



just enough to understand the instrumentation and when it was written. And so, as the name suggests, *Piano Trio 2020* offers a delightful exploration of the composer's more recent chamber endeavours by Plus Minus Ensemble, which consists of Mira Benjamin on violin, Alice Purton on cello and Mark Knoop on piano.

Self-released albums sometimes produce less of an impact, but let this expectation not fool you: the composer's willingness to share the music as soon as possible and not have to deal with the unnecessary bureaucracies of record labels definitely deserves an hour of your life. *Piano Trio 2020*, being the namesake to the album, is the sole 52-minute-long piece on this recording. It is scored for violin, cello and piano and, by a curious stretch of the composer's imagination, it consists of 25 short kaleidoscopic movements, the longest of which clocks in at exactly four minutes. Working in what could be best described, for a lack of a better term, as a post-tonal idiom, Parkinson manages to conjure up diverse and vivid musical imagery. Some of the movements are melancholic, even solemn; others are upbeat and loud. While there is no apparent lynchpin linking the pieces together, and while the movements are different in their character, as a whole they still manage to maintain a uniform identity and a sense of coherence. A fascinating quirk, accentuating this coherent yet diverse maelstrom of musical ideas, is the titles of the movements. The composer resorts to all kinds of semantic tricks: classic Italian designators, such as 'Molto espressivo ma non troppo' and 'Allegro vivace e con brio'; whimsically absurd titles, such as 'Slowly carefully testing a list of 100 notes' and 'Zombie Paradise'; and plain signifiers, such as 'Rich' and 'Staggering'. They are there to perplex you and, by doing so, win your interest.

In an unexpected turn of events, while listening to the album, I found myself witnessing a fascinating and honest dialogue with the musical tradition and pondering whether this had been a conscious intention on the composer's side. The music achieves great success in bringing freshness to the melodies, harmonies and rhythms, which are not particularly uncommon; it is on the constant brink of reinventing itself. There were bits of Bach, Stravinsky and of course Parkinson himself: tunes resembling old Baroque dances alongside more maverick and adventurous bits, such as the deliciously parallel 'Digital', which made me think of the overabundance of digital information in our lives.

It also reminded me of Valentin Silvestrov's concept of 'meta-music', which draws heavily

on musical tradition while simultaneously transcending it. One might hear similar reverberations from *Piano Trio 2020*, where the fleeting material not only sparks interest in what is coming next, but also simply feels appealing without being pretentious about its creative genesis. The deliberate strategy of intertwining a number of seemingly disparate brisker elements into one larger composition allows the album to showcase Parkinson's multifaceted writing in a number of musical contexts, while never losing its essence. This release is superb and has given me sheer joy, which I will definitely revisit in the warmer coming months.

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Martin Smolka, *Moon on the Sea – Sea in the Moon*. Press, Aleph Guitar Quartet. Kairos, 0022007KAI.

Martin Smolka is a Czech composer born in 1957. The album, *Moon on the Sea – Sea in the Moon*, released by the Austrian label Kairos, brings together a series of works for guitar quartet written between 1998 and 2020. Two of the four compositions of the collection are mixed pieces for guitar quartet and soprano, with poems from Bashō and Li Po. The album brings together performers of high calibre, such as the Aleph Guitar Quartet, a leading guitar quartet from Germany founded in 1994 and focusing on contemporary music, with whom Smolka has collaborated throughout the years. The other performer on the album is soprano Daisy Press, a versatile singer from the US whose performance practice expands beyond contemporary music to include pop and circus performance. This is the first collaborative project between Smolka and Press, and to my ears it's a very successful one!

The album's compositions present a clearly defined soundworld of the guitar quartet as a musical formation. The performers' execution brings about the timbrally rich sound intended by the composer, while the recording mix captures the richness of the sound, taking strongly into consideration the spatial placement of the musicians, an element that will be creatively treated in some of the pieces. The album presents a cohesive collection of pieces: most pieces are short in duration with a focused treatment of simple yet concise musical ideas.

Smolka's writing is transparent, direct and not developmental in nature. The first composition on the album, *Bashō*, for soprano and guitar

quartet, is a cycle of five pieces with text by Matsuo Bashō, the seventeenth-century Japanese poet. The cycle includes solo pieces for soprano, ensemble pieces and mixed music for guitar quartet and soprano. The five haikus chosen for the composition are sung in English and depict evocative scenes in nature, like the sunrise on a mountain path, the morning dew on treetops and the moon reflected on the water's surface, with a beautifully concise and almost whimsical simplicity. The minimalistic musical setting is comparable to the conciseness of the haikus chosen for the composition. Whether instrumental or vocal, Smolka's music comprises a limited number of musical gestures, with a tendency for homophonic writing for the ensemble.

