



the definition of love. Many of these are couched in lush harmonies that complement this smearing of text. However, when the words become clearer, the piece suffers from similar issues to the piece that precedes it: the boldness of this meditation doesn't come across as believable, I don't think. Indeed, the piece concludes with an assertive 'Love is an action'. I wonder what it might mean for a definition of love to be presented in this performatively courageous, borderline insincere way after such candid playfulness.

Jeffery Gavett's 'Waves' is a wordless triptych, though the three parts aptly flow into each other, feeling more like movements than distinct sections. Diving into the well-established musical trope, Gavett's waves sometimes ebb and flow in large motions through structures and sometimes appear at a much more minute scale through oscillations of pitch. This is, then, a neat distinction and marrying of definitions of waves, perhaps summoning the repetitive movement of an ocean while also drawing attention to literal acoustics. Commendable too are the singers' performances here: juicy and full low drones, and an exceptionally graceful soprano leap at 0:50 of the second movement.

The disc concludes with Erin Gee's 'Mouthpiece 36', split into four sections. The first lasts just two minutes but immediately presents a soundworld that offers an enchanting balance of playfulness and seriousness, a mapping out of a choral language that others might allude to but not capture. This palette is deployed again in the longer second section. There is a sort of *hardness*, both in terms of techniques but also expression, which is artfully nestled in an overall softness, and it is this play that offers the piece its character and form. Part three lasts just 14 seconds and subsequently has the feel of a sort of interlude: a bold compositional choice, but one that Gee pulls off, providing an unexpected reset of attention that I didn't realise I needed. The final movement, which closes the album, draws together the strands of the previous three sections: sustained pitches, sometimes chords, forming the backdrop to various surreal and beguiling mouth noises, with occasionally more discernible melodic lines, all stitched together by playful but decisive structural decisions. A marvel of a piece, to be sure.

There is much boldness to *We Live the Opposite Daring*. Where this courage is indeed daring and oppositional, such as at the start and end of the disc, new choral worlds flourish. I think the take-home message from the disc is underscored in these bookends. Artistic boldness alone is not enough for a successful piece:

meaningful aesthetic bravery requires a balance of what is kept from other practices and ideas that are jettisoned, which foregrounds the importance of ever elusive taste and sensitivity.

Ed Cooper

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Michael Finnissy, *Alternative Readings*. Marsyas Trio, Betts-Dean, Havlat. Métier, MEX 77102.

In my mind, Michael Finnissy occupies an interesting position among composers of his generation. The massive and seemingly impossible piano works, both musically and notationally explosive works of art, invite inclusion with the so-called 'new complexity' school. But for Finnissy and the more interesting composers of that school, I don't think complexity was ever a goal for its own sake: to paraphrase a comment from Brian Ferneyhough, modernism can be seen as late-late-late Romanticism. This connection to Romanticism is brought into especial relief in this intriguing collection of pieces. Ranging over nearly Finnissy's entire career, from 1966 to 2022, these ten pieces are all limited to the instrumental forces of the Marsyas trio: piano, flute, cello, with a guest mezzo soprano. From their great chronological spread and instrumental consistency, the works are unified by a unique sense of lyricism. One wouldn't necessarily associate this composer's work with lyricism in general; it's a function of the curation. These works are predominantly 'little gems', or 'B-sides': two or three short movements exploring a mood or some technical procedure. The connection to Romanticism becomes self-aware as more than one familiar moment from Beethoven or a fleeting stylistic allusion makes its way to the musical surface. His vocal writing is particularly foregrounded in this collection of works, and not only when literally writing for the voice. The treatment of the piano, cello and flute all feature highly vocal moments.

The disc begins and ends with the eponymous work, *Alternative Readings*, from 2002, first as a live recording and last as a studio recording. The texture and discourse are constantly cushioned by a murky haze of low-register chords in the piano. The three instruments occupy different temporal spaces; generally there is a fuzzy quality to this music. Towards the end, Bruckner's first symphony is alluded to like a distant memory. Both the live and studio iterations were recorded with the same performers and, in a demonstration

of their fastidiousness, the durations of the two recordings differ by only five seconds.

