

otherwise, due to tradition, tastes and (I think) more practical things like funding. As such, he positions the disc as a sort of political act, (re)claiming new music as his own. While these ideas might have some truth to them, they are common tropes of ongoing conversations concerning music and higher education. His words sound *like* discussions around accessibility, but they don't call for anything that isn't already in the surrounding rhetoric. Indeed, algorithmic composition is a centuries-old practice which is firmly grounded in (Western) universities. To deploy such techniques suggests a level of (likely institutionalised) education that would parallel what one might need to be interested in and have access to instrumental new music. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that the music and accompanying book form part of Karlsson's master's degree at the highly selective Royal College of Music in Sweden. If taken not to be uncanny but instead sincere, I worry how his claims might be read by someone who *really* hasn't had access to new music or anything equivalent for whatever reason. Perhaps a consideration of the ethics of the uncanny is provoked here.

Daniel M. Karlsson's *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny* is a piece of research, then. The disc is good at what it does – that is, creating uncanny new music – which makes me consider the implications of what it's doing altogether. How does the uncanny operate in the realm of new music? Can there be an uncanny composer? What kinds might exist? Possibly important questions, but ones that distract from the experience of listening to the work.

Ed Cooper

10.1017/S0040298224000147

---

Ensemble Nikel, *Radio Works*. Bandcamp.

*Radio Works* is the fourth release by Ensemble Nikel, a chamber ensemble founded in 2006 by Israeli guitarist Yaron Deutsch. The ensemble is formed by Deutsch on the electric guitar, Patrick Stadler on the saxophones, Antoine Françoise on the piano and Brian Archinal on percussion. Versatility of style is a trademark of Nikel: since its foundation, the ensemble has worked with an international pool of both established and young composers. The instrumental configuration makes it a singular formation of its kind and one of Europe's leading chamber ensembles of contemporary music. Nikel's combination of electric guitar, saxophone, percussion

and piano – instruments commonly present in contemporary jazz and other popular music genres – has raised the interest of young composers whose creative work incorporates the musical elements of post-rock or improvisation.

The ensemble's repertoire is stylistically varied, mirroring the diverse pool of composers they have worked with since their beginnings, and tackles many different stylistic approaches. *Radio Works* features four compositions composed for the ensemble by a diverse set of composers from different parts of the world. These compositions were commissioned by different European radio stations to celebrate the role of radio in the production of music in the twenty-first century and were recorded in different studios across Europe. The project originated during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when public performances and live concerts almost completely stopped.

The album opens with *Aiguilles*, from 2022, by French composer and improviser Sylvain Marty. It begins with a low bell-like sounding gesture, which masks the entrance of a fragile-sounding, high-pitched tone and a back-and-forth gliding gesture, creating a complex sonority, which ends abruptly with a sharp percussive sound. This sonority is presented several times with varying duration. Gradually each element acquires a life of its own and the piece unfolds. The sonic elements presented at the beginning begin to unravel, their initial boundaries are blurred and what started as a sequential presentation of a combined sonority becomes a compelling texture with multiple layers. Marty's treatment of the instruments does not limit itself to conventional performance techniques, and the combined sounds he creates are not easily identifiable as coming from one of the instruments of the ensemble. Sylvain Marty has a background in philosophy and is also a jazz drummer and improviser. His background impacts his compositional approach by informing the development of the musical materials at the micro level and the overall structure, conceptual framework and form at the macro level. The quality of the studio recording captures the sonic nuance and richness intended by the composer. The closeness of the sounds to the listener facilitated by the studio recording creates a sense of immersiveness.

