

LUÍS ANTUNES PENA, 'CAFFEINE': *Caffeine*¹; *Im Rauschen, Cantabile*²; *Man on Carpet*³; *K-U-L-T*⁴; *Anatomia de um poema sonoro*⁵; *Tres quadros sobre pedra*⁶; *Fragments of Noise and Blood*⁷. ¹asamisasa, ¹⁻⁷Luís Antunes Pena (elec), ²Edicson Ruiz (db), ³Rita Redshoes (voice), ^{3,6}Nuno Aroso (perc), ⁴Pavlos Antoniadis (pno), ⁵Mafalda de Lemos (voice), ⁵Fabian Sattler (spkr), ⁵Alexander Berezny (sax), ⁵Michael Pattmann (perc), ⁵Martin von der Heydt (pno), ⁷ensemble mosaik c. Valerio Sannicandro. Wergo WER6416 2

According to the website biography of Luís Antunes Pena – born in Lisbon 1973 and currently living in Cologne – his compositions result from an intensive use of computer-generated structures. But this is not really what one hears: his music is much more playful than this suggests. In large part that is a consequence of his palette of sounds, which might be drawn equally from a covertly recorded telephone conversation as from any of the instruments on stage.

Like the Dane Simon Steen-Andersen or the Austrian Clemens Gadenstätter (two composers with whom he appears to have little other connection), Antunes Pena has found a liberating energy in the legacy of Helmut Lachenmann's approach to sonic production that Lachenmann himself has never quite been able to embrace. Where Lachenmann sees rubble, Antunes Pena finds revelry. ('A movement of dead movements, of almost final quivers, the pseudo-activity of which consists of nothing more than rubble' is the German's famous description of his *Mouvement* (– *vor der Erstarrung*), a piece on which Antunes Pena has written a dissertation.) Antunes Pena's music may thus be accused of lacking seriousness or intensity, but that's not necessarily a bad thing always; and not necessarily true anyway: there are many ways to say something serious.

The album's title piece certainly explodes with a flamboyant burst of sounds: sweeps of piano strings, clacking and pinging percussion, the twang and glissando of electric guitar, some feedback and amp hiss, abrasive bass clarinet multiphonics . . . The players are Oslo's asamisasa, and this is a style of music in which they are eminently comfortable – one of their first recordings was a Steen-Andersen portrait, which bristled with similarly manic energy. Yet this is not a chaotic free for all: everything is carefully placed into an angular, technicolour prosody. The details, of both writing and playing, are crucial: Antunes Pena keeps every

possible sonic plate spinning at once; asamisasa time the entries and exits of every sound with diamond-cut precision.

Woven through *Caffeine*, the piece, is the aforementioned phone call, apparently overheard and recorded by Antunes Pena on a Portuguese train. That phone call is electronically treated such that we only hear tiny snippets of it at a time – the words are hardly discernible; in fact it is the sleeve note that reveals their intimate content. 'A glimpse into a private life' and a pursuit of 'the question of how intimate space is changing in the age of smartphones and YouTube', says that note (written by Friederike Kenneweg). Certainly Antunes Pena's piece asks questions about public/private space; I'm not sure if they're the right ones though.

Found materials of a more neutral type are woven through the rest of *Caffeine*, the album. There is certainly a Dadaist edge to Antunes Pena's work, acknowledged in *Anatomia de um poema sonora* for soprano, male speaker, alto saxophone, piano, percussion and electronics, towards the end of which are heard lines from Kurt Schwitters' *An Anna Blume. K-U-L-T* for piano and electronics stitches into its eight-minute toccata (played with untiring force by Pavlos Antoniadis) excerpts of pop, Beethoven and Mozart, as well as noise recorded from streets, industry and the sea.

