

world premiere. Weir is at her best in some wonderfully simple writing for obligato viola (here the excellent William Coleman) and soprano saxophone (Christian Forshaw – the only way in which Weir's Job resembles Vaughan Williams's). If the viola's repeated rocking phrases call to mind that other English religious classic for ensemble and chorus, Vaughan Williams's *Flos Campi*, that is no disadvantage. Similarly, if the lamenting high-pitched B-flat saxophone puts one in mind of the oboe in Bach's 'Erhabe Dich', that is a subtle ghost Weir can draw on naturally. There is much 'darkness and death' sung and spoken in the cantata, the chorus have their burden of narration too, but not for the first time, Weir does most with simple single-line instruments straining, lamenting and rejoicing where words after words have gone and failed.

Thomas Larcher's (b. 1963) interest in disturbed states of mind is particularly evident in his chamber music, including *My illness is the medicine I need* which sets monologues by psychiatric patients, or *A Padmore cycle*, an excellent piece setting truly strange Swiss poetry, where Larcher's Romantic philosophy of 'insight by seeing the world strangely or obsessively' is to the fore. Not only does Larcher's philosophy draw on Romanticism but his music draws on and challenges that approach too.

Larcher's only work for chamber orchestra to date, the 15-minute *Nocturne – Insomnia* dates from 2008 but was revised and given its second performance at the 2017 Proms by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Robin Ticciati, nine years after the Nieuw Ensemble toured it around The Netherlands for its world premiere. Here as in the third and fourth movements 'Sleepless 1 and 2' of the Third String Quartet 'Madhares' (2007), or the Fourth Quartet 'Lucid Dreams' (2015), sleep and its disturbances are opposed. In *Insomnia* sleep is unsurprisingly tonal, slow, scalic and regular. This is where we start, in the almost parodic 'child practising scales' sequence of the first part. Sleep deepens very quietly and the strange and subtle demons of night's imagination – trumpet overtone glissandi, high long-held accordion notes, low double-bassoon thrummings – create a descent into rest thwarted by the disfigured memories of day.

In the second section – double the tempo of the first – rhythmic patterns beat furiously while a hexacentic's (a rock-climbing tool) scrapings provide the cue for the chariot of sleep to gather pace and volume and thunder out of control. Like bad dreams, *Insomnia* has a slightly manic and unstable quality, yet never reaches that point where near-madness can illumine the

self that Larcher achieved in 'Madhares', *A Padmore cycle* or *My illness*. Fans of Larcher's restless genius can sleep easy, however – the excellent recent cello concerto *Ouroboros* (2015) is reason enough.

Robert Stein

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Apartment House: Wolff, Cage, 'Performing Indeterminacy', University of Leeds, 1 July 2017

At the beginning of July, the University of Leeds played host to the 'Performing Indeterminacy' conference: a series of talks, panels and concerts that are part of a research project on John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58), led by Philip Thomas and Martin Iddon. In the middle of all this, Apartment House presented what many consider the pinnacle of Cage's indeterminate work alongside a new commission from Christian Wolff, the last surviving member of the New York School composers. *Resistance* (2016–17), Wolff's new work 'for 10 or more players and a pianist', was written in response to Cage's *Concert*, sharing elements of its instrumentation and schema. In Leeds' Clothworkers Hall, Apartment House – led by Anton Lukoszevics – premiered the new piece alongside its progenitor, composed some 59 years apart. At the heart of both pieces in this concert is Philip Thomas at the piano. The conscientiousness and exactitude that Thomas brings to the music of both Cage and Wolff (having worked closely with the latter over the past 15 years) make him, perhaps, the ideal soloist for this programme. Quite simply, it is a line-up that could not have come about through chance procedure.

