

atop an off-kilter Dilla-esque beat, before *delirious ecstasy* takes the listener into robotic post-bop swing territory. *Writing to you because I love you* feels like a chewed-up Patty Waters or Norma Winstone avant-garde cut, while the beautiful *sex* channels a stumbling, crazed boogie. These stylistic resonances are never straight but always disrupted or undercut by Oliver's rhetorical eccentricities and flair. The final song of the set, *letter [for Anna]*, is in many ways the most subtle and strange. Over a lopsided locked groove expertly held down by Riot Ensemble, a tender vocal is delivered over a repeating six-chord sequence that begins cold and oblique and ends with warm quartal harmonies. It's a very subtle progression that gives the impression of human and non-human in a strange kind of dance. *Love Letters* represents a fascinating example of music utilising AI-generated elements, rendering a uniquely palpable feeling of that slippery relationship between man and machine.

The final piece on the disc, *A-Listers*, returns to the forces of piano (played by Clíodna Shanahan) and electronics, but here the pre-recorded audio includes snippets of an interview with Anil Sood, a figure central to the Southampton dance music scene in the 1990s and 2000s. The text is never fully explicatory, but rather paints a picture of an underground cultural scene and community. Oliver cannily avoids direct musical references to 90s dance music culture, and so opens a space and dialogue between Sood's history and our own contemporary relation to it. It's a work that sticks out on the disc as operating in quite a different way to the other pieces, but as such it's a generous and fittingly human way to close the album.

Neil Luck

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Sarah Hennies, *Bodies of Water*. Duo Refracata, Arcana New Music Ensemble. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

How many times can one repeat a gesture? At what point does it become something else, does the mind become moulded to its contours and is then free to do something else? Notice something else? These were my questions when listening to Sarah Hennies' *Bodies of Water*, and it turns out they were also questions that Hennies had herself when composing *Lake* (2018) and *Abscission* (2017), the two pieces comprising the album. They are not companion works, but they are nice companions together, and it's worth listening

to how Duo Refracata and Arcana New Music Ensemble tackle similar conceptual frameworks carried through by audibly different processes.

Lake feels like a series of still videos. Fifteen minutes long and composed for an intimate trio of violin, vibraphone and piano (Ilana Waniuk, Michael Jones, Shaoai Ashley Zhang), the piece is arguably six vignettes that are two or three minutes long. The title evokes a placid landscape – whether sombre or peaceful, the listener is free to superimpose their current frame of mind – but the form is not a rolling camera as per a nature documentary, panning across. It's rather a camera set on a tripod, capturing a seemingly unchanging scene. Yet when one looks for long enough, there are subtle changes: perhaps waterfowl float slowly in the distance from one side of the frame to the other, or the cattails sway ever so slightly. Dear reader, we leave the details to your vivid imagination since a specific natural description of a lake is not the point, as I understand it. Though how does one compose the feeling of a lake? For Hennies, there are piano chords that imbue atmosphere. There are short violin artificial harmonics that recall crickets or cicadas. Taken as a whole, the metaphor here is that something serene on the surface upon closer observation reveals that a lot is actually going on. Continuing the analogy, I sometimes wished that there was a musical zoom function (maybe in a future album?); instead, Hennies allows extra time in the musical gesture to do that work of noticing.

Abscission, for violin, cello and guitar, also has the minute or half-minute as its timescale, but the compositional blocks are less picturesque and greater in number. They morph and build forward momentum, though still invested in the idea of repeating. Two of the instruments (violin and cello, performed by Carlos Santiago and Erin Busch) have a closer relationship to each other than to the other (guitar, Jonathan Pfeffer). I did not pick up on this hierarchy immediately, but I did find it very interesting that in a conversation with Hennies she divulged that this trio in her mind could represent two parents and a child.¹ Hennies surprised herself, as she normally isn't so prescriptive about the meaning of her pieces in interviews. But I understand, in a way – family is complicated, and it's not hard to view the world through the lens of relationships. It adds to the piece, I think, to listen with 'family' in mind, if not this particular iteration of a nuclear family, because *Abscission* lends itself to humanistic thoughts. Though there are loops, normally shaded 'machine' in this composition, 'errors' are

¹ Interview with Sarah Hennies, 19 August 2024.

embraced. In the performance notes, Hennies asks for a context in which traditional musical mistakes are bound to occur – players should be synchronised, but they should also sit facing the audience without looking at each other. The musicians are tasked with the impossible, but instead of sounding anxious, the recording contains beautiful moments of just-after: the sound of one musician catching the other with trust.

