

conspicuously limited gamut in each melody, even when nominally they have a high number. Notes are elaborations of a bespoke tuning system for the melody in question. Notes are entities already embedded within a motivic and therefore rhythmic framework. A note has gestural modes of being, as well as access and egress.

This is music that sounds vaguely familiar, sounds like the field recordings of folk musics far from the influence of the Western music industry. But it is totally unique and beguiling, totally itself. Each of these pieces has a personality, and I found myself imagining that each had a kind of recognisable pen stroke. The album artwork by Hyun Yoon loosely takes on this idea: visual forms are created from repeated physical motions of the pen or brush on paper. Each melody has a compelling motivic signature which emphasises a timbral signature of the instrument(s), the harmonic signature of the intonation regime, and the rhythmic and metric patterning. The vocal writing is especially beautiful. Denyer himself is the vocalist in the fifth and eighth movements, both for solo voice. That there should be so much vocal writing is no surprise given the importance of personhood and personality in this music.

Each piece is a highly structured gem, as the composer details at length in the liner notes. Yet a stylistic continuity is impossible to miss; as I listened, I often had to check if a silence was part of the same movement or the boundary between two. If one is to let go of focused listening and allow the mind to wander, one can easily get lost in the labyrinthine structures. For limited spans it is a wonderful experience, but one that needs to come to an end before all 25 pieces have been heard. Returning to the album and starting at various points or shuffling the tracks randomly is an immensely enjoyable experience – like wandering through the streets of an unfamiliar city. The span from the eighth to thirteenth movements is especially enchanting. The performances across the board are entirely convincing as to the intent of the music and the composer. The only issue in an otherwise pristine release are the occasional fade to -inf at edit points. In all likelihood, two different takes were cut together and the best juncture was found. But in such an organic musical situation, this highly artificial artefact is jarring.

Alex Huddleston

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Evan Johnson, *L'Art de Toucher*. Craig, Frazer, Peters, Saviet, Trio Accanto. Another Timbre, at199.

When encountering any music for the first time I start by listening, which might seem absurdly obvious. But the temptation, as here, with something unfamiliar, unusual or experimental perhaps, is to begin by doing your homework – reading the liner notes, checking the composer's website and so on (although I guess with opera or song it's a good idea to have at least some idea of the story). This can be a mistake because it skews your perception: you listen in a different way, in a 'musicological' way, as Nicholas Cook once put it.<sup>1</sup> The music might, for example, have some kind of embedded message. There may be some deep poetic, political, environmental or architectural or biological or cosmic or... subtext, or, perhaps, something more surface and blatant. You are already lost because the music is no longer just music, and if, as a close listener, it doesn't engage and convince as sound then it isn't doing its job and probably shouldn't detain you any further. I followed my usual procedure with Evan Johnson's fascinating new album for Another Timbre, which gives us a selection of his works from 2006–20, where he has (I discovered later) continued to plough a particular furrow of quiet (apart from some piercing high piccolo staccato spits) fragments scattered into swathes of silence – rather like those galleries with tiny, intricately detailed art hung on large expanses of white wall.

I am intrigued by the sounds for piccolo, violin and cello, less convinced by the writing for piano and voice. This is a composer who explores the detail and graininess of sonorities often at the edge of audibility, discovering 'musical' and musically meaningful gestures while not organising them in a traditionally developmental way. Apart from a couple of more extended sections, still relatively short, there seems little sense of direction or continuity despite his assertion in an interview that counterpoint is at the heart of what he does.<sup>2</sup>

His previous disc, reviewed in *TEMPO*,<sup>3</sup> was of all his piano music, including a couple of noisy early pieces, but the majority of which, those written since 2010, are also very quiet

<sup>1</sup> N. Cook, *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Evan Johnson, Another Timbre, [www.anothertimbre.com/evanjohnson.html](http://www.anothertimbre.com/evanjohnson.html) (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>3</sup> D. Jamieson, 'Evan Johnson, List, Little Stars', *TEMPO*, 76, no. 302 (2022), pp. 90–1.

with lots of silent pauses. Listening as part of my subsequent Johnson homework, I was quite charmed by what seemed like absent-minded tinkering, as though some precocious kid had just discovered Schoenberg's op. 19 (the second and last pieces), picked out their favourite intervals and fiddled around with them – a kind of super-minimal, super-sparse free improvisation, drawing you in for a while before beginning to outstay its welcome (the added Glenn Gould-esque pianist breathing and whistling didn't help). The current album, despite also having much silence, is busier than the piano disc.

