

crystalline about the first ‘Crystallization’ is not at all present in the second, which suggests the possibility that the former is emphasising the process of crystallisation, while the latter might represent the resulting state, albeit of a completely unrelated crystallisation process, borne by different physical materials. ‘State’ is not to be confused with ‘stasis’, though: the crystal, once formed, only becomes stable enough that we can perceive its inner fragility and register that it is on the verge of crumbling to dust. But dust too can be crystalline, before it gets blown away.

There are three tracks interposed between the Crystallizations. The fifth track, ‘Opening’, playfully invites cross-reference to the seventh, ‘Rift’. Are these not synonyms? To be sure, there is nothing particularly expository about ‘Opening’. No, something has instead opened up and its innards have been exposed. Again a matter of weird proportions: after rummaging through a truly ragged array of disparate musical objects, the centre of the piece cuts to some emphatic, disjunct double stops in the violin, and the entire second half of the movement sees the remaining instruments re-invoking that disjuncture over a steady overpressure sound emitted by the violinist. ‘Rift’ strikes upon an equally vulnerable interstitial material. Here, though, the texture is gentle, impossibly intricate. The musicians are frequently at the limits of their ability to control how they sound.

Between these highly contrasting introspections is, in many respects, the heart of the album, a cheekily titled ‘Ballad’, which refuses to actually tell a story. Cello and piano are cast in an obstinate accompanying role while the solo violin expounds a winding melody. Echoes of the ‘Louange a l’Éternité’ from Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* suggest themselves. The violin melody is notable, however, in its steadfast refusal to break down into phrases. Watch it sing, yet it never runs out of air. In a maddeningly beautiful moment it is later joined in this monody by the saxophone, in one of the most unlikely and oddly dissonant unison cantilenas you could imagine. But this injection of colour changes nothing about the melody itself. It continues to be a slice of eternity with no immanent reason to end. (I cannot speculate on whether the reference to Messiaen is intentional, and I don’t want to know.) Once we’re past the halfway mark, the tenor sax takes over completely, introducing a new melodic attitude (can’t call it an ‘idea’), and carries said attitude forward as the obstinate duo re-enters and its chords start to fan out. The balladeer has

definitely stopped balladeering. Smythe closes out the track on his three spectral keyboards – spectral in the sense of haunting – to restate some of the original violin melody. Given how this track ebbs to a close, nothing could possibly follow it except the shredded silence of ‘Rift’.

Space considerations prevent me from expounding about the final track, ‘Chorale’, to the degree that it deserves, but the title really winks back at us in a revealing way. Although it runs for nearly 20 minutes – in other words, given plenty of time to cohere into some chorale-like texture – we are treated to all sorts of other things which would have no place in a Lutheran hymnal. The track comes to a close in apothecotic revelry and a harmonically gorgeous anti-linear counterpoint that, in itself, could be explored for an entire follow-up album.

The metaphors that Modney underscores with his clever titles constitute a powerful set of clues about the music’s thematic focus, and the compositions themselves are a study in dismantling exactly these metaphors. In the course of – and through the process of – abdicating their expressive power, they become expressive. Profoundly so. I beg you to give this album a listen, as there is so much to ponder in it. The whole suite would be such a magical thing to hear in a live setting as well.

Philipp Blume

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Mirela Ivcevic, *Scarlet Songs*. Black Page Orchestra, Klangforum Wien, Miceli, Tsiatsianis, Volkov, Wiegers. Kairos, 0015123KAI.

Mirela Ivcevic (b. 1980) is a Croatian composer living in Vienna. She is a co-founding member of the Black Page Orchestra, a contemporary music ensemble based in Vienna. Ivcevic’s Album ‘Scarlet Songs’, released by Kairos, includes a selection of pieces composed between 2014 and 2019 for large and small ensemble configurations performed by Klangforum Wien, one of Europe’s leading contemporary music ensembles, and the Black Page Orchestra, an up-and-coming contemporary music ensemble focusing on electroacoustic and mixed-media works by young composers. Ivcevic’s musical writing is highly differentiated, ranging from the use of dense sustained sonorities to more rhythmically driven multi-instrumental gestures; from timbrally diverse granular textures to repetitive segments with a clearly articulated rhythmic/melodic profile; from a contemporary

