

roots by a composer who is deeply concerned with the role memory plays in music and in life. Its inspiration draws on feelings about the 1948 assassination of the politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, which ‘plunged Colombia into decades of violence’, and also on the composer’s memories of his mother playing the accordion. The recorded part, which includes fragments of text, has a subtle but insistent rhythm, giving a sense of unresolved urgency against a sustained accordion part. Zöllner’s control of the ever-shifting dynamics contributes a great deal to the success of this piece.

While some works include spoken word, no texts or translations are provided; it would have been helpful for the booklet notes to clarify the meaning. Overall, this recording is a voyage of discovery. We are a long way from clichés of popular music, and despite some of the programme note descriptions, there is little of the popular side of the accordion in this collection. The album is not only a showcase for Zöllner’s considerable musicality but also for the lively contemporary Colombian musical scene.

Caroline Potter
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Daniel M. Karlsson, *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny*. XKatedral, XK027.

The adjective ‘uncanny’ describes something that is not only enigmatic but also somehow unsettling because of its familiarity. In 1970, Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori utilised the term in his essay ‘Bukimi no Tani’ – that is, ‘The Uncanny Valley’ – to caution robot builders against making their creations resemble humans too closely, to avoid the possible terrors of likeness. Such warnings are taken in vain by composer Daniel M. Karlsson in his latest album, *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny*.

The whole album has been composed with algorithms that produce structures which are populated with acoustic sounds that have been heavily processed. To that end, the disc is supposed to be ‘uncanny’ and, presumably, resemble contemporary classical music, which it does very effectively, and there are undoubtedly some very nice, perhaps even beautiful, sounds here. The album opener, ‘Intersections of traversals’, presents a 40-minute-long smear of organ and orchestral sounds, resulting in undulating timbres that slip effortlessly between following and leading each other. Later, there are much shorter tracks, such as ‘Fundamental’ and ‘Finite Resources’,

each under two minutes, that feel like ephemeral études for solo instruments, presenting feebly alluring soundworlds that close just as they’ve hooked the listener – a poised blend of the sounds of Klaus Lang, late Morton Feldman and members of the Wandelweiser collective.

So, to the composer’s credit, *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny* does indeed sound like contemporary classical music. From what I understand of the press release and accompanying interview, this is what Karlsson set out to do. But to my ears it does so in a sort of removed way, because, well, I am listening to something that is intentionally designed to be *only like* contemporary classical music. Its construction is so mechanical that it feels bare, not unnerving as other examples of the uncanny might.

It seems, then, that Karlsson is very successful in his endeavours. Perhaps so successful that I feel compelled to consider the reasons behind uncanny music altogether. I can see why, theoretically, it might be interesting to make something explicitly limited to an image of its origin, but to listen to and try and have a relationship with, I personally find it much harder. Maybe the affects of the uncanny don’t translate between media: in a lot of visual art and robotics, I find it disconcerting, but here it comes across as automated and – I think this is the right term – *soulless*. Raising these sorts of questions is no small feat and is a credit to the disc.

But as a listener, as opposed to a musicologist, *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny* makes me miss messiness: the vulnerability of a composer, at some stage and to some degree, having to hold their hands up and say, ‘I did it because I thought it sounded good’. I think it’s these decisions that distinguish pieces that I like from those that I love. Karlsson’s removal of self is perhaps too effective: I can’t hear him.

I wonder if this removal of messiness – of *people* – within the creative process is most apparent through the overall structure of the album. *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny* clocks in at just under two hours and reasons for this grouping of pieces are hard to decipher. There doesn’t seem to be a path plotted that I might be (emotionally) guided down or resist, nor anything *resembling* either of these as further deployments of the uncanny. But, then again, if committed to the uncanny in method and output, then maybe my expectations of curation aren’t appropriate.