The above preamble prefaces two questions prompted by the new disc that are somewhat tangential to the music itself, to what you actually hear: first, the significance of the album title, *L'Art de Toucher*, which is also the title of three of the five pieces (*L'Art de Toucher* 1, 2 and 3, written in 2021, 2009 and 2011 respectively); and, second, unfortunately, as I discovered on briefly examining the scores, that thorny old chestnut – notational complexity. This latter is what we used to call, back in the day, 'new complexity'. It was certainly complex, but hardly new, rather just an extension of post-integral serialism: the next (as it turned out, the final) step of that 'emancipation' begun by Schoenberg and the rest. Despite a handful of the ageing old-garde (Ferneynough is 80 this year), in my obvious naïveté I had thought this once fiercely fought and contested style, which got a lot of people very hot under the collar in the 80s and early 90s, had just fallen by the wayside. Johnson's often quite beautiful music, for me, brings the 'why?' question tumbling back. The issue for performers was never about extended techniques, or even about the way they were notated, which has become pretty standardised over the years, but more simply about complex rhythmic notation – irrational metres, nested tuplets and so on.

Coming back to my first question, the title isn't particularly an issue but is still rather curious. François Couperin's 1716/17 treatise, *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*, is about performance style in terms of surface embellishments added to the bones of the notated score. The three pieces here – the first, and most recent, for solo piccolo, then piccolo with violin and the third a trio adding percussion take Couperin's title. Johnson tells us in the Another Timbre interview that the explanation for the title is the 'idea of music made of ornament... layers of ornament on ornament, flowering elaboration... of very simple, trivial musical figures, until they become something else altogether'. Because the material – for the

piccolo, for example – is completely in the world of extended techniques, where the sounds themselves are the techniques and not noises grafted on to traditional notes, it is difficult to fathom what the original 'trivial musical figures' might be. What is evident is that the music for piccolo, violin and cello, and for saxophone (*thaes oferode, thisses swa maeg*, 2013, is for voice and cello; *Plan and Section of the Same Reservoir*, 2018, is for Trio Accanto, saxophone, piano and percussion) is embedded in 'extended' sounds: the music is the sounds, which is why the music for voice and particularly piano using notes, recognisable intervals and gestures seems at odds with the essence of Johnson's work overall. For me the most interesting music is for the wind instruments, the piccolo, excellently played by Richard Craig in the solo and Susanne Peters in the duo and trio, and the saxophone of Marcus Weiss in the Accanto piece. The use of vocalisations, air sounds, under-produced or half-voiced notes, multiphonics and the almost complete lack of 'real' notes takes the listener into a much richer and more imaginative world. Interestingly Johnson has used Weiss and Giorgio Netti's new techniques treatise<sup>4</sup> for some of the sounds, and quite a lot of what Weiss does here sounds like Netti's extraordinary solo works written for him back in the 90s.<sup>5</sup>

Coming back to the interview with Johnson, he gives us his reasons for the complexity of notation, and I have great sympathy with hand-written scores, which, as a player, I have always felt made a composer's musical intentions more clearly apparent. But I wonder about the following: 'It's absolutely fundamentally important to me that the scores look the way the performances sound, and I really think you can hear these things, even on record.' It seems to me this isn't true here. All the scores are very detailed and obsessively controlled with complex ultra-precise notation. That's fine, as far as it goes, because there needs to be some certainty about the specific and very particular sounds Johnson wants. Having said that, in the second *L'Art* piece while the piccolo is strictly notated in every parameter, the violin is directed to be more in the background and have a more 'ornamental' role, where the material, notated but not rhythmically prescribed, is intended 'as raw stuff for further spontaneous ornament, always reacting to the piccolo's material' (performance notes

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Netti and M. Weiss, *The Techniques of Saxophone Playing* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Netti, *necessità d'interrogare il cielo* (1996–99); see my review of Patrick Stadler's 2019 recording in *TEMPO*, 75, no. 295 (2021), pp. 104–106.

in the score). The violin part has the same bars and time signatures as the piccolo but is written in proportional or spatial notation where 20 millimetres of stave equals a quaver of the piccolo's tempo (not clock time), which is mostly quaver equals metronome 26 to 34(!).

