of meditations, incremental fasts and mindful exercises, in and around finding my touch/sound/mode of being at the piano'.³

Her meditation practice seemed to pay dividends as Ledger failed to show any signs of fatigue throughout, even at the end of the performance when she addressed the audience.

The audio quality of the stream was adequate. The compression of the livestream mattered little, however, as I became absorbed in its sound world and imagined exactly how each

sound was heard in Ledger's room. Later, I felt this as a welcome break from pristine Steinways in concert halls. Far better to feel that I was invited into Ledger's home. I had the livestream on speakers all day, while at my desk, preparing food, living. The quality of the stream and of Ledger's home piano offered the experience of hearing her playing just in another room of the house, which perfectly suited the music she was playing and the general timelessness of our lockdown experience. Ledger's husband, Iain Harrison, shared his sense of this in the live chat: 'have been following the piece all day, hearing it LIVE from the next room and then, four seconds later, "live" on YouTube. There's a trip!'

For Alan Turing is a perfect ode to the brilliant mind and trauma of Turing, which for me extended to a meditation on the suffering of all LGBTQ+ peoples throughout history and the effort to serve something greater than oneself. Meditating on the past while listening to long-duration pieces *works*. I want to experience more, possibly live but definitely on a livestream, so we can experience the special performance/composition in our own space and time. I hope this piece opens doors to more performances of Matthew Lee Knowles' long-duration works as evidenced here; they must contain vast compositional imagination and grace.

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³ www.kateledgerpiano.com/for-alan-turing.