

passage of time.¹ More provocatively, Brooks also argues that Cage's compositional process 'stands outside time; it operates on its source with no regard for its history'.² Listening to this new recording I am struck instead by how carefully Cage regarded his source, using a process that obscures its harmonic contours in such a way that it sounds new yet retains a sense of its oldness.

There is an earlier recording of *Hymns and Variations*, released in 1986, in which the vocal quartet Electric Phoenix were multi-tracked three times. The more numerous Latvian Radio Choir are able to assign a different singer to each of the 12 parts and the result is much more satisfactory; they sound like a congregation dispersed, an impression aided by a recording style that takes us close to each of the singers but sets them in a large acoustic. The other works on the album – *Five* (1988), *Four*² (1990) and *Four*⁶ (1992) – are also given excellent performances and imaginative recordings, *Five* and *Four*² presented as a more cohesive mass of voices, whereas *Four*⁶ uses the same style as *Hymns and Variations*.

Only *Four*² was written as a specifically vocal work; it was composed for a school choir in Oregon and the singers vocalise on the letters of the state's name. The scores of *Five* and *Four*⁶ are more open but work equally well. *Five* is for 'five voices or instruments', and in this recording a number of realisations (it sounds as if either 15 or 20 singers are involved) are performed simultaneously, producing a series of lushly dense, overlapping harmonic clouds that flood the air; I could quite happily have listened to it for many more than the five minutes that Cage's score allows. In *Four*⁶ each performer must choose 12 different sounds to distribute within Cage's time scheme. The Latvian Radio Choir members assemble an engaging array of sounds, from subharmonics to glissandi and animal impressions, all performed with great discipline. In one of the 'How to kick, pass, fall, and run' texts collected in *A Year from Monday* Cage wrote of his frustration with some performances of his indeterminate scores and wished that he could 'find a way to let people be free without their becoming foolish. So that their freedom will make them noble.'³ In these

recordings the Latvian singers reveal themselves as truly noble.

Christopher Fox
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Sylvia Lim, *sounds which grow richer as they decay*. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

Sylvia Lim's debut album demonstrates a fondness for rare instruments and unusual combinations of sonority. Born in 1992, she recently completed a Ph.D. at Guildhall School of Music & Drama and now teaches at this institution. Her work is intimate, ideal for listening to at home: in a single work she explores a very small range of sound in depth, revealing unsuspected characteristics and rewarding close listening. *sounds which grow richer as they decay* is released by the Texas-based Sawyer Editions, 'a small-batch label specializing in contemporary, experimental, and improvised music', and the recording sessions took place both in London and in Texas.

The album starts with *Piece for three tuned cowbells* (2019), played with admirable precision and sensitivity by percussionists Ben Clark and Antonin Granier. This polyrhythmic piece, around ten minutes long and in three distinct sections, was, according to the composer, 'driven by childlike curiosity'. Around four minutes into the piece, the sounds are more distorted and resonances come to the fore, as if a bell is being stroked. What appears on the surface to be an abstract work gradually acquires a ritualistic quality.

sounds which grow richer as they decay (2017), for the unusual combination of two trombones (Ian Calhoun, Zachary Johnson) and harp (Kaitlin Miller) is a strange piece showing Lim's original sonic imagination. The harp, as if exhausted, produces a deep metallic-edged twanging (an effect produced by the vibrating string being moved by a pedal) and the trombones emerge from nothing to produce quiet sustained sounds that often sound electronically produced rather than human. Silence plays an increasingly important role in this piece, which moves inevitably towards a silent conclusion.

It is hard to believe that *Reordering the Unconsumed* (2016/17) is for two cellos, such is Lim's ability to reimagine the instrument. High-pitched fragments are separated by silence, and while the range progressively expands, it is as if the sound emerges from nothing with

¹ William Brooks, 'John Cage and History: *Hymns and Variations*', *Perspectives of New Music*, 31, no. 2 (1993), p. 99.

² Brooks, 'John Cage and History', p. 100.

