

wise choice), supplies a firm, inspired foundation throughout.

Inasmuch as one can situate a piece through a recording, Apartment House manages to convey an inviting, *permissive* space – one that accords with Eastman's scantily clad manuscript. A space of possibility and agency. Listen to it loud, or not. Playfully, or not. Wear a dress. Take off all your clothes. Eat some soup. Make some for friends. Or don't. Think about what it means to play *Feminine* in 2019. Think about race, sex, class, disease and fame. Or stop thinking. Do this or that. Or something else. Play. *Live*. Or not.

Mark Barden

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Stefan Prins: *Augmented*. Nadar Ensemble, Klangforum Wien, Yaron Deutsch, Stephane Ginsburgh. Kairos, 0015044KAI.

At the 2016 Darmstadt courses, the musicologist Ulrich Mosch presented a series of lecture-performances titled 'Rückspiegel' ('rear-view mirror') which highlighted a single representative piece from each decade of Darmstadt's history. Somewhat boldly, Mosch even presented a concert to represent the 2010s – devoted to Stefan Prins's *Piano Hero* series. This must be a very tricky situation for a younger composer to find themselves in. On the one hand, there's the professional recognition and institutional approbation of being a classic, foundational subject of New Music's current identity; on the other hand, well, you *are* a classic, and the plaudits about 'critiquing received convention' threaten to fall flat after you become precisely that.

Perhaps Prins isn't quite there yet. Certainly it's difficult to perceive any slackening – either critical or musical – in his work over recent years. This present release, the first commercial portrait of Prins since *Fremdkörper*, released on Sub Rosa in 2012, represents both a milestone and a victory lap – a milestone because it brings together a comprehensive collection of pieces representing more than a decade of Prins's work, a victory lap because there's more than four hours' worth of content on this thing. It's an intimidating document on many levels, one that demands the sustained attention and continued re-listening to come to terms with its expansive and frequently elusive universe of aestheticized politics and politicised aesthetics.

*Generation Kill* is a case and point: it is impossible to treat the piece with anything near the nuance and focus it deserves in the context of a

short review on whether or not a CD is good enough to buy. I first saw the piece performed, outdoors and heavily amplified, in the Georg-Büchner-Platz during the 2014 Darmstadt courses. It left a very intense, almost incomprehensible impression, and I've been returning to it on YouTube periodically ever since. The video on this set, filmed in a small theatre at the DeSingel art school in Antwerp, is an uneasily claustrophobic production. The camera's focus is disproportionately on the controller-players, often giving their hands the kind of intense close-up treatment usually reserved for cellists milking a bit of vibrato. Their faces express the sort of intense, grimly emotionless focus familiar from watching people play more conventional video games. There's something much different here – the monolithic catastrophe I remember experiencing in Darmstadt 2014 is gone, replaced by an almost clinical experience of digital fragments. It seemed then like the entire composition was a ruthless battle for audio-visual presence, that the controller-players were just as overwhelmed by their live-instrumental counterparts as vice-versa; here, they are undoubtedly the puppet-masters. The moment, towards the three-quarters mark of the piece, when the video feed switches to drone footage then felt like almost an intermezzo, the silent consequence of the fore-going power struggle; now it barely registers as a tonal shift. It would be a bit silly in a piece as self-consciously mediated as *Generation Kill* to suggest that change reflects the inevitable loss of live-ness in recorded media or detracts from the experience of the piece. It simply provides yet another filter, another warped vantage point of experience, maybe slightly more privileged through its commercial availability.

It is easy, almost certainly too easy, to read *Generation Kill* as the capstone, the cumulative masterpiece, resulting from Prins's painstaking perfection of his practice. As unhelpful as that is, it is nevertheless difficult for me not to compare the other pieces on the DVD, especially *Mirror Box Extensions* and the later *Piano Hero* selections, to *Generation Kill*. It's perhaps not the best reference point: *Mirror Box Extensions* gives a sense of ghostly unease and confusion where *Generation Kill* inspires raw terror. Not to say that it's any less compelling an experience – indeed, on a purely aural level it's astonishing (the electronics, which sample some ultra-compressed smooth jazz, recall Prins's work as part of the three-piece improv outfit Ministry of Bad Decisions). Here the video production is even more fragmented, disorienting and alienated (in true post-Brechtian fashion, the video begins with shots of the



