

catalogue of hitchhiker graffiti from the Mojave Overflow Bridge – but the rest are an assemblage of deep cuts, first arrangements and forgotten detritus. On tracks like ‘The Intruder’ – a yearning whisper, hardly a minute long but played with the aching fragility of one singing himself asleep alone beneath the stars – the mythic Partch of massed percussive fame seems impossibly far removed. Emphasising not the heady microtonal theory or the precision of his scores but rather the cigarette sighs of a fatigued voice and the ambient noise of a stray fingertip, Rainier unconceals Partch as what he perhaps was all along: a folk musician belonging steadfastly to the great legacy of Americana. Classical music has got him figured wrong; this is music that passes between imperfect bodies by way of campfire smoke and coffee, by dirty fingernails and sea spray, more familiar to Elizabeth Cotten than Tristan Murail. Math only ever served a rugged naturalism for Partch: here, perhaps for the first time since his death, this music feels natural again.

And so while Rainier’s is an uncommonly assured and rigorous interpretation, the inevitable interrogations of fidelity – of a mimicry measurable against the real Harry Partch – are superfluous. The album is not a document of likeness (though Rainier has kept Partch’s endearingly pragmatic habit of introducing every title as it arrives; it becomes him well), nor does it capitulate to the promised deference of a ‘portrait album’. The ‘Harry Partch’ in the title is not a person but a kind of place, a resonant chamber set deep within the recesses of Rainier’s own body, carved from years of admiration and affectionate attention, where his own voice mixes with archival dust in odd and enchanting sprays of light and memory. It is true in-habitation we hear, a body both utterly inseparable from Rainier’s artistic sensibility and yet impossible to recall without destroying. The same is also true for Partch: this interior place in Rainier – and in each of us who forms a bond with his music – is the elusive site of his continued, inaccessible habitation.

Chris Rainier Sings the Music of Harry Partch is thus an act of mourning. It is a devastating and unbearably detailed account of intimacy’s uncanny occupation, of the too close proximity a living musician knits with his unaware, ahistorical other. Rainier’s anfractuous Adapted Guitar traces out the curving architecture of this cenotaph, but we never hear it except in glimpses. What we hear instead is the care, the gentle responsibility with which Rainier traverses and invokes without desecration the unknowable space of the other within (every act of mourning being, after all, the work of love).

Chris Rainier and Soosan Lolavar both stand to have inherited the utopian vision of musicianship Partch himself etched out back in 1940. His dream for the artist daring enough to venture beyond the ‘safe cathedral of modern music’ for the ‘little-known country of subtle tones’ – as both of them have – was one of too many bodies, of restless and transient inhabitation (from his essay ‘Patterns of Music’):

The zealot driving into this wilderness should have more than one life to give: one to create instruments within the tyranny of the five-fingered hand, to play the tones they find; one that will wrestle with notation and theory, so that they can make a record of what they find... still another that will create and re-create significant music for their new-old instruments and in their new-old media; and, finally, another that will perform it, give it – as a revelation – to the general wealth of human culture.

That both Rainier and Lolavar have given us of their wilderness is revelation indeed. Both albums are testimonies, documents of a distinctly modern and critical relationship to place, ownership and authority that takes as beautiful precisely that which destabilises the power of singularity. As in the Derrida quote that opened this review, every habitation contains the exile and loss of another inside it. To listen to either record – as I still recommend you do – is to attend to the impossible invocation of that exiled space, to hear the distant resonance of the invisible other whose exteriority is forever buried deep within.

Ty Bouque

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Christian Mason, *Time – Space – Sound – Light*. Octandre Ensemble. Winter & Winter, 910 291-2.

Most of the works on Christian Mason’s new portrait disc make claims to nature. Their material may be reasonably traditional in gesture and timbre, but these pieces position themselves less as objects of contemplation inhabiting their own centres of gravity than as translucent scirms over the pre-existing world: glosses on birdsong, or more generally on the gesture and pacing of the sounds of the natural world, or on the resonance of its empty spaces.