Resistance begins frenetically, as though the whole ensemble is starting midway through the piece. After these scant busy moments, individual players drop out to reveal more fragmented and hesitant gestures. Conducting the ensemble, Jack Sheen mediates the player's roles, intervening intermittently rather than governing or leading them through the piece in a traditional manner. After 30 seconds of conducting Sheen sits down while the ensemble continues, now left to work either autonomously or collaboratively. Without a conductor, sub-groups form and shift organically among the ensemble. Thomas' complex piano lines seem to move skittishly between the fleeting trios

and quartets: sometimes inserting the piano into them, sometimes placing it in opposition – sparing with individual soloists that emerge in intricate flourishes, then fading as another emerges. A few minutes later Sheen stands, waiting for various instrumental threads to conclude before, once again, interposing himself into the ensemble and bringing players and erstwhile soloists back together for a short time before sitting back down and leaving the ensemble to continue independently.

Like Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, Wolff's score mixes vastly different notational styles, each page seeming to catalogue a different compositional or notational process drawn from throughout Wolff's oeuvre. The result is an energetic performance, at times made frantic by a complexity one might not typically associate with Wolff's music. Beyond the titular note ('for 10 or more players and a pianist'), the instrumentation is non-specific other than a few minimum requirements (at least one stringed-instrument, one wind, one brass). Without defined parts, performers must divide the roles between themselves. Unlike the Cage piece, whose modularity creates an ensemble of isolated voices, *Resistance* relies on supporting precarious relationships between performers. Temporary sub-groups form and shift around the ensemble, soloists emerge briefly before returning to another group. This, as Sheen noted in Apartment House's panel discussion the morning after the performance, is a very communal way of making music.

Intimating the underlying political temper of the piece, *Resistance* teases fragments from Cornelius Cardew's *Revolution is the Main Trend*, which are alluded to in shards before emerging more clearly across the ensemble. Wolff's programme note draws attention to another specific moment of quoted material, *Resistance*'s final passage: a short arrangement based on Pete Seeger's 'Hold the Line'. Wolff notes that this song was written, 'on the occasion of a posse of thugs trying to break up a concert by Paul Robeson'. Of course, *Resistance* was written in the lead-up to the recent presidential election in the United States. The title – one of Wolff's most politically charged – alludes to the rise of the Trump administration and the resistance to it that has emerged in response to the rising tide of hate in such a politically divided country. Discussing *Resistance* the next day as part of his keynote talk, Wolff noted the political tone of the work: 'Our music exists in such a small world, that its impact on a larger political scene is practically nil. Basically, you do what you can, and on a scale which is available to you'.

Following the intermission, Apartment House presented Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The beginning of the performance is restrained, as the conductor's arms – simulating a clock – begin their exhausting revolutions (Sheen will do this, unwavering, for the next 50 minutes). Amidst silence there is a single piano gesture and the ensemble start softly. Given that Cage proffers little direction for the interpretation and construction of the *Concert* (an indeterminate accompaniment to the renowned *Solo for Piano*), any given performance is necessarily a personal and individualised one for each performer. In their panel discussion the next day, members of Apartment House discussed some of the various methods used in preparing their individual parts – from Lukoszevieve's Cagean use of the *I Ching*, to Sheen's conductor calisthenics training – but in the moment of the performance, such personal approaches are undisclosed. Thomas plays forcefully with short phrases, small clusters or isolated single notes, but leaves a lot of space between actions so that the orchestra are playing for the majority of the piece's opening. Sheen's composure is unrelenting. As he begins to speed up the conductor's clock, his equanimity belies the performance's building agitation. The piano part becomes more intense and unwieldy fragments are strung together with greater urgency.

As the focus of the piece, Thomas is authoritative, his performance commanding. While there is perhaps an exploratory aspect to any interpretation of the *Solo for Piano* score, there is no sense of meandering in this performance.¹ When framed next to the domineering force of the piano, the anarchic isolated voices of the ensemble somehow fuse together into something very musical. The thaumaturgy of Cage is such that this collective chaos somehow becomes a cohesive unit – delicate, sustained tones passed back and forth across the ensemble – even where individual interpretations run isolated or even contrary to each other.

After the concert, microphones are set up in Clothworkers Hall as its audience leaves, and Apartment House repeat the entire concert once more for a CD recording. In the following days, the players will also take part in a panel discussion and individually record their interpretations as part of Thomas and Iddon's research project. Apartment House's devoted work on Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* is sure to

¹ Thomas has discussed his approach to realising the *Solo for Piano* elsewhere, see Philip Thomas, 'Understanding Indeterminate Music through Performance: Cage's *Solo for Piano*', *Twentieth-CenturyMusic* 10/1 (2013), pp. 91–113.

become an authoritative interpretation of the work alongside the original *25-year Retrospective Concert* recording, almost 60 years after the famous Tudor/Cunningham premiere.