The cycle begins with a short, sung prelude for soprano solo. Press' singing style is light and expressive, and contributes greatly to the delicate quality of the music. In the following piece, the guitar quartet emulates the sound of an electronic delay effect by hocketing the melodic motifs with rhythmic precision. The choice of contrasting sounds – damped low notes combined with piercing harmonics in the upper register – and the resonant trace of the sounds create a very captivating music texture. In the 'Interlude', for solo soprano, the vocal actions bring into sound some images represented in the verses, like the falling motion of a drop of dew, the trembling surface of the water or the drop falling in the water. The contrasting vocal quality of Press' rendition further expresses the difference in affect of the different haikus. The end of the 'Interlude' marks the beginning of the second ensemble piece, 'Slosh and Foam'. The displacement of the musical gesture through the ensemble creates a compelling evanescent movement. The last piece of the cycle finally brings together the soprano and the ensemble. Following the characteristic quality of the cycle, the movement focuses on a very limited array of material in both the soprano and the guitar ensemble. The text of this piece gives the album its title. The composition truly captures both the simplistic beauty and the evocative nature of the poems. Smolka's soundworld is highly concentrated, with little development in the course of the composition; however, his thoughtful sonic exploration and the economy of means employed is highly appealing. The music presents itself with the same directness as the nature scenes in the poetry.

The second composition on the album is an arrangement of *Music for Marcel Duchamp*, by John Cage, originally written for prepared piano in 1947. Using different playing techniques

simultaneously, Smolka recreates the timbral richness and the quality of the sound of the original. The unconventional sonority of the prepared piano is recreated by combining low, half-muted tones with harmonics in the upper register. The quartet's mechanically precise execution creates the illusion of a meta instrument playing a timbrally rich melodic line. In relation to the fixed nature of the piano, the composer takes advantage of the multi-instrumental setting of the quartet to rearrange repeated sections, avoiding setting repeated passages in the same way. More than an arrangement, Smolka *orchestrates* the piece for guitar quartet. The reduced material of the piece resonates with his compressed approach. The inclusion of this arrangement on the album might hint at the composer's influences and the development of the timbral quality of the guitar quartet in his work.

The third composition on the album and the second one for guitar quartet and voice is *LipoLied*, written in 2020, with text by the eighth-century Chinese poet Li Po. The poem describes a nature scene: birds flying in the sky, a cloud slowly passing by, a man looking at the mountain in calm contemplation. What is interesting about the poem is the fact that the poet introduces himself as one of the characters partaking in the scene, adding his personal, lived dimension to the scene. The steadiness of the musical elements could be interpreted in relation to this scene: a person contemplating the majestic mountain at a distance. While the rest of the compositions on the album highlight the melodic treatment of musical material, in this piece Smolka introduces another soundworld: *LipoLied* is characterised by the use of chords throughout the composition, which is laid out as an extended stanzaic song. Using a German translation of the text, the sung, short gliding gestures upwards and downwards in register, which sometimes culminate on one of the guitar's notes, add fluidity to the seeming periodicity of the guitar part. The last part of the piece departs from the cyclical chord sequence, introducing a less 'predictable' sequence of actions. This section hints at the reflective moment in which the poem alludes to the experience of the poet witnessing the natural scene. The musical rendering captures the essence of taking into consideration the fleeting, the fixed and the subjective elements in it. It is clear that Press is the appropriate performer for this piece: the wandering character of the vocal part is brought about masterfully by her performance. Additionally, her singing style brings about the subjective dimension of the contemplating subject intended by the performer.

The album ends with the earliest piece of the collection. The *Eight Pieces for Guitar Quartet*, composed in 1998, are short pieces focusing on a single musical idea carried out in different ways. This composition incorporates different facets of Smolka's writing for the ensemble: from homophonic writing and the introduction of melodic microtones to granular 'clouds' of sounds brought about by the delay in attack of the individual musical motifs to the contrasting use of chords. The recurring presentation of musical moments occurs with a clear naturalness. The evanescence of the musical moments imposes itself against the implacable repetitiveness of the music. The promise of the expected return – ad infinitum – is only suggested.

The Aleph Guitar Quartet achieves a timbrally rich homogeneous sound on the one hand, and a highly nuanced exploration of fragile and dark sonorities on the other. The voice of Daisy Press adds expressiveness without making the

music heavy or dramatic in an operatic sense. The album brings together a collection of pieces with a consistent, transparent and fresh approach to writing for guitar – and voice. All the pieces on the album place audibly crafted sound objects before the listener somewhat insistently. Rather than resorting to discursive development, Smolka's music focuses on repetition: there is a reminiscence of minimalism. This is also suggested by the inclusion of the arrangement of Cage's piece. Lastly, the inclination towards simple yet profound beauty is reflected by the poems. The texts depict natural scenes, whimsical yet highly evocative, and this quality permeates the compositions. The almost meditative concentration of the musical ideas in each of the pieces presents the listener with compelling musical moments.

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