The first track stakes the claim boldly: *A kingfisher dives into the sunâ* | is a completely unexpected opening to what presents itself as an album of instrumental solo and small-ensemble music. Mason describes it as an ‘electronic soundscape’, but what it in fact is is a gently

extended field recording: birdsong, masses of chirping insects and rushing water blend seamlessly into a digital field of similar but artificial rustles, creaks, hisses and chirps, each plane becoming a version of the other and each local sonic morphology becoming a version of the others. Distilled from a longer video instillation co-created with James Stephen Wright, we are in the presence here of an extremely subtle art (subtle as in understated, and also as in the Italian *sottile*, as in delicately thin), which can be heard through and beyond. It sets a premise, unambiguously and with great force, that resonates through the rest of this record.

A kingfisher melts, seemingly seamlessly, into itself, and then into the early piano solo *à |just as the sun is alwaysâ |*. In this eight-minute work from 2006, one of the first entries in Mason's catalogue, the harmonies are resonance-based, the melodic material gently inflected towards a bespoke modal universe, the recognisably post-French gestures comfortably and respiratorily paced. The piece has an aquatic, sometimes slightly ornithological sensibility, but really its most remarkable quality, especially with *A kingfisher* still in our ears, is its transparency. We see through it – something to do with the virtually complete limitation to high registers, the resonant spaces, the pauses for breath or for the concentric ripples to recede. This is not to say *à |just as the sun is alwaysâ |* is insubstantial (and, anyway, one of the most valuable legacies of late-twentieth-century experimental music has been the undermining of received categories of what 'musical substance' might in fact be). Nor is it unmemorable; this very evanescence leaves a paradoxically strong impression. It is passive. It is whitely translucent; it lets the light through.

I wandered for a whileâ | (it is tempting to see these recurrent ellipses as a totem of openness, transparency, an abjuration of self-sufficiency, isn't it?), from 2019, is essentially a concerto in two halves for piccolo with accompanying cello, piano, bells and electronics. The first builds from spacious melodicism, underpinned mostly by bells and artificial resonance, towards an unexpected endpoint – 'climax' feeling very much like the wrong word – juxtaposing an increasingly birdlike piccolo with the real thing on tape and electronic simulacra. The second half opens up a five-and-a-half-minute spectral field over a low cello B \flat , electronics humming, bells chiming and piano strings scraping, the piccolo still dancing melodically above.

General aesthetic impressions aside, from a purely musical perspective the first highlight of this collection is *Remembered Radiance*. This

11-minute trio for piano, cello and percussion stands out for its concentration, the patience of its discourse: piano chords and brief, inescapably 'Feldman-esque' gestures alternate for a long time, a very long time, longer than we expect, with a variety of prolonged, more or less pitched responses from the others. This strict dialogue breaks down by way of climax (the word quite appropriate here), then settles down on to a mid-register piano E and a high, quasi-electronic response. One idea, then, and a beautiful one, and all the more striking for its unusual lack of reliance on Mason's melodic sensibility.

There are two cello solos here: the early 11-minute *Incandescence* (from 2011, when Mason was in his mid-twenties) and *Bird learning to fly*, from six years later. *Incandescence*, for all its technical assurance, feels a bit limited; it is the sort of fantasia on open strings and natural harmonics we have all heard before, with occasional dramatically emphasised low Cs underpinning arpeggios and little melodic fragments in overtones. Only in the last minute or so does it assert an identity, in an increasingly frantic miniature scherzo-as-coda, where those harmonics are not lovingly lingered over but snatched at, made to resist a bit, their easily wearying tone turned a bit sour.

Bird learning to fly, the other cello solo, is an entirely different beast. Written for an instrument strung with four A strings tuned to overtones of the standard low C, it is also based around little melodic fragments, casually paced and allowed to breathe naturally, and it also features our familiar harmonic arpeggios and open-string cameos. But the whole thing is fundamentally alienated, timbrally strained, shot through with strangled ponticello echoes; those open strings are not asserted boldly as refrain but woven throughout like a fraying metallic thread. The six intervening years have made a stark difference, it seems, the fluency of Mason's huge talent coming in the later work to interact explosively with a more sophisticated sense of restraint, pressure and instrumental capability. The result is the most striking music to be found on this record, and a piece that deserves to be heard far more than I fear its daunting demands of instrumental set-up will allow.

In between these two solos is another early work: 2010's *Heaven's Chimes are Slow*, a short duet for flute and piano. An unfamiliarly spiky texture dominates the first half of this work, with much use of a staccato articulation that is not much heard elsewhere in these pieces; but here too the high point takes the form of a

pealing of overtones over a low 'cello' C. By this point in the album this feels a little rote, a little routine, a little easy. But the brief coda that melts away thereafter gives a passing hint of the elusive, icy translucence that would become Mason's strongest language.