Oliver Thurley

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Music We'd Like to Hear II: (UN)PREDICTABLE

Now in its thirteenth season, *Music We'd Like to Hear* is an established presence in London's new music calendar. And true to form, the second concert in this year's triple bill, named (UN)PREDICTABLE, programmed a host of new works, including the UK premieres of Makiko Nishikaze's *trio-stella* and Alvin Lucier's *Twonings*, the world premiere of Paul Newland's *things that happen again (again)*, and Tom Johnson's *Predictables*, all performed by Mira Benjamin (violin), Anton Lukoszevics (cello), and Philip Thomas (piano).

The introductory blurb in the concert programme notes that *MWLTH* 'presents brand new works from emerging artists alongside treasures worthy of revival from more established voices', even if the choices with regard to programming are stated as being unabashedly 'personal'. Indeed, over the years *MWLTH* has established its own micro-canon around the aesthetic purview of the curator-composers (Tim Parkinson, John Lely and Markus Trunk). In scanning the programmes of the last 12 years, a particular picture is painted of what might constitute an 'emerging' voice, and indeed a treasured composer: Lucier or Johnson feature in almost every single concert season since the series began in 2005, and amongst the younger generation (still averaging over 40 or so in age), the degree of latitude with regard to the composers represented is not exactly considerable; this is Nishikaze's fifth time on the bill, for example. That being said, the programmes for this year's season were characteristically fascinating, and for its evening of (un)predictability, 'ambiguous', and 'mysterious' were the curatorial watchwords, as put to the audience by Parkinson in his concert introduction. Indeed, under the banner of predictability and unpredictability, the works presented demonstrated how both elements in music can be, in a host of different ways, mysteriously ambiguous.

The concert began with Nishikaze's explicitly unpredictable trio. The form of the work

certainly seems to embrace a wanton discursiveness; the layered gestural groups – sliding unisons, chromatic 'sighing' melodic fragments, and high, softly resonating piano clusters – are all presented at the outset of the piece, and do little by way of development in the time that follows. Rather, inside the nebulous overall form, the predominant gestural shapes seem to orbit around moving gravitational centres, like constellations of stars (implicitly invoked in the work's title), and rather than 'developing' in any dialectical sense, the motivic variations seem almost like viewing similar objects in different lights. Despite the generally enigmatic form of the work, *trio-stella* ends in an almost 'traditionally' musical way: the dynamic peak of the piece (framed by three strong, dense piano sonorities) is followed by dissipating lines slowly swirling into lower registers, and sinking below a lingering, airy drone on the violin.

Taking its title as it comes, Newland's trio is unsurprisingly more directly repetitive than the Nishikaze, and motivic development is completely set aside. Instead, a series of (delicately and tightly controlled) objects are presented simply as a series of mostly homophonic panels, though at times individual components decouple from one another. Although by some margin the shortest work in the concert, it is perhaps the most conceptually intriguing. The concise programme note – 'this work is an assemblage of interweaved looping readymades' – suggests a number of possible proposals for listening, though they all raise more questions than they answer. The application of 'readymades', for example, seems to be used in a way that avoids the baggage of what might constitute a musical *objet trouvé*. That is, in contrast to the Nishikaze, the listening experience here is rather more transparent, and all hints of symbolic musical language are eschewed in favour of a music of faded images (a result perhaps of Newland's synthesis of Duchampian and Japanese aesthetic worlds). This is apparent also in the generally hazy, floating sound world of the piece, and here – as in Nishikaze's work – there are moments of beautifully crafted timbral interaction. One moment that stood out particularly is the use of the cello artificial harmonic often placed above or in unison with the violin, which rendered even seemingly simple voicings somewhat strange. The communication of all these elements within the piece of course would not be possible without the performers of Apartment House, who, whilst playing with an unobtrusive clarity that allowed the music to speak effortlessly, also maintained