

the role of the composer, choice of instruments and replicability perhaps exceed the scope of a programme note. Interestingly, Lei Liang's subsequent work, *Six Seasons*, which premiered in October 2022, combines many of the electronic sounds heard in *Hearing Icescapes* with an improvising quartet. Perhaps this is indicative of a different direction in the composer's future work.

In the context of Lei Liang's varied and prodigious career, the contrast between *Hearing Landscapes* and *Hearing Icescapes* might not solely be attributable to the passage of time. Instead, musical diversity seems indicative of the vast breadth of Lei Liang's interests, as demonstrated by Lei Lab and his extensive catalogue of works and recordings. In addition to the cultural and ecological ideas explored in this album, Lei Liang's other compositions have examined social issues such as gun control (in the opera *Inheritance*, in 2018), and climate change (in his Grawemeyer Award-winning concerto, *A Thousand Mountains, A Million Streams*, written in 2019). The home page of Lei Lab refers to upcoming projects with intriguing titles such as *Singing Earth* and *Inaudible Ocean*. Given the scope and variety of his work to date, it seems almost impossible to imagine the soundworlds of his next work. Lei Liang clearly has much more to say.

Edmund Hunt

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Lise Morrison, *No grief without joy*. Sawyer Editions, bandcamp.

How does grief unfold and refold after the death of a loved one? How does it bend and diffract through the prism of loss? What are the possibilities of feeling or even love in the wake of bereavement? These questions linger as I listen to Lise Morrison's *No grief without joy*, released in July 2023 on Sawyer Editions. The debut portrait album comprises five works written between 2016 and 2019 in a time of feverish artistic growth while she was studying composition at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Yet, as Morrison writes in the liner notes, this was also a 'period that echoes, in part, the grief after [her] mother's passing at the end of 2015'.

The album opens with *The Actors* (2017), an acousmatic work featuring multitrack recordings of Federico Fòrla, (oboe) and Sofie de Klerk (accordion). It was originally presented as part of an installation at the Royal Academy of the Arts in The Hague and appears on the album

in the same form. Samples of oboe and accordion are interlaced here to create an arrested chordal progression in which timbre, voicing and shape sit like material architectural features. The lo-fi recordings of the accordion are particularly tactile, with emphasised lower frequencies feeling almost grainy, like the touch of sandstone, in the ear. Where the accordion samples suggest an enduring tactility, the oboe shapes are almost illusive, like subtle shafts of light dancing on a mirror's surface. There is little in this work to distract from the textures and shading of timbre, which Morrison playfully manipulates like shadow puppetry through equalisation. Lasting just over 15 minutes, the work is the longest on the album and asserts the composer's aesthetic language of minutiae, which marks to greater or lesser degrees all the works on the album.

*Five Times Recycled* is the most recent composition and was written for Ivan Bushuev of the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble in 2019. Scored for bass flute and tape recorders and performed here by Sara Constant, the two-movement work is self-effacingly humorous. The delightful first movement offers snappy rhythmic motives in the recorded flute parts as manic playmates for the live flute. Yet the tape hiss and distortion of the recordings engender a type of lo-fi refraction. This not only makes the listener aware of the material presence of the recorders but suggests something of the uncanny animation of these marionette-like ensemble members. The second movement retains this sense of the ghostly by referencing Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*. Here, slow multiphonic chords are recorded live and layered over each other, becoming almost haunting memories of each progression. If the minutiae of timbre and voicing is the order of the day, Morrison's dark satire seems to suggest, then we are playing a mad game with ghosts.

The third work on the album is – on the surface – humorous in a less morbid way. Citing Morrison's South African background, *Dololo* is youthful slang for 'nothing', 'absence' or 'missing'. It is often used in response to not finding what you are seeking (as in, 'I looked for money in my wallet – dololo!'). The earliest work on the album (2015), it pre-empts the stripped-down aesthetic of the later works while still offering more traditional notions of motivic figuration, drawn here from mbira music. However, scored for flute, string trio, guitar and percussion, there is a marked sense of playing with synthetic timbres. The guitar and gongs, for instance, are drawn together to

replicate something of the mbira's rattle, while the strings and flute often are suggestive of the mbira player's voice. The composition is far more delicate than the exclamation, *dololo*, might suggest. I do, however, hear the subverted expectation of finding nothing where you had hoped to find something (or someone): lush melodic lines are curtailed and fractured, rhythmic ideas are interrupted and structural teleology is negated. What we are looking for is gone.