*Oxford 1817*, I is the earliest piece on the disc, dated 1966–67. Composed in his early 20s, it is a cycle of three brief songs, none exceeding two minutes. In their concision, brevity and material, they are very effective, demonstrating the haunting lyricism to be developed further in the later work. However, these pieces lack an urgency that the later work has. Mezzo-soprano Lotte Betts-Dean balances a generosity of interpretation with an incisive musicianship.

*Botany Bay*, for cello, alto flute and mezzo, demonstrates a unique formal quality to this music. Further developing the connection to Romanticism, the music is both freely organic and clearly sectional. The sections alternate two characteristics: on one side, microtonal gestures from the flute and cello writhe about, while on the other, a drone anchors the musical landscape for the mezzo's music to enter.

*Blessed be I* (1992) and *III* (1996) are both settings of the Sermon on the Mount. The first is from the gospel according to Matthew. It is very pretty music indeed. The harmonic space is a sort of white-note-only, very gentle gestural language – quite surprising to hear from this composer. *Blessed be III*, from the gospel according to Luke, for mezzo, flute and piano, contrasts heavily. The harmonic and gestural language is much sharper and more dissonant. But lyricism is no less present here than in the other work on this album.

The longest work and undoubtedly the centrepiece of the disc is *Wisdom*, commissioned by the Marsyas trio. While the rest of the music on the album is interesting for any number of reasons, it is simply lacking a sense of scope that one would associate with the Finnissey of *English Country Tunes* or *The History of Photography in Sound*. In *Wisdom*, a wide interval between the cello and flute like a tolling bell encases the singer's song. She sings about isolation, abandonment, loneliness. This piece was written during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Finnissey has very effectively captured the condition of that moment in time. The lyrical style remains, as ever, as does the balance between free organicism and clear structure: there are very narrow transitions that one doesn't clock as such until it's too late. A stratum of history has been peeled away or bubbled up and suddenly the piano quotes Beethoven op. 111, movement II. This beautifully voiced root-position C major sonority emerges like a picture of tranquility. Then in a moment the music progresses elsewhere, different material is explored, then a new quotation has emerged

or else a later part of the same Beethoven movement. This piece is a real journey.

The next seven tracks, *Salomé*, *June* and *An den Mond*, all display similar artistic qualities: maturity of craft, focused creative scope, the same set of instrumental forces. In isolation each is a lovely piece, but in the sequence of this album they unfortunately lose their definition. *Salomé I*, for voice and piano, features three streams of music stratified by register in a kind of awkward conversation with each other. The pianist's left hand converses with the right, the right hand with the singer and the singer with Richard Strauss. *Salomé II* works with a much more unified texture than its predecessor. Gentle pulsations in the piano give the impression of waiting. Similarly, *June* has a first movement built around a kind of unquiet waiting or striving followed by a plateau. It ends with a beautiful flute solo, the pay-off of the whole piece. The three movements of *An den Mond* feature new configurations of the same elements explored elsewhere: Schubert quotations, the same text set differently, a general feeling of waiting. Betts-Dean delivers a particularly strong performance in these pieces.

Alex Huddleston

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Hugues Dufourt, *Surgir*. ensemble recherche, WDR Sinfonieorchester, Ensemble Nikel, Remix Ensemble, Yaron Deutsch, Nicolas Hodges, Johannes Kalitzke, Peter Rundel, Ilan Volkov, Mariano Chiacchiarini, Sylvain Cambreling. bastille musique, BM027.

Composer Hugues Dufourt (b. 1943) is well known for his research in spectral composition and electronics undertaken at, among other venues, IRCAM and the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). He has created a large body of work for orchestra and chamber forces, as well as a more modest collection of vocal pieces. *Surgir* is a generous three-CD set of compositions dating from 1984–2022, the early title work joined by the Tiepolo Cycle, pieces for piano and orchestra and music featuring electric guitar.

*Surgir* (Arise; 1984) is nearly half an hour long, and is powerful, at times nearly bellicose. Widely spaced verticals project spectral harmonies, which are then broken up into diverse attacks by individual players and small units of the ensemble. Drumming is a concomitant near-constant, from thrumming in the background to thunderous martial rhythms. The use of