Similarly, the *Accanto* piece is written in spatial notation, which, I would argue, negates the need for rhythmic notation, as the two things do the same job. While this might please the composer's notational obsessions, for the player it is an easy get-out (used before by some of the older 'new complexity' composers) and means they simply don't have to bother working out those rhythms. The problem is that you can hear this in the performances, where what might have been jagged, unexpected placements are evened out by the player's natural 'musical' instincts based on, for example, their breathing, even heartbeat, and certainly some kind of internalised pulse against which to play the micro-'off-beats'. Johnson further confounds things by stating, 'The rhythmic language... is extremely complex and detailed, but it is treated in a flexible, almost "improvisatory" manner.' So, despite there being much to fascinate and enjoy here, my 'why?' question still stands.

Roger Heaton

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Eden Lonsdale, *Clear and Hazy Moons*. Apartment House, Rothko Collective. Another Timbre, at206.

Moons are defined by their orbit around celestial objects other than stars. In this sense, they are essentially relational, in the orbit of gravitational fields of larger spheres. However, moons are not without their own energies, causing, for example, oceanic tides on these regulating planets. Multiplied, one could imagine how several moons might come to simultaneously pull at the edges of but also contain large bodies of water as some sort of mercurial mediator. These sorts of ambiguities between transition and stasis are of apparent concern to composer and cellist Eden Lonsdale in his debut album, *Clear and Hazy Moons*, comprising four pieces for chamber ensemble, three of which are performed by Apartment House and the title track by the Rothko Collective.

The opening sound on Lonsdale's disc neatly encapsulates this metaphorical lunar liminality. A lone, heavily reverberated piano harmonic, a muted fundamental alongside a high, hazy partial: indeed, I cannot tell whether this sound is real or

synthesised. Its core conflict between haze and clarity sets the atmosphere for and is continuously alluring throughout *Oasis*. The orbiting, micro-tonally fluctuating B $\flat$  harmonic partials act as reference points – guiding but hazy moons – controlling the ebbing and flowing tides of beatings conjured by the other instruments. This opening to this disc is slow-moving: at the surface level, not much *happens*. However, this apparent stasis creates an almost purpose-built crater for the considered playing of Apartment House to fill, breathing iridescence into Lonsdale's blueprint. A subtle shift of pacing occurs around 8'30", wherein the players alter their roles, and this continues for the remaining six minutes. Indeed, one of Lonsdale's achievements across this album is how different sections of the same piece are both transitioned between and subsequently speak to each other. Some sort of partial eclipse in this newfound meandering occurs from c. 12'45". Here, for about a minute and a half – and perhaps due to the fleeting quasi-major tonality – there is captivating lucidity, like the piece has arrived, before it jettisons this clarity and abruptly ends.

*Billowing* begins by sounding like a sort of lopsided Arvo Pärt-like hymn before introducing quickly descending lines. It then exhales as if this solemnity is collapsing in on itself. These plunging lines draw attention to themselves – distorted moons hastening their orbits – at the expense of the simple Holy Minimalist melodies. The first seven minutes present discrete episodes of approximately a minute long, each with slight variations: expulsions of unearthly energy through a lunar filter. The music withers and returns minutes later for the fifth episode: here, Lonsdale's attention to structural nuance momentarily baffles and subsequently allures me, which demonstrates the way he holds the listener's attention. From just before the seven-minute mark, the piece cowers in itself, presenting elongated wraiths of the previous material, inviting re-inspection and reinterpretation of its timbral world. The higher woodwinds that follow recall the first section with increased clarity. The piece sits with this isolation of the previous moment for a few minutes before returning to the full descending figure and gradually to the billows of the start. This is an elegant show of pacing.

Lonsdale's third offering, the title track of the album, performed by the Rothko Collective, is sculptural in feel. Celestial-sized forms orbit in and out of focus, as if one is standing in an effervescent Alexander Calder mobile; these are, largely, reiterations of ideas found in the first half of the album, which are readily welcomed back (the delicately placed swell at c. 11'40" is particularly beautiful and suggestive this time