³ John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 136.

almost no initial attack. The two cellos (Christopher Brown, Natasha Zielazinski) wind around each other, descending to the depths of the instrument and vanishing at the end of the piece as if the sonority has collapsed.

The longest piece on the album is *Colour Catalogue: Whites* (2018), for bass clarinet (Heather Ryall), two flutes (Fiona Sweeney, Katie Macdonald) and two cellos (Evie Coplan, Christopher Brown). The instruments, generally introduced in alternating pairings separated by silence, produce fragile sonorities that require close attention. The fluttering of the bass clarinet makes the listener feel as if they are present in the bell of the instrument, and Ryall's control of harmonics after about 7 minutes, paired with breathy flute sounds, is a striking moment. Lim's objective description of the piece is 'a catalogue of different gradients of sound'; she creates a timeless atmosphere, and the piece ends suddenly as if this is just a fragment of something that could carry on forever.

Perhaps the most surprising piece on the album is *flicker*, for piano, performed by Alvin Leung. Lim views the piano not as an instrument with hammers and pedals, but as a stringed instrument whose strings can be plucked or gently struck, only to decay almost immediately; only very occasionally does a 'natural' piano key sound. Again, the focus is on delicate sonorities at very low dynamic levels, though there is necessarily more attack than in the other pieces on the CD, and the reiterating rhythm suggests a flickering flame. From about 4'33", plucked chords are interspersed with silence. Hugely narrowing down the range of possibilities of the piano, Lim's aim is to 'explor[e] a single sound from various angles', and again an unsuspecting listener might be surprised by the origin of the sound source.

It seems that this fragile recorded music is very much an idea in the air. Lim's work can be compared to Georgia Rodgers' 2019 *all that dust* CD, which I reviewed in 2020 (*TEMPO*, 74, no. 294) and which also explores sound at the threshold of audibility in microscopic detail. Both Rodgers' and Lim's recordings are ideal for home listening, and although Rodgers shows more interest in how the performance space is an integral part of a work, Lim has an intriguing ear for unusual sonic combinations. Lim's CD is a fascinating introduction to her musical language; it will be interesting to see how she develops as a

composer, perhaps moving towards larger formations?

Caroline Potter

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Harry Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*. Ensemble Musikfabrik. Wergo, Wer 6871 2.

In 2014 I went to see Heiner Goebbels' production of American composer Harry Partch's *Delusion of the Fury* at the Edinburgh International Festival. In the rich, intimate interior of the King's Theatre, the futuristically clad ensemble sat on a stage piled high with unusual instruments that, in the words of Bob Gilmore, looked like 'the artefacts of some imaginary ethnic group, a compost of allusion to flower stems, tendons, human sexual organs, claws, stamens, dismembered limbs, petals'.¹

The two acts – the first 'very serious', the second 'highly farcical' – tell separate tales that are linked by their exploration of putting anger aside in favour of forgiveness. The first presents a warrior who meets the ghost of a rival he slew, while the second shows an altercation between a hobo and woman who has lost her lamb, which is then pronounced upon by a myopic judge. Or, at least, this is the bare bones of the plot derived from the synopses and literature. At the time I am not sure I knew entirely what had happened, or what it meant, though I did know I would jump at the chance to hear it again.

The evening was a mixture of ritualistic scenes with distinct rhythmic characters and intoning voices. Triadic organ passages repeat rather like rock progressions, if prog rockers had been interested in dividing the octave into 43 intervals. A snaking zither melody returns at periodic intervals, while various drums and bells, flutes and pipes comment on proceedings. The voices for the most part do not offer any recognisable text, instead offering statements such as 'O la klu/Boo day tho/Klu la o/Tho day boo day'. These descriptions can make it sound like a menagerie of exotica but somehow it coheres into a special Partchian unity. It is informed by a profound appreciation of music cultures from around the globe, as well as a connected conviction that Western music had taken a wrong turn with the move towards equal temperament. The recording here was made one

¹ Bob Gilmore, *Harry Partch: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 1.