The performances here, by the Octandre Ensemble (of which Mason is a member and a co-founder), are extraordinary, particularly that of pianist Joseph Houston, whose gentle yet full-bodied touch carries the rhetoric of every track on which he appears, and cellist Corentin Chassard, who presents the pair of solos (particularly *Bird Learning to Fly*) with urgency and confidence. They present a small-scale portrait of a music that, at its best, is wonderfully pale and self-effacing, at peace with itself, watching the world alongside us.

Evan Johnson

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James Weeks, Zosha Di Castri, Hannah Kendall, Shawn Jaeger, Jeffery Gavett, Erin Gee, *We Live the Opposite Daring*. Ekmeles. New Focus Recordings, FCR394.

... *we live*/ ... *the opposite*/ ... *daring*/ is Anne Carson's translation of one of Sappho's surviving poetic fragments. Vocal ensemble Ekmeles use these words as the title for their new album, but close up or omit the characteristic disintegration to create something that avoids the neat definition of a sentence or clause: *We Live the Opposite Daring*. A bold artistic choice, perhaps, to offer such a reworking of two so admired poets' work, but the sort of action that is ingrained into the group. In Ancient Greek music theory, 'ekmeles' referred to tones that lie outside accepted tuning systems and were therefore deemed not fit for purpose. These two names find resonance in each other, then, conjuring themes of the re-appropriation of ancient materials in ways that are daring, risky and perhaps even somehow oppositional.

James Weeks' 'Primo Libro' opens the disc and, accordingly, marries ancient and contemporary concerns of choral music. The nearly 18-minute piece presents a series of distinct madrigals forming a whole that moves between solos, duos and quartets, each using a 31-degree scale. The combination of microtonality and parallel intervals offers an aural world that feels both familiar and crisp. The suddenly hushed, gloopy harmony at 5:30 might be heard as some sort of chant, but not *totally*, and importantly this

proximity is handled with the utmost taste: I can hear the reference and how it is *not* that. Also highlighted at this moment, but true throughout, is the artful ordering of the sections. The ensuing solo at 6:30 floats itself free from the previous syrup and leads to the return of harsh, nasal chords. This piece, then, is as masterful a combination of old and new as one might expect from a collaboration of Weeks and Ekmeles.

The namesake of the album follows, Zosha Di Castri's 'We live the opposite daring' (note the different capitalisation from the album title). The work offers four settings of Sappho's poetry. Largely lost, these texts are, to me, beautiful precisely because of their fragmentation. The few words and brackets or spaces alluding to romanticisms never knowable quickly conjure sentimentality, which is perhaps only amplified by absence: a space where not knowing, or not *having* to know, soothes and supports. This reading is not the one that Di Castri adopts, however. Across the first three movements, there is frequent use of both body and mouth percussion. The final of these is the most guilty of this, using rhythmic 'ta'k'd's throughout and ending with an emphatic march-like finish of percussive taps of the leg. Though an attitude of daring might frame the disc, this particular instance is boldly at odds with Sappho's texts, but not in a manner that offers a rewarding dissonance or opposition. The fourth and final section is perhaps closer to what one might expect, offering an astute amalgamation of two resonant and wandering but decidedly different materials. Ekmeles once again demonstrate their talents here, this time through careful attention to timbre and resulting subtle and controlled overtones that drift in and out of audibility as per Sappho's words.

Hannah Kendall's 'this is but an oration of loss' opens with a chorus of harmonicas, flowing undulations of inhales and exhales. Dreamlike and surprisingly expansive for such small and simple instruments, the voices join after three minutes or so, and Kendall's unique soundworld settles. This grace is, to my ears, disrupted by the spoken word, the forthrightness of which is spell breaking. Indeed, the brief monologue at 5:40 starts 'there was a noise, a rattling sound', and I hear this as overly melodramatic word painting such that any sense of previous welcome hypnosis struggles to return. The suggestion of these spoken parts being 'utterances' or 'chants' in the programme note seems to have been omitted.

There is a sort of candour and light-heartedness apparent in much of Shawn Jaeger's 'love is'. The work offers a series of playful near homonyms, rhymes and seemingly absurd statements about