*Dololo* is followed by a second strongly South African work, *Mamela Mamela Mamela* (2018). Scored for solo violin and originally commissioned and recorded by Lieva Starker (to whom, for full disclosure, I am married), it is here performed by David Bester. The title, which in isiXhosa means 'Listen, listen, listen', is a bold directive but perhaps should be thought of in terms of being drawn into a space of confidentiality: 'listen, come close, I have something to share with you'. Indeed, the first part of the work is in terms of pace and structure suggestive of Nguni storytelling, in which time and care are taken in weaving complex narratives from scattered events or disparate characters. These shorter evocations eventually move into a section of more sustained melodic writing that ends in a soaring melody accompanied by the violinist whistling a quotation from David Bowie's 'Starman'. Again, Morrison's writing is delightfully witty here, even if memory's longing is never far away.

The album closes with *Study for marimba and thunder sheets*, which was devised with Jonathan Boony (marimba) during a workshop in 2018. The work reflects the aesthetic of minutiae heard in *The Actors* and the second movement of *Five Times Recycled*. We are taken here slowly through a continuous progression of swelling chords produced in the tremolo marimba and by sympathetic resonances in the thunder sheets activated by transducers. It is a less overtly humorous piece, but it still retains a sense of playfulness in its inventive curiosity and inquisitiveness around sound's materiality. Indeed, Morrison herself performs in this recording, playing with the transducers on the thunder sheets.

Written in the wake of a painful personal loss, the works on this album remind us that grief and joy are always bound up together in strange ways. There is certainly a sense of sadness lurking in many of these works, but it is a sadness that is always entangled in moments of wit, playfulness and delight. As a debut album, *No grief without joy* sketches a process of becoming but does so by grappling with the themes that we

often only hear in the works of far more established composers. It is a raw and moving collection presenting intelligent, inquiring and compelling writing.

William Fourie

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Soosan Lolavar: *Every Strand of Thread and Rope*. Saviet. all that dust, ATD18.

This short (26-minute-long) album showcases four pieces for solo violin by the British-Iranian composer Soosan Lolavar, composed for the stunning violinist Sarah Saviet, who is based in Berlin and regularly performs with the Riot Ensemble. In fact, the second track, 'Undone', was the first of the four to be composed, during the 2020 lockdown as part of the Riot Ensemble's *Zeitgeist* series of works for solo performers.

The *Zeitgeist* series was written for musicians who, of necessity, were only able to make music on their own and share their art online. Lolavar explained in a video introduction that the title 'Undone' references how she was feeling during lockdown, when everything that kept her secure was being moved in a way that wasn't entirely comfortable.<sup>1</sup> Many of us will recognise her mixed feelings of vulnerability and destabilisation, combined with the odd normality of being at home all the time.

The most unusual feature of *Every Strand of Thread and Rope* is the tuning of the violin, which moves the instrument into territory closer to the viola. Laura Tunbridge's programme note explains that 'Lolavar devised her initial pitch materials on the santoor, a hammered dulcimer that is tuned to a particular mode; in other words, it cannot modulate midway through a piece. She sent her ideas to Saviet, who explored them on a violin tuned down a minor sixth.' This is *scordatura* taken to an extreme. Apparently, the use of *tremolando* and *glissando* 'nod to traditional santoor techniques', and 'the emphasis on limited pitch materials relates to Iranian classical music and its melodic focus on the interval of a tetrachord'. This exploration of ideas from both Western and Iranian classical traditions is characteristic of Lolavar's musical style.

The extreme *scordatura* means the violinist does not have total control of the instrument: the looser strings produce unplanned pitch shifts and harmonics, but at the same time, things

<sup>1</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT8gG4cxZbg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT8gG4cxZbg) (accessed 6 August 2023).