music idiom to the incorporation of elements from free jazz, improvisation and post-rock. Ivcevic's music moves seamlessly between referential spaces. The rhythmic insistence in her music is a driving force in the unfolding of the music, creating expectation through mechanistic repetition and surprising the listener with sudden changes, additions or reconfigurations. The composer writes about her music: 'My work focuses mainly on exploration of reflective and subversive potential of sound, using bits and pieces of reality, abducted from their natural environment into a surreal acoustic world, resulting mostly in the patchwork of abruptly exchanging, hyperactive structures, distorted occurrences of post-yugoslavian reality, blocks of noise and traces of trip / hop? pop?'¹

The pieces on the album, albeit different in their individual unfolding, share procedural strategies through the use of repetitive patterns as elementary building blocks of the musical discourse. The opening piece, *CASE WHITE*, from 2018, performed by Klangforum Wien, starts with a striking dynamic texture combining several instruments, among which the fast tremolo of the strings in the high register stands out. The section gives way to a more transparent repetitive section with traces of elements present in the opening texture. The beginning texture returns, creating a sense of a large-scale repetition, but this time the subsequent section develops further. The piece unfolds in a somewhat episodic presentation of repeating musical gestures. Ivcevic's writing focuses on the use of different instrumental actions to create rich multi-instrumental gestures with a clear rhythmic profile. The use of repeated segments made by such multi-instrumental gestures to create a developing musical drive is a central aspect of the composition. The music presents the listener with a constantly changing relationship between expectation and surprise. The segments unravel often in contrasting ways; however, the music never lingers long in a single sonority, keeping a constant degree of change.

The second piece on the album, *The F sonG*, for ensemble and live electronics, performed by The Black Page Orchestra, begins with a masterful timbral articulation of a sustained pitch in the middle range comprised of repeating instrumental patterns of different lengths and an electronically produced sustained pitch. With each repetition, and following an anticipatory gesture, new sonorities are introduced, gradually

adding new timbres and pitches to the repeating sequence. A sense of rhythm is instilled in the listener. The introduction of new sounds contributes to the discursive unfolding of the instrumental gestures that leads to a climatic section with sharp clusters in the low register of the piano, overblowing sounds of the flute and the saxophone culminating in loudly distorted electronic sonorities. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of the music is contrasted with wall-of-sound-like sonorities creating something more textural, combining electronic bursts and chirps with extended instrumental actions. The tablecloth has been swept from under the listener; the seeming regularity of the previous segments is replaced with granular sonorities of different consistency and duration in a staged erratic fashion.

The gradual evolution of the instrumental writing is clearly audible, with a tendency towards sophistication of the musical material and differentiation between sections. The third piece, *Lilith's New Toy*, from 2017, performed by the Black Page Orchestra, foreshadows the highly nuanced and intricate instrumental writing of the large ensemble piece but on a smaller scale. Ivcevic composes music that makes use of compelling 'fleeting' gestures combining very different instruments, often using timbre as a differentiator; at other times, instrumental timbre is used to enrich the particular texture or musical passage. A striking example of this is the rich timbral interplay at the beginning of the fourth piece, *Sweet Dreams*, from 2019, performed by Klangforum Wien. The opening texture combines fast figurations of piano, xylophone and fast string tremoli in the high register, accompanied by sustained pitches by brass instruments in addition to a pulsating layer of additional brass instruments. The layering of elements of different lengths to create larger repeating units creates a musical texture with a mix of both static and dynamic elements.