audience entering into the building, and then the concert, in Ghent's gorgeous Muziekcentrum De Bijloke), often cutting to extreme close-ups of a trombone bell or saxophone keys between one-shots of the individual performers. While this is visually striking, the conceptual root of the piece – the medical 'mirror box' used in physical therapy for amputees and trauma patients – as well as its political implications – the liner notes mention Spanish activists circumventing an anti-protest law by using holograms – are somewhat lost in the crossfire. The piece ends with a projection of the audience themselves on the stage screens, which, if memory serves, is also a technique used by experimental filmmaker James O. Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*. The Nadar Ensemble, in both these pieces, exhibits an acrobatic professionalism and a brilliantly subdued showmanship, stoically performing as their holographic avatars are projected onto themselves.

The fragmented production and editing of the *Piano Hero* series, on the other hand, greatly enhance and even augment the ethos of the music, adding another level of keyboards-within-screens-within-screens almost organically. Stephane Ginsburgh is brilliantly calm and self-assured under considerable technological duress throughout, from the spectacular and rhapsodic early pieces to the more subdued and contemplative *Piano Hero* #3 and #4.

In generic terms, *Third Space* falls within the category of multimedia ersatz opera, the long-form multimedia showcase most often found in a portrait concert as part of an international festival, like Annesley Black's *Tolerance Stacks*, Jagoda Szmytka's *Limbo Lander*, Johannes Kreidler's *Audioguide*, Martin Schüttler's *My Mother Was a Piano Teacher ...*, Hannes Seidl's various collaborations with Daniel Kötter, and a large number of Jennifer Walshe, Alexander Schubert and Matthew Shlomowitz pieces from the past decade or so. Clearly building on *Mirror Box Extensions*, the piece begins as a sort of holographic hall of mirrors, before we're allowed – very literally – to see behind the curtain. Concrete metaphor notwithstanding, it's a supremely effective moment of dramaturgy, watching the curtain slide slowly back and revealing a minimalist stage with dancers languidly stretching. While the environment is never quite inviting, it's certainly less forbidding than much of Prins's other work, and members of the audience are requested to join the performers on wooden bleachers on the stage. Instrumentally, Uli Fussenegger easily steals the show: positioned front stage left, his growling, croaking double bass cuts through even the

most intense and distorted electronics. The dancing, somewhat unexpectedly, is thoroughly expressionistic, with jerky, irregular motions and strained facial expressions, evocative miming of obscure actions, and increasingly urgent whispering. It's also sometimes a bit confusing (the liner notes say '[t]here is little information about who, or what happens on the stage'): the dancers contort their faces and flail during sections of loud feedback, make spidery gestures very close to the heads of audience members who look like they wish they'd sat further to the back, and, towards the end of the piece, seem to be twerking. The biographical note provided for choreographer Daniel Linehan mentions that he explores 'various interactions between dance and non-dance forms', and his contribution to *Third Space* is a stunning and occasionally bewildering testament to just how far those interactions can go.

Needless to say, it's a far different experience on CD, much darker and more threatening, even with a couple of genuine jump scares. Somewhat counterintuitively, the 'compromised artificial environment/glitched biodome' concept comes across much more clearly and disturbingly without the visual element. Without the choreographic objective correlative, the instrumental textures feel more vital, the electronics more vivid, and the entire piece gains an abstract energy that's easy to miss when watching on-stage audience members try not to fidget. It's a very finely mixed track, shifting seamlessly from the expanse of reverb-drenched electronics to the intimacy of minute instrumental gestures, and represents one of Prins's most accomplished sound environments.

Two smaller-scale pieces round out the CD. *Infiltrationen 3.0* is an unrelentingly harsh piece of ensemble music, its real-time-generated score producing aggressively unpredictable sound aggregates. *Not I*, for solo electric guitar and live electronics, uses a similar technologically aleatoric setup, with Yaron Deutsch's live performance disrupted by a 'black box' mediating between the guitar and the amp, but with diametrically opposite aural results: the resulting timbres are achingly fragile and occasionally even lush.

All in all, this is one of the most thoroughly electrifying releases of New Music on physical media in recent memory, a long, dense, intense portrait of a decade of work from an exceptionally dedicated musician and his close collaborators. There's something bizarrely, immediately alive about this music, a sort of immanent nowness, which is perhaps why both contributors to



the liner notes make repeated reference to current events (Tim Rutherford-Johnson's mention of Brexit negotiations supposedly entering their 'final phase' in particular is bleakly amusing). But it's also difficult to pin down and, as the committed performances here demonstrate, deeply rooted in a far-reaching aesthetic practice.

