

are used quite often here, just feel slightly tired. Overused empty gestures, perhaps, especially when attempting to portray the more chimerical aspects of this story – the monstrous Cerberus, the frightening gates to Hades and the rest.

The first six movements are very similar in mood and texture, dealing with scene depiction rather than any narrative and using almost exclusively extended techniques to achieve this: the instruments as sustained sound sources, air with vertical bowing, key clicks with *battuto*, multiphonics with extreme *ponticello* (resulting in string multiphonics), tremolo multiphonics in both instruments and so on. There are some striking moments: in the fourth movement, ‘Sentinels’, there are repeated screeches and *battuto*, but also some very beautiful soft multiphonics with the double bass at the end. Similarly, in the fifth movement, ‘At the Gates’, screeches alternate with effective quiet multiphonics. But I’m surprised that a composer of Wilson’s experience and enormous skill has left quite so much of this piece to his players. I have always thought of his work as tonal/post-tonal. For me the Bartók of the Third Quartet would have nodded approvingly at his string chamber music, and much of his choral music is really wonderful. The loose and atmospheric nature of the first six pieces might owe something to his own work as an improviser in the duo *Crow* (with saxophone player Cathal Roche – I’m not sure if the duo still functions). There are some strangely un-Wilsonian anomalies too – for example, a curious section (in the first movement, ‘Mourning’) using a cheap ‘Eastern promise’ trope (minor third sandwiched by two semitones) that I can’t believe Wilson would have written and he probably should have edited out.

The best music only appears after halfway through the piece when the composer really takes control. The seventh movement, ‘Entreaty’, begins with a kind of *pizzicato* jazz walking bass, with the clarinet playing an embellished sinuous melodic line all sounding completely notated. Curiously there are no extended techniques here apart from the odd slap tongue in a short coda. Similarly, in movement eight, ‘Towards the Light’, there is a slow processional of low pitches, the two following each other in a carefully heard tonal progression. The ninth, perhaps most successful, section, ‘The Losing Again’, also sounds fully notated, alternating three short sections – quick chasing fragments, quiet multiphonics with *pizzicato* and a two-note melody with slow, tonal double stops – then simply repeating them five times with slight variations. As Wilson tells us in the liner notes, ‘Orpheus replays in his mind over and over, unbelieving, his folly in looking behind’. The final movement, ‘To Sing Forever’, returns us to the opening’s air sounds

with a high double bass lament then taken by the clarinet, which ends rather abruptly after a couple of minutes.

There is much to enjoy here but the moral of all this, perhaps, is always to be wary of leaving your precious ideas and fragments of sketched material in the hands of others, however experienced they may be. Collaboratively produced pieces, especially of the quasi-aleatoric, directionless improvised variety, rarely satisfy. Composers should, and do, steal the tricks and techniques of the best players but then always maintain control.

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Osnat Netzer, *Dot: Line: Sigh*. Mivos Quartet, Lamb, Dal Niente, Hall, Parker, ~Nois, DeBoer Bartlett, Volk, Armbrust.

But what does it all mean? A relevant question for any composer as they grapple with the often conflicting forces of intent, reception, signification and abstraction in their music-making. Osnat Netzer enters the fray with her album *Dot: Line: Sigh*, a bold collection of seven works, which all ‘share the tropes of a punctuated sustain (Dot-Line) and many forms of pitch bends, glissandi, and stylized portamenti (Sigh)’.¹ It is an interesting provocation: the balance of pure gesture and the potential meaning gleaned therefrom.

The first track, entitled *They bury their dead with great ululations*, refers to the ancient practice of hiring professional mourners, often women, to attend funerals. The professionals in question: Ensemble Dal Niente – an iteration of oboe, bass clarinet, violin and cello – who bounce nimbly between timbres, all instruments beginning with a piercing middle B. The effect is a multiplication of the sound, as if many more instruments, or mourners, were animated in the music. Pitch wavers, then splinters like voices breaking in an impassioned cry. I wish Netzer had stayed with this opening gesture longer, a vivid caricature of performative grief. Instead, the piece moves on quickly with frenzied melody and angular harmony. There are moments where I can hear doleful huffs and sniffles (aeolian sound in the winds) and plaintive moans (trilled glissandi).

It’s a larger-than-life soundworld and extremely effective character work. In her liner notes,

¹ Osnat Netzer, *Dot: Line: Sigh*, p. 4.