The uncanny extends into aspects of the release beyond the sounds. In the accompanying interview, Karlsson claims that through working electronically with algorithms, he’s had access to sounds and structures that he wouldn’t have had

otherwise, due to tradition, tastes and (I think) more practical things like funding. As such, he positions the disc as a sort of political act, (re)claiming new music as his own. While these ideas might have some truth to them, they are common tropes of ongoing conversations concerning music and higher education. His words sound *like* discussions around accessibility, but they don't call for anything that isn't already in the surrounding rhetoric. Indeed, algorithmic composition is a centuries-old practice which is firmly grounded in (Western) universities. To deploy such techniques suggests a level of (likely institutionalised) education that would parallel what one might need to be interested in and have access to instrumental new music. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that the music and accompanying book form part of Karlsson's master's degree at the highly selective Royal College of Music in Sweden. If taken not to be uncanny but instead sincere, I worry how his claims might be read by someone who *really* hasn't had access to new music or anything equivalent for whatever reason. Perhaps a consideration of the ethics of the uncanny is provoked here.

Daniel M. Karlsson's *Mapping the Valleys of the Uncanny* is a piece of research, then. The disc is good at what it does – that is, creating uncanny new music – which makes me consider the implications of what it's doing altogether. How does the uncanny operate in the realm of new music? Can there be an uncanny composer? What kinds might exist? Possibly important questions, but ones that distract from the experience of listening to the work.

Ed Cooper

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Ensemble Nikel, *Radio Works*. Bandcamp.

Radio Works is the fourth release by Ensemble Nikel, a chamber ensemble founded in 2006 by Israeli guitarist Yaron Deutsch. The ensemble is formed by Deutsch on the electric guitar, Patrick Stadler on the saxophones, Antoine Françoise on the piano and Brian Archinal on percussion. Versatility of style is a trademark of Nikel: since its foundation, the ensemble has worked with an international pool of both established and young composers. The instrumental configuration makes it a singular formation of its kind and one of Europe's leading chamber ensembles of contemporary music. Nikel's combination of electric guitar, saxophone, percussion

and piano – instruments commonly present in contemporary jazz and other popular music genres – has raised the interest of young composers whose creative work incorporates the musical elements of post-rock or improvisation.

The ensemble's repertoire is stylistically varied, mirroring the diverse pool of composers they have worked with since their beginnings, and tackles many different stylistic approaches. *Radio Works* features four compositions composed for the ensemble by a diverse set of composers from different parts of the world. These compositions were commissioned by different European radio stations to celebrate the role of radio in the production of music in the twenty-first century and were recorded in different studios across Europe. The project originated during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when public performances and live concerts almost completely stopped.

The album opens with *Aiguilles*, from 2022, by French composer and improviser Sylvain Marty. It begins with a low bell-like sounding gesture, which masks the entrance of a fragile-sounding, high-pitched tone and a back-and-forth gliding gesture, creating a complex sonority, which ends abruptly with a sharp percussive sound. This sonority is presented several times with varying duration. Gradually each element acquires a life of its own and the piece unfolds. The sonic elements presented at the beginning begin to unravel, their initial boundaries are blurred and what started as a sequential presentation of a combined sonority becomes a compelling texture with multiple layers. Marty's treatment of the instruments does not limit itself to conventional performance techniques, and the combined sounds he creates are not easily identifiable as coming from one of the instruments of the ensemble. Sylvain Marty has a background in philosophy and is also a jazz drummer and improviser. His background impacts his compositional approach by informing the development of the musical materials at the micro level and the overall structure, conceptual framework and form at the macro level. The quality of the studio recording captures the sonic nuance and richness intended by the composer. The closeness of the sounds to the listener facilitated by the studio recording creates a sense of immersiveness.

The album's second track is by Turkish composer Didem Coşkunseven. Her piece *Ext.The Woods.Night*, from 2021, is a slow, unfolding composition, reminiscent of 80s synthesiser-heavy ambient and drone music. The piece begins with a slowly accumulating swell played