

Between these transcriptions are four pieces written for Alarm Will Sound, and recorded for the first time: Charles Wuorinen's *Big Spinoff*, Wolfgang Rihm's *Will Sound*, Augusta Read Thomas's *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour* and AWS pianist John Orfe's *Journeyman*. Wuorinen is often called a modernist, but here it is a stylistic category only: he is not a modernist for his capacity to shock or horrify. Indeed, for all his polemical comments, it is surreal to imagine him inspiring the visceral reactions portrayed on the album cover. *Big Spinoff* (2011) is true to form: meticulous, deft, complex, but also unpersonable. Rihm's music is more questioning: *Will Sound* (2005/6) is ponderous and alert, beginning with an eerie, splintered duet for two saxophones and spiralling out unpredictably. As so often with Rihm, modernism is there somewhere – perhaps in the jaggedness of the lines and the hints of *Klangfarbenmelodie* – but it is a reference point; maybe a preoccupation, but hardly an aesthetic creed.

The following two pieces make a strange pair. Orfe's *Journeyman* (2013) is a virtuosic romp that makes the most of the ensemble's outstanding technical chops, whereas Read Thomas's *Final Soliloquy* (2004) sets simultaneously two poems by that undoubted modernist Wallace Stevens. One poem is recited by ensemble members while a mezzo-soprano and a countertenor sing the other. Sparse and atmospheric, the work's austerity seems appropriate, although the rather dour melodramatic vocal flourishes – recitation, dramatically held notes – give a humourless impression. The two poems' intense intertwining, however, is complex and intriguing: this is the piece on the album that most absorbingly engages with modernism and our continued fascination with, as Stevens puts it in one of the poems set here, art that is 'complete in an unexplained completion'.

Wallace Stevens is the poet from whom eighth blackbird draw their name, although their latest album 'Hand Eye' glances back to his era rather less than 'Modernists' does. It contains six works by the six-strong composer collective Sleeping Giant, each inspired by a work of visual art. The pieces are all quite different, but show a shared interest in minimalism and/or post-minimalism: Timo Andres's *Checked Shade*, for instance, is inspired by the subtle, not-quite-regular textures of artist Astrid Bowlby, and sounds like a (very enjoyable) version by Steve Reich of John Adams's *Grand Pianola Music*. Robert Honstein's *Conduit* is likewise based around repetition, and is inspired

by an interactive installation by Zigelbaum + Coelho that invites viewers to complete an electrical circuit with their touch. Its three movements, 'Touch', 'Pulse' and 'Send', are attractively crafted but, each being a few minutes long, cannot really convey the immediacy of the technological experience they seek to illustrate.

Andrew Norman's *Mine, Mime, Meme* and Christopher Cerrone's *South Catalina* both draw on interactive works by rAndom International. The two pieces are filled with elegant swishes of sound – in Norman's hypnotic piece the cellist finds his every move mimicked by the rest of the ensemble, while Cerrone's depicts a twinkling cascade of light triggered by the piano and percussion. It seems unprogressive to take artworks so intrinsically involved with viewer engagement and turn them into sit-and-listen concert pieces, but the result in both cases is elegant and smart, especially the poignant *South Catalina*, which also draws inspiration from the unrelenting brightness of the California sun.

By-By Huey by Ted Hearne is enigmatic: it 'memorializes the (self)-destructive', Hearne writes, and there is a sense of futility and destruction in the relentless, static-sounding, jazz-inflected lines. This piece is a response to Robert Arneson's painting of the man who murdered Black Panthers founder Huey P. Newton in 1989; perhaps, though, Hearne is concerned as much with the backstory as with the artwork itself. Its unwieldiness, undoubtedly deliberate, makes for a perplexing listen. The brief and subtle *Crossfade*, composed by Ted Hearne and Jacob Cooper, leads into the album's final piece, Cooper's *Cast*, inspired by a series of paper casts of everyday objects by Leonardo Drew. Cooper mimics the casting process by imposing various soft instrumental elements on top of a gentle, rocking vibraphone part, and then gradually removing the vibraphone until only the 'extra' elements remain. This simple concept is realised with skill, and the piece has a wistful, childlike air. There's little modernism here, true – it's all rainbow, no granite – but, this being the twenty-first century, perhaps it's time to stop glancing so far back.

Paul Kilbey

'DIFFERENT BEAT': FRITZ HAUSER. CD1: *Second Thought; As We Are Speaking; Double Exposition*. CD2: *Schraffur*¹; *Rundum*². We Spoke: New Music Company; Serge Vuille, Julien Annoni, Olivier

Membrez and Julien Mégroz (perc.) with ^{1,2}Fritz Hauser. Neu Records NEU MCH ST 006

Fritz Hauser understands percussion instruments from their internal grain outwards, and the work documented on *Different Beat* – five pieces for percussion ensemble written between 1996 and 2015 – is exactly the music you might hope to hear from a composer/percussionist who collaborates regularly with improvisers. Hauser is not especially motivated to impose abstract compositional theories upon percussion, instead allowing meticulously defined processes to s(w)eep inside gongs, cymbals and temple blocks with the aim of giving voice to their innate echoes and resonances. As lamestream percussion concertos from the likes of James MacMillan and Jennifer Higdon remind us, percussion instruments become expressively impotent when retracing the rhetorical contours of Romanticism; in that regard, Hauser finds himself entirely on the right side of history.