The album's second track is by Turkish composer Didem Coşkunseven. Her piece *Ext.The Woods.Night*, from 2021, is a slow, unfolding composition, reminiscent of 80s synthesiser-heavy ambient and drone music. The piece begins with a slowly accumulating swell played

by the synthesiser to which guitar and bowed cymbal are subsequently added. The monolithic quality of the initial sonority unfolds gradually: the phrasing of the swells becomes shorter and more dense, filling the space and creating a clear sense of directionality. Saxophone, percussion and electric guitar complement the texture driven by the rich synthesiser sound, which provides a harmonic backbone to the whole piece. Coşkunseven writes, “‘Ext.TheWoods.Night’ is a piece which operates like a “sonic script”. It takes its inspiration from the art of cinema and weaves an imaginary midnight journey with the help of the diverse sonic palette of electric guitar, sax, percussion, electric piano, bass synthesizer and live electronics.’<sup>1</sup> It contrasts with *Aigulles* on many levels: its harmonic-melodic treatment of the music, apparent linearity, repertoire of sounds and referential context. However, like *Aigulles* the closeness of the sounds and the recording quality create an immersive experience.

The following piece is *Sonic Leak*, from 2020, by Chinese composer Huihui Cheng. It begins with a presentation of a fragmented image comprised of short instrumental gestures by the ensemble musicians. The musicians interweave a musical texture with short interlocking gestures. The music, reminiscent of melodically driven improvised music, quickly becomes almost pointillistic, isolating individual instrumental components, and the resulting texture shifts from dynamically driven to statically quasi-repetitive, from gestural to noisy to ethereal. Cheng explores sparseness as means of creating expectation and surprise, part of the theatricality in her music. The instruments take on different roles and characters throughout the piece, interacting in different ways and creating a continuously unfolding sonic discourse. In a brief description of the piece, Cheng gives the action of muting (‘dämpfen’ in the original German citation) a central role in the composition <https://huihuicheng.com/index.php/video/> (accessed 15 February 2024). She uses its different possibilities to explore the theatricality of performative aspects related to concealment, withholding and negating musical behaviours and the inherent tension that arises from expectation.

The collaborative composition *Minor Characters*, by Australian composer Matthew Shlomowitz and Irish composer–performer Jennifer Walshe, concludes the album with

something completely different. Following a very brief piano introduction, we are immediately at the centre of the musical action: the music, tightly arranged for a kind of avant-rock formation, accompanies the sometimes narrating, sometimes singing voice of Jennifer Walshe. Her characteristic vocal delivery, infused with a bardic-like quality, combines effortlessly with the fast-paced music, moving through different ‘scenes’, which present a distinct character and musical accompaniment. This piece shows another side of Nickel: together with Walshe, the ensemble accurately recreates the sound of a band, somewhat reminiscent of Mr. Bungle or even Frank Zappa in its combination of absurdity and musical virtuosity in a coherent musical experience. The ‘minor characters’ are kind of humorous portraits of the personalities that stand out in social media posts.

*Radio Works* presents four distinct pieces by five distinct voices in the contemporary music landscape. The album introduces listeners to several composers of the younger generation alongside established composers. Ensemble Nickel, together with the recording engineers involved, deliver great renditions of the featured compositions. The diverse musical approaches that make up the album, and the studio quality of the record, make it a delightful and refreshing listening experience. The crispness of the recordings produces a sense of great proximity for the listener that is not always found in recordings of contemporary music due to their reliance on live performance.

Andrés Gutiérrez Martínez

10.1017/S0040298224000159

---

Sara Glojnaric, *Pure Bliss*. ORF RSO Wien, Klein, Sun, Rothbrust, Klangforum Wien, Neue Vocalsolisten, Cerezo Falces, ensemble mosaik. KAIROS, 0022031KAI.

Who’s tired of institutional European contemporary music – its publicly subsidised but walled-off subculture(s), its desperation to avoid cliché that leads directly into a forest of other clichés, its ossified power dynamics and subsequent public efforts to undermine them but not by so much as to upset things?

Sara Glojnaric is, and she wants you to know it. In recent years, as she has become (still in her early 30s) one of the most awarded and celebrated young composers in Europe, Glojnaric has developed a practice of scepticism towards the received practices and metacultures of contemporary concert music, not so much by

<sup>1</sup> [www.swr.de/swr2/musik-klassik/donaueschinger-musiktage/donaueschinger-musiktage-2021-didem-coskunseven-ext-the-woods-night-100.html](http://www.swr.de/swr2/musik-klassik/donaueschinger-musiktage/donaueschinger-musiktage-2021-didem-coskunseven-ext-the-woods-night-100.html) (accessed 10 February 2024).