Amidst this Merz-like arrangement of sonic detritus are moments of intense stillness, however, when the recordings take over and we hear just the busy hum of street or café or station. For all the music's surface hyperactivity, windows like these appear all over this album – one of the most striking is the long metallic drone that occupies more than a quarter of *Anatomia* – and they set any presumptions one might have about that music's range into sharp relief. The fourth movement of the suite *Fragments of Noise and Blood*, 'Das Kapital Chaos', juxtaposes a single reverberating piano chord against the loud buzz and pop of an amplifier cable; Antunes Pena calls this his 'covert key work', and it is striking for its multiple inversions of foreground and background, accident and intention, acoustic and electronic, beautiful and ugly. Indeed one of the most successful pieces here may be *Tres quadros sobre pedra* (Three Paintings on Stone), written for tuned pieces of granite, percussion and electronics; much of the material of these pieces derives from sessions of improvisation and experiment with the stones undertaken with the percussionist Nuno Aroso, and the music is imbued with a

calmer, more measured sense of investigation and discovery.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson
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QUATUOR DIOTIMA: Arturo Fuentes, *Broken Mirrors; Liquid Crystals; Ice Reflection; Glass Distortion*. Kairos 0015015KAI

Following recordings of his chamber music for the NEOS label by PHACE and ensemble recherche, and Ensemble Intégrales, this is the third portrait CD of the Mexican composer Arturo Fuentes. The four string quartets here were conceived as a cycle, composed between 2008 and 2015, and for those interested in Fuentes' music the disc perhaps offers a more straightforward, less heterogeneous route in.

Certainly there is a stylistic and sonic coherence to these four pieces, reflected and suggested by their titles: the music inhabits a crystalline sound world, all harmonics and sul ponticello sibilance. In the fourth, those glassy harmonics are augmented with a glass harmonica, playing a 24-note microtonal bed, as well as electronics that resynthesise and multiply its sound.

Born in Mexico in 1975, Fuentes moved to Europe in 1997. He currently lives in Innsbruck, but along the way he has worked at many of the major centres for electronic music: IRCAM, the Freiburg Experimental Studio, the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe and the Institute for Computer Music and Sound Technology at the Zurich Hochschule der Künste. In a 2010 interview, he made explicit the link between such global mobility, digitalization and his own musical aesthetic: 'Boundaries have been eliminated by information technology, not just the physical boundaries, but also those that are encountered during sound production. Today we can mix different layers of sound in the computer. With the microstructure as its foundation the overall sound contains a diverse unity'.¹

All of which could be potentially fruitful musical ground, but unfortunately in this case I don't think it proves to be. Having listened to

this disc several times over the course of a week or so I'm still struggling to find something of interest to say about much of it. It is certainly technically accomplished, and in its details – the tiny interactions between voices, the shaping of ensemble gestures – imaginatively conceived (the Diotima Quartet do excellent work in bringing all this out), but details alone are not enough.

I think I have identified two problems, or at least barriers to my getting more from this music. The first is that sound world. Ultimately, it makes for a fairly narrow expressive band, and until we get to the glass harmonica and electronics of *Glass Distortion*, Fuentes does little to throw it into relief. By the end of third piece, *Ice Reflection*, it has all started to sound very samey. Rather than a cycle of works – suggesting movement and change – this feels like several iterations of the same basic idea.

The second is to do with the work's unfolding structures, which seem all too straightforward. Again, almost nothing unexpected happens; the broad gestural language is familiar from other contemporary repertory, and (in spite of the talk of 'sonic labyrinths' and 'musical kaleidoscopes' that Fuentes uses to describe his own work) the music rarely steps outside the lines that it draws for itself at the start.

I say 'almost' and 'rarely' because there is one exception. It comes a few minutes into *Glass Distortion* – so about two-thirds of the way into the cycle in terms of timings – and continues for much of the rest of that piece. This is when the electronics begin to take over and the quartet falls almost silent. Suddenly the bass register is opened up, percussive attacks become a possibility (perhaps inevitably there are some tolling, bell-like sounds in here – but unusually they act as a pleasant contrast rather than spectralist cliché), the music acquires new dimensions. In the face of all this, the quartet takes on a different role too. The endless threads of harmonic filigree continue, yes, but there is a greater use of space now that the electronics are available to fill in the gaps. Dialogic possibilities are also introduced, and Fuentes does interesting and attractive things with these too. Frankly, at this point the CD takes off and becomes something considerably more compelling. *Glass Distortion*, then, makes for a fine view. But as part of this overall disc it comes at the end of a long walk.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson
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¹ Interview contained in *Verdrängter Humanismus: Verzögerte Aufklärung, VI: Philosophie in Österreich 1951–2000* (Vienna: Facultas Verlag); translated and quoted in Christian Heindl, 'From Mexico to Innsbruck: A Portrait of Composer Arturo Fuentes', *Austrian Music Export*, 2015. Available at www.music-export.at/from-mexico-to-innsbruck-a-portrait-of-the-composer-arturo-fuentes/.