Max Erwin

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Riot Ensemble: *Speak, Be Silent* (Czernowin, Thorvaldsdóttir, Ivic'evic', Saunders, Lim). Huddersfield Contemporary Records, HCR20CD

UK chamber group Riot Ensemble's latest release is a beautifully curated disc, with each work seemingly growing out of and occasionally bursting out of the one before. This organic development leads us from the material to the mythological to the metaphysical, featuring works by some of the most accomplished and inventive living composers.

Chaya Czernowin's poetically titled *Ayre: Towed through plumes, thicket, asphalt, sawdust and hazardous air I shall not forget the sound of* (2015) explores various textural frictions through a concentrated lens. It opens with the contact of hard and soft surfaces in layers of thumping, creaking and huffing. The focusing in on very small areas of movement, creates a sense of something slow and giant: a fragment slowed down by many times that plays back suboctave and somewhat warped. The moment of attack – bow meeting string, breath split by edge or reed – is stretched right out. There is a terror here, of the microscopic made massive, like a godzilla-sized bacterium rolling around stroking the air with its cilia, or the uncanny 'walking' of proteins along a strand of DNA. Halfway through the piece this laborious focus on motion opens suddenly into what Czernowin describes as 'an unexpected negative space'.<sup>1</sup> Cascading glissandi colour the emergent silences. Riot Ensemble explores all of these spaces with patient curiosity and resounding calm.

There is further deep textural investigation in *Ró* (2013), by Anna Thorvaldsdóttir. Like the Czernowin, a striking action produces a lasting resonance of resultant sounds that grow rather than decay. A tentative melody emerges from a

consonant spectral chord, first voiced by the strings, and later echoed by the bass flute and bass clarinet. Both work and performance are characterised by an enduring tenderness, punctuated throughout by pointillistic knocks and pats and thunks and other interruptions.

Frenetic activity emerges for the first time on this disc with Riot Ensemble's call-for-scores commission by newcomer Mirela Ivic'evic' (Croatia): *Baby Magnify/Lilith's New Toy* (2017). The demon Lilith, from Jewish mythology, was Adam's first wife, created from the same clay as he and on the same day. After refusing to become deferential to him she left Adam and the Garden of Eden, and she is generally characterised as a sexually wanton baby snatcher. A feminist rethinking of the myth has cast her as an archetype of the empowered woman. As Ivic'evic' puts it: 'Her seemingly frightening and uncompromising character and undisputable power comes closest to the energy of those strong women creators I am happy to see more and more in field of composition nowadays'.<sup>2</sup> *Baby Magnify/Lilith's New Toy* takes us through the four alchemical layers of the Magnum Opus, from delighted chaos to sudden and magical wholeness. Riot Ensemble springs to action, with a bold and brilliant interpretation that stands this up-and-coming composer on par with the established 'strong women creators' on this disc.

The title track, Liza Lim's *Speak, Be Silent* (2015) for solo violin and ensemble, explores possibilities of unison, unification and connection, as well as difference and change. From its first entry – emerging from the fanfare of unfolding, reverberating octaves to publicly tune – the violin is set on a different (if parallel) track to its accompanying ensemble. It acts as catalyst and conduit, an irreverent barometer for tension and desire. Where the ensemble proclaims a unified front, the violin insists on dissent. The individual emerges from the collective as a fully formed subject, complete with embedded complexities and contradictions. Rather than being contained by any social rigidities, it insists on space for its whole being as a condition of inclusion. In this way the work calls to mind Sara Ahmed's excogitation of the 'willful girl'<sup>3</sup> – by refusing to adjust 'willingly' to hegemonic norms, the wilful girl asserts the existence of her own will. Soloist Sarah Saviet's performance

<sup>1</sup> See the description on the Schott website: <https://en.schott-music.com/shop/ayre-towed-through-plumes-thicket-asphalt-sawdust-and-hazardous-air-i-shall-not-forget-the-sound-of-no319263.html>.

<sup>2</sup> 'A Few Moments with Mirela Ivic'evic'', <http://riotensemble.com/a-few-moments-with-mirela-ivicevic/>.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), esp. p. 66.