Netzer outlines her intention for the work to evoke both 'deep grief and deep exhilaration', calling on music to 'purge us of overwhelming emotion and provide cathartic relief'.² To me, this work says less about the nature of grief, exhilaration and catharsis than it does about the *performance* of these emotions – the artifice of theatre, dramaturgy in sound.

By contrast, the second track, *Pillars*, is a turn towards authenticity for Netzer as she ruminates on the foundations of her compositional approach. Perhaps a study of sorts, therefore, this work is skilfully interpreted by saxophonist Geoffrey Landman with the composer herself on piano. The introduction has Landman singing through his instrument against sustained portamenti, the voice beating, strained, against the saxophone as if trapped inside. Metallic preparations of the piano strings accumulate to introduce a jilted 'groove' (one of Netzer's pillars),³ an open fifth ostinato, stark against the saxophone's distracted melody – then, a devilish walking bass in the piano's left hand, which lasts just 20 seconds. So much happens within the short duration of the track, and musical ideas jostle as they are hastily queued for my attention. *Pillars*, despite the apparent stability of the title, teeters on the edge of the unhinged.

Next, a clear highlight of the album: *I won't be outrun by a cavalry of snails*, with Ensemble Dal Niente. This piece epitomises the album title, probing the semantic connection between shape (dot, line) and meaning (sigh): the threshold of abstraction and signification under a magnifying glass. With a toolbox of extended vocal techniques, the two sopranos traverse the familiar and the unfamiliar, sometimes to be felt resonating warmly in one's own body and other times cold and alien. The text is a mix of nonsense English and abstract vocalisations. The instrumental writing, which dances nimbly around that of the singers, is a case study in gesture. Netzer's characteristic restlessness is here light-handed such that the piece feels pleasantly homogenous. Her compositional idiom truly shines in *I won't be outrun by a cavalry of snails*. The vibrant shapes and colours of her music are freed from any specific narrative obligations but still hint at some obscure meaning – it's like watching a scene unfold from behind a frosted window.

Reaching the halfway point in the track list, Netzer has emphatically established a unique

compositional voice – a blend of the satirical, the absurd and the dramatic, with a penchant for agitated textures and fickle melody. In *Scherch* (*scherzo sketch*), for the Mivos Quartet and Eric Lamb (flute), she fixes this peculiar musical lens upon form rather than theme. The target: the scherzo, traditionally a playful and jocular middle movement. The result: a debauched four-and-a-half minutes that would surely have had Papa Haydn in puddles of sweaty exhilaration. In *Contrapose*, for Michael Hall (viola) and Marianne Parker (piano), Netzer explores the abject qualities of her idiom, directing agitation into the body with taught and spiky writing.

As might be gleaned from the irony of the title, *I AM FUCKING ZEN* is rather un-zen, albeit a subdued iteration of Netzer's characteristic frenzy. The piece (commissioned and performed by saxophone quartet ~Nois) is a pandemic response: Netzer uses the proximity of microtonal harmony to symbolise confinement, and warm triadic harmony to symbolise wholesomeness. Fragments of groove, as in *Pillars*, punch through sustained melodies, often in rhythmic and octave unison. The tension that arises from these contrasts is wielded deftly as the piece unfolds according to a process that gradually transforms the harmonic material. The measured pacing of this work is a welcome interjection into the busyness of the album.

The album ends with a party: *away dream all away*, presenting like an encore, performed by Amanda DeBoer Bartlett (soprano), Constance Volk (flute) and Doyle Armbrust (viola). The recurring flute motif might be the most contextualised musical idea on this album, laden with the 'stank'⁴ of its jazzy origin. In this piece, Netzer pays tribute to Australian jazz/funk band Hiatus Kaiyote with a compositional approach that refracts these contemporary genres through a kaleidoscope – beautiful fragments of melody, splinters of groove. The flute motif feels heavy against this sparkling backdrop.

Perhaps influenced by the album artwork (by Ayala Netzer), I'm left with a very visual impression of this album. I feel that I'm at the end of a picture book wherein the narrative is delightfully unclear, but it's no worry – the sheer brilliance of the shapes, their colour and their pleasing combinations are enough.

Kate Milligan

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² Ibid., pp. 4–5.

³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴ Oznat Netzer, liner notes: *Dot: Line: Sigh*, Page 6.