Mirela Ivcevic's instrumental writing makes great use of timbral similarities and differences to create compelling musical gestures and passages. The combination of inventive musical gestures and masterful orchestration resulting in the repurposing and reconfiguration of musical materials to create new musical phrases in a kaleidoscopic-like manner is a striking characteristic of her music. The pacing of the different changes instils expectation in the listener, both in terms of expected return and sudden change. The degree and quality of change between different sections are elements of great importance in Ivcevic's music. Sometimes, the musical

¹ <http://cargocollective.com/mirelaivcevic/About>.

materials reconfigure and reshape the rhythmic texture; at other times, a section builds up and culminates in a new sonic space. Every piece on the album moves around a given set of musical spaces, which are traversed as the music unfolds. Some sections are traversed linearly, and others reappear later on, creating a sense of a cyclical motion. Additionally, every piece introduces a sonic 'other', which in most cases appears towards the end of the piece. This sonic other presents a very different referential space that puts the preceding music in perspective. An example of this is the introduction of harmonic progressions reminiscent of film music in some passages. Another takes place in the last piece of the album, *CASE BLACK*, from 2016, performed by the Black Page Orchestra. The incorporation of musical elements considered to lie outside of the referential space of contemporary classical music shakes the listener and recontextualises everything that has preceded it. The interplay between harsh electronic sonorities and noise-like instrumental textures with passages of harmonic and melodic quality creates a multi-genre musical patchwork; the episodic becomes multi-referential. The coda of *CASE BLACK* reveals a harmonic sequence played in an arpeggio figuration on e-guitar with a melodic bass melody in pizzicati and a soprano melodic line played by the flute. The revelation, albeit somewhat prepared throughout the piece through the gradual insertion of e-guitar licks and harmonic shifts, is quite successful in achieving an expected twist at the end of the piece. The explicit fleshing out of the pop-rock-sounding arrangement unravels somewhat unexpectedly and creates an interesting reconfiguration of the listening experience. Placing this piece last creates a large-scale closing section: a quite satisfying conclusion to the album.

Andrés Gutiérrez Martínez

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Ayanna Witter-Johnson, Alex Paxton, *Philharmonia Composers' Academy vol. 5*. Philharmonia Orchestra, Darren Bloom. NMC, NMC DL3047.

Anyone who still thinks that there is a preferred 'official' contemporary music style in the UK ought to listen to this release. The two tracks, composed in 2022, are the artistic outcomes of the Royal Philharmonic Society composers' programme for which the two featured composers were paired with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Both composers developed pieces over a ten-

month period with the orchestra and conductor Darren Bloom. While the Philharmonia regularly includes contemporary music in its programmes, this is hardly its principal focus and neither of these pieces would slot easily into a traditional orchestral programme (my computer unhelpfully suggests 'unknown genre' for both). The CDs issued as a result of the academy are more like tasters to introduce us to the composers in question than a carefully curated programme designed to be listened to in one sitting.

The most obvious thing to say about the tracks on this CD is that they are, to say the least, extremely different in style; about the only things they have in common are that they are written by composer-performers based in the UK and are just over ten minutes long. Bloom conducts and the members of the Philharmonia featured in the ensemble are not credited by name in the booklet. And it would appear that both composers, Ayanna Witter-Johnson and Alex Paxton, eschew traditional programme notes. Witter-Johnson prefers to allow her piece, *Equinox*, to speak for itself, writing 'Music cannot always be intellectualised into a neat programme note.' On the other hand, Paxton's provocative stream-of-consciousness text is – in my view, at least – a verbal parallel of his track, *Levels of Affection*. He ends with a question: 'There are many levels of affection, these are some of my favourite. Which one is yours?'

Ayanna Witter-Johnson is established as a multi-talented musician who effortlessly embraces multiple styles as both a cellist/singer and as a composer whose work draws on jazz, popular music and adventurous sonorities. Starting with a fragmentary cello melody that gradually draws the string ensemble into its orbit, *Equinox* combines atmospheric string chords and clear, well-placed R&B-style vocals. Expanding and contracting string textures encircle and underline the voice and solo cello. Structurally, *Equinox* contrasts vocal-dominated sections (with a text by the composer) with a light string accompaniment with what sound like improvisatory episodes that are dynamic and highly rhythmically inventive, in which Witter-Johnson sometimes uses the cello body percussively. Only an extract of the text, on the topic of the circle of life, seasons and relationships, is provided, though Witter-Johnson's excellent diction makes the complete reproduction superfluous. This is an instantly appealing, accessible work.

To say the sonic universe changes for Alex Paxton's *Levels of Affection*, 'for ensemble and improviser', would be a huge understatement. From the transparent, legible textures and musical language