His material has been presented with due care and diligence by the Barcelona-based Neu label. The two CDs slot inside a paperback-sized wallet that encases a rotund booklet which includes your code to download a digital version in high-definition stereo and/or 5.1 surround sound. On the cover, and then dropped in throughout as a visual leitmotif, are stylised representations of colour spectrums that meet in the middle to form a visible horizon – an apt metaphor for Hauser's structures. If you're prepared to sift through his override impressionistic turns of phrase, Thomas Mayer's booklet notes contain some useful information. There's no excuse, however, for skirting around the basics: it would have been helpful to know, for instance, what specific instruments the final piece, *Rundum*, is scored for; and whether electronics were involved in sustaining its drone-like sonorities.

An argument could be made that these pieces tell their own story. *Second Thought* (2011) is conceived for three percussionists at one marimba who, over a seven-minute duration, systematically reduce an enveloping mass of chromatically interweaving lines down to scalic atoms as metal percussion joins in the fray. The second piece, *As we are speaking* (2004), is scored for four percussionists playing temple blocks which, in the context of that opening work, retains the sound of wood as pitch becomes noticeably more relative than absolute. The remaining three compositions, *Double Exposition* (1996), *Schraffur* (2015) and *Rundum* (2011), all check in around the 30-minute mark and follow a general trajectory:

the importance of functioning internal note-on-note pitch relationships is gradually reduced as Hauser puts a compositional frame around natural vibrating phenomena – the 'different beats' of colliding cymbal harmonics and the sonic boom of a bowed and scraped gong.

A line from a letter written by John Cage in 1940 (as plucked from the newly published *Selected Letters of John Cage*¹) describes Edgard Varèse's percussion ensemble *Ionisation* (1929–31) as 'an expressive organisation of sound as opposed to tone' – let that distinction between sound and tone stand as the litmus test of all good percussion music.

As the linear chatter of Hauser's *Second Thought* begins the process of thinning itself out, a naked chromatic incline pokes out of the texture like a clumsy sound bite in an otherwise erudite paragraph of writing. Roger Reynolds's magnum opus for percussion ensemble and electronics, *Sanctuary* (2003–08), kicks that same issue into touch by notating precise movements for all ten fingers as they tap and caress unpitched instruments; patterns and structures are fixed while the instruments speak their own pitch. AMM percussionist Eddie Prévost's 2006 album of improvisations for bowed tam-tam, 'Entelechy', similarly warms the sonic pot by stimulating his instrument into sounding, then pursuing a dialogue with the resultant harmonics and clusters of tones. Aesthetically and technically, Hauser positions himself pretty much equidistant between these two approaches.

Hold firm to the idea that musical narratives really ought to be spelt out by landmark moments of harmonic arrival and you might find Hauser's vision a struggle, but disorientation, and then the enlightenment that comes with discovering how to listen to 'Different Beat', is very much part of the fun. By the time you reach *Rundum*, which Hauser describes as 'a concept for percussion ensemble', not only has pitch been comprehensively removed from the equation, he has also managed to eliminate rhetorical gesture. Even the idiomatic inevitability of an initial point of attack, as sticks or hands touch instruments, has been convincingly wished away.

That *Rundum*'s seamless continuum of sounds exists at all feels more significant than figuring out its constituent parts. Is the music purely acoustic? Are electronics discreetly bolstering

¹ Laura Kuhn, ed., *The Selected Letters of John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

this quiet but insistent hum? The sounds are too richly fascinating to avoid posing such questions, but there comes a point where such analytical listening fades away and your ears dive willingly inside Hauser's fine-grained adjustments of harmonic interference and minute alterations of timbre. Listening, therefore, becomes a proactive experience. *Double Exposition* makes good on the promise of its title: a forest of cymbals are pushed deeper and deeper into an ever-closer union of resonating harmonics as looping crescendos and diminuendos turn the heel; and, just as that process feels like it's reaching an endpoint, a swarm of disruptive woodblocks sends structural certainty flying, leaving stunned cymbal strokes moving gingerly through newly disembodied space.

Hauser himself performs on *Schraffur*, playing gong, with his vividly sculpted overtones

freefalling against the rhythmically flat, unchanging responses of the ensemble. Part of me wishes this material had been presented on DVD: on the Mode label, for example, seeing what you hear adds a whole new level of understanding to Reynolds's *Sanctuary*. Then again, getting the measure of the space Hauser has clawed open with only your ears to guide you is valuable too. I realise I've managed to reach this final paragraph without mentioning the performers once, but in work where sound matters far more than interpretive personality, that the top-notch ensemble We Spoke, directed by Serge Vuille, play this music without particularly drawing attention to themselves is the sign of a job well done.

Philip Clark