

of a chance meeting of Zimmermann and Lipparella's Peter Söderberg at the Ultraschall festival in Berlin, but only two of the works presented here were written specifically for Lipparella. *Dit*, for example, was written in 1999 for ensemble recherche's 'In nomine' project. A solo string instrument, a cello in the recherche version, a viola da gamba on this album, shadows the melody of a folk song from Western New Guinea that, like John Tavener's 'In nomine' melody, has a range of a ninth. It's a breathtakingly arbitrary connection, and in this new setting it is no longer even contextualised by other 'In nomine' music; but it's also breathtakingly beautiful: for a little more than two minutes voices speak to one another across time, geography and cultures.

Something similar happens on the opening track. *Cirkel* begins and ends with the voice of the Danish poet Inger Christensen (1935–2009) chanting parts of her poem 'Lys' (1962); her intonations are diatonic, with something of the quality of a nursery rhyme, yet they frame music for countertenor and theorbo, Zimmermann's 2019 setting of another Christensen poem, that is much more fragmented and chromatic. 'To sketch a spindly circle in water or air' is how the poem begins and it is just such a spindly circle that Zimmermann's music evokes, the complexity of his musical response apparently at odds with the assuredness of the poet's own voice.

Different qualities of voicing are also explored in the third and fifth tracks, *Gras der Kindheit* and *Från Hovets Bibliotek aus der Bibliothek des Meeres* (both 2006), where Peter Söderberg's oud playing and Louise Agnan's viola da gamba playing respectively is combined with their singing. Both sing well but there is no doubt that this is not their day job. As Söderberg observes in the excellent liner notes that accompany the CD, his is a particularly challenging task: 'it was not until the score had arrived', he writes, 'that I realized that this was actually a solo work, demanding the performer to play the oud and use his voice – singing in German and reciting in Arabic'. He goes on to comment that this task is 'unusual and insecure' but also has 'desirable qualities, such as a certain directness and intimacy'. This is emphasised by the track ordering, the insecurity of the two part-time singers framing *Zman-vertont* (2007) in which Mikael Bellini's thrillingly exact countertenor weaves around Baroque oboe and violin lines.

Lipparella's musicianship is consistently compelling: they have found their way into the heart of Zimmermann's enigmatic, anti-

rhetorical aesthetic, and the performances and recordings have that 'certain directness and intimacy' that Söderberg mentions. Yet the music itself, for all its textual and formal clarity, is rarely direct. The earliest work, *Shadows of Cold Mountain 1* (1994), sounds straightforward enough: the music traces a single sliding line, but what is determining its path, and why is it being played simultaneously by three tenor blockflutes (here multitracked)? The answers are provided in Zimmermann's contribution to the liner notes: the sliding line is a transcription of calligraphy from the 'Cold Mountain' series that Brice Marden (1938–2023) began in the mid-1980s and it is multitracked because the resultant interference tones draw together 'the world of colour and the world of sound'.

Like all Walter Zimmermann's work, the *Chantbook for Lipparella* maps an ocean of intertextual currents. His is music that has fascinated me ever since I first encountered it in 1982, but nowhere before have I found the paradox of its variety of means and unity of purpose so beautifully articulated as it is in this album. To quote Inger Christensen's words in *Cirkel* again, this is music that 'sketches a spindly circle' but, as it does so, also 'puts a finger to the lips' and 'lays a hand on the heart'.

Christopher Fox

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Ian Wilson, *Orpheus Down*. Davis, Calderone. Farpoint Recordings, fp094.

The distinguished Irish composer Ian Wilson's recent piece *Orpheus Down* (2021) dramatises the familiar Orpheus and Eurydice underworld story in ten relatively short movements for just a duo of bass clarinet and double bass – an atmospheric and not unusual pairing that works very well in timbre and range. Both players here are experienced old hands with new music and improvisation using extended techniques: Gareth Davis in the tradition of his once teacher the late Harry Sparnaay and Dario Calderone in a similar tradition of the late greats Fernando Grillo and Stefano Scodanibbio. I mention these historical predecessors simply to point out that most of the sounds they use here have been exploited in similar situations for well over half a century – extended techniques can no longer be called 'new'. In the early days of free improvisation we might have been excited by Peter Brötzmann's (or similar) visceral screaming but now these loud bass clarinet split notes, which

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.

Roger Heaton

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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.