The impossibility of togetherness is a sublime concept, attractive in its heady Romanticism. Unlike Romanticism in music, though, there's very little material in both pieces, yet unfiltered humanity is communicated almost more clearly. Hennies says that this is why she likes working with small chamber groups and limited musical elements: 'because there's more thought space for what's going on, if you're not being brushed with a million notes at the same time'.² There is an art to how much to repeat, though – and this mastery is present in *Bodies of Water*. Just when one feels sated by the repeating gesture, having stayed as long as one can in one place. . . when the mind ceases to notice differences that penetrate the moment and starts to wander. . . the scene changes, perfectly felt in time.

Julie Zhu

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Paolo Griffin, *Supports & Surfaces*. Zucchi, Duo Holz, Hackston. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

Supports & Surfaces is the debut album by the Canadian composer Paolo Griffin. The album includes three pieces written between 2019 and 2022, featuring saxophonist David Zucchi on the first piece, violinist Aysel Taghi-Zada and percussionist Michael Murphy from Duo Holz on the second and countertenor David Hackston on the third. Griffin's creative practice includes notated music, live performance installations and text/event scores. His compositional approach blends a deep investigation of tuning systems with a methodical, process-oriented exploration of sonic forms. He is the curator of Freesound, a Toronto-based new-music collective.

On this album, Griffin presents us three outstanding works that showcase a diverse yet concise picture of the composer's musical world. Paolo Griffin's music is captivating for its transparent, direct quality and his sense of musical space. The processes at play are legible to the listener, who becomes a witness in the unfolding

of the music. The opening track of the album is called *The Purpose of an Empty Room*, for saxophone and electronics, performed by David Zucchi. In this piece, the composer uses electronics to repeat and play back the motifs and sustained notes played by the saxophone. The slow but steady unfolding of the music brings the listener into a kind of meditative state. Using the delay effect, the acoustic instrument generates and controls the musical texture that unfolds together with it and gradually changes as new sounds are introduced. The piece moves through different types of texture, each one with a different and captivating surface quality. There is an interesting relationship between the somewhat dynamic surface texture and the time span of the piece. The slow pace of the piece allows for the listener to 'be' in each of the spaces created like a kind sonic landscape.

The second composition of the album, entitled *Alone, Together*, recorded by Duo Holz, starts with a melody in the violin accompanied by sporadic hits of different types of high-sounding, resonant metallic percussion. The violin sustains the last note, allowing the resonance of the percussion to die out. In this piece, Griffin presents the listener with a sequence of musical 'scenes', each consisting of a different manifestation of a musical phrase. The violinist combines different registers effortlessly in an expressive meandering soliloquy of great beauty. The way he enriches the melodic contour with double stops is truly appealing. Similarly, the percussionist's strikes articulate the musical phrase, creating a second layer that sometimes coincides in pitch and other times opens up the space. The composer plays with the listener's expectation by creating a clear and predictable musical form while varying the musical phrase in such a way that it sounds different every time. Each reoccurrence shows the same musical object but from a different perspective.

In the third and last piece of the album, *Madrigal*, for countertenor and electronics, the voice of the countertenor emerges singing a sustained note, which is then seamlessly maintained as a drone. The countertenor then sings a first motif, which he repeats with slight variation in pitch. As the sung motifs are played back, a gradual process of accumulation begins. The interaction between the singer and the electronic playback is elegantly realised and in a way less transparently than in the first piece: the 'mechanicity' of the loop playback in the first piece is replaced by a seamless and remarkable accumulation of vocal lines. The singer

² Interview with Sarah Hennies, 19 August 2024.