

constructed ('a cosmic Cheshire grimace whose tones fall out one by one like loose teeth', as Brodsky brilliantly puts it). Măcelaru and the WDR Sinfonieorchester handle this balance well, presenting every gesture sincerely while allowing each the possibility of collapse, eruption or transformation, never letting them lapse into irony.

And still, despite an abundance of 'moments' (like those chords, like the solos for horn or piano, like the pulsing wooden percussion, like the Copland-esque trumpets of the third movement), Lim's music remains fundamentally concerned with lines. The only difference with an orchestra is that they are more thickly drawn and are stretched over greater distances. Again, Măcelaru and his orchestra excel at maintaining the necessary momentum through a rapidly shape-shifting terrain. When, in the final movement, Emily Hindrichs' soprano arrives (one can't help but think of Beethoven) she feels like a sublime but utterly natural addition, blooming, almost imperceptibly at first, out of those trumpet calls. She sings words by Etel Adnan, from 'The Spring Flowers Own', the image of a loved one moving 'like a bunch of flowers', a 'light-wave', 'the beginning of the day'. Driven by desire, the line keeps moving.

Tim Rutherford Johnson
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Frank Denyer, *Melodies*. Scordatura Ensemble, Luna String Quartet, Mad Dog, Denyer. Another Timbre, at203x2.

In the context of new music, one cannot ask 'what is a melody?' without also asking several other questions. 'What is a melody?' is really asking 'what is a melody *now*?' Can a melody be new or part of a critical project? Why is it that melody should be so controversial? In my view, that which makes a melody a melody is a process of recognition: a melody is what we recognise as one. There's something self-evident and even obvious about it. That's why a brutally materialist definition like 'a sequence of pitches' or 'a sequence of sounds' is so unsatisfying. It is both outrageously over-permissive and still somehow manages to miss the actual point. A melody is human subjectivity in music; it is music which creates a symbolic identification between the music and a listener, mediated through the craft of a composer. I think we in new music might tend to forget this and indeed to forget how astonishing this dynamic can be.

In a very general sense, there are two arguments against melodicism: one, that the psychological identification is nothing more than a matter of trope and proper handling of clichéd material, that nothing actually new can be written through the ideology of melodicism. The other is that symbolic identification – especially heroic identification – has only been permitted to a privileged class of society, tersely 'dead white men', but, more properly, the global bourgeoisie. The identification of self with melody imparts narratives of struggle and triumph, flattening all other artistic dimensions into petty grievance. Now, it is not my intention to litigate these points in this review, but rather to indicate the stakes involved with the topic of melody and to frame the profoundly difficult nature of the task of composing new or relevant melodic music. Not all melodic music necessarily projects a tired Western imperialist identity, though this certainly is a common situation. So it was with great joy that I listened to this music from Frank Denyer, offering such a fresh perspective on melodic music, so clear and direct, yet not lacking in intrigue or depth for it.

The 25 pieces on this release from Another Timbre were composed in the mid-1970s and this is their first commercial release as a set. The gripping third interlude, 'voices', is the only piece to have been excerpted on an earlier release. It is quite a remarkable feat of Denyer's to have made music as an individual that is plausibly legible as the product of a culture: a development of several persons over several generations. The search for archetypical compositional methods is at the forefront of the project. Not one sentence of Denyer's liner notes has been written before a specific type of compositional constraint is described: 'It is now more than half a century since I first became interested in forms of traditional music made from just two, three or four notes.' Thus the all-encompassing search for archetype and the particular compositional restraint are elegantly bound.

Each piece is called *melody* and indexed by the number of notes and the instrumental forces playing. An uneven linear development is charted starting at one note for one instrument and ending at 15 notes for string quartet and percussion. The use of the word 'note' rather than 'pitch' is quite a subtle provocation, and the implications manifest when listening to the music. There is no abstraction from note (as played on an instrument) to pitch (regularly cycling through a number of octaves), therefore no real concept of octave equivalence and so a

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.¹ 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.²

His previous disc, reviewed in *TEMPO*,³ 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

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

² Interview with Evan Johnson, Another Timbre, www.anothertimbre.com/evanjohnson.html (accessed 25 May 2023).

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